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Intersections Studies In The Canadian And American Great Plains

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INTERSECTIONS

STUDIES IN THE CANADIAN AND AMERICAN GREAT PLAINS

In March of 1982, the Center for Great Plains Studies at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln sponsored the symposium *Intersections: Studies in the Canadian and American Great Plains*. This was the sixth in a series of annual Great Plains symposia, each focusing on a different aspect of the region. *Intersections* was also a direct response to the *Crossing Frontiers* conference on the literature and history of the Canadian and American Wests, held in Banff, Alberta, Canada, in 1978. The four essays in this *Great Plains Quarterly* represent a cross section of the twenty-nine papers in nine disciplines presented at *Intersections*.

The idea of Great Plains studies implies that there is a regional identity to the plains that can profitably be defined and discussed. We can test and explore the significance of this implication by asking what happens when this region, this geographically coherent area, is bisected by a national boundary, the forty-ninth parallel. How does regionalism interact with nationalism?

Previous comparisons between Canadian and American ideas of the West and of the nation, particularly those made at *Crossing Frontiers*, have established that different perceptions have governed the nations on either side of the forty-ninth parallel. To generalize, the United States has favored self-reliance and self-determination. Americans have expected to conquer by violence, sanctified by natural law, both the land and any peoples who might oppose the archetypal American's vision of Manifest Destiny.

Americans have viewed their West as a crucible in which all cultures were to fuse into one new and undeniably American self. Canadians, on the other hand, have favored cooperation and duly appointed authority. The archetypal Canadian has regarded the land with awe, striving to endure rather than to conquer, and Canadian images tend to be of victims rather than of victors. Canadians, fighting to maintain a national identity separate from the potentially engulfing United States, have viewed their West as a mosaic rather than a melting pot. The writers of each of the essays in this number of the *Quarterly* have examined these national characteristics in terms of specific comparisons between the ways the people of the two nations have lived on the Great Plains.

In "Diplomatic Racism: The Canadian Government and Black Migration from Oklahoma, 1905-1912," historian R. Bruce Shepard examines a little-known episode to show how both national differences and environmental realities were overridden by cultural bias. Blacks were part of the stream of people who moved to the West after the Civil War, looking for freedom and prosperity, but many who had found both in Oklahoma Territory also found that statehood was followed by laws and mob violence denying blacks what they had gained. If the West had been a symbol of freedom to all Americans, Canada, the final terminus of the Underground Railroad, had been the same for blacks. Oklahoma blacks began to move

north, only to be rebuffed by white Canadians and the Canadian government. Ultimately, most remained in Oklahoma. As Shepard convincingly shows, the mosaic model was not to include black pieces, and Canadian rejection of American patterns of violence did not extend so far as to guarantee a refuge from that violence. Neither ideals of frontier democracy nor ideals of Canadian equality and rule by law could stand up to the larger cultural pattern of racial prejudice.

Combining history with social science, Harry C. McDean discusses "Social Scientists and Farm Poverty on the North American Plains, 1933-1940." He finds that, because large-scale social science research in rural and agricultural areas was not undertaken in Canada until a decade after it had been undertaken in the United States, the findings on and proposed solutions to rural poverty were radically different in the two countries. American social scientists did their basic research during the relatively prosperous 1920s, while Canadians began their research in the chronically depressed 1930s. Thus American solutions to farm poverty emphasized the failures of identifiable individuals, while Canadian solutions dealt with regional or communal failure. McDean's research shows that, although the solutions seem to be in keeping with the theory that Americans emphasize individuality and Canadians community, at least in the important matter of farm poverty, these traits are a coincidence of development, rather than a reasoned divergence.

In "American Literary Images of the Canadian Prairies, 1860-1920," James Doyle argues that American writers used Canada less as a real and mappable place than as an undefined wilderness to serve as "other" for defining the United States. In popular literature, perhaps the most accessible medium for grasping the cultural concepts that a society has internalized, the contrasts between the Canadian and American Wests hold most true. Even travel writers who purported to see a definable "Canadian" identity tended to regard that identity as a replay of America twenty years before, both resplendent with nostalgia and somewhat lack-

ing in progress. At the same time, however, American writers saw on the Canadian plains the chance to redo the American frontier, leaving out the mistakes and excesses that marred the original dream of Virgin Land turning into an agrarian paradise.

Geographer James M. Richtik chronicles "Competition for Settlers: The Canadian Viewpoint." The United States had substantial advantages over Canada in attracting settlers to its plains region. It was more populous, had a more temperate climate, and had a better and more extensive transportation system. Canada tried to counter these advantages by relaxing its homestead requirements and by granting large blocks of land to groups such as orthodox Mennonites, who wished to settle in communities. Nonetheless, the advantages of the United States continued to outweigh the inducements of Canada, and even after the closing of the U.S. frontier, the northern nation continued to have to struggle to attract immigrants. Richtik's article suggests that, at least in part, Canada's adherence to the mosaic concept and the community ideal was less the result of ideology than of a partially successful attempt to curry favor with potential immigrants.

Taken together, the four essays in this issue of the *Great Plains Quarterly* confirm the generalizations about the Canadian and American Great Plains as developed by earlier scholars, but also suggest that the differences are less the result of intention or ideology than of an ongoing series of circumstances. Neither environment nor national identity, it seems, shapes the deep patterns of our living on the Great Plains, but rather the cultural and economic patterns of the continent and such seemingly inconsequential accidents as which decade social scientists began their research. In tracing attitudes and accidents, the four scholars represented in this volume, and the others who presented papers at the *Intersections* symposium, help us to understand human life on the Great Plains.

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