Writing Western Canadian* History:

A CALL TO THE IMAGINATION

ABSTRACT

While there are encouraging signs of innovative directions in the writing of Western Canadian history, Sarah Carter argues that historians could be doing more to revitalize and expand the field and to appeal to both local and international audiences. Carter says historians should use the opportunity of the centennials of the provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan to not only celebrate, but critically reflect on the past.

Centennials and other anniversaries marking occasions such as the achievements of European explorers (the 1992 Columbus quincentenary, or the 1984 celebration of Jacques' Cartier's first voyage), or the federation of British colonies (Australia, 2001), have led to anguished and angry controversies, often centred on the impact of colonial settlement and the subsequent dispossession of Indigenous populations. These commemorative events have become battlegrounds in the ongoing "history wars," over the kind of history we should read, fund, or see in exhibits, on films and postage stamps. In Australia the history wars have "polarized the nation," "split academic departments, dominated the opinion pages of the nation's broad sheets, and fuelled a national exercise in self-criticism."[1]

By contrast, the 2005 centennials of the creation of the provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan have been tranquil and serene; not even a prairie duster to whip up the calm of a warm summer day. While I do not lament the absence of acrimonious controversy, I am sorry that the centennials have not excited a ripple of debate, even mild exercises in self-examination in the West, or significant sparks of interest beyond the region. Commemorative events can be opportunities for critical reconsideration of the past, illustrating the importance of the past, and how it continues to live with and within us. Conflicting readings of the past surface. Comfortable generalizations, cherished narratives, and the mythic past, inscribed in popular memory and history, are challenged.

For Alberta's celebration there is no shortage of books aimed at a general, non-specialist audience, and there appear to be many well-researched and handsome productions among these.[2] The *Calgary Herald* will issue eight special centennial magazines that will highlight the "heroes, accomplishments and achievements of the province."[3] An emphasis on the remarkable and the rugged (mostly White male) individual remains predominant in "popular" histories of Alberta. These tend to celebrate the past, to inform but also to entertain and inspire. They prop up, rather than challenge cherished myths and narratives. There is not much of an unsettling, disturbing or controversial nature- they confirm and affirm the wisdom of what has taken place. As Jackie Flanagan, editor of *Alberta Views* wrote in the centennial issue of that magazine, "disagreement or dissent is suspect" in Alberta.[4] While she is writing about politics, the same could be said for other domains, where a similar appearance of consensus masks our diversity of opinion.[5] Flanagan calls for more "clash," for different points of view to enable the best thinking and arguments to emerge.

The point of my article is that historians of Western Canada could be doing more to present alternative views, to revitalize and expand the field, to provide critiques and reassessments, and to engage in international debates. I would like to see fresh, lively, creative and bold activity that would be of interest both in and beyond Western Canada, and that would shake what Curtis White has called the "Middle Mind" that doesn't want us to think. White writes that "the Middle Mind is there to provide a culture of thought that ensures that it all amounts to the same thing: no thought from any quarter that is a threat to business as usual."[6] While making this "call to the imagination" however, I want to point out that there are encouraging signs of innovative and new directions in the writing of Western Canadian history.

While overall I find that the academic historians of Western Canada have tended to be cautious, low-key and tentative, there have been important periods and locales of ferment and activity. In an essay entitled "Prairie Dusters in the Field of History in 1980s Winnipeg," I argue that many of the historians who emerged from that time and place challenged cherished myths and narratives and questioned the traditional model of progress and improvement.[7] With the stress of many of these

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historians on colonization, exploitation, the convergence in the West of diverse people, and the surrender of historians' claims to neutrality and objectivity, they shared some of the same approaches, objectives and interpretations of the "New Western" historians of the U.S. West, although without the same public fanfare and controversy. I likened this phase of activity to prairie dusters, or dust devils, that sweep through fields forming little cones of dust and debris. They stir things up but do little real damage. As with a prairie duster, this moment of intense activity died down, meant little to any long-term revitalization of the field of Western Canadian history and generated little interest beyond our own borders.[8]

Historians of Western Canada have been somewhat isolated from trends in the field of history internationally, making modest or no contributions to new methodologies and areas of focus such as gender, sexuality, post-colonial, subaltern, whiteness or lesbian-gay – bisexual – transgendered history/studies, to name only a few. One area that we could engage with much more is the new colonial scholarship, as Adele Perry has recently pointed out.[9] In the late nineteenth century, Canada was, as declared in an 1888 book called *The New West,* "the Greater Britain of the West – the worthy scion of the grand old Motherland across the seas, whose pride is in the colonial gems which adorn the imperial diadem, of which Canada is one of the brightest and most valued jewels."[10] In particular the vast stretches of land in Western Canada were seen as "lying tenantless and silent, only awaiting the advent of the Anglo-Saxon race to be transformed into a prosperous and thriving country."[11] Here were opportunities for *English Lands and English Homes in the Far West,* as declared through the title of an 1891 book.[12] Western Canada clearly shares much with other British settler colonies in which Aboriginal people were cleared from their land, becoming a small minority in their homeland. They were depicted as not true settlers, as not deserving or proper owners of their territory, and as not possessing the necessary energy and industry to develop the land. Representations of Aboriginal people as a "dying race," as found in Western Canada in the late nineteenth century, were congenial to settler colonization as they harmonized with the project of removing Aboriginal people from the land.[13] As in other corners of the British Empire the work of White Anglo-Saxon males was to explore, dispossess, and make the land prosper and produce capital, while the women were to reproduce the "race," and introduce "civilizing" influences.[14]

