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FROM WASTELAND TO UTOPIA

CHANGING IMAGES OF THE CANADIAN WEST IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

R. DOUGLAS FRANCIS

It is common knowledge that what one perceives is greatly conditioned by what one wants or expects to see. Perception is not an objective act that occurs independently of the observer. One is an active agent in the process and brings to one's awareness certain preconceived values, or a priori assumptions, that enable one to organize the deluge of objects, experiences, and impressions into some meaningful and comprehensive world view. Perception changes as new information or altered perspectives are integrated and thus, one's view of the "objective" external world is affected.

The perception or "imagery" of the Canadian West is the subject of this article. As I have used it, the term "West" refers to the North West in the fur trade era and to the Prairie Provinces in the post-confederation era.

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This region, possibly more than any other in North America, underwent significant changes in popular perception throughout the nineteenth century largely because people's views of it were formed before they even saw the region.¹ Being the last area of North America to be settled, it had already acquired an imaginary presence in the public mind. Imbued with a preconceived view of what the region should be like, early visitors to the area imposed their image on the region. During the nineteenth century, three dominant images or perceptions of the Canadian West successively held sway. It was seen as a wasteland in the early nineteenth century, a pristine wilderness in the mid-nineteenth century, and a utopia by the late nineteenth century. This article chronicles these changing images of the Canadian West.

THE WEST AS WASTELAND

The present-day Canadian West first came to the attention of Europeans when British and French fur traders penetrated the area in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. The first white man to see the interior of present-day western Canada was

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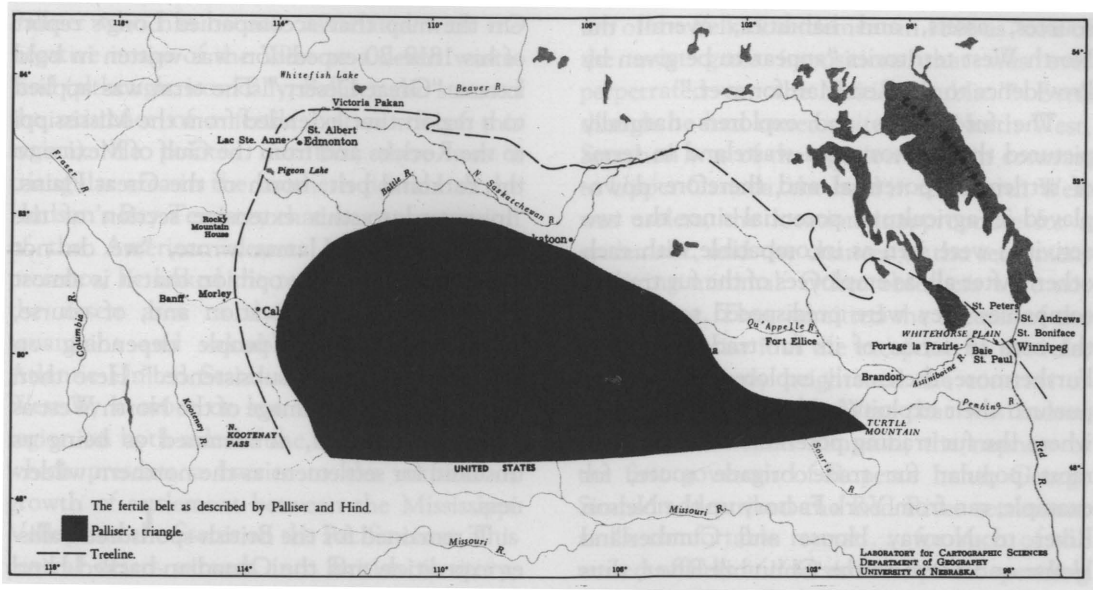


FIG. 1. *The Canadian West*. Reprinted from *Images of the Plains: The Role of Human Nature in Settlement*, edited by Brian W. Blouet and Merlin P. Lawson, by permission of University of Nebraska Press. Copyright © 1975 by the University of Nebraska Press.

twenty-year-old Henry Kelsey, an employee of the Hudson's Bay Company. Kelsey in 1690 went from York Factory on the Bay into the western interior, perhaps as far south as the country between the Saskatchewan and Assiniboine rivers. As his first report, he submitted a ninety line poem. In his verse, Kelsey introduced many of the descriptive terms for the region that reappeared in later fur-trading reports. He called the southern grasslands a "plain," first used the term "desert" to describe the lonely empty space, and termed the general terrain "barren ground" because of the lack of trees. "Desert" may have meant "deserted" for Kelsey, a common meaning of the term in his time, even though, of course, the area was inhabited by Indians. Throughout he stressed "the Emynent Dangers that did often me attend" in this terra incognita, this land where no white man had previously been.² He conveyed the image of cold, inhospitable, desolate, barren wasteland where an individual was at risk of danger to his life.

Later fur traders reinforced this negative

image of the West. In 1783 Alexander Mackenzie, an employee of the Montreal-based North West Company, made his great exploratory journey from Montreal to the Arctic Ocean and later to the Pacific. He recorded his impressions of the area in his *Voyages from Montreal* (1801). Mackenzie was optimistic about the fur trade potential of the area, but voiced pessimism about settlement possibilities. "The proportion of the region that is fit for cultivation is very small, and is still less in the interior parts; it is also very difficult of access; and whilst any land remains uncultivated to the South of it, there will be no temptation to settle it. Besides, its climate is not in general sufficiently genial to bring the fruits of the earth to maturity." David Thompson, another North West Company trader (a former employee of the Hudson's Bay Company) and an expert cartographer, made a similar sweeping indictment of the North West. He concluded in his *Journal* that although there were distinct regions within this vast territory, each with its own unique geography, re-

sources, assets, and liabilities, overall the North West territories "appear to be given by Providence to the Red Man for ever."³

The fur traders and explorers naturally pictured the territory as a wasteland in terms of settlement potential and therefore downplayed its agricultural potential since the two activities were seen as incompatible with each other. After all, as employees of the fur trading companies they were predisposed to observe the area in terms of its fur trade potential. Furthermore, these early explorers and traders pursued their exploits in the northern regions where the fur trading potential was best. The most popular fur trade brigade route, for example, ran from York Factory up the Nelson River to Norway House and Cumberland House and north to the Churchill River, thus never leaving the rugged Canadian Shield. Their generalizations about the region were based often only on their limited exposure to the far north. Even those European explorers and travelers who did reach the prairie lands quickly gained a negative image of the North West. Whether from Britain or France, they came from heavily forested areas of the world where successful agriculture was associated with abundant vegetation, trees, and a moist climate. They came upon the barren grasslands, devoid of trees and lush vegetation, and could only conclude, based on their own experience, that the land was ill-suited for settlement. As the historical geographer, Wrexford Watson, notes, "There developed in the minds of Europeans an equation that went as follows: bareness equals barrenness equals infertility equals uselessness for agriculture."⁴

The American fur traders and explorers also fostered a negative image of the North West. As Americans began exploring the area west of the Mississippi River in the early 1800s, they were struck by the arid, sterile landscape. Zebulon Pike, in his exploration of the area along the Arkansas River in 1806-07, referred to it as a "sandy sterile desert." But to Stephen H. Long—or more precisely the chronicler of his expedition, Dr. Edwin James—belonged the decisive condemnatory view of the region.

