

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jene M. Porter, ed. *Perspectives of Saskatchewan*. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2009. Illustrations. xiv + 377 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-88755-183-3.

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## The Many Faces of a Province: Or, Yes, Virginia, We Do Have Some History

In 1913, while compiling a two-volume history of Saskatchewan and the old North West, scholar Norman Fergus Black faced objections from various friends. “Has Saskatchewan any history?” they asked, concerned that Black was wasting his time on this seemingly empty project. He proved them wrong, producing both a two-volume set and later a one-volume “popular” version. Through the years, Black’s endeavors to produce a readable and interesting history of the province have been replicated by many others, both on a provincial scale and a regional “prairie” scale.[1] In recent years, essay collections written by a conglomerate of authors have become popular.[2] In this, *Perspectives of Saskatchewan* stands in good company.

The premise of the volume is simple: eighteen essays drawn from a variety of Saskatchewan-based research or Saskatchewan-bred scholars, written in conjunction with the provincial centennial in 2005. But unlike the provincial celebration, the theme of this collection is transformation, primarily from rural to urban and from agriculture to economic diversification. It also includes aspects of division, dichotomies, and layers within and between Saskatchewan people—and not, it states quite clearly, celebration. In direct contrast to the provincial centennial year and decades of work from local and regional historians, this essay collection sets itself in opposition to that classic mood of “next year” triumph.

That it took four years to publish gives the reader a sense of time warp: many of the essays, written circa

2005, place Saskatchewan as a “prairie New Brunswick,” a backward-looking, static place hemorrhaging people. This is in keeping with the non-celebratory intent. However, it does not fit well with the current blossoming and reasonably positive provincial economic powerhouse. The little town where I live has become home, in the last eighteen months, to families from Ontario, Alberta, and elsewhere across Canada, as well as a large international contingent from the Phillipines and Kyrgyzstan. As Canadian folk singer James Keelaghan proclaimed in “Boom Gone to Bust,” we Canadians are used to such cycles, where “this nation of migrants, from father to daughter, from mother to son, must constantly shift from the East or the West, till we run out of work or of places to run.”[3] Perhaps it does seem odd, but right now, Saskatchewan is a place to run *to!*

One casualty of this time warp is Peter Li’s analysis of population change in the province over the past one hundred years. His work springs from an overall argument—augmented and shared by several other essayists in the collection—that Saskatchewan must diversify its economy away from agriculture in order to experience continued growth and attract new migrants as it did earlier in the century. (That the Saskatchewan economy could *benefit* from agriculture and diversification *within* agriculture does not occur to anyone.) Clearly the robust provincial economy, cushioned from the worldwide economic downturn in large part because of the phenomenal “bumper crop” year from its agricultural sector in 2008, refutes any simple analysis.

The delay in publication leads to the next question: why does the University of Saskatchewan (which receives its own chapter by historian Michael Hayden) not have its own press? This book had to be published by the University of Manitoba Press—an odd predicament for a provincial collection.

These two overall criticisms/comments aside, the book offers a reflection on the past one hundred years of Saskatchewan. Many of the essays are by eminent researchers who have spent time and energy thinking about, studying, researching, and writing various aspects of the Saskatchewan story. Much is familiar—from Brett Fairbairn on cooperatives, David Smith and James Pitsula on politics and the provincial economy, Harley Dickin-son and Renee Torgerson on medicare, and Jack Stabler and Rose Olfert on the rural economy—but even these essays offer some thought-provoking questions: Does medicare work, is it really a good thing, and will it last? What will it mean for Saskatchewan to have a ruling party with no ties to a federal organization? How can we define or analyze Saskatchewan’s rural economy as rural when so many people, particularly women, take off-farm employment? Certain myths are laid to rest: Saskatchewan did not invent cooperatives, although they gained a strength and tenacity here that compares favorably in a global context; and Bill Waiser deconstructs the myth of multiculturalism, showing that the province’s motto, “From Many Peoples, Strength,” is a modern development. At the time when thousands were arriving here from eastern and southern Europe, there was a rigid expectation to adapt to a dominant English Protestantism. The ability of all the essayists to question, to offer judgment, and to prognosticate toward the future is a signature point in this collection. It is, in many ways, an opening gambit leading the way for further debate.

There is debate within the collection, as well. Hayden’s essay questions whether the University of Saskatchewan is meeting its founding obligation to be a “people’s university,” and points, in particular, to the Canadian Light Source Synchrotron as symbolic of the shift to scientific research intensive work, and a corresponding drop in support for other academic and community programs. This is paired with Robert Woods’s laudatory history of the Chemistry Department, an essay that situates the Synchrotron as the apex of a long legacy of scientific excellence.

Two essays on art (one by Keith Bell on landscape painting and one by Eli Bornstein on prairie abstract art) are complemented by Neil Besner’s review of

Saskatchewan writing. None are definitive, particularly the essay on Saskatchewan writing, but all offer a glimpse at the artistic growth of this province and its reaction and contributions to Canada and the world. Beth Bilson offers a policy history of Saskatchewan labor laws, while Christine de Clercy analyzes women’s legislative participation in Saskatchewan. The last is an odd essay that, although highly informative, focuses solely on women who won political office in this province and does not present enough social analysis (particularly of women’s reasons for *not* entering politics). Neither does it present a breakdown of those who ran for political office but did not win, or any comparisons to either local/municipal politics or the national stage, leaving the essay frustratingly intriguing but less useful than it could have been.

