

The Canadian Prairie West: A Review of Recent Studies

David Breen

Volume 11, Number 2, Spring 1982

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad11_2rv04

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Department of History of the University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0044-5851 (print)

1712-7432 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Breen, D. (1982). The Canadian Prairie West:: A Review of Recent Studies. *Acadiensis*, 11(2), 117-129.

— their culture and traditions. These are now being preserved in print, and one hopes that this represents not a memorial to something which is soon to disappear, but a new element in the life of a vital and evolving community.

HUGH TUCK

The Canadian Prairie West: A Review of Recent Studies

In a perceptive essay that assessed the state of western Canadian historiography in the mid-1970s, Peter Ward noted that the new work on the west strongly manifested the established presence of a new generation of scholars.¹ This is even more apparent in the studies that have appeared in the past several years. The maturation and promise of prairie historiography bodes well for the larger field of historical enquiry in Canada, for as our understanding of regional development matures, our comprehension of the national experience will be further refined.²

It seems appropriate that the history of the fur trade, the subject that first drew scholars' attention to the western interior, has once more emerged as the most innovative field of west-centered historical enquiry. In the mid-1970s several studies set fur trade historiography on new paths. Arthur Ray appraised the Indians' role in the trade and greatly refined our understanding of the economic relationship between the parties involved;³ John Foster, Frits

1 Peter Ward, "Western Canada: Recent Historical Writing", *Queen's Quarterly*, LXXXV (Summer 1978), pp. 271-288. The helpful comments of colleagues Peter Ward, John Foster, Keith Ralston and Catherine LeGrand are gratefully acknowledged.

2 Nowhere is the vitality and direction of regional enquiry in the prairies more apparent than in the activities of the Canadian Plains Research Center at the University of Regina. Established in 1973, the Center maintains a computerized inventory of prairie researchers and research projects in all disciplines. A research board encourages and coordinates funding and expertise for the development of long-term projects. The Center also sponsors conferences and symposia on topics of special relevance to prairie studies. The Center publishes conference proceedings, occasional papers and manuscripts, as well as a quarterly newsletter, the *Canadian Plains Bulletin*, designed to keep those interested in prairie studies informed of current developments. The growing importance of the Center in prairie studies is apparent in the contents of its semi-annual interdisciplinary journal, *Prairie Forum*. Recent contributors have included Patrick Dunae, John W. Bennett, Alan Artibise, Doug Owsram, P.L. McCormick and Olive Dickason, and some of the subjects presented are: prairie architecture, transportation and western settlement, the Canadian West in British boys' literature, the Red River resistance, the evolution of prairie towns and cities to 1930 and longitudinal research in cultural ecology. The presence of the Plains Research Center, coupled with other activities such as the Calgary-based Western Studies Conference, provides a foundation for regional study unmatched elsewhere in English Canada.

3 Arthur J. Ray, *Indians in the Fur Trade: Their Role as Trappers, Hunters, and Middlemen in the Lands Southwest of Hudson Bay, 1660-1870* (Toronto, 1974).

Pannekoek and Sylvia Van Kirk focused upon the social interaction between Indians and Europeans to reveal a complex new indigenous society in the western interior with roots in the different traditions of the Northwest and Hudson's Bay Companies.⁴ Since then, research has moved dramatically forward to encompass a wider range of topics and disciplines. This achievement is best revealed in the recently published papers of the Third North American Fur Trade Conference, Carol M. Judd and Arthur J. Ray eds., *Old Trails and New Directions* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1980). Focusing on Indian maps, Malcolm Lewis argues that the European readiness to dismiss or ignore Indian maps stems from our failure to understand Indian cartographic conventions; he points out that Indian map-makers were more sophisticated than we have realized. In a biography of the Carrier Chief Kwah, Charles Bishop tries to come to grips with that formidable obstacle — how to use effectively sources that come from the bias of an alien culture. Despite this difficulty, the more substantive revisionism is found in the study of native society and social history. Looking specifically at the James Bay Cree, Toby Morantz challenges the popular and scholarly convention that the arrival of Europeans quickly revolutionized the material culture of the Indians; this study must lead scholars to reassess the impact of European intrusion upon the life-style of 18th and early 19th century Indian communities. Employing the methodology of the historical demographer, John Nicks adds substance to the generalizations commonly applied to the main component of the Hudson's Bay Company's white labour force, the Orkneymen. His study reveals as much about the social setting in the Orkneys as it does about the company's recruitment practice. In an article entitled, "Linguistic Solitudes and Changing Social Categories," Jennifer Brown addresses the vexed problem of what labels to affix to the offspring of white and Indian parents and how to use and interpret the "native" categories. We are reminded that these terms are culture-bound, that usage changes over time, and that "the trickiest terms to decode may be those we assume we understand."

