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2003

## Book Review of *The War on Weeds in the Prairie West: An Environmental History* by Clinton L. Evans

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Morrison, Ian, "Book Review of *The War on Weeds in the Prairie West: An Environmental History* by Clinton L. Evans" (2003). *Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and Social Sciences*. 651.  
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**The War on Weeds in the Prairie West: An Environmental History.** Clinton L. Evans. Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2002. Figures, appendices, index. xvii + 309 pp. \$29.95 paper.

A book written by an environmental historian who proclaims that weeds are “more than vegetative shadows of capitalist farmers” but instead “both products of and participants in culture” is bound to stimulate an interest in and reaction to his work. *The War on Weeds* does just that. It is both informative and provocative in broaching a subject most people would easily dismiss as irrelevant to the settlement of the West.

While the study is billed as an environmental history, it does not provide an ecological scan of agricultural development on the Great Plains. Some additional

historical perspectives on Western development and the many adversities faced by pioneering farmers would have established a clearer focus for the work.

The book provides some excellent gems ranging from an early 18th-century quote describing cow garlick as “a great whore in corn” to well-researched accounts of the formation of the Canada Weed Committee and the regional societies that now comprise the Weed Science Society of America. One of the book’s main strengths is its overview of the enactment of noxious weeds legislation in Canada and the United States and the parallels between the acts proclaimed on both sides of the border.

Throughout much of the book, Evans unabashedly uses war-like metaphors to emphasize the adversarial manner in which the human-weed relationship was portrayed during the first half of the 20th century. On the one hand, these metaphors underscore his thesis that the West was literally at war with weeds and substantiate his argument that modern cultural practices are ecologically unsound. On the other hand, they could be seen as a means of framing his argument in such a way as to lend credibility to his beliefs, regardless of whether they are strongly supported by the historical record.

While Evans rightly contends that modern agriculture is overly dependent on herbicides, which has curtailed the development of integrated weed management systems, he fails to take into account the place of herbicides in reducing problems like salinization and soil erosion associated with intensive tillage and summer-fallow operations. Likewise, he overlooks the fit of newer products, particularly glyphosate, in minimum and zero-tillage production systems that arguably are much more environmentally friendly than those in place throughout the 1950s and 1960s.

For those with an interest in agriculture, or in the socioeconomic, political, and environmental dimensions so tightly linked with the transformation of North America’s grasslands to cropland, this book is well worth its price of a few bushels of wheat. **Ian Morrison**, *Faculty of Agriculture, Forestry, and Home Economics, University of Alberta*.