On the map that accompanied Long's report of his 1819-20 expedition was written in bold letters: "Great Desert." The term was applied to a region that extended from the Mississippi to the Rockies and from the Gulf of Mexico to the Parkland belt, north of the Great Plains. "In regard to this extensive section of the country," Edwin James wrote, "we do not hesitate in giving the opinion that it is almost wholly unfit for cultivation and, of course, uninhabitable by a people depending on agriculture for their subsistence."⁵ Here then was a new negative image of the North West as a desert bad land, condemned as being as unsuited for settlement as the northern wilderness.

It remained for the British-sponsored Palliser expedition and the Canadian-backed Hind expedition, both begun in 1857, to popularize the term "desert" in describing the grassland region of the Canadian prairies. Both expedition leaders expected to find desert-like conditions in the prairie region along the American border. Evidence exists that they had read American scientific literature on the Plains area with reference to the "Great American Desert," and John Palliser had previously explored the Missouri and Yellowstone rivers area.⁶ Henry Youle Hind became the first to apply directly the term "Great American Desert" to the present-day Canadian prairies. In the map accompanying the *Narrative* of his western expeditions of 1857-58, published in 1860, Hind applied two sweeping generalizations to the area south of the North Saskatchewan River: "the Great American Desert" to the southern plains, and "a Fertile Belt" to the area immediately north, stretching in an arc from the Lake of the Woods to the Rocky Mountains, passing through the Red River and Saskatchewan River countries, and extending into the foothills at the 49th parallel.⁷ In the remainder of his *Narrative*, Hind dwelt on the positive qualities of the Fertile Belt for settlement, and downplayed the desert area to the south. Thus he has been remembered for his optimistic assessment of the North West for agricultural settlement. It has been John

Palliser who has become associated with the negative image of the West as a desert wasteland (although, ironically, Palliser also stressed the existence of a fertile belt north of this region). He pointed out that there was a triangular area in the southern portion of the Hudson's Bay Territory that was an extension of the American desert. In indicating its presence, he linked the territory directly with the desert area to the south. "The fertile savannahs and valuable woodlands of the Atlantic United States are succeeded on the West by a more or less desert, occupying a region on both sides of the Rocky Mountains, which presents a barrier to the continuous growth of settlement between the Mississippi Valley and the States on the Pacific coast. This central desert extends into British territory, forming a triangle."⁸ The negative image of "Palliser's Triangle," as the area became known, still remains one hundred and twenty-five years later.

Thus the Canadian West was viewed prior to the 1860s in negative terms from both a northern and southern perspective. For northern fur traders, it was a wilderness, full of danger and terror, where the climate was forever cold, the land barren, and the native people inhospitable. For southern travelers, it was a desert, lacking trees and water essential for agriculture and having a monotonous, dreary, and unappealing landscape. In both cases, the area was considered unsuited for agriculture and best left as a fur trading area under the aegis of the Hudson's Bay Company.

Yet, since 1811, there had been an agricultural settlement in the North West—the Red River colony at the junction of the Red and the Assiniboine rivers (present day Winnipeg). Here appeared to be the exception that disproved the view that the region was unsuitable for agriculture. Nevertheless, prior to 1850, few observers looked at the colony in these terms. John Strachan, the Anglican clergyman of York (Toronto) and a powerful public figure in Upper Canada, gave an admittedly one-sided but representative opin-

ion of the Selkirk settlement in 1816 as "one of the most gross impositions that was ever perpetrated on the British public."⁹ Even though he had never visited the North West, Strachan was of the opinion that, in contrast to Upper Canada, the land in the North West was useless, the location inappropriate for a settlement, and the chances of the settlement surviving minimal. Other observers were not so negative. They admitted the success of the colony, but saw it as the exception to the rule; its presence only heightened the contrast to the rest of the North West that was indeed wasteland. Thomas Simpson, the nephew of the first governor of Rupert's Land, George Simpson, described the Red River settlement as "a comfortable retreat . . . for such of the retired officers and servants as prefer spending the evening of life with their native families in this oasis of the desert."¹⁰

The Red River settlement was seen as an oasis not only in physical terms, as a small agricultural settlement, but in spiritual and moral terms as well. Most of the early missionaries to the North West saw themselves as working against great odds in trying to Christianize the heathen in this vast wilderness. The Reverend John West, the first Protestant missionary in the Red River community, described his efforts in disparaging terms: "Thousands are involved in worse than Egyptian darkness around me, wandering in ignorance and perishing through lack of knowledge. When will this wide howling wilderness blossom as the rose, and the desert become as a fruitful field!"¹¹ The missionary historian, Sarah Tucker, writing in 1850, projected her image of the missionaries in the North West in her book title: *The Rainbow of the North*. "To no mission, perhaps, can this emblem be more truly applied than to that among the North American Indians: no people were ever enveloped in a thicker darkness, and in no spot has the light been reflected in more varied hues." She described the Red River colony as "an isolated settlement of civilized and half-civilized men in the midst of an immense region of

barbarism."¹²

Peter Rindisbacher, the only resident artist to paint the North West in this early period, conveyed a negative image of a wilderness area. His one painting that depicted a real life event—"The Murder of David Tally [Tully] and Family by the Sissetoon Sioux, a Sioux Tribe (1823)" (fig. 2)—shows the Tullys being attacked while en route from the Red River settlement to the United States. The survivors returned to the Selkirk colony to recount the incident, and Rindisbacher painted the scene as he imagined it but with incredibly lifelike and detailed accuracy, as though he had been present. Concerning another one of Rindisbacher's paintings, "Buffalo Hunt," an art critic at the time commented, "The landscape and the animals are faithfully depicted; and the wild scene which is daily acted upon our prairies is placed vividly before the eyes."¹³ While realistic, the image he projected was of a hostile and wild environment where struggle was the fare for daily survival. It was hardly the kind of image that encouraged other settlers to come to the region.