The work of one author in this collection must be singled out for particular attention. Arthur Ray's article "Indians as Consumers in the Eighteenth Century," centres on the central issue in fur trade studies, the relationship between European and Indian. It is a theme that Ray has pursued in numerous articles and in two books.⁵ At the leading edge of revisionist statement, Ray has

4 John E. Foster "The Origins of the Mixed Bloods in the Canadian West", Frits Pannekoek, "A Probe into the Demographic Structure of Nineteenth Century Red River" and Sylvia Van Kirk, "The Custom of the Country": An Examination of Fur Trade Marriage Practices", all in Lewis H. Thomas, ed., *Essays on Western History* (Edmonton, 1976).

5 In addition to the works cited above, see Arthur J. Ray and Donald Freeman, *Give Us Good Measure: an economic analysis of relations between the Indians and the Hudson's Bay Company before 1763* (Toronto, 1978).

elaborated the argument initially advanced by E.E. Rich that the Indian was hardly the innocent, dependent or passive trade participant that most earlier writers assumed or implied.⁶ Making extensive use of Hudson's Bay Company business records and account books and drawing upon models from economic geography and economic anthropology, Ray has examined the trade relationship more closely than anyone else. He presents the Indians as hard-nosed, sophisticated traders who understood how to play off rival traders to advantage, and he argues that it was the Indians who set the standards of quality and acceptability of trade goods. Ray's thesis has not gone without challenge. Perhaps the most controversial aspect of his analysis, a subject he has examined most completely in *'Give Us Good Measure,'* concerns the mechanism of market price. After careful analysis of the factor's "overplus", Ray and Freeman find that there was room for price adjustments that could balance the Indians' inelastic demand and resistance to price fluctuation on the one side, with the necessity of the trader to function within the fluctuating European market economy on the other. In so arguing the authors reject the thesis of the earlier revisionists, Rich and Abraham Rotstein,⁷ that in the fur trade before 1800 the price mechanism did not work.

If it is the nature of economic relations between the fur trade participants that has provoked the most substantial debate so far, the articles collected in *Old Trails and New Directions* reveal that it is in the complementary area of social relationships where we might anticipate the most exciting research over the next decade. Jennifer Brown's new study *Strangers in Blood: Fur Trade Families in Indian Country* (Vancouver, University of British Columbia Press, 1980) stands as one of the studies that will help to define, reconstruct and reinterpret fur trade society. Brown offers a comparative assessment of the domestic relationships that developed within the Northwest and Hudson's Bay Companies. In conceptualizing fur trade society as an incomplete social sphere and indentifying the traders as a European fragment, Brown adds a Hartzian dimension to her analysis.⁸ The traders are viewed as men confronting an isolated foreign environment within the restricted and distinctive environments of their respective companies. Brown sees the company experience creating two kinds of company men that in the end defined their social status and the character of problems that faced their descendants. Sylvia Van Kirk's *'Many Tender Ties': Women in Fur-Trade Society, 1670-1870* (Winnipeg, Watson & Dwyer Publishing Ltd., 1980) represents the conclusion of her pioneering work on fur trade family life and more particularly, the alliances with Indian women that

6 E.E. Rich, "Trade Habits and Economic Motivation Among the Indians of North America", *Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science*, XXVI (1960), pp. 35-53.

7 Abraham Rotstein, "Innis: The Alchemy of Fur and Wheat", *Journal of Canadian Studies*, XII (Winter 1977), pp. 6-13.

8 See Louis Hartz, *The Founding of New Societies* (New York, 1964).

were the central social aspect of the fur traders' progress through the western interior. While the analysis has been refined, the thesis in essence remains that of her earliest articles on the subject. Like all of the preceding works, Van Kirk's study reflects the range, direction and depth of fur trade historiography over the past half-decade. It also reveals the central place of the Hudson's Bay Company Archives. The transfer of the Company archives from Beaver House in London to the Provincial Archives of Manitoba in 1974 and the renaissance of fur trade studies are not unrelated.

