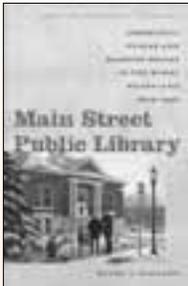


## Main Street Public Library: Community Places and Reading Spaces in the Rural Heartland, 1876–1956

Wayne A. Wiegand

(Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2011.  
244 p. Paper, \$25.95.)



Facing profound technological changes and ongoing budget constraints, public libraries today are increasingly re-examining their purpose. In *Main Street Public Library*, Wayne Wiegand looks at the roles rural libraries and their collections played in their communities. Valuable for documenting the history of this facet of small-town life, the work also informs the current debates on public libraries. To that end, the book may be of more interest to librarians and library supporters than historians.

*Main Street Public Library* looks in depth at four mid-western small-town libraries, chosen as typical, from 1876 to 1956: Sauk Centre, Minnesota; Osage, Iowa; Lexington, Michigan; and Rhinelander, Wisconsin. Wiegand analyzes holdings and circulation patterns and provides an overview of the major figures and critical decisions at each library.

A central theme of the book is the degree to which users, versus library professionals, determined the libraries' collections. Through recommended lists and training, the library profession upheld a standard emphasizing nonfiction and downplaying literature, especially popular fiction. Yet in all four libraries, fiction formed the core of the holdings and circulation, although more "frivolous" fiction, such as dime novels, was not often found on the shelves. The collections were driven by the wealthier, largely Protestant, business and professional class. Library services usually reinforced the values that community leaders held, rather than following state or national library guidelines.

Public libraries were also touted as being "arsenals of democracy," providing a broad array of viewpoints and materials to inform the citizenry. Wiegand finds little evidence to support this claim. The four libraries held few materials on important social issues and, even less often, provided books on opposing viewpoints or materials out of the political mainstream. For example, the Rhinelander library held few socialist- or labor-related works, even though it was a strong working-class community and had elected a Socialist mayor.

*Main Street Public Library* touches on many other aspects of rural libraries, including censorship, women's roles, social class, and a community's broader reading environment. Wiegand also provides a good theoretical overview

and underpinning for his work. He concludes that these small-town libraries served primarily as "agents of social harmony," and that their mission of offering negotiated public space was foremost. He argues that the libraries provided a gathering place for the community but also, through their collections and circulation, helped reinforce the community's dominant values and sense of identity.

Offering important insights, Wiegand's book raises many questions that further work could illuminate. He postulates that libraries were critically important in providing public space, yet his research focused most heavily on analyzing collections and circulation data. He does examine the use of the libraries for meetings, exhibits, school purposes and, in at least one case, a tourist attraction. However, a deeper historical look at the public-space concept, as well as library connections to the broader reading environment (for example, newspapers, materials distributed at churches and unions, and book sales), would help advance our understanding of library roles in reading, literacy, and community building. Some of the questions this work suggests but does not fully answer include: Were these libraries "agents of social harmony" or, in fact, agents of the existing social order, reinforcing the values of community elites? Was the reading and literary environment in the broader community more important than actual library use? Were the libraries first and foremost purveyors of entertainment?

Wiegand demonstrates that many of the deeply held assumptions regarding library roles, such as advancing education and democracy, were probably less significant than is commonly believed. His research suggests that providing communal values and space has always been primary. Many librarians today consider these roles as central to the future of libraries. As physical collections shrink and virtual collections grow, public libraries are turning again to providing communal spaces, virtual environments, and community outreach to remain relevant. These new directions may just reflect the ongoing, historic role of public libraries.

Extending these conclusions, though, one has to wonder if the idea of a public library, at least in Main Street America, was and is more important than the services provided. Is the primary value of the public library simply to serve as the embodiment of a particular view of ourselves as an enlightened, progressive citizenry? As Archibald MacLeish, the Librarian of Congress, once stated, "What is more important in a library than anything else—than everything else—is the fact that it exists."