These negative images of the North West in fur traders' reports, the Hind and Palliser scientific expeditions, the early missionary and travelers' accounts, and Peter Rindisbacher's

paintings dominated the outlook of many Europeans and Canadians for two centuries. That perception more than anything else enabled the Hudson's Bay Company to control the region virtually unchallenged. Only when a new positive image emerged in the mid-nineteenth century did the image of a western wasteland disappear.

THE WEST AS UNSPOILED WILDERNESS

The great ocean itself does not present more infinite variety than does this prairie-ocean of which we speak. In winter, a dazzling surface of purest snow; in early summer, a vast expanse of grass and pale pink roses; in autumn too often a wild sea of raging fire. No ocean of water in the world can vie with its gorgeous sunsets; no solitude can equal the loneliness of a night-shadowed prairie: one feels the stillness, and hears the silence, the wail of the prowling wolf makes the voice of solitude audible, the stars look down through infinite silence upon a silence almost as intense. . . . The prairies had nothing terrible in their aspect, nothing oppressive in their loneliness. One saw here the world as it had taken shape and form from the hands of the Creator.¹⁴

FIG. 2. *The Murder of David Tally and Family by the Sissetoon Sioux, a Sioux Tribe* (1823). Courtesy of West Point Museum Collections, United States Military Academy.



This paean of praise to the West appeared in William Butler's *The Great Lone Land*, published in 1871. Butler was an official for the Canadian government who was asked to report on conditions prevailing among the natives in the North West Territories. In contrast to the pre-1850 image of the West as a hostile, forbidding wasteland, Butler talked about its infinite beauty, its sublime silence, its splendid peacefulness, and its mystical spiritualism. He believed that here in "paradise" could be seen God's wondrous works.

There appears to have been a miraculous transformation in the image of the West in a very brief period of time. Clearly one factor in this change was the altered European view from that of the rational and "scientific" perception of the Enlightenment, which had affected such explorers as Alexander Mackenzie and David Thompson, to that of the emotional and spiritual view characteristic of the Age of Romanticism.¹⁵

The romantic tradition was a complex intellectual movement which had its origins in Europe in the mid-eighteenth century and took form in various guises in Britain and in the United States. One of the common underlying beliefs of romantic writers was that God could be found through Nature and through expression of self. Emotion rather than reason was the means to know God. And man's emotions were in their purest form, the romantics believed, when man existed in his "natural state," before he had been corrupted, and his senses dulled, by civilization. Jean-Jacques Rousseau best captured the essence of this belief in the opening sentence of his *Social Contract*: "Man is born free, but everywhere he is in chains." Man had lost his innocence and purity when he became a member of society. To regain his freedom, he needed to return to his natural state. Figuratively that meant regaining a sense of himself as an individual independent of the society of which he was a part. But the belief was interpreted literally as meaning the need to return to the natural world—to the wilderness—where man could live in harmony with Nature and with God, as

man had once lived in the original Garden of Eden. This Edenic myth appeared in literature as glowing descriptions of wilderness lands and in art as depictions of pastoral settings similar in their beauty to what the writer or artist imagined the Garden of Eden to have been like.

Such an idealized vision of the world naturally presented a more positive view of the wilderness. A wilderness for a romantic was not a frightening and gloomy wasteland, but rather a place of serenity, a source of inspiration, a sanctuary—a primeval cathedral—where man could truly commune with God. The wilderness was virgin territory barely touched by man, untamed, unspoiled, undiscovered.

William Butler held just such a romantic image of the wilderness. That image had been formed in his mind well before he even set foot in the "great lone land." Butler wrote in his autobiography that "in boyhood I had read the novels of Fenimore Cooper with an intensity of interest never to be known again in reading."¹⁶ Traveling in the American West near the Platte River, in the autumn of 1867, Butler recorded that he found "the mystic word 'prairie' at last a veritable reality. Since my early boyhood that word has meant to me everything that was possible in the breathing, seeing, and grasping of freedom." With these images in mind, Butler went to the Canadian North West to find the romantic world of Fenimore Cooper. Indeed, in later life, he recalled his visit to the West in a poignant phrase that reversed the usual association of dream and reality. "The reality of the wilderness had become a dream."

Western Canada had become the dream of a romantic who saw in the landscape—the rivers, forests, mountains, and plains—the world of Nature and of God. Here was one of the few remaining areas in the world where Nature still remained in its primal state, untainted by civilization. Indeed, the very things that made the West so appealing to Butler and his contemporaries were precisely those features of the region that, ironically,

had made it unappealing to an earlier generation: its isolation and its unsettled nature. Butler was very conscious that he would be one of the last to see the West in its "natural state," for civilization was rapidly marching westward with the opening up of the region to settlement and the building of the railway. It was this sense of urgency—this need to capture in print the romantic West for posterity—that heightened Butler's fascination with the West. Soon it, too, would be defaced, conquered, and civilized. Where then would man find a "natural state" where he could see "the world as it had taken shape and form from the hands of the Creator?"

William Butler was one of a number of individuals who visited the North West in the years between 1845 and 1875. They came to enjoy, contemplate, and record its natural beauty, its solitude, and its majesty. They came as well to observe its native inhabitants in their natural state and to report to a public back home (whether in Britain, the United States, or British North America) eager to learn more about this unknown region. The nineteenth century was an age of exploration and adventure. Travel narratives, whether in the form of published journals and diaries, travelogues, or accounts in the illustrated press, had a receptive audience. Victorian readers delighted in sharing vicariously in the experiences of adventurers in exotic places. They satisfied a natural curiosity and offered an escape from the drudgery of everyday life in the factories, or on the farms, or even in the drawing room.

The transformation of the West from a terra incognita to a paradiso is evident in the missionary accounts of the mid-nineteenth century. Juxtaposed in a number of these writings are the two images of wasteland and benevolent wilderness vying for supremacy in the mind of the beholder. To late nineteenth century missionaries, the West remained a "spiritual wasteland" of heathen Indians and a few struggling, isolated religious missions, and a rugged terrain that made communication virtually impossible. But rather than dwell on

the negative aspects as earlier missionaries had done and thus despair at ever hoping to see the region come within the pale of civilization, these later missionaries stressed the positive features of the North West: its spiritual solitude where man could commune with God; its challenge to the Church; its tremendous potential. There was an evident Victorian optimism in these later missionary writings that had been decidedly absent in earlier accounts.