For the chronological period covered by the fur trade, Indian history, or ethno-history as it is now commonly known, is an integral part of the larger field of fur trade studies and shows the sophistication now characteristic of this wider body of enquiry. However, as one moves forward in time to consider indigenous peoples through the settlement period and beyond, the range and depth of analysis diminishes. Perhaps the impeding factor has something to do with the perception by scholars that the settlement frontier represented a much more direct and pervasively destructive force to native society and did not seem to have manifested the same creative relationship between Indian and White.

What is available of a scholarly nature is owed largely to the energy and pioneering efforts of one man, Hugh A. Dempsey, curator of the Department of History at the Glenbow Alberta Institute. Dempsey's recent work *Charcoal's World* (Saskatoon, Western Producer Prairie Books, 1978) follows very much in the pattern of his earlier study, *Crowfoot, Chief of the Blackfeet* (Edmonton, Hurtig Publishers, 1972). In both cases the author has taken a prominent and controversial Indian figure and has endeavoured to show that there are "two sides to situations involving Indians and whites." As in the earlier volume, Dempsey challenges traditional interpretation, but in bringing the reader into Charcoal's world and in adding definition to the Plains Indians' evolving relationship with the North West Mounted Police, Dempsey is compelled to rely heavily on legends and oral tradition which, due to the variables of time and human memory, are not always empirically valid. The author must therefore interweave the probable and the possible with a somewhat sparse pattern of verifiable fact. In the process he leaves the critical reader sympathetic but uneasy.

As editor of two hitherto little-known and unpublished Indian manuscripts, Dempsey also is the force behind the publication of Mike Mountain Horse's, *My People the Bloods* (Calgary, Glenbow Alberta Institute and Blood Tribal Council, 1979), and Joseph Dion's *My Tribe the Crees* (Calgary, Glenbow Alberta Institute, 1979). Just as Dempsey has striven in his own works, these accounts also present history through the eyes of the Indian, but with several important differences. These books stand as appropriate sequels to the studies of Crowfoot and Charcoal — they are histories by Indian authors and by Indians of a particular generation. With Mountain Horse and Dion we go from Crow-

foot to the next generation of Indians growing up on the reservations to see what it meant to be a first-generation Treaty Indian.

Notwithstanding Dempsey's estimable contributions, the historiography of the Plains Indian in the post-fur trade period is not far removed from where it was a generation ago. This is apparent in the decision of the Canadian Plains Research Center to publish a revised edition of David Mandelbaum's study *The Plains Cree: An ethnographic historical and comparative study* (Regina, Canadian Plains Research Center, 1979). Originally completed in 1936 as a doctoral dissertation, the study still stands unrivaled in the field. Though a small part of the work has been superseded by more recent assessments of the Indians in the fur trade, this reconstruction of an aboriginal culture remains a key source for the re-evaluation that eventually must come.

The most extensive literature on the transition period between the fur trade and settlement frontiers is centred upon the Indians' partial relatives, the Métis, and particularly upon the western rebellions. During the last half decade two authors have argued for a reappraisal of the principal Métis leaders. If we are to better understand the plains Métis and their resistance, George Woodcock has urged in *Gabriel Dumont: The Métis Chief and His Lost World* (Edmonton, Hurtig Publishers, 1975) that we should shift our focus from Louis Riel to that much more representative Métis figure, Gabriel Dumont. At the same time addressing himself to a larger theme, Woodcock sees something particularly Canadian in the popular and historiographical preference for Riel the martyr and our rejection of the free natural man of the plains, Dumont. In *Louis 'David' Riel: Prophet of the New World* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1979) Thomas Flanagan also urges a shift of emphasis. The perspective in which he places Riel is at once narrower and broader. Riel's religious ideas are set in the larger context of oppressed peoples' millenarian movements, a theme well-developed in Latin American historiography. In maintaining that the Métis leader's religious rantings are not to be understood as a symptom of mental disorder, but rather the mark of a remarkably "typical" millenialist leader, Flanagan challenges the conventional view of Riel's "deranged" leadership in the second rebellion. If Flanagan does not really answer the question of Riel's sanity, he does provide a framework to evaluate the religious dimension of Riel's personality and leadership.