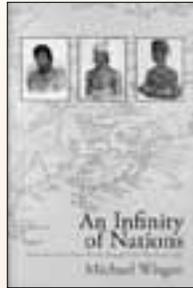
*Reviewed by Stu Wilson, formerly the executive director of the Friends of the Hennepin County Library and vice-president of the Friends of the Saint Paul Public Library. He currently*

serves as board president of Coffee House Press and on the advisory committee of the Minnesota Book Awards. He holds history and art history degrees from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and the University of Oregon.

## An Infinity of Nations: How the Native New World Shaped Early North America

Michael Witgen

(Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012. 450 p. Cloth, \$45.00.)



Michael Witgen's book charts a useful course for viewing the earliest written history of the Lake Superior and Upper Mississippi region, one in which the stories of native people are central to the narrative—contrary to long tradition making them part of American colonial history. While several notable works have made a similar point, Witgen's book extends and revises these earlier examples in important ways.

In 1962 ethnohistorian Harold Hickerson's influential work *The Southwestern Chippewa* applied a model of contest-for-resources to the interactions between Dakota and Ojibwe (Anishinaabe) to explain the oft-described, though overemphasized, wars between the two peoples. Hickerson suggested that the treaty line the two agreed upon at Prairie du Chien in 1825, which cut diagonally across the present state of Minnesota, marked the center of an overlapping region, one little inhabited, rich in resources, and desired by both peoples. Hickerson called it a "contested zone," providing alternative explanations in cultural ecology for warfare that Witgen notes was described in the nineteenth century as "rooted in the savage nature of Indian identity." Hickerson's work was one of the first to propose a history of the Minnesota region in which native people were central to the narrative.

In another influential work, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815* (1991), historian Richard White proposed a new way of looking at the regional interactions between tribes and with Europeans. He described these as taking place in a "middle ground," a social space in which people interacted in a fluid way, based in part on cultural beliefs but also reflecting the improvised creation of new forms and institutions.

It may very well be that White's central metaphor was influenced in part by Hickerson's work, in which he noted in passing that the Dakota and Anishinaabe "contested zone" was sometimes called by native people "the middle ground."

The term reflected native metaphors of relationships being like a road that had to be kept clear of rocks and fallen trees, representing impediments to peace; unlike White's phrase, however, this Dakota-Anishinaabe middle ground was a real physical space. It was also a wider piece of ground than the "contested zone," embracing regions to the north at places such as Leech Lake, long part of the Dakota homelands. The Anishinaabe had entered this region generations previously at the invitation of the Dakota, as part of an alliance system that began in the seventeenth century, if not much earlier.

It is precisely the deep origins of this nineteenth-century Dakota-Anishinaabe story that are the meat of Witgen's book. While influenced by Richard White, he crafts a narrative in which the story of the middle ground between the French and native people is less interesting than the interaction among native groups. Witgen calls for a recognition of a native New World, isolated from French and British empire. The alliance between Anishinaabe and Dakota peoples is this book's central story.

While Richard White handled the role of the Dakota in the region badly—even to the point of insisting on calling them "Sioux"—Witgen writes about the Dakota with more familiarity, making an effort to see events from their point of view. Nonetheless, the central actors in Witgen's narrative are the Anishinaabe. Witgen demonstrates their ability to be "shape-shifters," capable of appearing in different guises and identities and transforming themselves when necessary to survive in the changing cultural, social, and political world of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Unfortunately, Witgen appears to largely abandon any continuity of Anishinaabe history at his narrative's strongest point in the mid-eighteenth century. His story then becomes episodic, shifting to several later contexts when the agendas of native people were at the forefront of history. It is for this reason that the book ends with a discussion of Louis Riel, the Metis leader executed by the Canadian government in 1885.

Still, Witgen's absorbing narrative suggests many fruitful ideas. It makes clear that the native New World in the western Great Lakes provides rich possibilities for many narrative threads and does not need to be justified by its traditional subservience to the American colonial story.

*Reviewed by Bruce M. White, an anthropologist and historian whose newest book is the co-authored Mni Sota Makoce: The Land of the Dakota, to be published by MHS Press in Fall 2012.*



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