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Book Review: Harm's Way: Disasters in Western Canada

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Harm's Way: Disasters in Western Canada. Edited by Anthony Rasporich and Max Foran. Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2004. viii + 291 pp. Photographs, illustrations, notes, index. \$24.95 paper.

Anthony Rasporich says that a "sense of struggle, of painful discovery, and loss of innocence" in the face of disasters is "embedded in the Canadian consciousness" with the same sense of urgency felt south of the border but with "a different collective sense." Some essays in this collection on the Prairie West do allude to that comparison. Hugh Dempsey shows that nineteenth-century smallpox epidemics did not respect the border and weakened the ability of the Native peoples to resist European settlement. Janice Dickin's analysis of the Spanish Flu Epidemic of 1918-19 in Calgary, however, only suggests that Canadians and Americans had different experiences. Given current concern over mad cow disease, Max Foran's study of foot and mouth disease in Saskatchewan in 1952 is timely. It explains how Canada quaran-

tinued the area and the United States temporarily embargoed Canadian livestock and goods likely to carry the virus that probably came in the effects of a European immigrant.

Humans caused another agricultural scourge, weeds. Clint Evans documents how poor husbandry spread weeds but did not look south for similar problems. Floods result from weather conditions; humans influence their impact. In describing Red River floods, J. M. Bumsted reports that Manitobans, though noting investments in flood control south of the border, did nothing until a devastating flood in 1950. After that, the Canadian "welfare state" was ahead of its American counterpart in offering financial aid for flood fighting, rehabilitation, and control.

Unwillingness to admit the vagaries of nature is the focus of David Jones's evocative story of a semi-arid part of southeastern Alberta where rains fell during the early twentieth-century boom. When drought returned, most settlers left after turning it into such a wasteland that the Canadian government located a chemical warfare research center there. Yet short-term problems were readily overcome. The bitter winter of 1906-07, vividly described by Joe Cherwinski, was more a disaster for immigration promoters than settlers. As Patrick Brennan persuasively argues, a cyclone in 1912 only temporarily diverted Regina citizens from the established order.

Some disasters may have been man-made. In exploring persistent fascination with the 1903 Frank Slide (rockslide-avalanche), Lorry W. Felske observes that coal mining in its bowels may have caused Turtle Mountain to collapse on the mine and townsite. Poor supervision of drilling by the responsible regulatory agency contributed to the blowout in 1948 of an oil well near Edmonton. David Breen shows that regulators learned and devised an international model of oil field inspection. Moreover, the disaster gave the infant oil industry invaluable publicity.

While many would have benefited from longer glances below the border, these well-written, thoroughly researched, and generously

illustrated essays convincingly demonstrate that both nature and human agency can cause disasters but that resilient western Canadians often overcame situations that had put them in harm's way.

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