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March 2000

## Review of *The Literary History of Alberta: From Writing-on-Stone to World War Two*, by George Melnyk.

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Banting, Pamela, "Review of *The Literary History of Alberta: From Writing-on-Stone to World War Two*, by George Melnyk." (2000). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 2.

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*The Literary History of Alberta: From Writing-on-Stone to World War Two.* By George Melnyk. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1998. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. xx + 240 pp. \$24.95 paper.

Literary histories play a crucial role in the construction, maintenance, and enforcement of literary canons. In some academic quarters, literary histories have come to be thought of as the tanks deployed in the canon wars, forces acting to suppress awareness of the vitality of local, regional, and minority literatures, and even of the national literatures of postcolonial countries. The canon—as represented in literary histories, conservative anthologies, official prizes, traditionally designed university English courses, and other cultural apparatuses—is the bulwark resisted by younger writers, women writers, writers of color, gay, lesbian, aboriginal, and experimental writers. Literary histories themselves, however, *can* play a very subversive role in cultural construction. George Melnyk's *The Literary History of Alberta*, volume one of a two-volume work (the second volume appearing in the fall of 1999), poses a radical challenge to the literary status quo. In audaciously constructing a literary history of a single western Canadian province, Melnyk asserts once more his firm belief that the arts and culture originate in and thrive upon a passionate engagement with and commitment to place.

In his poetry volume *Ribstones*, Melnyk draws inspiration from a cluster of buffalo-shaped stones sacred to the aboriginal inhabitants of northern Alberta. He begins his literary history similarly with a chapter on Native petroglyphs, pictographs, winter counts, and oral traditions. Most Canadian literary histories and anthologies commence with the print tradition, but Melnyk refuses to be limited by the Eurocentric conception of the literary arts as restricted to printed text alone, at least with reference to Native culture. Indeed, his first chapter, "Writing-on-Stone: The Aboriginal Tradition," is the most engaging and provocative in the book. Here

Melnyk provides a narrative context by combining his discussion of Native inscriptions and storytelling with brief discussions of current theories of orality, literacy, and translation. In some of the later chapters, about periods when large numbers of books were being published, the necessity of including information about a profusion of authors exerts considerable pressure on the narrative. In a few of these passages, Melnyk's historical narration gets overwhelmed by capsule plot summaries and biographical notes.

Aside from that single shortcoming, an inherent problem in any large survey, *The Literary History of Alberta* offers tantalizing glimpses into previously unfamiliar prairie literary terrain and provides an initial step in the incorporation of early Native oral, incised, and painted "texts" into that terrain. Of equal importance, *The Literary History of Alberta* challenges the hegemony within Canada of the combined literatures of just two other provinces—Ontario and Quebec—which still today often masquerade under the pseudonym of "The Canadian Literary Tradition." George Melnyk's book marks a significant contribution to the study and appreciation of the literature of the North American Plains.

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