Yet historians of Western Canada have been reluctant to adopt a colonial framework, and have emphasized the distinctiveness of our past. "Emphasizing Canada's distinctiveness," Adele Perry writes, "is an understandable if ultimately unsatisfying response to our continued marginalization as one of the "inconsequential others" of North American history." Western Canada's status as an "inconsequential other" is of particular concern to me. We have a low profile in international historical scholarship. Even our neighbours in the field of the U.S. West pay virtually no attention to us, despite the fact that we deal with many of the same developments, topics and time frames. A critique that has been directed toward Australian history applies to Western Canada: because we have "looked inward, become insular and thereby failed to address the rest of the world; it is not surprising that others respond to our self-absorption by ignoring us."[15] Sylvia Van Kirk's ground-breaking 1980 *Many Tender Ties": Women in Fur Trade Society in Western Canada,* remains the only book that regularly attracts international attention.[16] We need to be part of recent trends toward comparative, borderlands and world histories, and there are many encouraging signs of moves in this direction, particularly from a new generation of scholars.[17]

Western Canada is a place of tremendous artistic and literary creativity and we should seek inspiration from our creative writers, some of whom write highly acclaimed novels and poetry on historical topics.

We could also be more experimental and adventuresome in how we write history. We favour the approach of the omniscient narrator, who presents linear stories with a beginning, middle and an end on the model of the nineteenth century novel. Novels are no longer necessarily written that way, reflecting the multiple ways in which the world has changed since the nineteenth century. Western Canada is a place of tremendous artistic and literary creativity and we should seek inspiration from our creative writers, some of whom write highly acclaimed novels and poetry on historical topics.[18] Experiments in history elsewhere include "parody, mystery, pastiche, humor and the miniature- and all… as thoroughly researched and as well documented as any that appear in the pages of the most sober academic journal."[19] We should experiment, according to Robert A. Rosenstone, to "…express something about our relationship to the past which has hitherto been inexpressible, to include in history things which have long been excluded, to share information or insights or understanding that cannot be carried by traditional historical forms." Escape from the boundaries of the nineteenth-century narrative, the "vertigo of experimentalism," defamiliarizes the reader and disrupts routine perceptions of the past. "As dancers choreograph their performance, historians historiograph theirs," writes Alun Munslow, and not all dance is modeled after nineteenth century ballets such as Swan Lake any longer.[20] Some of the more experimental and innovative studies of Western Canada's past are from fields other than history, or reflect interdisciplinary approaches.[21]

I suggest then that we use the opportunity of the 2005 commemoration to revitalize the field of Western Canadian history, to seek new audiences at home and abroad, and to create "clash" that will provide alternate ways of understanding the meaning of our world. Let's stretch our imaginations. Let's critique but also reinvent to disrupt the familiar and comforting and require our readers to think.

Endnotes

* These remarks do not apply to the writing of British Columbia history.

[1] See the website for Melbourne University Publishing http://www.mup.unimelb.edu.au/catalogue/0-522-85091-X.html. See also Stuart Macintyre and Anna Clark, *The History Wars.* Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2003.

[2] See for example the 2005 advertising flyer "Great Western Canadian Alberta Centennial Collection," The Great West Collection, Markham, Ontario.

[3] "Herald Centennial Magazine Series Starts Sunday," *Calgary Herald,* 1- Sept., 2005, A3.

[4] Jackie Flanagan, "Anyone Opposed?," "Centennial Issue," *Alberta Views,* 7, No. 7, 2005, p. 8-9.

[5] Two publications to appear later in 2005 promise to present a diversity of views on Alberta history, and to critique cherished narratives. These are Michael Payne, Donald Wetherell, and Catherine Cavanaugh eds., *Alberta Formed – Alberta Transformed,* 2 vols., University of Calgary Press, forthcoming; Sarah Carter, Lesley Erickson, Pat Roome and Char Smith, eds., *Unsettled Pasts: Reconceiving the West Through Women's History,* University of Calgary Press, forthcoming.

[6] Curtis White, *The Middle Mind: Why Americans Don't Think for Themselves,* San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 2004, p. vi.

[7] Sarah Carter, "Prairie Dusters in the Field of History in 1980s Winnipeg," presented at "The Prairies Lost and Found: A Multidisciplinary Conference," Canadian Studies, St. John's College, University of Manitoba, Sept. 24, 2004. Historians of 1980s Winnipeg include (but are not limited to) Jennifer S.H.Brown, Bob Coutts, Lyle Dick, Gerhard Ens, Gerry Friesen, Jean Friesen, Walter Hildebrandt, Royden Loewen, Graham MacDonald, Jim Mochoruk, Diane Payment, Frits Pannekoek, Michael Payne, Katherine Pettipas, Randi Roestecki, Jeffrey Taylor.