George Mountain, Anglican Bishop of Montreal, was inspired during an 1846 visit to the West to record his perceptions in *Songs of the Wilderness*. The dual nature of the landscape, good and evil, forced the poet to come to terms with this great empty and wild wasteland.

All yet is wild: be sure no garden's knife
Has trimm'd these shrubs; no sheep have
cropp'd the grass:
No cottage smoke will use,—no spinning
wife
Peeps forth; with milk-pail charged no
village lass:
In stillness all the way and solitude you
pass.

Yet in this rugged wilderness he found time to pause and reflect on God's wondrous work of creation, a fullness unknown to civilization.

And yet, though all be wild, we seem to
meet
Here wandering on, a wilderness more
subdued;
And, in the features of the far retreat,
Tho' all be waste, a gentler solitude:
Some rocks there are and fall, but not so
rude:
The pause relieves your mind when off you
look
From objects huge and vastness still re-
new'd,
On landscape more confined and quiet
nook,
On willowry streamlet soft, or clear fast-
flowing brook.¹⁷

The Reverend John Ryerson, Bishop Mountain's contemporary, on a missionary tour of the Hudson's Bay Company territory in the early 1850s, was equally uplifting in his appraisal of the potential for Christianity in the West. While he spoke of the "waste howling wilderness," he also saw the little missions on the prairies, such as at Red River, as evidence of an "advancing" Christianity. More than "oases in the desert"—garrisoned settlements struggling to survive against insurmountable odds—these religious centers were for Ryerson "beacons of light" radiating their Christian message to the heathen people around them. "What an inviting field, 'whitening unto the harvest,' does this region open up to the philanthropist, and the Christian Church, in the thousands of souls waiting to hear God's word."²⁸ In another passage, he described Rupert's Land as "the Saviour's vineyard"—a decidedly romantic image of the Edenic myth tradition; the missionary's labor would one day bear fruit.

By 1881, the Reverend Sutherland, on a summer tour through western Canada, could write in the true romantic tradition, "God Himself seems nearer in these solitudes than 'in the city full,' for here is nothing to divert the attention or distract the mind; and in the brooding silence the 'still small voice' is heard more clearly than amid the din of human activities or the strife of human tongues."²⁹

Artists too were imbued with the romantic spirit and were anxious to capture on canvas the Edenic wilderness on the eve of settlement. Paul Kane was the most famous of these nineteenth century romantic painters of the Canadian West. Even before Kane left for the West in 1845, he was predisposed to find the "noble savage" and an idyllic wilderness. From his studies in Europe during the Age of Romanticism, he had been exposed to the techniques of the European romantic artists and to the Indian paintings of George Catlin, the famous American artist who had held exhibitions of his paintings in London and Paris. Catlin had painted Indians in noble stances wearing their bright costumes and



FIG. 3. *Some Prairie Flowers and a Prairie Dog*. Edward Roper, watercolor, 1887. C-11036 Public Archives Canada.

involved in heroic acts of warfare or buffalo hunting. Kane knew then that he wanted to do as much for the Indian of the North West as Catlin had done for the Indians of the American Plains.³⁰ As Kane moved west, his paintings became more romantic. The veil of civilization was stripped from his vision and he was able to see the Indian in his "natural state." As Kane's biographer, J. R. Harper, notes:

On the prairies [the Indians] are no longer pictured wearing clothing with European additions or with government medals about their necks. These men of the plains have not the quiet submissive air of the men of

Manitowaning who had been in contact with Europeans for generations and foresaw the end of their free native life as hunters. Instead, his Sioux chieftain, the Assiniboin named Mal-Min or the Blackfoot, Big Snake, are noble beings. Muck-Cranium, the Cree from Fort Carlton, is above all the haughty Indian looking far out over the plains which are his empire. Here is the proud savage, not beaten down by Europeans, the kind of man for whom Catlin had such regard. Kane finally had met the Indians he really wanted to paint.²¹

Kane romanticized not only the Indian but also the landscape. His western scenes, done in soft pastels, depict a tranquil land, giving the observer a sense of looking through a mist or haze. The landscape forms a backdrop where the gentle rolling hills, the stately trees, or the peaceful waters of a lake pose no threat but act only to complement the people in the foreground. The composition is static, as though Kane had isolated this moment in history. Time stops in the peaceful repose of a prairie scene. Harper observes, "Kane's is a romantic and idealized world. He painted the grass of the wildest regions trimmed like an English greensward. Trading boats descending the Saskatchewan River have a dignity of Roman galleys, and buffalo hunts are like wonderful tableaux on some gigantic stage. . . . His personal romantic nature was consistent with the spirit of the age."²²

Frederick Verner was another romantic painter of the Canadian West. This native Canadian made only one known trip into the North West Territories in 1873, but it was sufficient for him to convey his perception of the West. That image, like Kane's, was of a calm and tranquil world, an almost secret garden in the wilderness, with Indians and wild animals living in harmony and in a natural state untouched by white man's influence. It is a primeval wilderness, filled with mystery, enchantment, and beauty. There is a mellow quality to Verner's paintings that sets the observer at rest amidst a mist-rising lake, a

sun-drenched prairie, or a lush-green woodlot. Here is visualized the American romantic novelist, James Fenimore Cooper's idealized world—"a wild majesty of untouched forests, mountains, and lakes."²³

What Kane and Verner did in the artistic realm, R. M. Ballantyne did in the field of literature. Ballantyne, the most popular romantic writer of the Canadian West, achieved a popularity among Canadians and Britons comparable to Cooper's in the United States. During his lifetime, he wrote some eighty books for boys, a large number set in Hudson's Bay Company territory. Whatever knowledge the Upper Canadians had of this unknown territory in the mid-nineteenth century probably came either from Kane's paintings or, more likely, Ballantyne's popular novels.

In 1841, at the age of sixteen, Ballantyne became apprenticed to the Hudson's Bay Company and spent the next six years as a fur trader stationed at various times at Norway House, York Factory, and Fort Garry. Here he gathered the first-hand knowledge of the North West that he conveyed in long letters to his mother in Scotland. These letters fell into the hands of a cousin in the printing trade who published them under the auspices of the Hudson's Bay Company. The publisher, William Nelson, then persuaded Ballantyne to write a book for boys based on his adventures in the great lone land. The result was *Snowflakes and Sunbeams or The Young Fur-Traders* (1863).

