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NOSTALGIC REACTION AND THE CANADIAN PRAIRIE LANDSCAPE

RONALD REES

A man is, of all sorts of baggage, the most difficult to be transported.

Adam Smith, 1776

In psychology and psychoanalysis, nostalgic reaction refers to the behavior of people separated from familiar places and familiar pasts.¹ Used professionally, the expression encompasses the entire range of behavior exhibited by the uprooted. It is used here in a limited sense to describe the efforts, both physical and imaginative, made by migrants from Europe and eastern North America to adjust to a difficult and unfamiliar landscape. Cut off from their homelands, migrants to the Canadian prairies and to the northern plains in general were forced to make a home of a new and, as one of them put it, "naked land."² For most, arrival on the plains was the equivalent of a moon landing. (The analogy is not

fanciful; to enrich their understanding of the problems of adjustment to an alien environment, American astronauts were required to read Walter Prescott Webb's classic study of the Great Plains.)³ Even settlers accustomed to continental conditions were overwhelmed by the enormities of the region. German Catholics from the Ukraine and Ukrainians from Poland were dumbfounded by the emptiness of the plains and by the length and severity of the winters. For the Ukrainians, wrote Myrna Kostash, the first nostalgia was longing for the early spring and the blossoming plum and cherry trees of their homeland while the prairie offered only poplar saplings, willow brush, and grasses, still under the snow.⁴

The dimensions of the problem posed by the loss of home and the need to make a new one were the subject of a poignant memoir by Welshman Evan Davies, who homesteaded with his friend David James on the southern edge of the Saskatchewan parkland:

I felt very low, and I believe David James did too. This was so unlike what we had imagined back in Wales. We had visualised a green country with hills around, and happy people as neighbours—no doubt a naive outlook on so drastic a venture, but one common to

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many people emigrating at the time. There was something so impersonal about this prairie, something that shattered any hope of feeling attached to it or even building a home on it. Any moment now, I thought as we trotted along, we'll come to our piece of land. Any moment! What is there to make it different from the rest of the land we've come through since yesterday morning? Nothing. Nothing at all.⁵

David James selected a quarter section that had on it patches of stone and a small ridge. He could have chosen a cleaner quarter nearby, but "I rather fancy," remarked his companion, "he took the piece with the ridge on it because the flatness of the other pieces was abhorrent to his Glamorgan nature." David James's reaction was commonplace; in unfamiliar surroundings we gravitate to what we know. Pioneer records are rich in examples of locations that were chosen as much for emotional as for practical reasons. Forest and parkland locations, sometimes with stony and poorly drained soils, were repeatedly preferred to the richer and more easily worked grasslands. "We chose to settle in the Dauphin region of Manitoba," said one Ukrainian emigrant, "because the woods and streams and meadows very much resembled our native Carpathian scenery."⁶

As well as choosing settings that reminded them of home, settlers undertook physical changes that sustained the illusion of conformity between the new landscape and the old. The intractable nature of the prairie allowed only token changes, or what anthropologist John Bennett calls "symbolic" adjustments.⁷ Trees were planted, lawns and gardens made, and towns and villages given names that recalled the homeland. The changes were encouraged and supported by the government and the railways, both of which, said a government spokesman in 1901, were eager to convert "a bleak and uninviting stretch of country into one in which newcomers will be anxious to settle."⁸ Under a policy of "beautification" the government planted trees and the Canadian Pacific Railway made gardens. Together they demonstrated that a landscape as plain as the prairie could be

redeemed. "They were islands of beauty," wrote Aileen Garland of the station gardens, "tokens of gracious living in a landscape often bleak and bare. When the train had pulled out . . . passengers would have found the pervasive aroma . . . of the coaches replaced by the fragrance of mignonette, tobacco plants, and sweet-scented stock. They were home again."⁹

RESPONSES OF RANCHERS AND HOMESTEADERS

Symbolic adjustments to the landscape and the nostalgia that they expressed were not as evident in ranching as in farming districts. Ranchers did not plant trees and they often dispensed with gardens. Immigrant ranchers were not immune to nostalgia—those in Alberta, for example, created a distinctly English colonial society—but among them the condition was never epidemic. They were clearly more at home on the prairie than farmers were. In the foothills of southern Alberta and the hills and coteaus of southwestern Saskatchewan, they had the most scenic landscape of the prairie. "It was beautiful," wrote novelist Robert Stead of the foothill country, "not with the majesty of great mountains, nor the solemnity of great plains, but with that nearer, more intimate relationship which is the peculiar property of foothill country. Here was neither the flatness that, with a change of mood, could become in a moment desolation, nor the aloofness of eternal rocks towering in cold space, but the friendship of hills that could be climbed, and trees that lisped in the light wind, and water that babbled playfully over gravel ridges gleaming in the August sunshine."¹⁰

