

David M. RAYSIDE, *A Small Town in Modem Times: Alexandria, Ontario* (Montreal & Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991, Pp. 336, ISBN 0-7735-0826-0)

Pauline Greenhill

Volume 13, numéro 2, 1991

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1081730ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1081730ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (imprimé)

1708-0401 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Greenhill, P. (1991). Compte rendu de [David M. RAYSIDE, *A Small Town in Modem Times: Alexandria, Ontario* (Montreal & Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991, Pp. 336, ISBN 0-7735-0826-0)]. *Ethnologies*, 13(2), 132-135. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1081730ar>

has been largely omitted in the central Californian stories in this book" (p. 43). Despite the regularizations in the data that they have made and the wholesale omission of the original language data, the stories themselves are excellent. When read together, general mythic themes emerge from the corpus which certainly present a uniquely native Californian perspective.

Had *Californian Indian Nights* been produced in 1991, it would have been faulted for its essentializations of Native traditions, for its zealous concern to separate post-contact materials from that which comes from "pre-Caucasian natives" (p. 13), and for the admitted editing out of Native rhetorical devices. However, on the strength of Gifford and Block's even minimal contextualizations found in their introduction, in the organization of the myths and legends, and in the extremely brief story attributions ("As told by the _____ indians of _____ county"), this book certainly warranted reprinting for a contemporary audience. The 1990 introduction serves to locate the book as an historical document to be read with that earlier anthropological context in mind. We hope that more contemporary studies will also be made available by this press.

Lisa PHILIPS VALENTINE
University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario

David M. RAYSIDE, *A Small Town in Modern Times: Alexandria, Ontario* (Montreal & Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991, Pp. 336, ISBN 0-7735-0826-0)

Readers may wonder why a book on Ontario by a political scientist is being reviewed in *CFC*. Part of the answer lies in the interests of the book review editor, who taught for five years in an interdisciplinary Canadian Studies Program and specialises in Ontario's traditional and popular culture. However, this book is of interest to any folklorist, and particularly to those who work in communities; it is ethnographic both in its research methods and in its primarily descriptive mode.

Clifford Geertz's "Blurred Genres" article (1980) was one of the first works to draw attention to the cross-fertilising influence of disciplines on one another. Many prominent recent works combine academic perspectives to create something that goes beyond any one disciplinary "genre". Folklorists refer particularly to those who have linked history and anthropology: Robert Darnton, Eric Hobsbawm, and Nathalie Zemon Davis, to name a few. Though Rayside's *A Small Town* instead draws primarily upon sociology and political science,

it is a blurred discipline work which seems destined for use by anthropologists and folklorists because of its ability to draw us into the consideration of the place of formal institutions in communicative processes.

As a Canadianist, I could quibble about the author's periodic central Canadian bias which tends to see activity in Ontario as representative of the country as a whole. For example, "Conflict has been more evident along language lines than along either gender or class lines, a characteristic of the Canadian political system as well as of this community" (p. 290). Does such a generalisation apply to politics in Newfoundland, or in the Northwest Territories? I think not. But in other aspects Rayside shows a remarkable lack of typical bias. Unlike those anthropologists and folklorists who are certain that "mainstream" Ontario has no culture, the preface on methods indicates that Rayside simply assumes it does and approaches his subject in a descriptive, ethnographic mode. I interpret his choice "to attend as many meetings of local political bodies as I could manage" (p. xii) as a kind of selective participant observation; further, his decision to use local self-descriptions, particularly the weekly *Glengarry News*, and to conduct open-ended interviews about the community within and without it, are conventional in ethnographic methodology.

Even more telling of this approach is the first chapter which — though it's entitled "The Lie of the Land" — descriptively addresses Alexandria's "self-image". It opens with an introduction to six residents of Alexandria whose well-drawn personalities — and voices — appear throughout the book, along with those of others in the town. While Rayside's concern with formal institutions might lead one to expect this group to consist primarily of the socially and economically privileged, they represent instead a variety of classes, ages, and degrees of participation in hegemonic Glengarry (insofar as such an entity exists). And the representation of voice is pervasive; I don't know of many works beyond anthropology and folklore which use direct quotation so extensively and well.

Subsequent chapters deal with regional industrial development, wage labour, gender, language and schooling, and community politics. The political scientist's bias means that he searches for culture primarily within formal institutions — industry and labour unions, public associations, schools, and town council — but many of our cohort would tend to ignore such institutions as shapers of culture in favour of more informal, face to face elements. However, Rayside is very aware of the extent to which the realm of the political extends beyond its conventional definitions: "The political arena has become the crucible in which human demands and aspirations are given voice and fought over. Activities once thought the proper functions of churches, families, and voluntary organizations are now widely considered to be within the realm of the state" (p. 236).