In a novel approach to the western rebellions, William Oppen's *The Riel Rebellions: A Cartographic History* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1979) contends that historians have failed to give proper attention to one important body of source material. Oppen reminds historians that since maps, like other documents, reflect the biases, assumptions and opinions of contemporary viewers, the use of archival cartographica must not be neglected. Though revealing little of the interpretive possibilities, this fine collection of rebellion maps may stimulate others to think more creatively about their value.

Few studies of the transition period following the decline of the fur trade and preceding general agrarian settlement have looked substantially beyond the rebellions. However, Lewis H. Thomas' classic study, *The Struggle for Responsible Government in the North-West Territories: 1870-1897* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, second edition, 1978), has recently been republished with a new chapter discussing the administration to 1970 of the remaining federal territories. Demonstrating the continuity of the imperial-colonial relationship that to the present generates regional discontent and alienation, Thomas has carried the old theme forward. J.G. MacGregor's new book, *Senator Hardisty's Prairies, 1840-1889* (Saskatoon, Western Producer Prairie Books, 1978), also pushes the rebellions to the background and looks more broadly at the Territorial period. His view is centred about the life and times of one prominent prairie figure of the day. Through the activities of Richard Hardisty, a Hudson's Bay Company employee in the prairie west from 1849 who progressed through the western posts from apprentice post master to chief factor of the Saskatchewan district in 1872 before commencing a political career in the mid 1880s, we have an attractive window through which to view the great fur company during the critical transition years. Hardisty's period began with York boats on the North Saskatchewan, progressed to include Red River carts on the Carlton Trail, changed to steamboats on the North Saskatchewan and ended with prairie settlers arriving by rail. MacGregor's study suggests the rich possibilities awaiting scholars who would follow him into the area.

The work of Thomas, MacGregor and other earlier writers is nicely balanced by Doug Owram's timely study of the western interior as viewed from outside, *Promise of Eden: The Canadian Expansionist Movement and the Idea of the West, 1856-1900* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1980). Through his examination of the change in the image of the western interior from a sub-arctic wilderness or barren wasteland to a fertile garden, and through his assessment of the role and motivations of the Ontario expansionists in bringing about the transformation, Owram has strengthened our understanding of the east-west relationship during the critical decades between 1850 and 1900. While the greater part of this study centres on Ontario expansionism, Owram also argues that the garden image was oversold. In the end this produced a feeling of betrayal as western settlers came to realize that the image did not square with reality and thus became an important factor in the development of western alienation and self-consciousness. However, Owram may have overestimated the significance of Ontario expansionist propaganda. The cattlemen of the western foothills, for example, are one group that cannot easily be fitted into this interpretation.

The extensive literature on the settlement period and the homestead experience continues to expand, though with little innovation. Settler reminiscences continue to predominate and one of the best to appear recently is L.H. Neatby's

Chronicle of a Prairie Family (Saskatoon, Western Producer Prairie Books, 1979). Of a slightly different genre, but of equal orthodoxy is the contemporary account, often with a new introduction or foreword that provides a larger interpretive context. Two superior examples of this type will be widely read in western history seminars at universities: these are Marcel Durieux, *Ordinary Heroes: The Journal of a French Pioneer in Alberta*, edited by R. Motut and M. Legris (Edmonton, University of Alberta Press, 1980), with an introduction by L.G. Thomas, and Georgina Binnie-Clark, *Wheat and Woman* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1979) introduced by Susan Jackel. The latter is the autobiographical account of a woman would-be farmer and thus it is a revealing document on the status of women in prairie farm society at the turn of the century. One of the few accounts that seeks to cut through the romanticism that surrounds the prairie homestead reminiscence literature is Myrna Kostash's reinterpretation of the settlement experience of western Canada's Ukrainian settlers, *All of Baba's Children* (Edmonton, Hurtig Publishers, 1977). While enriching the existing body of literature on the settlement frontier, these books nonetheless do not take us much beyond the fine homestead reminiscence written in the 1950s by J.G. MacGregor.⁹ The time has come for the social historian to take us further, past the romance, myth and stereotype that surround this phase of western development.