To the advantages of life in attractive, enfolding surroundings ranchers could add the satisfaction that accompanies a natural relationship with environment. Unlike the exposed farmhouses, the low ranch houses nestled in coulees where they were protected from wind and fire and where there were trees, sweet water, and sometimes trout. Many of the ranches had been located by settlers who had followed Indian and buffalo trails that led to

sheltered campgrounds and good grazing. The hard words "sodbuster," "mossback," and "nester" were expressions of contempt for territorial invaders who compounded the trespass by committing ecological abuse. The ranchers were not guardian angels of the prairie ecosystem, but they did not, in areas too dry for agriculture, turn the sod "wrong side up," nor did they need to "root, hog, or die." Ranchers, in Bennett's phrase, conformed to the environment; range cattle filled the ecological niche left by the buffalo, and raising them was not usually toilsome. More important than the homesteader virtue of dogged determination was a sympathetic understanding of the environment and of the animals. In ranching parlance, "knowing cow" indicated a knowledge of cattle psychology and—to prevent unnecessary movement and overgrazing—knowledge of the behavior of the animals on particular kinds of topography and on particular arrangements of grass and water. Though the prairie was not always beneficent, ranchers were less vulnerable than farmers to wind, hail, and drought; and in the prairie grasses they had, thanks to sun-curing and chinook winds, a year-round supply of pasture and hay. The result of a way of life that was more a partnership with nature than a struggle against it was a sanguine attitude toward the environment. The ranchers of southern Alberta took such pleasure in the landscape and in ranching—and were apparently so literate—that in 1883 the editor of the *Fort McLeod Gazette* complained that he was "getting mobbed" by poetry that sang the praises of ranch life.¹¹

The ranchers' satisfaction could also be attributed to their enjoyment of rapid and uninhibited movement. Delight in the spaciousness of the landscape and the ease with which they were able to move across it is a persistent refrain in the ranching literature. Wrote the Irish-born wife of an Albertan rancher: "I like the endless riding over the endless prairie, the wind sweeping the grass, the great silent sunshine and vast skies."¹² Occupants of a sealike land, Charles Olsen noted, respond to it in one of two ways; they either ride the land

or they fasten onto it.¹³ Ranchers evidently rode and farmers fastened. The choice may have been related to temperament.

Psychoanalyst Michael Balint has identified two personality types based upon fundamental differences between people in their need for security.¹⁴ The two types are labeled "ochnophil" and "philobat." According to Balint, the ochnophil is hesitant and fearful, and his world consists of objects (refuges) separated by "horrid empty spaces." Fear is provoked by leaving the protective objects and allayed by rejoining them; sojourns in the empty spaces are therefore kept as short as possible. The philobat's world is the converse of the ochnophil's: the horrid empty spaces are, instead, friendly expanses interrupted by occasional hazards that have to be negotiated. Unlike the ochnophil, whose security is founded on the proximity of protective objects, the philobat relies on his own resources and a limited amount of equipment. Provided the elements are not actually threatening, he is confident of his ability to survive. The philobat's world, concludes Balint, is characterized by safe distance and sight, the ochnophil's by physical proximity and touch.

The early farmers and ranchers on the Canadian plains might readily be assigned to Balint's categories. Pioneer ranchers, Bennett notes, were venturers who, arriving before the homesteaders, either valued isolation or were not particularly frightened by it.¹⁵ Because they had confidence in their own abilities and strength, they admired traits of self-reliance and individual effort. The early farmers were also adventurous but, notes Bennett, those who came after the turn of the century were mostly family men who hoped to create stable communities in an ordered, cultivated countryside. A life of unpredictable movement and activity, determined by the vagaries of weather and the needs of cattle, held no appeal. One of Bennett's interviewees, a farmer of admittedly nervous temperament, remarked that he liked the immobility of crops: "When you plant 'em," he said, "they stay there."¹⁶

