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Review of *The Heavy Hand of History: Interpreting Saskatchewan's Past* Edited by Gregory P. Marchildon; *On the Side of the People: A History of Labour in Saskatchewan* By Jim Warren and Kathleen Carlisle; & *Saskatoon: A History in Photographs* By Jeff O'Brien, Ruth W. Millar, and William P. Delaine

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## REVIEW ESSAY

*The Heavy Hand of History: Interpreting Saskatchewan's Past.* Edited by Gregory P. Marchildon. Regina, SK: Canadian Plains Research Center, University of Regina, 2005. 110 pp. Endnotes, bibliography, index. \$10.00 paper.

*On the Side of the People: A History of Labour in Saskatchewan.* By Jim Warren and Kathleen Carlisle. Regina, SK: Coteau Books, 2006. ii + 333 pp. Photographs, endnotes, appendices, glossary, bibliography, index. \$55.95 cloth, \$35.95 paper.

*Saskatoon: A History in Photographs.* By Jeff O'Brien, Ruth W. Millar, and William P. Delainey. Regina, SK: Coteau Books, 2006. 188 pp. Photographs, index. \$45.95 cloth, \$29.95 paper.

## CENTENNIAL SASKATCHEWAN

In their pictorial overview about the northern prairie city of Saskatoon, Jeff O'Brien, Ruth Millar, and William Delainey note that the opening decade of the twenty-first century contains three significant centennials for Saskatchewan, a land described by journalist Peter Gzowski as "that most Canadian of provinces." In 2005, Queen Elizabeth II joined Canadians in observing the centenaries of this western province as well as its restive sibling, Alberta. During 2006, residents and officials recognized the hundredth anniversary of Saskatoon, the largest city in Saskatchewan and home to the majestic University of Saskatchewan. For 2007, similar celebrations are planned for this campus community, as the University was established formally in April 1907. Contributing to this triptych of accomplishment, these successive anniversaries sparked the production of a plethora of substantive, sympathetic, and celebratory works focusing on Saskatchewan as well as the place of the province within what Duke historian John Herd Thompson refers to as "The New West and the Nation."

Within the substantive stream, Gregory Marchildon's edited volume of essays addresses Clio's weight upon this "Land of Living Skies." Helpfully, his introductory chapter alerts readers to a ubiquitous source of unease within contemporary Saskatchewan: its wealthy, western sister Alberta. The increasing disparity between these two provinces marks what the Canada West Foundation calls "an east-west divide within Western Canada." If helpful in identifying this fault line, Marchildon's initial analysis is unfortunately incomplete. While contending that many Saskatchewan residents feel left behind by Alberta's "blue-eyed sheiks," he adds that they have actually "fared well" when compared with citizens of other provinces. Quietly, he posits that "oil royalty revenues" help to account for lower taxes in Alberta, thereby contributing to the prosperity of that province.

As a former senior Saskatchewan policy maker, Marchildon makes three curious omissions in his introduction. First, as a significant source of oil, uranium, and potash, Saskatchewan has a surfeit of natural and

renewable resources. As highlighted by Jim Warren and Kathleen Carlisle, during the 1970s leaders from both Alberta and Saskatchewan were considered to be “blue-eyed sheiks.” Second, as Juan Enriquez explains in *As the Future Catches You*, wealthy jurisdictions no longer need “great deposits of gold or diamonds, or an abundance of land, or millions of people. They need to educate their population. They need smart and entrepreneurial people.” Within the context of the North American prairies and Plains, successful jurisdictions must also work to retain their populations. As recent work by the Canada West Foundation highlights, over the last decade 117,000 people left Saskatchewan for Alberta, as the population of that province increased by 10.3 per cent between 1996 and 2001 while Saskatchewan’s declined by 1.1 per cent over the same period. Finally, Mark Partridge, a former Canada Research Chair at the University of Saskatchewan (now at Ohio State), suggests that “it is time to slay the energy myth in describing Alberta’s prosperity.” He argues that geographic amenities—like mountains, business-oriented public policies, and the evolution of substantial urban centers cannot be overlooked when considering the contemporary trajectory of “Wild Rose Country.”

Beyond Marchildon’s uneven introduction, the other essays—including his work about the legacy of the 1930s—are crafted with care; these pieces focus on the enduring significance of ideas, institutions, and external shocks within contemporary Saskatchewan. Regarding the weight of ideas, Bill Waiser explains that in early twentieth-century Saskatchewan, state and societal leaders assumed and acted upon the primacy of Anglo-Canadian culture (by assimilation, if not ethnicity) and the sustainability of export-oriented wheat farming centered upon the southern part of the province. He concludes subtly that “Saskatchewan’s chosen path would create problems during the great Depression and in the following decades.”