As much a part of the settlement era as the homesteader's shack was the one-room prairie school, and the settler accounts speak volumes about the socio-cultural importance of this institution. Apart from the much acclaimed book by John Cheryk,¹⁰ work in the field has remained thin and is also characterized by reminiscence accounts. The recent collection of articles published by David C. Jones, Nancy M. Sheehan and Robert M. Stamp, *Shaping the Schools of the Canadian West* (Calgary, Detselig Enterprises Ltd., 1979) suggests that this is about to change. Ranging from traditional subjects such as school-state relationships and minority education, to more current topics, such as the school and farm women's organizations and moral education in the early prairie school house, these articles add some depth to our understanding of this critical institution in western development. These articles reflect the research now underway in the Education Foundation departments in western universities; they may also be a function of the gradual Canadianization of western education faculties.

The unshakable belief in the value of education on the part of many prairie homesteaders led them to direct their energies to numerous schemes of self-improvement outside of the school. One of the attempts to bring education and culture to small prairie towns is the subject of Sheilagh Jameson's *Chautauqua in Canada* (Calgary, Glenbow-Alberta Institute, 1979). Another book that reveals the missionary zeal, indeed educational evangelism, of those pioneers

9 J.G. MacGregor, *Northwest of Sixteen* (Edmonton, 1968). The book was first published in 1958.

10 J. Cheryk, *The Little White School House* (Saskatoon, 1968).

who worked to build a new world on the frontier is Robert England's *Living, Learning, Remembering: Memoirs of Robert England* (Vancouver, Centre for Continuing Education, U.B.C., 1980). A thoughtful review of a half-century's involvement in extension and adult education, the book is also of particular historiographical interest because England was the author of two important early works on settlement and immigration.¹¹ England's reflections underline a dimension of the reform tradition in the prairie west that has not been properly assessed, and they serve to remind us that the social history of western education has yet to attract the attention it deserves.

In considering the period of prairie settlement, the popular inclination is to think in terms of the prairie homesteader. But western literature of the past decade has drawn attention to the fact that this was also a period of rapid urbanization and that the urban frontier awaits informed assessment. The newest volume from the Plains Research Center, Alan F.J. Artibise, ed., *Town and City: Aspects of Western Canadian Urban Development*, (Regina, Canadian Plains Research Center, 1981) points the way. The articles collected here bring together most of the scholars who are working in the field of western urban history. It is apparent first of all that the research, like the work outside this volume, is concentrated in the pre-1920 period. The articles centred upon the emergence and growth of cities reveal also the underlying strength that comes from the more substantial historiographical base supporting this dimension of western urban history. One of the more promising trends to be noted here as well is a shift of interest from the larger urban centers to smaller communities where the town-building process can be assessed, thus taking us beyond the antiquarian or strictly local studies that are still characteristic.

While this volume reveals the debt that the field owes to Alan Artibise, the most recent prairie book in the series initiated and edited by Artibise, the "History of Canadian Cities", underlines the continuing dependence on his remarkable energy and direction. Presented in a popular style with an illustrated format, Max Foran's *Calgary: An Illustrated History* (Toronto, James Lorimer and Company, 1978) is an interpretive and comprehensive account that not only provides the best history of Calgary to date, but also enriches our understanding of the larger Canadian urban experience.

Just as one is reminded that urban growth was an integral part of western settlement and development, it is important to remember that from the outset there was also a significant non-agricultural workforce and it was not a workforce confined to the cities. Two new books that examine the condition of such workers on the western industrial frontier and resource hinterland and add measurably to the region's substantial labour history are David Bercuson's

11 Robert England, *The Central European Immigrant in Canada* (Toronto, 1929) and *The Colonization of Western Canada: A Study of Contemporary Land Settlement, 1896-1934* (Toronto, 1936).