Anchored on the sealike plain, the homesteader's defenses against the "horrid empty spaces" were the house and shelterbelt. So inseparable are conceptions of home and of shelter that sometimes the first act of cultivation was to plant tree seedlings around the sod house or tar-paper shack. Trees showed that "real" homes could be built even upon the "bald-headed" prairie, wrote one settler to the tree nursery at Indian Head.¹⁷ And another: "Without [my grove] I don't think I would care to live on the farm. . . . The bigger [the trees] grow and the more I have of them the stronger [they tie me] to my home. . . . I think the best thing of all about trees is that they make a place look like home. . . . fine buildings to me would not have their real worth without trees; so my trees are to start growing before I am to have many buildings."¹⁸

Inside the shelterbelts, homesteaders were able to make comforting havens. Wrote another of Indian Head's correspondents: "The shelterbelts dispelled the barrenness of the prairie, broke the wind, . . . created joy in homemaking and showed that our lives and surroundings are just what we choose to make them."¹⁹ So effective were the shelterbelts in blocking the view that from within some of them the prairie could be seen only from the very tops of the houses. In areas of English and Ontarian settlement, particularly, pallisades of trees up to eleven rows deep surrounded the houses on three and sometimes on all sides.²⁰ Inside the shelterbelt, one might find an old-world landscape of lawns and of flower and vegetable gardens often begun with seeds, bulbs, and roots brought from Europe or the East. To the homesick, familiar plants arranged informally in enclosed settings were a balm. Novelist Frederick Niven observed, "You step from the great billiard-board, the expanse of rectangular fields and long straight roads, into a grove where the birds are singing . . . into an oasis where the garden paths twist for a change, and there are green lawns, and the billiard-board at once seems remote."²¹

THE EFFECTS OF THE RECTANGULAR SURVEY

The contrast between the homeliness of the world within the shelterbelt and the anonymity of the one without is a familiar theme in prairie writing. Outside the shelterbelt lay the imprisoning plain—a world of unlimited, rigidly controlled space in which, as novelist Edward McCourt put it, determinedly straight roads led nowhere and, the ultimate irony, there wasn't anywhere to walk.²² By conveying the impression of a landscape possessed and controlled, the rectangular survey may have reassured anxious homesteaders; then as now, it may also have satisfied notions of ideal form and ideal organization of space. As a functional system, however, it fell short of perfection. The survey fulfilled the government's objective of systematic and orderly settlement, and it proved to be well suited to the requirements of machine agriculture, but for these gains there were offsetting losses. Except in totally flat, treeless areas, where it would have been churlish not to complement nature's geometry, it interposed an inorganic network of roads and field and farm boundaries between the settlers and their surroundings.

The effect of such mechanistic treatment of the landscape was to intensify topophobic sentiment associated with the empty, impersonal plain. The ecologist Paul Shepard dismisses the survey unequivocally as an exercise in nature-hating.²³ By substituting abstraction for perception and identifying order with regularity, it sanctioned the removal and destruction of elements that did not fit the pattern. The old trails, in Hamlin Garland's phrase, had approached hills with caution and followed lakesides with leisure, and they did not rive, nor uproot, nor crush.²⁴ But the surveyed roads were insensitive to the nuances of landscape. To preserve the angular pattern, hills were confronted and summarily crossed, and creeks and sloughs were laboriously filled in. Subservience to abstraction produced a landscape of superimposed order that did not satisfy the settler's need for familiar, lived-in

space. Topophilia requires forms and arrangements that express custom and practice, not preconceptions of geometric order. In a landscape it requires paths and trails. John Updike has written: "I am always affected—reassured, nostalgically pleased, even, as a member of my animal species, made proud—by the sight of bare earth that has been smoothed and packed firm by the passage of human feet. . . . What makes this small modification, this modest work of human erosion, seem precious to me is that it was achieved accidentally, and has about it that repose of grace that is beyond willing."²⁵

Updike's affection for the unwilling is shared by Wallace Stegner, who spent part of his boyhood on a homestead in the southwest corner of Saskatchewan. "In a country without landmarks it might have been assumed that any road would comfort the soul. But I didn't recall feeling anything special about the graded road. . . . It was our own trail that lifted my heart."²⁶ Conversely, the absence of paths and trails, and of the purposeful, cooperative habitation that paths and trails imply, could cause distress. Wrote an anguished Ukrainian immigrant of the parkland of central Alberta:

I found no path, no trail
But only bush and water
Wherever I looked I saw
Not a native [land]—but foreign
I found no path, no trail
Only green bush
Wherever I looked I saw
A foreign country²⁷

In addition to discouraging an organic relationship with the land and intensifying topophobic sentiment, the rectangular survey and the agricultural settlement that it served severed links with the history of the region. In this sense the survey was a two-edged sword. European traders and settlers who preceded the survey had complemented traditional ways of life. Fur traders had provided plains Indians with a market for furs and pemmican; by clinging to the rivers, long-lot farmers respected

the old highways and, far from obstructing hunters on prairie and parkland, they frequently joined the chase. The Manitoba uprising in 1869 began symbolically with a confrontation between Louis Riel, the métis leader, and a group of government surveyors who had come to subdivide the hunting grounds. Mass European settlement destroyed the Indian and the métis way of life and in so doing obliterated the past. Homesteaders, therefore, suffered a double loss; they were separated both from their own homelands and histories and from the history and traditions of the territory they had come to occupy. As the old landscape disappeared, its most evocative feature, the regional trail, became the object of a new nostalgia. In the absence of written histories and permanent settlements, the trails were hieroglyphs that recorded the movements and purposes of the Indians and the first Europeans. Their erasure prompted the following epitaph: "These trails were one of the most important links with the history of our country. Along these winding trackways Indians travelled long before the coming of the first white man. . . . Buffalo hunters followed them, as did traders, explorers, and surveyors to mark and map the land, to make it a checker of townships, sections and road allowances. . . . the very history of our country has been fenced over and plowed into the ground."²⁸

With the disappearance of the old landmarks and the ways of life they symbolized, the intimate knowledge of environment that is acquired by people who live by hunting and gathering also vanished. The Indian and métis understanding of the land and their ability to survive contrasted sharply with the ignorance of the homesteaders and their fumbling efforts to sustain themselves. The "green Englishman" was merely a stereotype of the inexperienced settler. Nothing revealed the vulnerability of the homesteaders so much as the apparently universal fear of being lost. In a country of few landmarks and uncertain distances the customary referents are relationships, not fixed points; orientation is a matter of interpreting the lie of the grass, the direction of the wind,

the position of the sun. Inevitably, the skills of the Indians and métis joined the trails as subjects for nostalgia. An example of that nostalgia may be seen in the acclaim lavished upon the legendary police scout Jerry Potts, son of a Piegan mother and a Scots father, whose "uncanny" sense of direction is said to have been proof against blizzard and blackest night. An extension of the same sentiment accounts for the praise of the old horses who saved countless pioneer lives by picking out the homeward trail in blinding snowstorms.

IMAGINATIVE RESPONSES TO THE LANDSCAPE

Feelings of vulnerability in an unfamiliar environment may be dispelled by experience and knowledge and by the labor of cultivation and building. Knowledge of the environment and physical control over it increase confidence, but in themselves they do not create the feeling of home. In Martin Buber's terms, they orient or control, but they do not realize. House, shelterbelt, garden, cultivated fields, and a rational grasp of environment are the beginnings of home-making in a new land, but the sense of belonging and the state of heightened perception that we normally associate with the home place are gifts of the imagination, not of the plough and the hammer. As Northrop Frye has remarked, no land is home until it has been imaginatively digested or absorbed.²⁹

In unfamiliar settings the imagination can follow one of two courses. It can find new means to express the new forms or it can tailor the new forms to fit the old means. The pioneer imagination, as evinced by the work of pioneer poets, novelists, and painters, followed the second course. In the West the temptation to impose external patterns was overwhelming; in many—perhaps most—eyes, the prairie was a vacancy, not a landscape. The expression "out of sight of land," used by travelers and settlers moving westward, summed up the general response to the flat grasslands. The prairie is still defined negatively, and often inaccurately,

by its deficiencies; it is flat, featureless, treeless, and waterless. Pioneer painters, for example, responded to the insubstantial landscape by selecting positive and familiar features—valleys, trees, hillsides, flocks of sheep, cattle—and treating them in the known manner (Figs. 1 and 2). "Like many other Canadians of the time," recalled a Manitoba pioneer, "my aunt saw little to interest her in the Manitoba landscape. She used pictures of English landscape as her models, changing and adding color and form to suit her taste."³⁰ Like most of the other pioneer painters, she offered little more than muted European landscapes that were artistic analogues of Bennett's "symbolic" adjustments to the physical landscape.