Snowflakes and Sunbeams is a fictionalized account of the Kennedy family of Red River. Charles Kennedy, the son of a Hudson's Bay Company servant, dreamt of the day when he would be a fur trader for the Company in some wild and remote region of the North West. The day came, and the ecstatic Charley joined a band of *voyageurs* "one beautiful morning in April"—one of those enchanting and romantic spring mornings that Ballantyne was so adept at describing—to experience the wonders and adventures of the wilderness. In Ballantyne's novels, the fur trader or *voyageur* was eulogized in the same way that the Indian was in Kane's

and Verner's paintings. These "picturesque athletic men" are described as leading a life as free and wild as the land itself. When Charley joined the *voyageurs* "his spirit boiled within him as he quaffed the first sweet draught of a rover's life—a life in the woods—the wild, free, enchanting woods where all appeared in his eyes bright, and sunny, and green, and beautiful!"²² Like Greek heroes before them, these *voyageurs* charted unknown waters and explored new lands. All of the Hudson's Bay territory was "God's country" to this romantic writer.

These writers and artists, as they reflected on the beauty of the western wilderness, were foreshadowing the demise of its pristine beauty with the coming of civilization. Indeed they were harbingers of that civilization; for ironically it was their romantic image of the west that contributed to its settlement by arousing a desire in others to live in this paradise. Canadians in particular were anxious to acquire this "great lone land" in order to make a nation that would stretch from sea to sea.

THE WEST AS UTOPIAN GARDEN

All the fabled mutations of wand and enchantment sink into insignificance before the change which this free world works on the serfs of Europe. Toil, combined with freedom and equality—and you have a more marvelous as well as nobler force than the fabled secret of the philosopher's stone. What they are weaving here for humanity Time will show; "there's magic in the web of it"; something better anyway than the tear-drenched, blood-stained tapestry of the old world's past.²⁵

To Nicholas Flood Davin, editor of the *Regina Leader*, and a pamphleteer for the Canadian Pacific Railway Company, the Canadian West was the utopia for which men had searched for centuries. Here on the golden prairies with its invigorating climate, ordinary mortal men were transformed into superior beings. This image of a new and better society—the prom-

ised land—infused the immigration literature that lured thousands of immigrants to the prairies, inspired numerous utopian settlement schemes, and dominated the early literary and artistic depictions of the West.

The image of the West as a utopian settlement region appeared shortly after Canada acquired the territory in 1869–70. It stood in contrast to the earlier view of the West as wilderness. The challenge now was to turn this virgin territory into a subdued and bountiful land, a new society where people could live in peace and in harmony with Nature and with one another. Robert Stead, the western Canadian poet and novelist, captured the changed imagery of the West from unspoiled wilderness to utopian garden in his poem "The Plough"

All the land lay desolate and bare,
Its wealth of plain, its forest riches rare
Ungessed by those who saw it through
their tears,
And Nature—miser of a thousand years—
Most jealously her treasure-trove concealed
Which only at your coming she revealed;
But all lay silent, useless, and unused
And useless it because it was unused.

You came. Straightway the silent plain
Grew mellow with the glow of golden grain;
The axes in the solitary wood
Rang out where stately oak and maple
stood;
The land became alive with busy din,
And as the many settled, more came in;
The Earth gave up her hoard, and in a
stream
The gold poured forth behind your busy
beam!²⁶

Robert Stead only mused about the West's potential for settlement; Clifford Sifton, Minister of the Interior for the new Liberal government under Wilfrid Laurier in 1896, turned the dream into reality. He initiated the most extensive immigration propaganda campaign in Canadian history, a campaign that

would ultimately turn the West from a near-vacant land of fewer than 300,000 people in 1896 to a region with a population of over two million by 1914. Sifton used a variety of techniques to attract immigrants, but the most effective was the publication of immigration pamphlets that presented glowing visual and literary images of the Canadian West (figs. 4, 5, and 6). In 1896 the Immigration Department sent out 65,000 pamphlets; by 1900 the number reached one million. These pamphlets did not, of course, necessarily reflect the views of the authors themselves since they were being paid to present such views, but their writings did decidedly foster utopian ideas in others.

Pamphleteers often extolled the numerous virtues of the West in superlative terms, implying that with such abundant assets at his disposal a settler had every reason to succeed.



FIG. 4. *The Last Best West*. Cover of promotional booklet, 1908. Courtesy of Glenbow Archives, Calgary, Alberta.

The West was "the land of opportunity" where every hard working and committed immigrant had an ability to survive and indeed was almost assured of success. Nowhere did the pamphlets acknowledge that some failed to make a go of it or that others regretted coming and wanted to return home if they could. Anyone, they claimed, stood to gain if he was willing to apply himself. Europeans already struggling to eke out a living could not help but be attracted by an official government or Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) pamphlet that offered assurance of success for one's toils in this promised land. "It is no Utopian dream," one pamphleteer wrote, "to look forward and see these endless plains thickly populated with millions to whom Western Canada has given happy homes, larger opportunities in life, and the assurance of a prosperous future."²⁷ Readers wanted to believe what they read and so read their dreams into the pamphlet. As one author notes: "Imagine what the words 'The West' suggested to the desk-tethered clerk, the factory-weary British workman, the mortgage-burdened Ontario farmer, or the landless Galician peasant? It offered a new chance, a new life, a new freedom."²⁸ To every immigrant the West was the promised land. Their motives for migration might differ—persecution, slum conditions, poverty, lack of opportunity for themselves and better opportunities for their children, or even adventure—but all had a common image of the West as a better place. In this sense, the West was a utopia.

The pamphlets followed a standard format. They contained an introductory section describing the West as a land of opportunity followed by sections on climate, soil, crops, the means to locate a homestead, advice on how to get started, transportation facilities, and social and cultural facilities. Such matter-of-fact information was embellished to exaggerate its importance. Pamphlets described the climate, for example, in terms of its positive effect on farming and on people's well-being. Sifton wanted to ban the daily publication of Manitoba's temperature so as to disassociate the

North West with Rupert's Land which conjured up images of furs, frost, and snow. Fearing this might have a greater negative effect, he and his pamphleteers simply eliminated certain negative words like "snow" and "cold" and used instead such positive terms as "bracing" and "invigorating." Others dwelt on the positive effect of climate on character. Thomas Spence, "the father of Western immigration pamphlets," believed the "climate gives quality to the blood, strength to the muscles, power to the brain. Indolence is characteristic of people living in the tropics, and energy of those in temperate zones." Living in the *North West* was an asset not a liability. Another pamphleteer proclaimed that "the climate of Western Canada does more than make wheat—it breeds a hardy race."²⁹ The effervescent poet of the West, Charles Mair, was more explicit as to how climate affected character.