Fools and Wise Men: The Rise and Fall of the One Big Union, (Toronto, McGraw-Hill Ryerson Ltd., 1978) and Donald Avery's *'Dangerous Foreigners': European Immigrant Workers and Labour Radicalism in Canada, 1896-1932*, (Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1979). Bercuson's study of the One Big Union emerges from his earlier work on western labour and the Winnipeg General Strike. It provides the first full account of a movement hitherto little-known outside the context of the 1919 strikes, and is essential to any comprehension of labour activity in the west in the interwar period. Offering a broader focus upon the isolated immigrant worker on the resource frontier, Avery's work is an appropriate companion piece. In advancing the thesis that isolation and alienation led directly to radicalism, Avery demonstrates the close relationship between federal immigration policy and the need for cheap labour on the part of the railroads and the coal and lumber barons. While these studies lend a further dimension to western labour history, they are nonetheless cast in the traditional mould. Western labour historians have yet to move extensively away from the study of political theory and labour organization. The emergence in Atlantic and central Canada of the "new" labour history or working-class history that is a function of the drift of the larger discipline towards "social" history, is yet to be strongly reflected in the work of western labour historians.

While we know something about the men labouring on western railways or in western coal mines, we know practically nothing about the thousands who worked for hire on prairie farms. An encouraging move into this void has been made by Joe Cherwinski. In addressing the training of agricultural labour, he also highlights a number of the broader questions that remain to be considered, which it may be hoped, will lead to a wider-ranging assessment.¹² Though not the central focus of his investigation, the measure of the hired-hand's importance and the potential for research in this area is also apparent in John Thompson's fine study, *The Harvests of War: The Prairie West, 1914-1918* (Toronto, McClelland and Stewart Ltd., 1978).

Thompson has struck upon another important gap in western Canadian historical literature, a gap made all the more apparent by the substantial scholarship focused on either side of the immediate war period. His decision has been well-rewarded, for he has successfully undermined a good many of the generalizations common to those numerous studies that theorize about the war's impact on subsequent agrarian and labour unrest. The legacy of the war years was not urbanization and industrialization so much as wornout land and an even greater dependence upon the production of wheat, all the product of misguided policy. This careful assessment of the social and economic consequences of the war years adds to our understanding of the post-war farmers' revolt. It is complemented by a quite different book with a much narrower focus. James L.

12 W.J.C. Cherwinski, "Wooden Horses and Rubber Cows: Training British Agricultural Labour for the Canadian Prairies, 1890-1930", *Historical Papers*, 1980, pp. 133-154.

McWilliams and R. James Steel, *The Suicide Battalion* (Edmonton, Hurtig Publishers, 1978), the narrative history of the South Saskatchewan Regiment (the 46th Canadian Infantry Battalion) reveals the unspeakable carnage these men of the prairies faced in Flanders. This history bespeaks an experience that the men demobilized at Moose Jaw on 9 June 1919 could never forget, and which would contribute significantly to the mentality of prairie radicalism.

There can be no substantive grasp of the larger pattern of prairie history without a close working knowledge of prairie agriculture. Of this very broad subject, the assessment to date has been mainly one-dimensional, focusing on the economics of and the political response to, the grain trade. To a body of literature anchored by the classic works of MacGibbon, Britnell and Fowke can be added an indispensable new reference work, C.F. Wilson, *A Century of Canadian Grain: Government Policy to 1951* (Saskatoon, Western Producer Prairie Books, 1978). Provided here is a detailed, though purely descriptive, narrative of policy formation. It begins with a comprehensive survey of the period to 1930, followed by a thorough account of the operations of the re-established Wheat Board from 1935 to 1951, by which time the basic structure of today's industry had been established. An aspect of the prairie farmers' response to the wheat economy and, in the larger sense, of the western hinterland's protest against the economic control of central Canada, is developed in Ian MacPherson's *Each For All: A History of the Co-operative Movement in English Canada, 1900-1945* (Toronto, Macmillan Company of Canada Ltd., 1979). Adding important background to the agrarian revolt in the west, the MacPherson book introduces the people and the hopes of those who toiled for the cause and points to the need for those research studies that eventually will lead to a social history of prairie agriculture.