Though few pioneers were painters or writers, all engaged in the imaginative transformation of the land. The first and indispensable requisite for pioneering, noted one, was not physical strength, endurance, or money, but imagination—the ability to see something

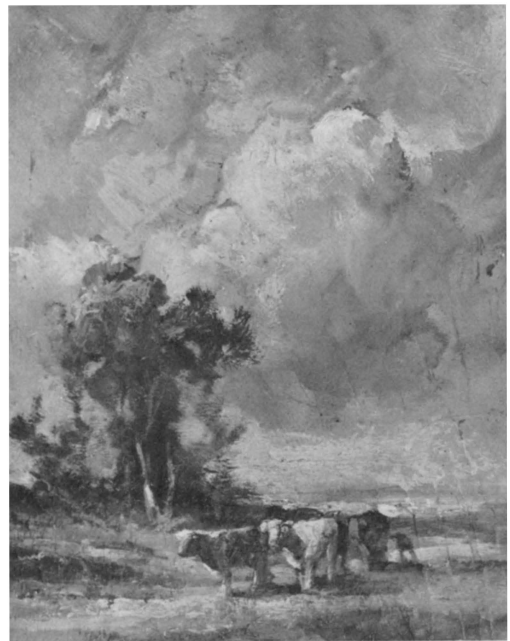


FIG. 1. *Augustus Kenderdine, Sketch for Whitcomb Trail, no date. Courtesy of Glenbow Museum, Calgary, Alberta.*

in the apparently empty land.³¹ In cases of extreme longing for a familiar, settled landscape, the transformation could take the form of a mirage: "The sun would set on a perfectly white plain, no dark object visible, everything covered with the white mantle of snow. After sunrise in the morning the plain seemed to be dotted with houses and trees, in one direction would appear a range of hills, in another a vast lake, and you would imagine you saw ships upon it, then the scene would change and when you looked again you would see the same old familiar prairie."³²

Images that suggested correspondences between the old land and the new comforted the homesick, and by preserving the patterns and traditions of the art of the Old World they reassured settlers of the continuity of cultural



FIG. 2. A. Thomas, *Moose Mountain from Cannington Manor*, ca. 1895. *Cannington Manor (Saskatchewan)* was a middle-class English settlement. Collection of Mrs. B. Forsyth, Carlyle, Saskatchewan.

ties. In a region where they found no familiar cultural patterns, these ties were lifelines. But duplications of the old-world culture, though they may have assuaged nostalgia, prolonged the sense of alienation by presenting images of a distant world. "Places" were elsewhere. Eric Severeid, a native of North Dakota, describes the sense of frustration felt by the literate, imaginative child who is unable to identify with his surroundings: "I remember studying the picture books of the seaside places, the mountains and the crowded cities. Somewhere they existed. I remember tracing the meaningless rectangle of Dakota in schoolbook maps and thinking: Why am I here on the cold, flat top of our country? What am I doing here?"³³

A sense of homelessness is endemic in pioneer societies; it lasts for as long as the new world is seen from inside a transplanted culture. Ivan Southall, a third-generation Australian, provides this illuminating anecdote: "The first time I ever felt properly at home was on a gloomy Autumn morning in 1943. . . . I pulled up the blinds onto early morning light as our train crossed the river Thames and for the first time in my life I saw the Tower of London downstream. I was twenty-two, a pilot in the Royal Australian Air Force . . . and, I was sure, very soon to die, but I cried inside because I was home. The landscape was right at last. Do you know what that means? I don't. Because London doesn't feel like home to me any more."³⁴

The answer to Southall's dilemma can be found in an autobiographical essay by the distinguished historian William L. Morton.³⁵ Morton (a Canadian, and also of the third generation) grew up on a farm in Manitoba early in this century, and like all Canadians of British background, he was raised on Victorian English literature. There was little Canadian or prairie literature available, and most of this reflected the Old rather than the New World. Through living in one world and reading, almost exclusively, about another, Morton inhabited two landscapes—one external, one internal. As a result he experienced the tension of a mind that is not integrated imaginatively with

its surroundings. In the absence of a regional art or literature to provide the images that he required, Morton realized that to resolve the dilemma he would have to provide his own. "Nothing, no country," he has written, "can really be owned except under familiar name or satisfying phrase. To be apprehended by the mind and made personal, it requires not only the worn comfort of a used tool or a broken-in shoe; it requires also assimilation to the mind, ear, eye, and tongue by accepted, or acceptable description in word, or line, or colour. . . . The need to reconcile the actual and the mind's landscape . . . underlies the need, felt at least by the sensitive of a new country, to create its own literature and write its own history." For Morton, good history must not only be true to fact; it must also possess its own integrity—the truth of total vision.

