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Review of *Wet Prairie: People, Land, and Water in
Agricultural Manitoba*. By Shannon Stunden Bower.
Foreword by Graeme Wynn.

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Wet Prairie: People, Land, and Water in Agricultural Manitoba. By Shannon Stunden Bower. Foreword by Graeme Wynn. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011. xxiii + 238 pp. Maps, tables, photographs, illustrations, appendices, notes, bibliography, index. \$94.00 cloth, \$37.95 paper.

to the geographical, environmental, political, and cultural history of the Prairie Provinces and to the Great Plains as a whole.

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Is a “wet prairie” an oxymoron? Many scholars of the Great Plains might think so, given the region’s location across the “aridity line,” for its periodic droughts and for memories and images of horrible dust storms. But as environmental historian Shannon Stunden Bower explains, the “wet prairie” describes most of southeastern Manitoba—the province’s most agricultural area. Yet the wet prairie is not a swamp, nor is it exactly wetlands—landforms that cannot be farmed. Thus, the wet prairie of agricultural Manitoba is unique for the larger Great Plains region and the entire North American West and, as Stunden Bower notes, “a distinctive landscape, with distinctive challenges.”

The prairie landscape of this region is wet, not so much because it gets more rainfall than areas of the Great Plains farther west, but primarily because there is such poor drainage in the remarkably flat terrain. Add to that the region’s being situated in a bowl due to an escarpment that divides the province from north to south, and you get an environment that prevents easy drainage and makes for frequent standing water and flooding (especially after heavy-snow winters or high-rain springs). The questions that Stunden Bower deals with here, then, include how humans managed to deal with this peculiar wet landscape, how liberal federal and provincial governments (based on the ideals of private property) created pro-drainage policies, how conservationists (especially Ducks Unlimited—with an excellent treatment of that organization in the book) worked to save the wet prairie, what transnational connections existed about the history and politics of wet prairies in the United States, and what agricultural and environmental implications resulted.

What makes the agricultural question all the more interesting is that, as Stunden Bower explains, this is not typical farming history relating to crops, markets, technology, and economics. Instead, it deals with how farmers, and government support for them, have dealt with the drainage issues. A bit more, perhaps, could have been added on types of crops that farmers chose to grow in this wet environment and the kinds of technology used for planting and harvesting. And perhaps a discussion of First Nations understandings of this environment, and more on the Métis who farmed in the area, would have added to the richness of this analysis.

More than anything, then, *Wet Prairie* is excellent environmental history that evaluates the human/nature relationship. Stunden Bower writes, “In grappling with the environment of their province, Manitobans confronted not only the environmental conditions, but also the political and social arrangements that bore on their lives.” Though no easy task, she succeeds in showing these relationships in what is an important contribution