The possibilities for productive research on the grain trade have not been exhausted,¹³ but the gaps in related areas of agricultural history are readily apparent. Where are our studies of science and technology in agriculture, or the regional studies that examine the progress of agriculture from cattle range to agri-business? What role has agricultural journalism played in the diffusion of knowledge within the farm community? We have yet to explore the important history of animal science in Canada and the linkage between changing popular attitudes towards nutrition and farm management practices. One critical factor, the improved farm productivity that came in the form of mechanical invention through the intrusion of the industrial revolution, has also received only limited attention. And no one has looked yet at a third great source of productivity increase, the bio-chemical revolution of the last half-century. The distinguishing characteristic of this factor is its direct connection with government-sponsored agricultural research. The implications are obvious but important and underline the need for an examination of the organization, diffusion, acceptance and

13 Dan Morgan, *Merchants of Grain* (New York, 1979).

politics of state-directed agricultural research.

If the history of prairie agriculture is still to receive its due, outside of some promising work on railroad entrepreneurs, western business history retains an open and largely undrawn account. Even the most traditional approach to historical enquiry, the biography, has not favoured the great western entrepreneurs. Calgary cattleman and meat-packer, Pat Burns, and the ubiquitous Winnipeg financier and land speculator, Augustus Nanton, are but two such giants of prairie commerce who beg serious assessment. John Kendle's recent study of a Manitoba politician, *John Bracken: A Political Biography* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1979) does enrich the literature on prairie politics, but at the same time it also points to a critical area of western history that demands attention. As old as prairie settlement, the debate over resource control continues. Kendle's chapters on Manitoba's tortuous negotiations in the late 1920s to have Ottawa transfer resource control to the prairie provinces so that the Bracken government could proceed with plans to exploit Manitoba's hydro-electric potential, add to our knowledge of this vexed but little-studied question and underline the prospect of research in this field.

In at least one area contributions to western business history have been forthcoming. While national preoccupation with the post 1973 energy crisis has not yet led to a serious historical assessment of the petroleum industry in Canada, it has brought forth a flurry of popular pieces. The better of these include Peter Foster's examination of the Canadian oil-establishment and Joseph Fitzgerald's work on the Alberta oil sands.¹⁴ Philip Smith's *The Treasure Seekers: The Men Who Built Home Oil* (Toronto, Macmillan Company of Canada Ltd., 1978) is an account of one of the leading independent Canadian oil producers and is also the best of the petroleum company histories. Though the focus is on only one company, from the Turner Valley oil strike to the mid-1970s, the book offers wider insights into the entrepreneurial spirit peculiar to the oil industry, the difficulties that plagued small capital-starved Canadian companies, and the struggle to develop markets and construct national oil policies.

The public attention drawn to the petroleum industry and the province in which it is barricaded has also led others, including the sociologists and political scientists who are the main contributors to Carlo Caldarola, ed., *Society and Politics in Alberta: Research Papers* (Toronto, Methuen, 1979), to try to interpret this alienated community to the nation outside. The results are mixed, as provocative insights are interspersed with fancy methodologies that repeat old truths; still this is a good starting place for those who would like to know more about "Texas North." In a complementary but more expansive assessment, sociologist J.D. House in *The Last of the Free Enterprisers: the Oilmen of*

¹⁴ Peter Foster, *The Blue-Eyed Sheiks: The Canadian Oil Establishment*, (Don Mills, 1979); J. Joseph Fitzgerald, *Black Gold With Grit: The Alberta Oil Sands* (Vancouver, 1978).

Calgary (Toronto, Macmillan Company of Canada, 1980) offers an excellent description of how the contemporary industry functions. He also gives a challenging if less convincing analysis of the mentality of the people who operate within the petroleum corporate world.

That prairie historiography has reached a point where the quantity and quality of specific subject monographs are at least sufficient to support more sophisticated works of synthesis that deal with broader themes, is suggested in the appearance of two recent books. Written with heavy reliance on secondary sources, John Richards and Larry Pratt's *Prairie Capitalism: Power and Influence in the New West* (Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1979), and Roger Gibbins' *Prairie Politics and Society: Regionalism in Decline* (Toronto, Butterworth and Company, 1980), are attempts to identify and interpret the primary features of prairie regional experience. Richards and Pratt see the growth of public entrepreneurship as a main theme in the political and economic development of the post 1905 prairie west. Generated by left and right-leaning populist movements, this trend is seen to lead away from dependent regional capitalism toward a situation where the provincial governments in co-operation with an "arriviste" local bourgeoisie, can act as a creative and independent force. Gibbins' interpretive path takes quite a different direction. Western alienation and the particular regional economy notwithstanding, he sees the predominant feature of prairie politics and society being that of integration into the Canadian mainstream. Quite apart from the success of the thesis being argued in each case, these works indicate the maturation of prairie historiography. It is not unreasonable to anticipate that they are the portent of things to come.