[8] I don't wish to suggest that this activity has altogether disappeared however. See for example Catherine Cavanaugh and Jeremy Mouat, *Making Western Canada: Essays on European Colonization and Settlement,* introd., Elizabeth Jameson, Toronto: Garamond Press, 1996; Catherine Cavanaugh and Randi Warne, *Telling Tales: Essays in Western Women's History,* Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2000; Lorry Felske and Beverly Rasporich, eds., *Challenging Frontiers: The Canadian West,* Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2004, and the special issue of the *Canadian Historical Review* edited by Bill Waiser devoted to recent writing on Western Canada (vol. 84, No. 4, Dec., 2003). Among the valuable and innovative new monographs are: Heather Devine, *The People Who Own Themselves: Aboriginal Ethnogenesis in a Canadian Family,* 1660-1900, Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2004; Simon Evans, *The Bar U and Canadian Ranching History,* Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2004; Paul Voisey, *High River and the Times: An Alberta Community and its Weekly Newspaper, 1905-1966,* Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2004.

[9] Adele Perry, "Canada and the Empires of the Past," *History Compass,* August 2003, http://www.history-compass/viewpoint.asp?section=9&ref=8

[10] Anonymous, *The New West: Extending From the Great Lakes Across Plains and Mountain to the Golden Shores of the Pacific,* Winnipeg: Canadian Historical Publishing Co., 1888, preface, n.p.

[11] *Ibid.*

[12] Rev. J. Wagstaff, *English Lands and English Homes in the Far West: Being the Story of a Holiday Tour in Canada,* Macclesfield: Claye, Brown and Claye, 1891.

[13] Patrick Wolfe, "Review Essay: History and Imperialism: A Century of Theory, from Marx to Postcolonialism," *American Historical Review,* (April, 1997): 419.

[14] Catherine Hall, "Of Gender and Empire: Reflections on the Nineteenth Century," in Phillipa Levine, ed., *Gender and Empire,* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004: 49.

[15] Anne Curthoys, "Does Australian History Have a Future?" *Australian Historical Studies,* 118, 2002.

[16] Sylvia Van Kirk, *"Many Tender Ties:" Women in Fur Trade Society, 1670-1870,* Winnipeg: Watson and Dwyer Publishing, 1980. On the continued international attention to Van Kirk see for example Hall, "Of Gender and Empire," 139-140.

[17] A new generation of cross-border historians is represented in the work of Carol Higham, *Noble, Wretched and Redeemable: Protestant Missionaries to the Indians in Canada and the United States, 1820-1900,* Calgary and Albuquerque: University of Calgary Press and University of New Mexico Press, 2000; Carol Higham and Bob Thacker, eds., *One West, Two Myths: A Comparative Reader,* Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2004; Michel Hogue, "Crossing the Line: The Plains Cree in the Canada-United States Borderlands, 1870-1900," M.A. thesis, Department of History, University of Calgary, 2002; Sheila McManus, *The Line Which Separates: Race, Gender and the Making of the Alberta- Montana Borderlands,* Edmonton and Lincoln: University of Alberta Press and University of Nebraska Press, forthcoming; Jill St. Germain, *Indian Treaty Making Policy in the United States and Canada, 1867-1877,* Lincoln and Toronto: University of Nebraska Press and University of Toronto Press, 2001; Jill St. Germain, "Broken Treaties: Indian Treaty Implementation in Canada and the United States, 1868-1885," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Calgary 2005. See also the special issue of *The American Review of Canadian Studies,* "One West, Two Myths: Special Issue on the West(s)," 33, No. 4, winter 2003. A new reader edited by Mary Ann Irwin and James F. Brooks, *Women and Gender in the American West* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2004) includes readings from the Canadian and U.S. Wests.

[18] Examples include Fred Stenson, *The Trade,* Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 2000 and Walter Hildebrandt, *Where the Land Gets Broken,* Victoria: Ekstasis Editions, 2004.

[19] Alun Munslow and Robert A. Rosenstone, *Experiments in Rethinking History,* New York and London: Routledge, 2004, 2. See also Peter Farrugia, ed., *The River of History: Trans-national and Trans-disciplinary Perspectives on the Immanence of the Past,* Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2005. Two experiments in writing history from Western Canada are Reinhold Kramer and Tom Mitchell, *Walk Toward the Gallows: The Tragedy of Hilda Blake, Hanged, 1899,* Don Mills: Oxford University Press, 2002; Chester Brown, *Louis Riel: A Comic-Strip Biography,* Montreal: Drawn and Quarterly Publications, 2003.

[20] Munslow and Rosenstone, 11.

[21] Robert Wardaugh, ed., *Toward Defining the Prairies: Region, Culture and History,* Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2001; Alison Calder and Robert Wardaugh, *History, Literature and the Writing of the Canadian Prairies,* Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2005; Jennifer Blair, Daniel Coleman, Kate Higginson and Lorraine York, eds., *ReCalling Early Canada: Reading the Political in Literary and Cultural Production,* Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2005.