A peculiar feature of the climate [of the North West] is its lightness and sparkle. There is a dryness and a relish in its pure ether akin to those rare vintages which quicken the circulation without impairing the system. The atmosphere is highly purified, joyous and clear, and charged with ozone—that element which is mysteriously associated with the soundness of mind and body and at war with their morbid phenomena. Surrounded by this invisible influence, one lives a fuller and healthier life than in the denser atmosphere of the east. The cares of manhood press less heavily on the brain, and the severest toil of exposure finds increased capacity to endure it.³⁰

Ebullient descriptions of the land matched those of the climate. The image of the prairies as ideal farm land—"the last best West"—was popular in immigration literature. A delegation visiting the West recorded their impressions in one of the pamphlets: "Altogether the whole district is very encouraging and hopeful to us. It is a nice prairie, covered with beautiful grass, and dotted here and there with little poplar forests which gives the whole a very romantic appearance. The settlers whom we visited look forward to a very happy and contented future."³¹ Here was the myth of the "one hundred and sixty acre homestead," where a man and his wife and children could enjoy a comfortable and rewarding life. A popular technique in many immigration pamphlets was to contrast a farmer's progress in his first five or six years of operation through a succession of annual pictures which showed a homestead transformed from a humble dwelling on unimproved land to a large, framed, two-story house surrounded by trees, livestock, and cultivated fields of wheat. The photographs or illustrations depicted a diversified farm of dairy, grain, and fruit, implying that each farmer could be self-sufficient. The emphasis was on economic success based on the assumption that material comfort was a necessary prerequisite to spiritual well-being.

Utopianism was not restricted to the

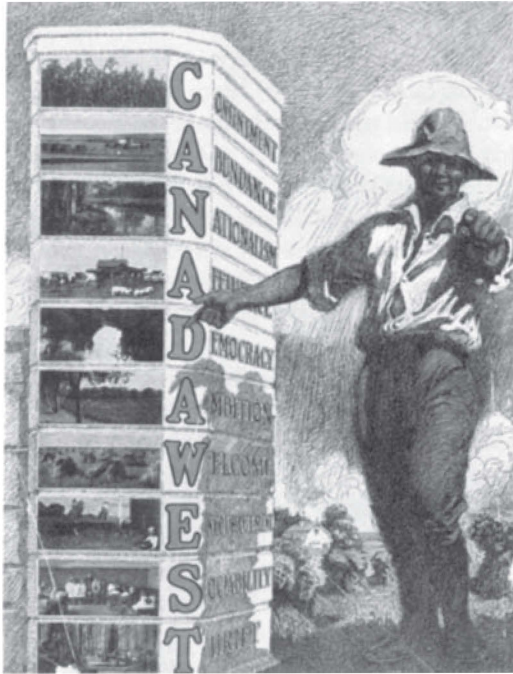


FIG. 5. *Canada West*. Back cover of *Canada West* magazine, 1921. Courtesy of Glenbow Archives, Calgary, Alberta.



FIG. 6. *The Granary of the World.* Cartoon from promotional booklet, c. 1908. Courtesy of Glenbow Archives, Calgary, Alberta.

pastoral ideal. Although Sifton advertised for farmers only, many of the immigrants settled in towns or cities or else moved there after an unsuccessful initial attempt at farming. Towns and cities in the West grew by an astonishing 700 percent in the pre-war decade. Where there had been only one prairie city in 1896, Winnipeg, there were more than twelve by 1914, not to mention the numerous towns that dotted the prairie landscape. These cities and towns vied for positions of dominance in the heady days at the turn of the century. Their civic leaders attempted to persuade potential inhabitants that theirs was the best of all possible urban centers. Boosterism—a popular form of the nineteenth-century concept of “progress” and based on the belief that a particular town or city was superior to all others—was used to convince people that in the urban centers of the West they could find the ideal setting to live a happy, prosperous, and contented life.³² Each urban center had its

unique qualities to offer, its particular slogan, its unlimited promises of what it would provide and do for its citizens. John Foster Fraser reported in 1905 that “there are not a half dozen wooden shacks on the prairie, called a ‘town,’ where the inhabitants do not believe that in a very few years that town will be one of the most famous and prosperous cities in the entire Dominion.”³³

“The eyes of the world are upon the West,” one pamphlet proclaimed, “half conscious, yet marvelling at the unbounded wealth being taken from the rich, black land of its fertile prairies . . . Regina is at the centre of this rich land and offers unlimited opportunities for industrial development to the commercial and financial countries of the world.”³⁴ Wolsley was billed as “the Grain Golden city of the Central West.” Although only having a population of 1,000, its “tributary” population was 5,000 and its setting “the prettiest of Western Canada.” “The orderly arrangement of the

business thoroughfares, the fine stores that stand upon the principal streets, the artistic residences in which the citizens live and the beautiful surroundings of the town, all conspire to make Wolseley far better fitted to call itself the City-Beautiful, than many another town, that has done so with a loud voice The country all around is a veritable Garden of Eden during four months of the year." (The pamphlet failed to describe what conditions prevailed for the other eight months). Alix, Alberta was "the centre of Alberta, the Garden of the West." Its founding father, Joseph Todd, chose the site for the town, we are told, because "travel as he might, he could find no more desirable place to settle. Indeed, what more could be wished for in a new country. Fertile soil, grass in plenty for unnumbered thousands of cattle, sufficient timber with which to build his home, scenery that is unsurpassed on the American continent and fuel in plenty from the coal beds of the Red Deer river but a scant half dozen miles away." Many western towns likened themselves to their American counterparts: Winnipeg was "the Chicago of the North;" Okotoks was "the Eldorado of South Alberta;" Saskatoon was "the Minneapolis and St. Paul of the West"; and Calgary the "Banner City of the Last Great West."

