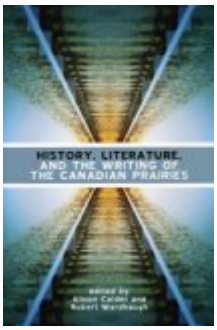
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Alison Calder, Robert Wardhaugh, eds.. *History, Literature, and the Writing of the Canadian Prairies.* Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2005. 310 pp. $24.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-88755-682-1.



Reviewed by Laura Detre

Published on H-Canada (January, 2006)

Everyone who studies the Prairie provinces of Canada is familiar with the idea that the geography of the region is somehow singular and that it has had a dramatic impact upon the people who have taken up residence there. We are all told that in some way the course of Prairie history was predetermined long ago, perhaps when the first Europeans set out across the peculiar landscape. Alison Calder and Robert Wardhaugh in their book *History, Literature, and the Writing of the Canadian Prairies* question this view of the Canadian West and have set out to show that the Prairie is a construct, created in this case by writers whose visions of the territory reflect their experiences as much as they do the environment. The editors of this anthology have posed the question, "When is the prairie?" and have answered it by suggesting that the relationship between geography, history, and culture was so strong that it was impossible to examine one aspect of the Prairie experience in a vacuum. For scholars who study other regions this proposal may not be a revelation, but as the editors note in their introduction, many of the popular culture references to the Prairies portray the region as "permanently frozen in a rural, agricultural scene alternately coloured by the grainy, sepia tones of the Dirty Thirties or by the romanticized, golden glow of a nostalgic small-town sunset" (p. 3). This book is a valuable resource for anyone who studies the Prairie West and is interested in the ways in which European immigrants, particularly writers, have constructed this region.

This book should have broad appeal among those who study the Canadian west, although it is primarily the work of literary scholars and as such probably of greatest interest to others who study Prairie writers. Most of the contributors include enough synopsis of the works they examine for the non-specialist to follow their arguments, but certainly those who study these authors themselves will find the most value in these essays. Both the editors and the academics whose essays appear in the book were conscious of the interdisciplinary nature of this work and benevolently avoided the use of jargon. Consequently researchers from many fields should appreciate this contribution to the study of the Canadian Prairies.

History, Literature, and the Writing of the Canadian Prairies begins with a detailed intro-

duction which concisely explains the project as envisioned by the editors. This introduction should be of great interest for readers who are not experts in the literature of the Canadian West. Calder and Wardhaugh expertly summarize the history of Prairie literary criticism in a manner that is accessible to all. The first essay in the collection is from Frances W. Kaye, who examines Sharon Butala's ***The Fourth Archangel***. Many of her observations apply equally well to the general history of the Great Plains as they do to Butala's novel. In particular, Kaye notes that the Prairies have always been fragile, both culturally and environmentally, and that rural prairie life may be at a crossroads.

Heidi Slettedahl Macpherson's essay "The Coyote as Culprit: 'Her-story' and the Feminist Fantastic in Gail Anderson-Dargatz's ***The Cure for Death by Lightning***" is another interesting study. Despite the novel's setting in rural British Columbia, Macpherson makes a compelling argument for its inclusion in a text examining the Prairie region. She suggests that in her novel Anderson-Dargatz used the landscape in much the same way that Prairie writers have and thus the same theories could be applied to this work. Another fascinating aspect of Macpherson's article is her observation that, while set in the past, Anderson-Dargatz's novel did not rely on the male-centric aspects of history, such as the events of the Second World War. Instead, she emphasized the stories of women in this rural community. As Macpherson states, "history thus becomes the story of the disenfranchised, and women's time and women's history are foregrounded" (p. 88).

From an historian's perspective, one article of particular interest is Russell Brown's "Robert Kroetsch, Marshall McLuhan, and Canada's Prairie Postmodernism." Brown rejects the notion that postmodernism was imported to Canada but identifies its origins in William Aberhart's Alberta. As the editors have noted, "postmodernism [in Canada] emerges as a particular response to the intersections of environment, culture, time and place" (p. 19). This idea certainly continues the overall thesis of the book that the Prairies exist both in space and time. Brown also posits the idea that, while McLuhan wrote about Hitler's use of media, particularly radio, he must have been aware of Aberhart's use of the technology. The Social Credit movement has received a great deal of attention in recent years but Brown's observations add a new dimension to this scholarship.

In writing this review, one essay came to the fore as both the most interesting and the most troubling. S. Leigh Matthews's "The 'Precarious Perch' of the 'Decent Woman': Spatial (De)Constructions of Gender in Women's Prairie Memoirs" sets out to study the ways in which women settlers viewed their society and wrote about their roles in prairie development. Her thesis is intriguing; she suggests that women had a difficult time translating British womanhood for their new lives in western Canada. She looks specifically at two memoirs, one written by the daughter of a Barr colonist and the other by an urban British woman who arrived in Alberta in 1920. Herein lies the trouble. The subjects of Matthews's work represent important immigrant groups, but their experiences certainly do not represent the entire story of women's settlement in the Prairies. Neither woman had experience with farm life. In fact, one could ask whether the reflections of a male Barr colonist would provide the reader with much insight into the definition of masculinity in the Canadian west. The women whom Matthews examines in her study, by virtue of their backgrounds in the British middle class, experienced the Prairies in their own specific way, and their lives would have been very different from those of a Ruthenian woman or even an American farmer's wife. Had Matthews acknowledged that women's lives on the Prairies were influenced not only by their gender, but also by ethnicity, class, and even rural vs. urban origins, her findings would have been more compelling. As it is, Matthews provides some worthwhile findings

but leaves the reader wondering if this is the entire story of women settlers in the Prairie West.

Overall, this book is a valuable contribution to the study of Prairie literature and of the Canadian West in general. The editors have posed a fascinating question to their contributors and the essays they collected add greatly to our understanding of the Prairies. ***History, Literature, and the Writing of the Canadian Prairies*** has accomplished its goal and demonstrates that the men and women who have written about the region have had a tremendous impact on the ways in which we view the area today. As such, scholars from many backgrounds will want to familiarize themselves with this work.