

Review Articles

Toward a New Form in the Writing of Canadian History

by DAVID C. JONES

The Canadian Prairies: A History. GERALD FRIESEN. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984. xv, 524 p. ISBN 0-8020-2513-7 \$24.95 cloth.

The Promised Land: Settling the West 1896-1914. PIERRE BERTON. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1984. viii, 388 p. ISBN 0-7710-1243-8 \$24.95 cloth.

Two important books about prairie history have recently appeared, one by Gerald Friesen, a competent academic from the University of Manitoba, and the other by Pierre Berton, whom many consider the country's foremost popular historian. The volume representing the broadest scope, the greatest challenge, and the longest apprenticeship is clearly Friesen's. Dilating upon native and metis history, the fur trade, the Red River Settlement, early Manitoba and Territorial history, capital and labour, politics and culture after 1900, the depression, and the West since 1940, Friesen has written the first synthesis of the region's history in twenty years. Beyond the many seasons required to attempt such a project, the recent burgeoning of several sub-fields of prairie history and the inherent problems of composing social history, especially quantitative history, have daunted all but the most resolute and rendered the task of synthesizers most trying.

One essence of *The Canadian Prairies: A History* is its concentration on historiographical debate in almost every aspect of prairie development. Consistent with recent trends, Friesen assumes the viewpoint of the natives and the metis before concluding that government Indian policy betrayed its wards and that the metis were swindled of vast land grants in Manitoba. Far less condemnatory, his chapter on immigrants stresses the maintenance of foreign cultural distinctiveness in the face of domination of Anglo-Canadian cultural standards and socio-political leadership. The apparent contradiction between the failure of assimilation programmes and this dominance is, however, not pursued. In the incessant debate over Riel, Friesen attacks the Macdonald government for delay and the McNaughton rule in English criminal law for a too restrictive view of

insanity. Unfortunately, since Tom Flanagan's *Riel and the Rebellion of 1885 Reconsidered* and this book were in press simultaneously, Friesen's sharp disagreement with Flanagan's neo-conservative interpretation is not aired.

Despite a preponderance of strengths, this prairie history will be challenged on some scores. Friesen's grip on the agrarian myth is tentative and inadequate. The term is not well conceptualized and should be set within the context of the indigenous country life movement and its supportive ideology about the relationships between man, the land, and morality. The myth, in the sense of the superiority of rural life as "a source of health, strength, plenty, riches, a thousand sober delights and honest pleasures ... of religion and all virtues" was not in eclipse during the First World War as Friesen suggests. It was at its peak until at least 1920. The treatment of this important movement requires a closer examination of the farm press, not just the literature of the period, and the enlistment of a cast of actors such as S.E. Greenway, S.T. Newton, Fred Bates, H.W. Watson, and several others. Of course, one cannot include everything in a synthesis, but readers may also regret that favorite sons such as John Diefenbaker, Bob Edwards, and Paddy Nolan are not included, that there are no land rushes, and almost no educational or entertainment history.

Friesen mentions the blunder of settling southeastern Alberta, but he does not attach it to matters of consequence other than the ensuing abandonment. The exodus of settlers and mortgage companies led to an unprecedented problem of farm credit in the 1920s and to remedial legislation by the United Farmer government which invoked debt adjustment for the first time in Alberta's history. (Saskatchewan did the same.) Friesen ignores these critical developments. His narrative betrays an uncertainty about which government introduced debt adjustment, when it was introduced, and what its significance was. The enactments of the first sessions of the United Farmers of Alberta government, moreover, were decidedly radical, a truth requiring some modifications of Friesen's assertion that the government was noted for cautious, even conservative legislation.

Criticisms and quibbles aside, the book is a genuine opus integrating a wealth of material and sources and adducing a reasoned judgment on a host of mooted historical questions across several hundred years. It inspires in readers a confidence in the author. Students of the West will consult it for years to study the nuances of historiography, to delineate the substance of academic controversy, and to set their minds right.

Pierre Berton's *The Promised Land*, by contrast, pivots on the single period of western settlement 1896-1914. Concentrating on the immigration of Ukrainians, Doukhobors, English, and Americans, Berton then turns to the Sifton scandals, the spirit of the West, the dark side of boosterism, and the bust in 1913-14. If there is a basic thesis in the book it is that the spirit of the West was an outgrowth of the settlement experience. The book contains a serious attack on Clifford Sifton, the analysis of whom would satisfy most academics. The Ukrainian, Doukhobor, and Barr Colony sagas, however, are very old hat, though doubtlessly not to common folk, as Berton has publicly stated. There is pace, energy, and wit in this book, a vivacity which is intensified by the recurrent and essentially happy use of the historic present. Berton's style allows him to quote Bob Edwards almost as if the words were his own. He has a way of underscoring the extraordinary nature of his depictions. The Theodore Burrows and J.D. McGregor scandals, for example, are so graphic that one has the overwhelming urge to retitling the passages, "The Crooks Who Became Lieutenant Governors of Manitoba."