While Morton was writing his creative histories of western Canada, painters and other writers were also engaged in the imaginative absorption of the land. By the thirties and forties, pastoral images of the prairie—Frye's "predigested picturesque"—no longer satisfied. A generation that had survived the rigors of pioneering, drought, and economic depression required, or at least was prepared for, more substantial fare. Images that matched the

settlers' experience of the prairie were provided by such writers as Sinclair Ross, Edward McCourt, and W. O. Mitchell and by painters Illingworth Kerr and Robert Hurley. All were determined not to shrink from the reality of the immense open plain.

For the prairie realists, as they were subsequently called, the landscape was a spare, indifferent, even menacing presence. Mitchell's taut vision is perhaps the best known: "the least common denominator of nature, the skeletal requirements simply, of land and sky."³⁶ Such a landscape, declared Sinclair Ross, could be painted only by a great artist.³⁷ Illingworth Kerr and Robert Hurley may not have met Ross's exacting standards, but their paintings conveyed with startling clarity the image of a great lone land (Figs. 3 and 4). Kerr was born in the Qu'Appelle valley in Saskatchewan, where it was customary to refer to the flat prairie above as "up on top." In his valley pictures Kerr hinted at the awesome spaces lurking above the shoulders of the Qu'Appelle, and when he did move onto the plain he created images of nearly abstract simplicity. Austerity and abstraction were also Robert Hurley's stock-in-trade. With ruler, pen and ink, and simple watercolor washes he reduced the prairie to a flat, empty foreground, a silhouette of a town or grain elevators, and, to lend perspective, a railway line or a line of



FIG. 3. *Illingworth Kerr, Last Light, Boggy Creek, 1935. Courtesy of Mendel Gallery, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan.*

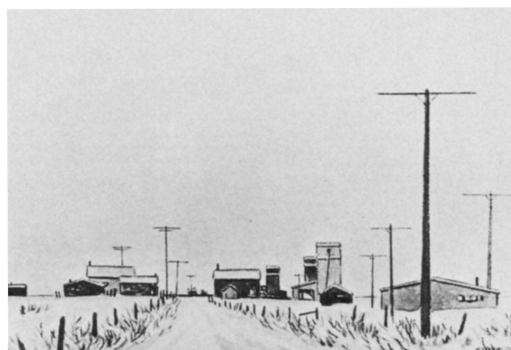


FIG. 4. *R. N. Hurley, Untitled watercolor, 1951. Collection of Mrs. A. Anstensen, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan.*

telegraph poles. Produced at an average rate of five per week for twenty years, Hurley's paintings sold and sold. The source of their immediate and continued popularity seems to have been a universal "shock of recognition." As a Saskatchewan journalist observed, it was as if people on the prairies had been waiting for an interpreter who would point out to them the realities of their environment.³⁸

In the serious art of the region today there is no hint of the pastoral or of nostalgic longing for distant places. In painting, the dominant principle has been reduction; a landscape of simple, repeated forms invites abstract approaches. Public sentiment, however, has not kept pace with artistic sensibilities. The art in calendars, hotels, and restaurants owes more to Constable than to Kerr, and suburbs are still named Wildwood, Forest Grove, and Lakeview, even though, one suspects, only recent immigrants actively hunger for landscapes where such features are characteristic. Nostalgia for other places, although not conquered, is at least controlled.

NOSTALGIA FOR THE PAST

Pioneer societies eventually dispel the sense of homelessness, but they do not escape nostalgia. Merely by growing older, as L. P. Hartley observed, they create another country, from whose siren call no one is ever safe.³⁹ That country is the past. Though recent in time, the pioneer period is remote enough in spirit to be alluring. Migrants to western Canada crossed an ocean or a continent only to land, figuratively speaking, on a shifting plain. Sudden changes in technology and in society required immigrants to adapt to changing conditions of life and work as well as to a difficult physical environment. Mechanization, farm enlargement, and rural depopulation quickly altered pioneer ways of life and, except for slowly decaying remnants, the pioneer landscape. The textured pattern of bluffs, barns, fences, and hayfields has been reduced in most places to one of large, unbroken fields served by combine and tractor. "I remember," recalled one pioneer, "our farm

had been a patchwork of bush, pasture, and plots of ground cultivated here and there. Now a tractor pulls a four-bottomed plow almost a mile of field without turning."⁴⁰ The uniform, undifferentiated landscape of "agribusiness" has completed a process of landscape rationalization that began with the rectangular survey, the building of the railways, and the mechanical planning and placement of the towns.

