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Book Review: Alberta Premiers of the Twentieth Century

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Alberta Premiers of the Twentieth Century. Edited by Bradford J. Rennie. Regina, SK: Canadian Plains Research Center, University of Regina, 2004. xiii + 298 pp. Photographs, notes, index. \$24.95 paper.

The Province of Alberta has had an even dozen premiers in the century since its creation in 1905. The body of historical and biographical writing on the political history of the province is uneven, to put it mildly. Only five of the province's political leaders have been the subject of biographies. Curiously, the current premier, Ralph Klein, has the most (three), while Ernest Manning, arguably the most important Alberta political figure of the century, has none. Five premiers have not so much as an article or chapter published on them. This collection thus fills a large gap and, on the whole, does it well.

Bradford Rennie put the book together, wrote the introduction, and contributed a short chapter on the obscure and unfortunate Richard Reid, who took office in 1934 and served just over a year before his party was obliterated in the Social Credit landslide of 1935. Rennie's introduction is rather bland and conventional, offering few insights into what makes for success or failure in Alberta politics. The biography of Reid is better, although there is not much to work with. Reid had been a successful cabinet minister, holding several portfolios including almost a decade as Provincial Treasurer, but his modest talents were no match for dire economic circumstances and the most potently original political campaigner of the century.

The chapter on Alberta's first premier, Ernest J. Rutherford, by Patricia Roome, adds little to the biography by D. R. Babcock and leaves the question of the extent of Rutherford's involvement in the disastrous Alberta and Great Waterways Railway project unsolved. The austere and reclusive Arthur Sifton, who rescued the Liberal government from the railway failure, fares better at the hands of David Hall, who provides a sympathetic and balanced account of a largely unknown leader. Franklin Foster does a good job of condensing

his full-length biography of John Brownlee, the most important of the United Farmers of Alberta premiers. Brownlee's career-ending sex scandal has defined his premiership, which is unfortunate since his central role in the Natural Resources Transfer Agreement of 1929 alone makes him one of the most significant premiers.

David Elliott, co-author of the best extant biography of an Alberta premier, incorporates significant new material in his excellent chapter on William Aberhart. Edward Bell on Ernest Manning is disappointingly defensive and pedestrian. Manning was the longest-serving, probably the most intelligent, and certainly the most complex personality among Alberta's premiers. His career cries out for the kind of sophisticated analysis of his religious and political ideas that Elliott has provided for Aberhart. Alan Tupper and Mark Lisac have written solid and balanced accounts of Peter Lougheed and Don Getty respectively.

Although there are weaknesses, this volume is an important addition to the literature on Alberta politics.

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