The book is not error free. For a railway historian, Berton has a surprisingly incomplete picture of J.J. Hill as a besmircher of Canadian wheatlands located "somewhere near the north pole." After the lengthening of his lines in Canada, Hill told the Merchants' Club of Chicago in 1910 to place on a map a pair of dividers with one leg on the US-Canada boundary and the other on Key West, Florida. They were to swing the latter to the northwest and, said Hill, "it will not reach the limit of *good agricultural land*." Berton claims that the Mormons in southern Alberta persevered because "they discarded visions of Utopia," but there were several such prophecies by church leaders which had the effect of keeping their people in the drought prone region, not the least of which was Asael Palmer's memorable vision of abundance at Taber. Berton also claims that by the First World War, when immigration ceased, talk of assimilation began to abate, but the quintessential assimilation programme in the West — J.T.M. Anderson's Directorship of Education Among New Canadians in Saskatchewan — did not even start until late 1918. Like Friesen's book, Berton's is far more worthy of praise than censure. It is an artistic unity by a litterateur of many crafts, with the skill of a novelist, journalist, and historian combined.

The difference between these two books suggests some important questions to academics, archivists, and readers of Canadian history. What is the scholar's responsibility to the masses? To what extent should he incorporate the skills and techniques of novelists and raconteurs in his work? How might he deal with the lack of trade interest value in so much of his output? And how might archivists facilitate the writing of a new and vitalized form of Canadian history?

Amid the crisis in university financing, recession and retrenchment, and the startling decline in university degrees awarded in history in North America, it is said with justification that too many academics demean their important relationship with and responsibility to the masses. Some enter their training as historians with a fine feeling for public sentiment, with a story weaver's bent and with a deep understanding of the make-up of the common man. However, when they graduate they have become analysts, shorn of their sensitivity to the common people, with a language and a style as jejeune as the Sahara, with a perversity to keep them that way, and a mulish renunciation of half the techniques and usages of the English language from metaphor to symbolism to exclamation points.

While these criticisms apply forcefully to much scholarly historical writing, they are too harsh to attach to Friesen's book. By its very nature it is encyclopedic, summative, and derivative, an impressive display of the author's command of a vast literature. Given its purpose, there is a sense in which it is unfair to expect it to address the masses in Bertonesque style. Berton's book, after all, is episodic, selective, and sensationalized, a masterwork of a journalistic genre.

Yet even Friesen's essay might be modified to enhance its appeal. The author possesses considerable skill as a writer, but he displays it rather seldom: in the masterful initial descent into the essay, in covering the Seven Oaks Massacre, the last days of Riel, or the horror of the depression, for example. Berton, on the other hand, is *always* the story teller, more interested in the descriptive, evocative power of language, more inclined to use simile, hyperbole, and humour, more apt to exploit language to the fullest, and completely out of sympathy with the incredible and unnatural restrictions most academic historians place on themselves. In Berton there are faces wreathed in smiles, prairies

diapered with fields broken by the plow, palm greasers, boondoggles, boodles and blatherskites, offscourings, skewerings and even neologisms such as wogs and fuzzy wuzzies.

Yet Berton's work has borrowed much more heavily than is generally acknowledged from the methodology and research of academics. His volume is much more "scholarly" than Friesen's is "popular." Like Friesen, other academics often claim that their work is for general readers as well as scholars, but the fact is that their presentation mode greatly limits the audience. A close analysis of the two books reveals characteristics of academic writing which inhibit its appeal among the masses and among many academics themselves, as well as Bertonesque modifications to the academic tradition, which do not have that effect.

Some, though not all, of the variations which follow posit ways that academics might extend their reach without undue sacrifice of principle or rigor. Friesen's volume is longer by 150 pages. He has seventeen chapters, varying greatly in length from twelve to forty-two pages. His chapter headings are bald and flat and the chapters are not sectionalized. Berton, on the other hand, has eleven chapters, plus a prologue and epilogue, the chapters spanning twenty-one to thirty-four pages. His chapter heads are more figurative, more lively, but still understandable, and the chapters divide into no fewer than fifty-three sub-parts, a reflection of his acute sense of the average attention span. Friesen stresses the controversy of historiographical debate — erudites arguing over the role of early boosters in Winnipeg, or over the origin of the 1890s schools legislation in Manitoba — and he places centre stage almost as much as the characters of history a host of historians and economists known basically to savants. Berton seldomly mentions historians in his text, though he quotes many. He prefers paragraphs sixty to one hundred words long, while his counterpart revels in weighty assemblages, many between four hundred and six hundred words long.

Interestingly, the two books have roughly the same number of footnotes; both have short bibliographical essays, though Friesen's is more substantial. Still, Berton's coverage of the secondary literature is impressive, and he has clearly sampled more than sparsely from the massive primary collections of the period, most tellingly from government sources and a few crucial newspapers. In the academic tradition, Friesen's footnote numbers are all in the text, and long quotations are given special status and appearance by indenting and reducing the print point. Impressed by the propensity of numbers and block quotations to impede reading by drawing attention to form rather than content, Berton omits entirely the numbers, and footnotes by page and line in the back of the book only. Quotations, however lengthy, are integrated entirely into the text without indenting or changing page format. Frankly, Berton's formatting is essential to his appeal, and historians might do well to sample a few of its elements.

