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Review of *The History of Prairie Theatre* By E. Ross Stuart

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The History of Prairie Theatre. By E. Ross Stuart. Toronto, Ontario: Simon & Pierre, 1984. Maps, bibliography, play index, index. 304 pp. \$24.95.

E. Ross Stuart's encyclopedic text, *The History of Prairie Theatre*—the development of theatre in Alberta, Manitoba and Saskatchewan—is simply too short. Selectively chronicling theatrical events on the Canadian Prairies, stressing “facts rather than opinions,” Stuart firmly refuses to evaluate the matters he records. But the man does set out to cover a vast, unexplored territory, a task he completes with admirable success.

Stuart clinically divides his research into four areas: Pioneer Times, Amateur Theatre, Educational Theatre, and New Professional Theatre. Analysis focuses around major prairie centers, Winnipeg, Regina-Saskatoon, Edmonton-Calgary-Banff, and since their theatre histories in some cases are so similar, Stuart explains, “not every prairie theatre, city or province is covered at equal length.”

Then why should this book be longer? For one reason, Stuart's own style appears to suffer because he often is reduced to making lists that are written in paragraph form. For example, in Part 3, under “Drama Activities at Other Universities and Colleges,” he sums up four major institutions in four very short paragraphs. A few anecdotes, or just more information, would have done much to round out the points and make the text more memorable.

As befits the author's idea of the function of a chronicler, Stuart gives the appearance of objectivity by refusing to tell those anecdotes we know he knows, thereby missing the chance to record living history, as it were. Indeed, “objective”—as he himself admits—soon yields to “selective.” Therefore, in the interest of readability, Stuart could well have succumbed and told us a few more stories than he does. Stories, after all, are the stuff of drama. Occasionally, however, he is sorely tempted to take sides. Regarding an early director of the Citadel Theatre in Edmonton, he says, “It was unfair to attack Mulcahy's play

selection for being too conservative.” Stuart's reasonable voice and his judgment are welcome additions to the text.

Had the author been more willing to make connections, perhaps he would not have made the glaring error that appears on the first page. He claims that trappers and explorers had little time for culture and then allows that “storytelling and dancing were popular pastimes in the early nineteenth-century communities.” While trappers and explorers had plenty of time for their “own” budding culture, they did not yet take an interest in touring companies who promoted a rather different kind of culture. Such contradictory statements could have been easily cleared up by E. Ross Stuart if he had relinquished his assumed objectivity in favor of a particular point of view. However, a beginning is better than nothing. One hopes that Professor Stuart will someday write the rest of the story.

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