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Review of: *A Geography of the Hutterites of North America*—Simon M. Evans

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Review of: **Evans, Simon M. 2021. *A Geography of the Hutterites of North America*. Lincoln, ND: University of North Dakota Press. Pp. 346. \$65.00.**

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Imagine a complex academic book without a subtitle: straightforward, lucid, accessible. These qualities describe Simon Evans' final word on Hutterites of the western plains of Canada and the United States. It's an historical geography, distinctive from the more numerous social scientific studies of the Hutterites. It methodically traces the dispersion of an 1870s Dakota settlement into Manitoba and Alberta during World War I, and then into Montana and Saskatchewan after World War II, with small representations in Washington State and British Columbia. Along the way, Evans deepens his analysis and interlaces theological consideration, demographic change, ecological intrusion, marketplace engagement, political interaction, gender relations, and internecine differences with the geographer's craft, spatial arrangement. Indeed, these various intersections make for a richly textured historical geography that no subtitle could capture. And they rely on Evans' own expansive on-colony ethnography, rich map collections, and broad engagement with a multi-disciplinary secondary literature. In the process Evans gives us a fresh look at the Hutterites and produces a historical geography that does much more than document the Hutterite diaspora in the North American grassland.

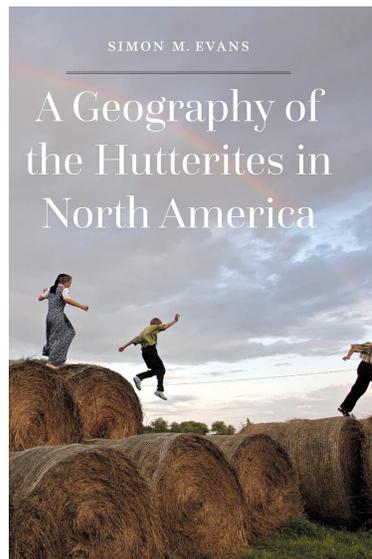
As an historical geography, the book is, after all, a study of space and the distinctive culture of space, and it does it exquisitely. There is, first, a rich culture of internal spatial arrangement. This approach includes numerous descriptions of the internal dynamics of colony reproduction: with debts of building a new colony paid off, money is saved, and then human resources deployed for the arduous task of restarting, including initiating the lot system to decide who moves and who

doesn't. There is also the theology intertwining the process: indeed, the Hutterites' very ethos—that sacred “ark adrift on the stormy sea of secular society” (p. xviii)—evokes a sense of the precarity of space, with Hutterites seeking to be in but not of the wider world, never quite certain how hostile winds will propel the community. Even appearances of external accommodation, as in colonies seemingly spaced apart to comply with government regulations or special “gentleman's agreements” (p. 52), may in fact arise from internal factors, such as sectarian schism, as exhibited by the Lehrerleut and Dariusleut of Alberta. Space is even a quotidian concern. Sometimes, in the name of equality, this concern ensures that all residential units are equidistant to the kitchen and dining room. And for most colonies, this concern pre-

scribes straight lines, usually along cardinal points, denoting cleanliness and orderliness and meeting the admonishment of one preacher, “you don't walk crooked on the earth, you walk straight” (p. 172).

The culture of social boundary maintenance is another overriding spatial concern. Among myriad examples, Hutterites encountered non-Hutterites like the Harmonists and Amana Society in the 1870s, striking carpenters from Winnipeg in 1918, Alberta politicians pushing Hutterites into Montana and Saskatchewan in the 1930s, and during the same decade, South Dakota agents visiting Canada to

seek to “lure back” the Hutterites to the United States (p. 47). Unlike most plain Anabaptist groups, Hutterites have increasingly emphasized education, including university-level endeavours, making for an acute global awareness. Similarly, the Hutterites have crossed over into the wider world and used the courts, contesting government regulations (drivers' licence photos), enforcing land acquisitions, or even regulating internal battles. They even named their colonies with reference to the cultural geography of that wider world—Wolf Creek, Bon Homme, Rockport, Dominion City, Jamestown, Milltown—rather than after old European places as was the custom among Western Canadian Mennonites. And if such practices allowed Hutterites to relocate



without attracting undue notice, so too did their proclivity to settle “place[s] in the wilderness” (p. 72) where few others would go, and establishing their colonies well away from public roadways so that passers-by are often “completely unaware” of their presence (p. 27).

One lasting impression from Evan’s geographic analysis is the pragmatism of the Hutterites when it comes to crossing these social boundaries. Ironically their simple lifeworlds are dependent on a rather sophisticated engagement with the outside world. Hence the Hutterites’ early use of the gasoline motor, their complete abandon to economies of scale-based equipment, and even their Malthusian approach to the environment (clear cutting forests, using scarce water, etc.). This complexity becomes even more apparent in accounts of Hutterites investing in value-added production and industry requiring close marketing arrangements with non-Hutterites. It is even seen where Hutterites embraced environmental stewardship: early twentieth century Hutterite leader Eberhard Arnold may have held “nature as pure and precious” (p. 192), but recently, Hutterites have adopted environmental sustainability and animal rights in response to “the growing concern among the urban public” about such matters (p. 203). Evans even speculates that given this pragmatism, the Hutterites might yet commodify their peasant personas and embrace organic agriculture to add even more value to their farm products.

This book presents a rigorous analysis of North American Hutterites, advancing a basic understanding of their history, and more pointedly employing the discipline of cultural geography within one Anabaptist group. To my mind, the one fault with the book is that Evans evidentially finds few faults with the Hutterites. But then, as his final and post-humous work on a primary subject of his academic lifetime, no one can really fault Evans on this matter. The book is a testament to a committed and dedicated scholar of immense integrity, hard work, and scholarly achievement.

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