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Review of *Laird of the West* By John W. Chalmers

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Laird of the West. By John W. Chalmers. Calgary, Alta.: Detselig Enterprises, 1981. Maps, illustrations, photographs, bibliography, index. 289 pp. \$19.95.

David Laird was born in 1883 in Prince Edward Island, a descendant of colonists settled by the fifth Earl of Selkirk. The young Laird was well educated, brought up in a Presbyterian family, and interested in public affairs. As publisher of the *Protestant*, he was in the thick of the fight for land reform. He married Laura Owen in 1864 and this union was blessed with six children.

Laird entered active politics as a Liberal and was elected to the Island Assembly. When Prince Edward Island entered confederation on 1 July 1873, he stood successfully as a candidate for the Canadian Parliament. He entered Alexander Mackenzie's government as minister of the interior after the "Pacific Scandal" brought down John A. Macdonald's ministry.

Canada had purchased Rupert's Land from the Hudson's Bay Company after the company relinquished its charter in 1869. Troubles with the métis, a term used generally to denote the offspring of unions between Indian mothers and white fathers, led to the creation of the Province of Manitoba within the Canadian Confederation. In the whole area, however, the federal government was responsible ultimately for law and order, for the Indians, for land claims, and for white settlement. The minister of the interior was expected to coordinate policies and to direct progress.

Laird went west in 1874, proceeding by United States rail lines to St. Paul and thence by steamboat to Winnipeg. He was in Fort Qu'Appelle for the negotiations preceding the signing of Indian Treaty No. 4, which concerned the Plains Cree and Saulteaux bands. He noted the Mounted Police trek across the West and the establishment of Fort Walsh in the Cypress Hills. In 1875, the North-West Territories Act provided a framework of government for the area, making provision for an elected assembly. Laird became governor under the new legislation. An Indian Act was passed in 1876 and Treaties Nos. 6 and 7 were signed. Laird played a leading role in the negotiations preceding Treaty No. 7, which dealt with the Blackfoot confederacy. There was anxiety among whites and Indians north of the 49th parallel when Sitting Bull and his Sioux fol-

lowers sought refuge in Canada in 1876. Hunger stalked the land in 1878 and 1879 as the buffalo disappeared and a recession brought a cutback of federal supplies of food for Indian tribes.

John A. Macdonald had been returned to power in 1878, but Laird finished out his term as governor. He returned to Prince Edward Island in 1881. Too active to retire, he sought election to the House of Commons but was twice unsuccessful. With the return of the Liberals to power under Wilfrid Laurier in 1896, he was back in harness, this time as head of a treaty commission to negotiate a treaty with the Indian bands in the northern boreal forest. He was then appointed Indian commissioner for Manitoba and the North-West Territories. As such, he devoted his energies to protecting his charges from exploitation by white settlers and agents and by providing schools to usher Indian youth into modern society. He died in 1914.

Laird of the West gives a clear and sympathetic view of the problems of governing a colonial hinterland, distant from the source of power. The author's skillful use of letters and informal sources gives depth to our understanding of the early prairie history. The book throws new light on the problems faced by officials who were expected to carry out policies fashioned in distant Ottawa. It is particularly valuable for the insights given on the Indian treaties. Unfortunately, the volume is marred by a number of typographical errors. Nevertheless, *Laird of the West* makes a substantial contribution to understanding the early development of federal policies in the Canadian prairies.

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