By identifying and addressing the evolution of a “Saskatchewan myth,” Dale Eisler adds that since the 1930s the “relative decline”

of the province has been accompanied by a collective belief in the “potential for a much greater future.” He contends that this myth still shapes provincial politics. As well, it continues to fuel false economic expectations and hinder progress on “the most important social and economic issue confronting the province—the situation faced by . . . Aboriginal Peoples.” Eisler’s concern about the marginalization of many in First Nation communities is underscored by the fact that Saskatchewan’s “registered Indian population” is predicted to rise from almost eight percent of the province’s total in 1990 to about fourteen percent by 2015.

Regarding the significance of institutions, David E. Smith argues that “the origin of distinctiveness” in Saskatchewan is political, as the province fostered “the first socialist government in North America.” By addressing why such an ideological party came to power in 1944—and has controlled the legislature for much of the time since—and the choice of policies pursued over forty years in power, he highlights “persistence” in explicating that “the network of political-bureaucratic obligations formed over half a century” still serves as an uneven “brake on change.” Meanwhile, in his substantive contribution, Marchildon focuses capably on the dual shocks that hit Saskatchewan—and other Canadian and U.S. substate actors in the region—during the 1930s: the Great Depression and the Great Drought. Referring to this era as “the great divide,” he concludes that this distant decade of isolation, pessimism, disconnectedness, and resolve “reshaped the character of the province”; the ongoing emigration from Saskatchewan, especially of young adults, continues to prolong this somber shadow.

These sobering analyses reinforce the significance of celebrations surrounding Saskatchewan’s centennial; essentially, distinctive features of provincial history are perceived by various constituencies as formative events or points of pride. As suggested by the title, *On the Side of the People: A History of Labour in Saskatchewan* is an “inspirational”

survey of the origins, evolution, and activities of organized labor within Saskatchewan. As Warren and Carlisle explain, this is “inevitably a political story” of struggles and successes for, and within, this movement. Showing their colors, the authors slip occasionally into a normative tone; for instance, they warn that “Conservatives, Liberals, the Saskatchewan Party and [moderate] New Democrats have all discovered that they tamper with the [social democratic] legacy of medicare, Crown corporations, and labour legislation at their peril.”

While methodologically uneven—because of sympathy for the subject—the monograph utilizes a labor lens to interpret and explain important class and collective struggles that define Saskatchewan and still affect Canada. Starting in the “early days of the fur-trade economy,” the narrative includes initial attempts at collective bargaining undertaken by the Orkneymen in Cumberland House, the first permanent European settlement in lands that would become Saskatchewan. Moving to the twentieth century, the authors restate that within Canada, “Saskatchewan was hit the hardest” by the Great Depression; as wheat prices collapsed, numerous farms were ruined by dust storms, drought, and grasshoppers. The era is also characterized by a rise in labor-related tensions and concomitant violence. From the “notorious” coal fields around Bienfait through to the 1935 Regina Riot, Warren and Carlisle echo that the 1930s have “been permanently seared into the collective psyche of Saskatchewan.”

The book also usefully addresses the significance of Saskatchewan in shaping a complex and contemporary policy field: publicly-funded health care. Premised on a popular, if fragile, opinion that “universal state-funded health care is seen as a fundamental right of all

Canadians,” the authors focus on the creation of “an ambitious comprehensive health care plan” for Saskatchewan. Perhaps not surprisingly, they emphasize the supportive role played by provincial and national labor associations during this “battle for medicare” in the early 1960s; seen as a success for Saskatchewan, the outcome soon resonated and was repeated across Canada. Upon turning to the present, the work demonstrates both promise and prejudice; a more accurate subtitle might have been: a *tribute* to labor in Saskatchewan.

In addition to offering readers a rich array of relevant photographs, O'Brien, Millar, and Delainey's celebratory *Saskatoon* sketches the evolution of the city from its roots as a temperance colony in the late nineteenth century to current efforts to brand it as a global center of science and innovation. Throughout the text, the authors anchor their concise analysis along a broad horizon—from the interdependent international community to the dynamic local setting—including contemporary challenges and opportunities associated with a growing urban Aboriginal population and sometimes strained race relations. They also offer a reminder about the importance of cosmopolitan urban centers, like Saskatoon, within Saskatchewan. For instance, in the early twentieth century, wheat may have ruled rural communities, but, for many citizens of Saskatoon, “money was easy, optimism was everywhere, and real estate was king.” Importantly, if implicitly, O'Brien, Millar, and Delainey remind readers that this city remains pivotal as the peoples of Saskatchewan consider their common future within and beyond Western Canada.

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