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Review of The Canadian Prairies: A History By Gerald Friesen

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The Canadian Prairies: A History. By Gerald Friesen. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1984. Photographs, maps, notes, bibliographical essay, index. xv + 524 pp, \$22.50.

In *The Canadian Prairies*, Gerald Friesen has taken on a monumental task. Over the past generation prairie historiography has grown too rapidly to lend itself to synoptic treatments. It would therefore be unreasonable to expect specialists to be entirely satisfied with Friesen's treatment of their aspects of prairie history. I know I would like to edit his remarks on prairie literature, yet my informal inquiries suggest that this book is highly respected both by professional historians and by prairie pioneers, who find that Friesen's narration rings true to their actual experiences.

One of Friesen's greatest achievements is in making of prairie history a lucid, readable,

often entertaining narrative without denying its complexity. He outlines the main directions of scholarship on the principal issues, providing notes and bibliographical advice for further study. He strives to present contrary views with detachment, and often achieves a balance that clarifies contentious issues. This is particularly evident in his four excellent chapters on the native peoples and the fur trade, areas where questions of moral culpability have often overshadowed those of national achievement. By raising rather than adopting the arguments of the "revisionists," Friesen delivers the questions alive and whole. He also identifies important gaps in the study of the prairie past; most notably in basic sociological research. Yet he manages to sketch a reasonably full and human picture with the limited data available.

Friesen's synthesis could not, of course, be achieved without sacrifices. For structural reasons, a readable narrative is less likely to be a convenient reference tool than, say, a conceptually organized history. For many specific issues (for example, "the international boundary") even a brief history such as Douglas Hill's *The Opening of the Canadian West* will provide more accessible facts. And at times the complexities are too great to resolve, as when Friesen indicates the "bewildering multiplicity of leagues and churches" among the Ukrainian immigrants but has not the space to clarify them for the reader. His detachment is not without pitfalls either, especially later in the book when it seems a habitual rather than an achieved position. It can give the impression not that an issue remains problematic or requires further investigation but that judgment itself is unimportant, as in the question of Prime Minister Laurier's intentions with regard to Catholic separate schools. The unfortunate implication is that the attempts of historians to resolve the issue have the character of harmless diversions.

Here and there in the narrative it would be easy to quarrel with the point of balance Friesen adopts. To say, for example, that

during the fur trade the natives "were the subject of non-directed culture change" seems to me to evade the moral implications of white enterprises, as does the later argument that the changes "were aspects of a technological and economic revolution that encompassed the globe."

Friesen gives some attention to distinguishing the Canadian from the American experience of the Great Plains. When, for example, he accounts for the fact that the Mounted Police were not accused of being despotic or tyrannical despite their extraordinary range of administrative, judicial, and enforcement powers, he says, "this state of affairs can only be explained by abandoning all Turnerian assumptions about the influence of the frontier." Or when he describes the center of Canada's cattle industry: "Rather than a 'cowntown,' with whiskey and revolvers, as American images would suggest, Calgary was built upon the tea, the gymkhana, and entrenched wealth." But at times Friesen seems to waver, to blur important distinctions by applying terms such as "the North American Dream," and "the myth of the frontier" to the prairie West without redefining them in their new context. American readers, from their side, may be bothered by occasional errors in his references to the American West. He describes the development of large ranches in southern Alberta in the 1880s as "contemporaneous with the rise of the American cattle frontier," and refers to "the end of available free land in the United States" in the 1890s, although such a staunch Turnerian as Ray Billington has pointed out that four times as much land was homesteaded after 1890 as before.

Friesen also faces inevitable structural difficulties, especially in the later periods when the growing complexity of prairie society makes a coherent narrative line more difficult to maintain. After his four chapters on the natives and the fur trade, he devotes one chapter to "The Métis and the Red River Settlement 1844-70" and one to "Prairie Indians 1840-1900." Then the narrative crosses the same period in four separate chapters,

"Canada's Empire 1870-1900," "Manitoba 1870-1900," "The North-West Territories 1870-1904," and "Immigrant Communities 1870-1940," demanding of the reader an effort to keep track of relative states of development. The last five chapters are "Capital and Labour 1900-1940," "The Rural West 1900-30," "Politics and Culture 1900-29," "The Depression 1930-40," and "The New West Since 1940."

The weaknesses of *The Canadian Prairie* are easily enumerated—and accommodated. They should not obscure the fact that Friesen has made here an enormously impressive contribution to the study of prairie history. It should have a major effect both by stimulating scholarly discussion in various disciplines and by providing a long-needed text for university classrooms and school libraries. Not least, it will be read with pleasure by anyone interested in the prairie West.

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