The selection of sources also affects the appeal. Ironically, both books virtually omit the fundamental contribution of the masses themselves to historiography. The almost complete omission of the twenty-five hundred local histories of the region is quite remarkable — in Berton's case because of his predilection for unsung heroes, his focus on the oft dubious origins of the upper crust, and his rather considerable sympathy for the little people; in Friesen's case, because of his scholarly determination to cover the literature, and the fact that the entire cargo of literature he does cover would not amount to one-half the girth of the folk histories. There has long been a professional assumption that these tomes are little more than arid exercises in self-affirmation and

self-glorification, invariably decontextualized and uniformly uncritical. Friesen's cursory treatment of the pioneer myth is but a slight modification of this thesis.

More than a scintilla of truth resides in the thesis. Archives need to step up efforts, most notably undertaken in the West by the Saskatchewan Archives Board, to offer services and workshops to enhance the local histories. As important, they must actively solicit the entire collections of data from which the local histories have been compiled. The raw data which generated the volumes is always more extensive and contains more self-criticism than the final distillation; and the pity is that 99 per cent of this data is either mouldering in some attic or has been partially redispersed to original owners. A bare handful of such collections has found its way into western repositories — an incalculable loss, given the hours invested in them and the centrality of the public to the weal of historians *and* archivists.

Even without these detailed collections or archival fillips, many such histories are anything but uncritical of the past. Several written in southern Alberta are starkly truthful and reveal nothing short of the defeat of man. Some are remarkable creations, composed after the almost complete abandonment of the region by the mid-1920s. These volumes are not congratulatory homilies uttering the same boring platitudes page in and page out. For years they have been trumpeting facts that most professional historians still have not heard — specifically, that there were more farm abandonments and greater population loss in Alberta and especially southern Alberta in 1926 than at any time during the 1930s, that there was almost the same degree of abandonment in southern Alberta in 1926 as in southern Saskatchewan in 1936, that in short there was a monumental disaster in land settlement in the West between 1917 and 1926. Written after the exodus, these histories also disclose internal migration patterns which are hard to come by in other sources.

There is another aspect about sources that is directly related to popular appeal — and that is Berton's penchant for the sensational and extraordinary, as opposed to Friesen's eye for the typical and common. Though professional historians instinctively distrust the former, it has as much a place in our experience as the prosaic. In attempting to appeal to the masses, it may be that historians will turn somewhat more to newspapers and oral histories which tend to underscore highlights of experience and which are really finer sources than professional historians generally acknowledge.

In facilitating the new history, archives might play at least two other roles. A few repositories, without the constant inundation of government records, with the vast majority of their holdings processed, indexed, and cross-indexed, or with library, museum, and archival functions melded and overlapping — Glenbow, for example — might well spearhead a comprehensive indexing of the press. Throughout the prairies, none of the magnificent agrarian press has been indexed, and save for tiny, incomplete beginnings, not a single regional weekly, and not a single local weekly. In Alberta and Manitoba not even the major dailies are indexed for more than a trickle of time. More progress has been made in Saskatchewan, but even there indexes are imperfect.

For most of the nation's major archives, reeling under the mountainous backlog of uninventoried material, another role is more realistic. What professional and popular historians need in the new historiography is greater efficiency; that is, they need to combine the definitiveness of professionals with more of the production speed of popularists. Few initiatives by archivists would be more helpful to researchers than the provision of a detailed, but still summary, prehistory of the records — specifically, a

history which could encapsulate how the records were created and maintained, how they emerged from an administrative context, what the context reveals about interdepartmental connections and further avenues of pursuit, and how the mandate of a division within a department can slant certain problems, overemphasize, deemphasize, or even obscure others. Fundamentally, this kind of contextual background delimits and precedes all the massive subject indexing which researchers invariably demand of archivists. More pointedly, its generation is economically feasible. Among archivists, its dividends must include a finer sense of purpose, identity, and service.

In the next few years it is likely that academic historians will turn their thoughts more toward their crucial nexus with the masses. In that reorientation they will assiduously seek to retain the best of their own tradition — its rigor, completeness, respect for sources, and insight — and to fuse these with the finest elements of the popular genre — its pace, interest, and literary value. By no means will the union be facile, but it will be attempted. And it will hopefully involve a richer interaction among historians, the public, and archivists in the sharing of what has hitherto been sadly underplayed, the prehistory of archival records, and in the collecting and cataloguing of what have hitherto been deemed, too strictly and too exclusively, “popular” or “folk” sources. The seeds of the new, vitalized scholarly offering may be found in the two books under study. If one dares forecast, the profundity of the new form may at times recall the wisdom in *The Canadian Prairies*, but the *appearance* of the form may well resemble more the adjustment Berton has already made than the purer, but more constrained paradigm which has guided Friesen.