Saskatchewan’s “forgotten country,” the North, is presented by Robert Bone, a retired northern specialist. The dominance of the prairie story renders the Saskatchewan North all but invisible to Canadians, but Bone’s contention that “the North was ignored by Euro-Canadians until its forest and mineral wealth caught their attention in the post-World War II period” is untrue (p. 13). The Prince Albert newspapers of the first half of the twentieth century show significant interest in and knowledge of the North, including early commercial fishing, mining, forestry, trapping, freighting, and fur farming ventures; that this northern knowledge and early commercialism did not move toward significant modern exploitation and development until the post-WWII years (when technology led to improved roads and cargo airplanes) is a separate issue. But Bone’s case study of the Lac La Ronge Indian Band, Saskatchewan’s largest band, touches on key First Nations issues, particularly rapid population growth and urban migration.

Lynn Caldwell and Christopher Lind tackle a thorny history with grace and a deft touch. To recount a history of church in Saskatchewan means confronting missionary work, colonialism, exclusionary activity, racism, residential schools, and abuse—hardly an uplifting topic. But they also acknowledge church as a place of positive transformation, active movements, and spiritual growth and healing. Although their language sometimes retreats into postcolonial discourse, making it one of the toughest reads in the book for a nonacademic audience, it is nonetheless worth it. By embracing and naming a rainbow of stories—positive and negative—the writers allow a space to both “celebrate and grieve” (p. 330).

Two essays—Mark Abley’s reflections on Saskatchewan’s diaspora and Mary Ellen Turpel-

Lafond's proud and piercing history from the perspective of the Muskeg Lake Cree Nation—stand out for particular praise. Abley's essay is entertaining and illuminating, showcasing Saskatchewan as a state of mind, a place, a home, a story that has been and continues to be spread far and wide by the people who have lived here but have moved elsewhere. Having witnessed the rousing Saskatchewan Club parties in Calgary and the sea of green in the stands in Vancouver when the Saskatchewan Roughriders come to play, I know that Abley is tapping into a bedrock truth.

But if you have time to read only one essay, read Turpel-Lafond. Classic Saskatchewan stories—1905, politics, medicare, prairie agriculture, abstract art, the Synchrotron, cooperatives—have little resonance in the warp and weft of the First Nations and Metis story. But the First Nations people have the deepest history here, and by looking through the eyes of one reserve, a new perspective appears, one that incorporates the above but does not place it in the center of the story. In particular, land rights, schooling and leadership, from Soldier Settlement surrenders to residential schools, church and community take precedence. In contrast to much of the media hype that paints an adversarial relationship between First Nations people and the church, Turpel-Lafond (reflecting and reaffirming the above essay on Saskatchewan churches) quietly argues that the relationship also had its strengths, its defenders, and its own spiritual dimension. She concludes that First Nations people were not invited to be partners in building the first hundred years of the provincial story, but points out that, invited or not, "First Nations will play a central role in the future" (p. 100).

Overall, the collection is a good fit with Bill Waiser's wildly successful popular centennial history, *Saskatchewan: A New History* (2005). The format allows for more in-depth investigation into specific topics. No collection is definitive, and each reader will have personal preferences. Mine is that there is perhaps a bit too much politics, not enough northern history, and nothing at all on the environmental history and future of the province. Given current debates and problems regarding climate change, droughts, uranium development, bioenergy, and resource development, this is a fairly large omission. Nonetheless, it provides a valuable contribution to our knowledge of this province.

Physically and visually, the book is weighty but not too heavy, with an appealing cover that offers three views of Saskatchewan: a typical prairie panorama, a modern urban building, and the beautiful Saskatoon

riverscape with the Bessborough Hotel and Broadway Bridge in view. As with so many essay publications, photographs are relegated to one small section and provide a visual reference for the two essays on art. Strangely, and incongruously, Bell's essay on landscape painting focuses on Augustus Kenderdine's northern paintings near Emma Lake, Waskesiu, and La Ronge and their representation of a "northern" and "non-prairie" Saskatchewan landscape, but the two chosen Kenderdine pictures depict typical Depression-era prairie scenes. This is an unfortunate oversight, given the opportunity to present Kenderdine's northern vision.

It is a collection to sample, to have as a reference, to read at leisure, or to quickly find information. Local and regional audiences will savour the stories. National historians looking for the Saskatchewan roots of medicare, socialism, literature and the arts, cooperatives, and First Nations history will find much of interest. In this lies the ultimate reflection that Saskatchewan exerts an influence perhaps above her weight in the national picture. And if you are getting ready to move here, you can shore up your base of knowledge.

#### Notes

[1]. See, for example, John Hawkes, *The Story of Saskatchewan and Its People* (Chicago: S. J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1924); Jim Wright, *Saskatchewan: The History of a Province* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1955); John Archer, *Saskatchewan: A History* (Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books/Saskatchewan Archives Board, 1980); and Bill Waiser, *Saskatchewan: A New History* (Fifth House Publishing, 2005).

[2]. Recent essay collections include Lorry Felske and Beverly Rasporich, eds., *Challenging Frontiers: The Canadian West* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2004); and Carol Higham and Robert Thacker, eds., *One West, Two Myths*, 2 vols. (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2004-2006). The best comparative example with a provincial formula is Michael Payne, Donald Wetherell, and Catherine Cavanaugh, eds., *Alberta Formed/Alberta Transformed*, 2 vols. (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2006), although the Alberta collection goes far beyond the last one hundred years. To compensate, the Canadian Plains Research Center has launched a new History of the Prairie West series. Its first publication, Gregory P. Marchildon, ed., *The Early Northwest* (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Center, 2008), arrived in 2008.

[3]. James Keelaghan, "Boom Gone to Bust," *Time-lines*, Tranquilla Music, 1987, TMCD-001.

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