Few if any western communities could match Saskatoon for its boosterism. Only superlatives would do. Saskatoon was described on different occasions as "the fastest growing city in the world," "the eight-year-old wonder of the British Empire," "the Largest City in the World for its Age," and "the greatest example of town and city building in the world's history." "Nowhere will you find a happier people," one pamphlet boldly proclaimed. Why? "Simply because prosperity has lifted the lack of money out of life and thereby annihilated nine-tenths of human tribulation." Another pamphlet encouraged people to "come to Saskatoon, where, of all places in the West, your success is most fully assured; where no deserving man has ever yet failed; where there are no poorhouses because there

are no poor, where there is comfort, happiness and prosperity and an unlimited field for your intelligence and energy." Still another pamphlet attributed Saskatoon's amazingly rapid success to "*no old inhabitants* to hinder progress" and to a population of 16,000 "moved but by one impulse—the city's good." The utopia envisioned in the booster literature was of a material world, where all would live prosperous, contented, and comfortable lives.

It was left to the early western Canadian writers and artists—Charles Gordon (Ralph Connor), Robert Stead, Nellie McClung, Emily Murphy (Janey Canuck), Washington Lynn, James Henderson, Augustus Kenderdine, and C. W. Jeffreys—to capture in print and on canvas the quality of this new western society, to show to what extent the ideal presented in the propaganda literature had become real. Believing that they were only describing the West, these individuals actually created their own mythical West that was as utopian as that depicted in the propaganda literature. By setting their romantic stories in the physical locale of western Canada, and by painting life-like yet idyllic scenes of the prairies, these writers and artists made people believe that the West they depicted was the real West. The ideal became real; the pastoral West was removed from literature to history, from form to reality, from the imagination to an actual physical setting.

Western Canadian artists depicted an opulent West through the effective use of European painting techniques on selected prairie scenes.³⁵ Using dark rich tones, restrained colors, and soft outlines, these artists set the mood of a peaceful scene. Then they chose familiar landscape settings—farmsteads, valleys, and trails—to convey a sense of the prairies as a pastoral land reminiscent of an English countryside or a northern French landscape. James Henderson's depictions of the Qu'Appelle Valley in his "Summer in the Valley" and "Autumn Hillsides" are good examples. Quiet prairie homesteads nestled in the valley convey the same utopian image of the land as that of western novelists. Augustus

Kenderdine's paintings of the Qu'Appelle region have a similar effect. Tranquil scenes, rich in trees and presented in subdued color tones, present an image of the prairies which is a far cry from the wind-swept, drought-stricken prairies that many prairie farmers experienced. Charles Comfort commented on Kenderdine's selective view of the prairies, "He interprets the Western landscape more imaginatively than circumstances would require, and a preference for softly modulated tones and colours in his composition suggests that of the quiet solitude of the French paysage rather than the breeze-swept plains of the Canadian prairie." Edward Roper, a writer of travel books on Canada, crossed Canada in 1887 by CPR and recorded his impressions in *By Track and Trail*. The trip also afforded him an opportunity to paint prairie scenes. The two records, his travelogue and his paintings, contrast greatly. His travel book conveys a desolate and lonely land, while his paintings present a picturesque land where settlers are successfully turning virgin prairie into settlement. He concentrated on farmsteads and ploughed fields to convey a land of promise, contentment, and personal fulfillment. C. W. Jeffreys, a famous prairie artist in the early twentieth century, pointed out the popularity of these "familiar" scenes to settlers in a new country like western Canada at the turn of the century, "In a new country like this, where life in general is crude, and regardless of little beyond material things, it is natural that the first conception of art should be that of the sheltered garden, where the finer spirits may dream awhile and forget the hurly burly."³⁶

Western writers, like the immigration propagandists, believed that this "garden of the West" would be the home of a new and better society, one more egalitarian, democratic, free-spirited, and co-operative than that which existed elsewhere. They delighted in contrasting this new land with older societies, particularly that of eastern Canada: the West was young, not old; free, not restrained by tradition; egalitarian, not class-bound; virile, not weak; and pastoral, not urbanized. Here in the

new West, anything and everything seemed possible, if not today at least tomorrow in "next year's country." Optimism was the finest quality that westerners possessed. Emily Murphy observed, "With what joy I ride over the land this morning! In God's great blue all things are possible, and all things are fair." The image was of a West full of romance and adventure where heroic individuals daily acted out a life and death drama of good versus evil on a majestic stage. Young virile men and modest maidenly women struggled to conquer the forces of evil so as to create the perfect society here in the golden West. Emily Murphy described the virile westerner in her *Janey Canuck in the West*: "The real Westerner is well proportioned. He is tall, deep-chested, and lean in the flank. His body betrays, in every poise and motion, a daily life of activity in the open air. His glances are full of wist and warmth. There is an air of business about his off-hand way of settling a matter that is very assuring. Every mother's son is a compendium of worldly wisdom and a marvel of human experience. What more does any country want?" She notes, "It is a great place this Canadian West—the country of strong men, strong women, straight living, and hard riding. Tut! Who wants to go to heaven?"³⁷

Western writers and artists, like the immigration pamphleteers, believed in the magical quality of the West to turn ordinary individuals into superior beings. "How wonderful the power of this country of yours to transform men," proclaimed one of Ralph Connor's characters.³⁸ In *Sky Pilot* (1899), Connor describes the impact of the environment on British immigrant cowboys in the Alberta foothills, "These young lads, freed from the restraints of custom and surroundings, soon shed all that was superficial in their make-up and stood forth in the naked simplicity of their native manhood. The West discovered and revealed the man in them."³⁹

The image of a western Canadian pastoral utopia so prominent in the immigration propaganda, the booster literature, and art was a strong incentive to western settlement. Not

only did it spur a host of explicitly utopian communities—possibly more than in any other region in North America—the image also attracted hundreds of thousands of immigrants in search of a better livelihood or a new land where they might create the idyllic conditions that are a part of every man's and woman's dreams.⁴⁰ Immigrants wanted to believe that here, in this isolated wilderness, the conditions were perhaps right for the creation of a perfect society. They came with high expectations and hopes. When the reality failed to match their expectations, disillusionment followed. It was this feeling of betrayal that contributed to the rise of a western Canadian consciousness and that helped fuel the agrarian protest movements of the early twentieth century.

CONCLUSION

During the nineteenth century, the perception of western Canada underwent two significant transformations. Initially fur traders, explorers, and missionaries pictured the North West as a wasteland unfit for agricultural settlement, resistant to civilizing forces, and long to be the domain of the fur trader. By the 1850s this negative image was replaced by a positive one of the area as an unspoiled wilderness where man could escape from civilization to find God and to commune with Nature. This romantic image of a virgin territory was replaced in the late nineteenth century by a utopian vision—the “last best West”—where it was still possible to create the perfect society. All were figments of the imagination, yet each had a profound impact on the historical evolution of the Canadian West.

