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## Rock Bottom: An American Heartland Farm-Town and Family From Settlement Through the Great Depression (Book Review)

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mark of a superb craftsman, and there is a quietness in his prose that makes O'Connor's stories seem noisy in comparison. Yet like O'Connor's stories, Woiwode's reveal the intrusion of grace in the lives

of his characters. O'Connor, as she has said, shouts to the hard of hearing in her audience. Woiwode speaks *sotto voce* most of the time. But the message reaches the back rows just the same.

*Rock Bottom: An American Heartland Farm-Town and Family From Settlement Through the Great Depression*, by John M. Wilkinson (Privately printed, 1993). 226 pages, paperback, \$14.50. Reviewed by Louis Y. Van Dyke, Professor of History.

John Wilkinson received a B.A. degree in economics from the University of Minnesota and a graduate degree in public administration from Harvard University. After concluding a varied career which included being a U.S. Army officer, an economist in both the private and public sector, and an author on various topics on economics and public policy, Wilkinson decided to write the history of his home town, Rock Falls, Iowa, (population 140) from its founding in 1855 through 1940. When he related to an acquaintance the story of his town and its slow but inevitable decline, the rejoinder was that perhaps the town should have been named "Rock Bottom." Hence the title.

The book is really part history, part memoir, and part polemic. The history of the village's first sixty-five years is compressed into eighty-one pages. Wilkinson's tale is the familiar story of many mid-Western towns. There is a promising beginning as the local economy is sustained by the developing farm economy. Eventually, technology in the form of improved transportation and communication causes the village to lose out to the neighboring town, in this case Mason City. Businesses close, people move away in search of opportunities elsewhere, and the village fades into obscurity. Indeed, as a young man, Wilkinson himself leaves never to return.

The bulk of Wilkinson's narrative is devoted to his first twenty years in Rock Falls between the wars. We

do get acquainted with the young Wilkinson, his life, loves, hopes, dreams and frustrations, and his father appears as a character of the first magnitude. However, the rest of his family as well as other citizens of Rock Falls remain two-dimensional. We need to know more about the characters who ran the businesses in Rock Falls and the farmers who were their customers if the book is to be truly a history of Rock Falls.

In the last few pages, Wilkinson proposes a unique solution to the problem of lack of basic services to the rural elderly in villages such as Rock Falls. These small towns should be designated "open retirement homes" composed of clusters of twenty-five or more homes with a center which would provide basic services such as citizens in urban areas enjoy. He argues that a rural hamlet should be a "retirement home without walls."

While Wilkinson might have been inspired to propose a solution to rural poverty by his Rock Falls experience, his argument is really not part of the story of "Rock Bottom" and is rather the material for a separate article in an appropriate journal. The manuscript could use some close editing as typographical errors abound.

The book is written in a chatty, informal style, and those who have grown up in a mid-Western village would have no trouble relating to the story of "Rock Bottom," substituting the name of their own town and reliving John Wilkinson's experiences.

*Contemporary Literary Theory: A Christian Appraisal*, Clarence Walhout and Leland Ryken, eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991). 314 pages. \$19.99 paperback. Reviewed by Dr. John Van Rys, Assistant Professor of English.

Five or six years ago, before I became a semi-respectable professor, I was a doctoral student in English literature at a Canadian university, struggling not just with a dissertation but also with theoretical debates "raging" (as debates always do, it seems) in the esoteric ivory towers of English departments from Alaska to Zanzibar. During this time I had also (due to my under 30 innocence) been drafted, by default I think, into the eldership of the small congregation I called home. Again by default (my schedule was flexible, while other elders had real work), I ended up going to a classis meeting or two. During a meal break

at one such meeting, I stood in line politely listening to an elderly elder of the greased head decade. Referring to debates over evolution, women, and the age of the universe (and the relationship between the three), he remarked something to this effect, either assuming my agreement or daring me to disagree: "If the Bible says it, then that's what it says and that's what we've got to believe." I think he was referring to either 24 hour periods or wearing hats, but I can't remember. However, being an intellectual coward as well as a meek debater, and sensing that my orthodoxy was at stake (as was my meal), I kept my mouth shut.