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Review of *Westward Bound: Sex, Violence, the Law, and the Making of a Settler Society* by Lesley Erickson

William Katerberg
*Calvin College*

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Westward Bound is a detailed study of sex and violence in Canada’s prairie provinces and British Columbia—the circumstances and causes of that violence, its policing and prosecution, and the role of both in the shaping of class, race, and gender relations during the settlement era. Lesley Erickson’s study can be read profitably along with studies of the U.S. West, such as David Peterson del Mar’s Beaten Down: A History of Interpersonal Violence in the West (2002). Erickson makes few comparisons to the U.S., framing her analysis instead mostly in relation to historiography on other parts of Canada and Britain. But her book provides valuable material for historians of the Great Plains and the larger American West.

Regional and national mythology and old historiography often have compared Canada’s “mild” West with the “Wild West” of the U.S., as Erickson notes. Historians of the fur trade, Aboriginal peoples, labor relations, and immigration have been undermining this less than half-truth for several decades now. If violence was relatively more contained by the state, and if it took place on a smaller scale than in the U.S. West, violence and its threat were essential to “nation building” in Canada, too. Indeed, these were transnational and borderlands phenomena. What is new in the work of such scholars as Erickson and del Mar is their focus on interpersonal violence, often in the home—both its personal experiences and its social, economic, and political circumstances.

Westward Bound includes diverse topics related to gender, sexuality, and crime: rape, murder, incest, seduction, and court cases adjudicating them. Policing and the court system were not just a means of preventing and prosecuting crime and deciding guilt and punishment. Erickson emphasizes how decisions by juries, public attitudes about race and proper womanhood and manhood expressed in news accounts, and the work of police and court officials fostered a bourgeois, patriarchal, Anglo-dominated social order. She also affirms the agency of the ordinary women, men, and children involved. “Aboriginal men and women resisted attempts to restrict their movement,” she notes. “Farmers’ daughters defied their parents’ and the authorities’ attempts to regulate their sexuality. Wives refused to be cast as the promiscuous women undeserving of the courts’ protection.” Some resisted racial and gendered stereotypes; others used those social constraints to curry sympathy in the court system and public eye.

Whether readers agree with all of Erickson’s conclusions, Westward Bound provides valuable comparative material and a conceptual apparatus for thinking about interpersonal violence and sociopolitical formation not just in the Canadian Prairies but in the American West as well.

WILLIAM KATERBERG
Department of History
Calvin College

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