In some ways, this book fills lacunae in folklorists' accounts of communities. Shelley Posen's *For Singing and Dancing and all Sorts of Fun* (1988), for example, would benefit from the kind of detailed outline of language group relations so well described by Rayside. (Alexandria, like Posen's Chapeau, is an Ontario/Québec border town.) In my own research on various Ontario towns and small cities, I've noted the kinds of social processes Rayside considers — the exodus of upwardly mobile young people, the maintenance of an image of co-operation in the face of manifest conflict, the "good news" ethos of the local weekly papers, and residents' strongly negative image of outsiders, for example — but have not linked them to formal institutions.

On the other hand, I would hope that an anthropologist or folklorist would have considered how Alexandria's self-image is actually created and maintained. Rayside's description of the "distaste for political controversy" is apt:

The merchant and small entrepreneur depend on being liked, respected, or sought after by a wide range of local residents. In other words, they cannot afford to make many enemies In a small community, adversarial politics are....difficult, since your opponents are neighbours or relatives. If, in addition, your livelihood depends on good relations with the rest of the community, the avoidance of controversy becomes almost a fixation. (p. 248)

Yet little is seen of the mechanisms and negotiations of conflict-avoidance. Rayside suggests at one point that neighbours being related and employed at the same plant reduces their chances of entering into direct conflict (p. 291); on the next page, he suggests that "Kinship ties can, of course, divide a community as well as unite it" (p. 292). And while the extensive coverage of court news in the local paper is "a means of enforcing community norms" (p. 295); it could equally be seen as an extension of the kind of informal "gossip"/news that characterises other parts of the paper, like the "folksy accounts of card parties and family gatherings" (p. 294). Since the book focuses on institutions, and public disputes are avoided by face to face negotiation, or their virulence mitigated by the use of informal genres of communication like song, poetry, and joke, Rayside is at a disadvantage. He does consider, if somewhat sketchily, the fact that conflict against institutions and forces seen as coming from outside the community — provincial and federal government actions particularly — is easier to express, though he asserts that it is sometimes difficult to mobilise because of the community's "fatalistic alienation" (p. 285) from them.

However, a more anthropologically oriented work might have indicated that much political negotiation and action which eventually enters the public sphere has back room activity behind it. I recall, for example, attending a village Women's Institute quilting in which much of the discussion centred around one of the participants, a widow who was in conflict with the local government. The municipality had begun dumping on her property while her husband was alive, without the owner's consent. As she was now trying to sell the property,

the woman was withholding her taxes until the municipality cleaned it up. Her fellow quilters provided strong moral support, suggestions, and encouragement, and it was clear this was not the first time they had done so. In the public sphere, though, I'm sure this dispute had a more restrained tone. I can't help wondering if Rayside's closing commentary on the passiveness and quiescence of Alexandria would have been the same had he had entree into such informal social scenes.

In fact, the final chapter, "Fragmentation and Community", is perhaps the least successful, again because of difficulty with the issue of conflict. Rayside comments that "like other small towns, Alexandria is a highly fragmented society, but it remains more cohesive than larger cities" (p. 299). There is a kind of evolutionary inevitability in statements like "Alexandria has retained some distinctiveness from urban life, even while its economic, political, and social relationships have come to approximate urban patterns more than at any time in the past" (p. 300) which seem to obfuscate Rayside's assertion that fragmentation that has always been part of communities. I'm not sure he hasn't bought the community's vision of itself, which associates fragmentation and conflict with modernity.

Perhaps anthropologists and folklorists would have treated Rayside's material differently, and perhaps their works on Ontario and on communities would have significantly contributed to his understanding of the phenomena. However, *A Small Town* is a fine book, and well worth attention beyond the author's own discipline.

Pauline GREENHILL
University of Winnipeg,
Winnipeg, Manitoba

Dorothy Harley EBER, *When the Whalers Were Up North: Inuit Memories From the Eastern Arctic* (Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989, Pp. 187, \$29.98 (hardcover), ISBN 0-7735-0702-7)

Stephen HUME, *Ghost Camps; Memory and Myth on Canada's Frontier* (Edmonton, NeWest, 1989, Pp. 276, \$14.95 (paper), \$24.95 (hardcover), ISBN 0-920897-65-7)