That prairie studies have reached this point, is not at all to imply there is not far to go. Much of the research, its attractive methodology and insightful comment not to be denied, still turns inward upon itself. The focus on the region from within the region can lead only so far. Such evaluation must be complemented by the search for context and meaning through reference outside. In the past scholars often have sought such balance by looking to the abundant and ever-developing literature on the American west. No doubt the productive energy and assessment from that quarter will remain a continuing source of inspiration and measure. Students of western history are less accustomed, however, to look beyond American studies, and they are even less inclined to range past the broader patterns of western European historical enquiry. While not likely to offer so many of the close parallels that frequently make western American comparisons so attractive, it seems that we might broaden our attention to include scholarship underway elsewhere in the Americas. In the past decade Latin American historiography has developed dramatically in countries south of the Rio Grande and at numerous American universities that have scarcely heard of Canadian history.¹⁵ Historians of western Canada will find

15 A. Hennessy, *The Frontier in Latin American History* (London, 1978). Beyond the assessment of

much of direct interest here. The literature on settlement and contact with native peoples is especially rich,¹⁶ as is the material on land tenure systems and agrarian social structure.¹⁷ Research on peasant societies and agrarian protest is extensive,¹⁸ and studies on resource-based economics in Latin America reveal interesting new approaches that demonstrate the promise of broader perspectives.¹⁹ The extensive literature on millenarian movements in Brazil helped Thomas Flanagan decide that the traditional assessment of Louis Riel was too narrow. Marc-A. Blain and Carl Solberg have done very promising work on Canada and Argentina.²⁰ Western Canadian Studies cannot but be enriched by the similar pursuit of others.

DAVID H. BREEN

the frontier in Latin America, perhaps the most attractive feature of the Hennessy book for historians of western Canada is its extensive 23-page bibliographic essay. Religious messianism, confrontation with the Amerindian, the urban fixation, the mission frontier, gold frontiers, agricultural frontiers, colonization schemes, frontier society and culture, the frontier in literature, frontier versus metropolis and the rural crisis, are some of the headings under which books and articles are discussed.

- 16 See for example W. Taylor, *Drinking, Homicide and Rebellion in Colonial Mexican Villages* (Stanford, 1979) and I. Glendinnen, "Landscape and World: The Survival of Yucatec Maya Culture under Spanish Conquest", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, XXII (1980), pp. 374-393.
- 17 See for example K. Duncan and I. Rutledge, eds., *Land and Labour in Latin America: Essays on the Development of Agrarian Capitalism in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Cambridge, 1977) and A. Hagerman Johnson, "The Impact of Market Agriculture on Family and Household Structure in Nineteenth Century Chile", *Hispanic American Historical Review*, LVIII (1978), pp. 625-648.
- 18 R. Graham "Political Power and Landownership in Nineteenth Century Latin America", in R. Graham and D. Smith, eds., *New Approaches to Latin American History* (Austin, 1974), pp. 112-136, and J. Coatsworth, "Railroads, Landholding and Agrarian Protest in the Early Porfiriato", *Hispanic American Historical Review*, LIV (1974), pp. 48-71.
- 19 See for example, M. Palacios, *Coffee in Columbia, 1850-1970: An Economic, Social and Political History* (Cambridge, England, 1980), J. Scobie, *Revolution on the Pampas: A Social History of Argentina Wheat, 1860-1910* (Austin, 1964), and especially B. Orlove, *Alpacas, Sheep, and Men: The Wool Export Economy and Regional Society in Southern Peru* (New York, 1977). Orlove weighs the advantages and disadvantages of dependency analysis, modernization theory and the sector approach.
- 20 Marc-A. Blain, "Le rôle de la dépendance externe et des structures sociales dans l'économie frumentaire du Canada et de l'Argentine (1880-1930)", *Revue d'histoire de l'Amérique Française*, XXVI (1972), pp. 239-70 and Carl Solberg, "Argentina and Canada: Comparative Perspectives on Economic Development, 1919-1939", *Desarrolls Económico*, XXI (1981), pp. 191-212.