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## Review of Aberhart: Outpourings and Replies

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## BOOK REVIEWS

*Aberhart: Outpourings and Replies*. Edited by David R. Elliott, Calgary: Historical Society of Alberta, 1991. Introduction, photographs, index. xiv + 296 pp. \$22.95.

From Louis Riel, leader of the Canadian prairie Métis, to Preston Manning, Alberta-based leader of the Reform Party in the Canadian Parliament, men who somehow mix politics and religion have given political expression to the Canadian West. In recent years William van der Zalm spoke from this base for British Columbia. But it was William Aberhart who gave most radical voice to a complex of political anxieties and resistances that we might now call postcolonial. He enacted, vividly and sometimes confusedly, the resistance of the margin to the center.

David R. Elliott, in his book, *Aberhart: Outpourings and Replies*, gives us a window on Aberhart's mind that is as full of surprise and revelation as Aberhart's own unorthodox readings of other books of revelation.

"Bible Bill" migrated from Ontario to Alberta and very quickly became principal of the largest high school in Calgary—and a radio evangelist. A speaker rather than a writer, he nevertheless published his theological speculations in a collection call *God's Great Prophecies*. When the Great Depression struck viciously across the Canadian prairies, he formed a political party, called Social Credit, and in 1935 won the Alberta provincial election. In 1937 he as premier made himself his own Attorney General.

David Elliott, working with documents, does a persuasive job of letting Aberhart write his own—if you will—gospel. We see the dictatorial skills of a leader who is impatient with the democratic process, who is persuaded that either he has God's ear or more likely God has his, who is willing to take on the Parliament of Canada, who is at once an isolated rebel and a skilled dramatist, who with charts and figures and "funny money" speaks the mysteries of impossible economic theories.

While the Alberta of today, with Premier Ralph Klein at the helm, is still prey to discourses of the margin, Klein is less concerned with the plight of the average citizen than was Aberhart. The postcolonial impulses that drove Aberhart into resistance to political and economic centers now drive Klein into collusion with the economic centers that Aberhart would have defied. But the Westerners who vote for Klein, like those who supported Aberhart, are still persuaded by skillful messianic rhetoric to imagine a heavenly future.

In the 1960s I wrote a novel, *The Words of My Roaring*, that made fictional use of the 1935 political victory of the self-appointed "apostle" Aberhart and his followers. It would have been my good fortune, at that time, to have available the collection of documents so ably compiled and edited by David R. Elliott.

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