NOTES

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bility. I acknowledge the assistance of a Killam Resident Fellowship from the University of Calgary that contributed to the completion of this paper.

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2. A. G. Doughty and C. Martin, eds., *The Kelsey Papers* (Ottawa: Public Archives of Canada, 1929), p. 1.

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4. Wreford Watson, “The Role of Illusion in North American Geography: A Note on the Geography of North American Settlement,” *The Canadian Geographer* 13 (Spring, 1969): 16.

5. Quoted in John Warkentin, “The Desert Goes North,” in Brian Blouet and M. Lawson, eds., *Images of the Plains: The Role of Human Nature in Settlement* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1975), pp. 149–63.

6. See Irene Spry, *The Papers of the Palliser Expedition, 1857–1860* (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1968), Introduction; see also W. L. Morton, *Henry Youle Hind: 1823–1908*, Canadian Biographical Studies Series (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980).

7. See map in H. Y. Hind, *Narrative of the Canadian Red River Exploring Expedition of 1857* (Edmonton: Hurtig, 1971), p. 222.

8. Spry, *The Papers of the Palliser Expedition*, p. 9.

9. John Strachan, *A Letter to the Right Honourable the Earl of Selkirk on his Settlement at Red River* (London, 1816), p. 69.

10. Thomas Simpson, *Narrative of the Discoveries on the North Coast of America* (London, 1843), pp. 15–16.

11. John West, *The Substance of a Journal During a Residence at the Red River Colony, British North America* (London, 1824), pp. 28–29.

12. Sarah Tucker, *The Rainbow in the North* (London, 1850), pp. 3, 35.

13. Quoted in Alvin M. Josephy, *The Artist Was a Young Man: The Life Story of Peter Rindisbacher* (Fort Worth: Amon Carter Museum, 1970), p. 63.

14. William Francis Butler, *The Great Lone Land* (London, 1871), pp. 199–200.

15. Douglas Owram in his first-rate study, *Promise of Eden: The Canadian Expansionist*

Movement and the Idea of the West 1856-1900 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980) plays down the influence of romanticism and emphasizes instead the impact that a group of "expansionists" in the mid-nineteenth century had on the emergence of a positive image of the West.

16. Quoted in Susan Jackel, "Images of the Canadian West, 1872-1911," (Ph. D. diss., University of Alberta, 1971), p. 49.

17. George J. Mountain, *Songs of the Wilderness*, (n.p., 1846), p. 107.

18. John Ryerson, *Hudson's Bay or a Missionary Tour in the Territory of the Hon. Hudson's Bay Company* (Toronto, 1855), pp. 142-43.

19. Alexander Sutherland, *A Summer in Prairie-Land: Notes of a Tour through the North-West Territory* (Toronto, 1881), pp. 102-03.

20. See Paul Kane, *Wanderings of an Artist Among the Indians of North America* second ed. (Toronto, 1925).

21. J. R. Harper, *Paul Kane's Frontier including Wanderings of an Artist among the Indians of North America* (Fort Worth: Amon Carter Museum and the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, 1971), p. 18. On the romantic nature of Kane's paintings see Ann Davis and Robert Thacker, "Pictures and Prose: Romantic Sensibility and the Great Plains of Catlin, Kane, and Miller," *Great Plains Quarterly* 6 (Winter, 1986): 3-20.

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23. See Joan Murray, *The Last Buffalo: The Story of Frederick Arthur Verner, Painter of the Canadian West* (Toronto: The Pagurian Press, 1984).

24. R. M. Ballantyne, *Snowflakes and Sunbeams; or The Young Fur-Traders: A Tale of the Far North* (London, 1863), p. 95.

25. Nicholas Flood Davin, ed., *Homes for Millions: The Great Canadian North-West: Its Resources Fully Described* (Ottawa, 1891), p. 6.

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27. Canada, Department of the Interior, *Canada West* (Ottawa, 1913), p. 4.

28. Bruce Peel, "The Lure of the West," *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of Canada* (1966), p. 29.

29. Pierre Berton, *The Promised Land: Settling the West 1896-1914* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1984), p. 15; Thomas Spence, *The Prairie Lands of Canada* (Montreal, Gazette Printing, 1880), p. 6; Isaac Cowie, *The Western Plains of Canada Rediscovered* (n.p., 1903), p. 22.

30. Charles Mair, "General Description of the North-West," in N. F. Davin, ed., *Homes for Millions*, p. 11.

31. Canada, Department of the Interior, *Read this Pamphlet on Manitoba, the N.W.T., Provinces of Ontario and Quebec* (Ottawa, 1883), p. 20.

32. See A. F. J. Artibise, "Boosterism and the Development of Prairie Cities, 1871-1913," in A. F. J. Artibise, ed., *Town and City: Aspects of Western Canadian Urban Development* (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Center, 1981), pp. 209-36.

33. Quoted in Artibise, *Town and City*, p. 220.

34. Quotations are taken from the following "booster" pamphlets: Wolseley Board of Trade, *Wheat Wealthy Wolseley: The Grain Golden City of the Central West* (n.d.); Alix Board of Trade, *Alix: The Centre of Alberta, the Garden of the West* (1911); Saskatoon Board of Trades, *Saskatoon* (1908); T. W. Sheffelds, *Facts and Opportunities in Regina and Saskatchewan* (1911).

35. For a discussion of prairie painters see Ronald Rees, *Land of Earth and Sky: Landscape Painting of Western Canada* (Saskatoon: Western Producer of Prairie Books, 1984).

36. Quoted in Rees, *Land of Earth and Sky*, pp. 35, 37.

37. Emily Murphy, *Janey Canuck in the West*, ed. Clara Thomas (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1975), pp. 114, 11, and 213.

38. Ralph Connor [C. W. Gordon], *The For-eigner: A Tale of Saskatchewan* (Toronto, 1909), p. 378.

39. Ralph Connor [C. W. Gordon], *The Sky Pilot: A Tale of the Foothills* (1899, reprint Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1970), p. 27.

40. See A. Rasporich, "Utopian Ideals and Community Settlements in Western Canada 1880-1914," in H. Klassen, ed., *The Canadian West: Social Change and Economic Development* (Calgary: Comprint Publishing Company, 1977).