



**Paul Voisey.** *High River and the Times: An Alberta Community and Its Weekly Newspaper, 1905-1966.* Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2004. xxx + 270 pp. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-88864-411-4.



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For fifteen years or more, the history of journalism has been a growing and increasingly lively field. Much of this work has centred on the emergence of the popular and mass press in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; but as Paul Voisey, a professor of history at the University of Alberta, points out in *High River and the Times*, almost all of this literature examines the metropolitan daily newspaper. In this study, Voisey takes on the important task of looking at the small-town weekly, a distinctive journalistic form which has been little studied. To be more precise, he takes on the history of one small-town weekly, the High River (Alberta) *Times*.

The place-name will ring a bell with most Canadian historians. This is indeed the High River where Joe Clark, Canada's sixteenth prime minister, was born and raised; the *Times*, in fact, was founded by Clark's grandfather, and run by his father until it was sold in 1966 (after, as Clark says in the foreword, "it became clear that neither my brother Peter, nor I, had the talent or the temperament to carry it on"). The idea for this book arose after Clark consulted scholars at Carleton University and the University of Alberta about the possibility of producing a series of studies on Canadian communities. Professor Voisey proposed to begin by focusing on High River and its newspaper, noting that this would be a useful starting point for other projects, a biography of Clark

among them. It is often a good idea to put together related research projects, but for reasons outlined below, the choice of this particular small-town weekly brought with it some limitations from a research point of view.

The book has two parallel threads: one describes the growth and development of High River along with its ranching and farming hinterland; the second examines how these developments and aspirations were represented in the *Times*. Voisey's account of High River's history is detailed and sure-footed. The author of a previous study on the nearby Alberta town of Vulcan, he is clearly comfortable describing and analyzing the history of rural communities. When it comes to the newspaper, he offers both broad conclusions about the role of the small-town weekly and a more focused account of the role this particular newspaper played in each of three main phases of High River's development: the boom period to 1918; the difficult years of the 1920s and especially 1930s; and the return to prosperity after the Second World War, a prosperity that increasingly brought High River into the orbit of nearby Calgary. Mainly through an examination of what the newspaper published over the years, he clearly shows how it selected and interpreted the dominant events of each period to fashion an image of High River that would appeal to its readers and advertisers. His depictions of the newspaper's boosterism in the years

before 1914, its celebration of the homely virtues of rural and small-town life between the wars, and its nostalgic evocation of a largely mythical Wild-West past after 1945 are both convincing and intriguing.

From the perspective of journalism history, Voisey's observations about the small-town weekly's distinctiveness are the book's most interesting feature. He does not shy away from bold conclusions. The main difference between the big-city daily newspaper and the small-town weekly is that "first and foremost, it did not attempt to present news" (p. xx). As well, it did everything possible to avoid controversy and build consensus. Ultimately, he concludes, the weekly newspaper "performed functions quite unlike those of the metropolitan daily ... none of the great issues that engulf journalism seem relevant to the rural press: freedom of speech, bias and objectivity, the confidentiality of sources, ethics in collecting information, the protection of privacy, and the independence of the press" (pp. 210-211).

When Voisey says the *Times* did not cover news, he means two things: first, that it did not present national or international news, and second, that the local events it did cover were not really news since they were mostly already known to the newspaper's readers. (Coverage of local government, he notes, constituted an exception to this pattern.) Clearly, the fact that most people in the High River area knew each other personally, or at least by reputation, meant the newspaper played a very different role than it did in larger places where most people did not have such a direct connection. In towns like High River, one is tempted to conclude, the newspaper did not need to create an "imagined community" *À la* Benedict Anderson since a real community actually existed.[1]

Or did it? Was "the community" of High River such a straightforward matter after all? Voisey notes that, at different times, several kinds of local residents—the single, transient laboring men of the nearby large ranches; the prostitutes and brothel-keepers; union organizers; the Chinese; the Blackfoot; the Hutterites; the immigrants from eastern Europe; the itinerant merchants—were not considered members of the community. Part of what all newspapers do, including the *Times*, is precisely to define who belongs and (if only by omission), who does not; they do not merely reflect a community, but actively constitute it. At times, Voisey recognizes the complexity of this construction, namely that the newspaper "was not devoid of ideology and it strongly supported the aspirations of the farmers, merchants and self-employed tradesmen who provided its advertising and its reader-

ship" (p. xxix). Yet, at other times, he seems to lose sight of it: "the great majority of residents supported the version of the community that the *Times* presented" (p. 209).

Since the concept of community is central to the book's argument, one would expect a clearer account of what exactly it is and how it is related to what journalists do. In my opinion, this lack of clarity reflects the author's lack of engagement with some of the main themes of recent work in journalism history. Yes, researchers have paid considerable attention to such notions as the development of objectivity. But most of all, such scholars as James Carey, David Paul Nord, Richard Kaplan and Michael Schudson (none listed in this book's bibliography) have grappled with the relation between journalism and community; others like Kevin Barnhurst and John Nerone or Jean Chalaby address questions of power more directly.[2] To be sure, their research has focused mainly on journalism in cities rather than small towns, but at the least this would provide a basis for comparison. Carey's work, for example—especially his notion of the ritual as opposed to transmissive functions of communication—suggests that Voisey's sharp distinctions between big-city and small-town journalism may not be as clear-cut as they seem, or at least that the apparent differences need to be accounted for more carefully.

Beyond this larger problem, the study suffers to some extent from its choice of subject. While Voisey had access to the Clark family papers, and supplemented them with interviews and the records of mercantile credit agencies, most of the newspaper's business records were destroyed or lost, thus making it impossible to examine its operations systematically. As well, the Clark family publishers—Charles Clark, the founder, and his son, Charles A. Clark—are curiously in the background. Thus it comes as something of a surprise when one learns that the senior Clark was president of the local Chamber of Commerce. Of course, there is nothing surprising about such connections, but the fact that it seems so points up the extent to which the Clark publishers' role as members of the local elite has not been fully fleshed out.

These criticisms notwithstanding, *High River and the Times* seriously addresses a neglected subject. Its tracing of the twists and turns of the *Times*'s response to High River's hopes and setbacks is well thought out and convincingly argued. Voisey's basic premise captures something important that requires explanation: a newspaper that covers in detail the coming and goings of out-of-town visitors or the results of local euchre tournaments does clearly operate in a different, more intimate realm

than its big-city counterparts. But if one adopts the view that newspaper editors endeavor to print stories that affect and will interest their readers, it might be suggested that the difference is more one of scale than of principle. The questions of what constitutes a community, who defines and speaks for it, whose interests are put first—and how journalism relates to all of these—apply in big cities and rural towns equally, though the answers differ in important ways. This is a useful book; a closer reading of the extensive current literature in journalism history would have made it a better one.

#### Notes

[1]. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New

York and London: Verso, rev. ed., 1991).

[2]. See, for example, James Carey, *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society* (New York: Routledge, 1992); David Paul Nord, *Communities of Journalism: A History of American Newspapers and Their Readers* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001); Richard L. Kaplan, *Politics and the American Press: The Rise of Objectivity, 1865-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers* (Basic Books, 1978); Kevin G. Barnhurst and John Nerone, *The Form of News: A History* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2001); and Jean K. Chalaby, *The Invention of Journalism* (Basingstoke, London and New York: Macmillan and St. Martin's Press, 1998).

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