nity, hounded by Nazis. Scholem, on the other hand, Benjamin's childhood friend emigrated to Palestine concerned mainly with Jewish rehabilitation, and perhaps in possession of less universalistic concerns. He helps to establish the Hebrew University, and succeeds in bringing Jewish mysticism and philosophical thought to secular western university educational curriculum. *Benjamin's Crossing* subsequently possess a pertinent question for our time. Is it possible to attain true integration with respect for minorities in society? In the wake of the Holocaust and contemporary forms of xenophobia, is particularist thought the only viable path to safe-guard group rights? How should society treat minorities, guarantee basic human rights and citizenship? Despite his personal tragedy, Benjamin's writings provides us with hope for a better, a more just, and inclusive future.

I highly recommend *Benjamin's Crossing*. It is both a learning and enjoyable novel. It offers insights into the life and work of Benjamin, one of this century's most important thinkers, whose life experience is profoundly wound up and central to his work. Parini offers us crucial insights to his life, in a well-researched and carefully detailed account. It should be considered relevant reading material for university courses that use the work of Benjamin so to place the person and his writings in their proper context, so often neglected in current discourse. It is also appropriate for those interested in reading a well written novel.

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THE LAST BEST WEST: ESSAYS ON THE HISTORICAL GEOGRAPHY OF THE CANADIAN PRAIRIES by Yossi Katz and John C. Lehr. Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, 1999.

A distinguished British student of cultural geography once told me that he envied those of us who live in the North American Midwest, because we have such a splendid 'laboratory' in which to observe first-hand how different culture groups have occupied an environment that is essentially homogeneous over an extensive area. Up close, however, that environment is not quite as uniform as it seems when seen from afar, and culturally the Midwest is the epitome of the melting pot. Strong social pressure forced newcomers, groups as well as individuals, to conform to and to adopt an existing farming system that flourished for more than a century and a half because it was economically successful and ecologically sound. In the Midwest you have to work hard to find cultural differences.

The Prairie Provinces of Canada are much the same. Back east people accurately perceived the Prairies as marginal agricultural areas. The Canadian government was delighted to welcome anyone who was willing to settle them, and to do as much as possible to keep them contented. In the early years it even felt compelled to offer inducements and to make major concessions to attract and keep a wide variety of settlers. Today, however, you must look hard to find visible traces of ethnic groups in the contemporary Prairie landscape. The few that remain are preserved as quaint relics of the past and celebrated as tourist attractions.

Yossi Katz (for the last decade) and John Lehr (for the last three decades) have been exploring the experiences of various immigrant groups on the Prairies and their heroic (or perhaps foolhardy) attempts to cope with an intractable environment. They have performed a useful service by pulling together seven of their own published papers, plus papers on the Mennonites by John Warkentin and on the Hutterites by Bill Lastsch, into a single volume that is a rich resource for anyone interested in the Prairies. It has the added virtue of readability, in contrast to so much of what passes for geography nowadays.

Katz and Lehr have focused on specific religious and linguistic groups (Mennonites, Ukrainians, Mormons, Hutterites, and Jews) that settled or wanted to settle on the Prairies in blocks. These groups had to cope with the rectangular grid survey system and with the provisions of the Dominion Lands Act of 1872, which granted homesteads only to individual settlers.

Mennonites were the first large group of farmers to migrate to the Prairies. In 1876 the government welcomed them by reserving more than half a million acres of land for their exclusive use. They settled in agricultural villages, divided the land into large open fields, and cultivated it in individual strips, just as they had done in Russia. The peasant way of life was not suited to the Prairies, however, and within a decade some farmers were moving out of the nucleated villages to their own solid blocks of farmland. By the 1920s, the last of the open fields had been extinguished, but a handful of the old farm villages still attract the curious to the prairie southwest of Winnipeg.

The Ukrainians who came to the Prairies, "an obstinate, obstreperous, rebellious lot", to quote one exasperated immigration officer, insisted on settling close to their kinfolk from the same village in the Ukraine. They baffled outsiders by homesteading submarginal land just to be near kinfolk, even when better land was available elsewhere. The massive influx of Ukrainians after 1896 threw a scare into authorities with the prospect of a huge unassimilated cluster of Ukrainian homesteads in the Star area east of Edmonton, and they encouraged the creation of new Ukrainian homestead nodes that developed into an arc of Ukrainian settlements from Edmonton to Winnipeg in the aspen parkland belt along the northern fringe of the Prairies.

Groups of Mormons moved from Utah to southwestern Alberta in the 1880s because they had been persecuted in the United States for their belief in and practice of polygamy. They were strongly supported by a large and powerful church that provided experienced leaders and direct assistance, and could negotiate directly

with the Canadian government on their behalf. The church bought large blocks of land and developed irrigation projects, which are well suited to the nucleated villages that the church mandates. Some Mormons homesteaded individual parvels, then moved their homes and their farmsteads to nucleated villages after they had patented their homesteads.

Hutterites, who had established colonies in South Dakota in the 1870s, moved to Canada during the First World War to escape persecution in the United States. They bought enough land to establish eleven colonies in Alberta, and they have continued to buy more land to establish the new colonies that their high birth rate necessitates. Their pacificist beliefs won them disfavor during the Second World War, and the Communal Property Act of 1947 forbade them to buy or lease land within forty miles of any existing colony. This act has backfired, however, because nowadays farmers who want to sell their land and stop farming are not allowed to sell it to Hutterites who would like to buy it.

The Jews who homesteaded on the Prairies after 1884 have left no mark on the rural landscape. They arrived after the government had adopted a policy of discouraging block settlement and mixing settlers to speed the process of assimilation and acculturation, and their 'blocks' consisted of thirty to fifty farms spread over a ten-mile radius. All had been abandoned by the 1950s.

The Jews were poor immigrants from urban areas who had little money and even less experience of farming, but it is too simplistic to blame their urban origin for their failure. They were isolated from the mainstream of Jewish life, and their dispersed settlement virtually precluded religious observance as mandated by Jewish religious law, which requires a quorum of at least ten adult males to perform certain essential religious services. The dispersed Jewish settlements never achieved the critical mass necessary to establish a school, to build a mikveh, to maintain a shochet, or to provide suitable marriage partners for young people, and the families gradually drifted off to Winnipeg.

Katz and Lehr dislike the rectangular land survey system, and they have a romantic attachment to nucleated agricultural villages. They believe that the Prairies required block settlement, because the social and spiritual needs of settlers were more easily provided in blocks, and mutual support and cooperation were better, but most of the blocks have failed, and the authors have paid scant attention to the vast majority of settlers, who homesteaded individual farms. Their belief in the value of nucleated village settlement might be challenged by the success of many individual farmers who settled on dispersed and isolated farmsteads.

Wheat is the only crop that has been commercially successful on the Prairies, and wheat requires land, lots of land. Fortunately for those who settled the Prairies, the Dominion Lands Act of 1872 foresightedly ensured that they could not be locked into an archaic mode of settlement that is completely unsuited to the imperatives of contemporary Prairie agriculture.

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