The organization and methods of modern farming have also affected the character of social life. Unrestrained by the limitations of horses, farmers work with greater intensity and for longer hours. Old-timers complain that there is less time for visiting, and because there are fewer people, social occasions are less frequent. Most affected are the elderly, many of whom now have no physical connection with their past. The original homestead may be part of a larger unit, the house abandoned, and the children gone from the district. The sense of loss, which is not limited to the old, is reflected in the popular and folk art of the region. While the elevator was once the unrivaled icon of the prairies, other images now serve as symbols of an earlier time: the weathered, abandoned farmstead, the broken fence line, rusting machinery, the overgrown woodlot, and scenes of communal life—threshing days, country weddings, grain hauling, and journeys to and from the country school (Figs. 5 and 6).

The popularity of these images should not, of course, be mistaken for an earnest desire to return to rural life. Nostalgia for the past is as much the result of dissatisfaction with an alien present as of a desire to return to a former way of life, idealized in memory. A widely held belief, supported by the still-popular doctrines of agricultural fundamentalism, attributes the emptying of the prairies to implacable forces of nature, in the form of droughts in the thirties, and to an insensate technology. But neither can be held responsible for the movement from the land. Richard DuWors, a Saskatchewan sociologist, pointed out that the exodus was greater in the prosperous forties than in the destitute thirties and that, on



FIG. 5. Jan G. Wyers, *These Good Old Thrashing Days*, ca. 1957. Courtesy of Norman MacKenzie Art Gallery, Regina, Saskatchewan.



FIG. 6. George Jenkins, *The Old Toal Place*, 1969. Courtesy of Mendel Gallery, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan.

balance, technology ought to have prevented displacement, not caused it.⁴¹ Offsetting the displacing effects of larger tractors and combines were other innovations, such as telephones, radios, and rural electrification, that made farm life more tolerable. Not even the automobile, the greatest single antidote to rural isolation, could stem the outflow.

DuWors's explanation for what he called a "panic flight" from the land was twofold. People are attracted by the advantages of town and village-centered farming and are repelled by the plain. In some ways, observed DuWors, the prairie is more dangerous today than in pioneer days; technology has made us careless about

using such passive defenses as stout boots, warm hats, and heavy underwear, so that today it can be fatal to be too far from a car heater that works. The perception of the prairie as an empty and sometimes threatening landscape survives in the modern expression "out there." The persistence of such expressions, in combination with the steady drift of people from country districts to villages and towns, demonstrates the difficulties of making a home of such a landscape. In adopting nuclear forms of life, prairie people are merely reverting to a pattern of rural settlement that is characteristic of much of the Old World. The change may not be a nostalgic reaction, in the strict sense of the term, but simply a human response to a landscape so often inhuman in its scale and hostile in its moods.

NOTES

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2. Marie A. Hamilton and Zachary M. Hamilton, *These Are the Prairies* (Regina: School Aids and Text Book Pub. Co., 1948), p. 11.
3. Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Plains* (Boston: Ginn, 1931).
4. Myrna Kostash, *All of Baba's Children* (Edmonton: Hurtig, 1977), p. 21.
5. Evan Davies and Aled Vaughan, *Beyond the Old Bone Trail* (London: Cassell, 1966), p. 35.
6. Quoted in Brenton M. Barr, ed., *Western Canadian Research in Geography* (Vancouver, B.C.: British Columbia Geographical Series, 1974), p. 21.
7. John W. Bennett, *Northern Plainsmen* (Arlington, Ill.: A. H. M. Pub. Corp., 1969), pp. 85-94.
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9. Aileen Garland, "Gardens along the Right of Way," *Manitoba Pageant* 22 (1976): 7.
10. Robert C. Stead, *The Cowpuncher* (Toronto: Musson, 1918), p. 15.
11. Ermeline Ann Ference, "Literature

Associated with Ranching in Southern Alberta" (M.A. thesis, University of Alberta, 1971), p. 23.

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