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Great Plains Studies, Center for

Winter 1998

Review of *Hired Hands: Labour and the Development of Prairie Agriculture, 1880-1930* By Cecilia Danysk

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Cherwinski, Joe, "Review of *Hired Hands: Labour and the Development of Prairie Agriculture, 1880-1930* By Cecilia Danysk" (1998). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 2067.

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Hired Hands: Labour and the Development of Prairie Agriculture, 1880-1930. By Cecilia Danysk. Don Mills, Ontario: Oxford University Press, 1995. Photographs, tables, appendix, notes, index. 231 pp. \$18.95 paper.

The argument is a tidy one indeed. By concentrating on the reactions of farm workers to changing labor-capital relations Danysk contends that the tens of thousands of people who came to toil in the farm fields of prairie Canada over half a century can be conveniently divided into two groups. The first, those who worked in agriculture during the homestead stage before World War I, worked primarily to learn agricultural practices and to acquire sufficient capital to apply to their own quarter section once they acquired it. With labor in short supply they were able to control their relationship with their employ-

ers to a considerable extent. The War, however, was a watershed, and in the 1920s the absence of good land helped to consolidate rural capitalism. With independent ownership less likely, farm workers before the Depression became rural proletarians acting as members of the working class in league with industrial labor, but disadvantaged by small numbers working in isolation. Consequently, their only option in the event of dissatisfaction usually was to locate similar employment elsewhere or to leave agriculture entirely.

The data, both literary and mathematical, which Danysk musters to support her conclusions are indeed impressive. As with most sweeping generalizations, however, equal evidence can be found for the exceptions. For example, if land was so scarce after the war, why was the Soldier Settlement Board able to place so many returned veterans on their own holdings? Moreover, good land was available for the plow in the Peace River country well into the '30s and continued to attract farm workers intent on farming. Furthermore, many farm workers in the '20s, like the Hoadley Boys in Alberta, came with capital in hand, and like their pre-war counterparts only wanted skill and experience before purchasing already developed farms. In all likelihood once they had farmed for a while the liens held on their property by the bank, the implement dealer, and the general merchant usually left them with less capital than their employees had in pocket. Finally, the agricultural ladder was not as rigid as the author implies since one of a number of personal setbacks ranging from prairie fires to unsympathetic bank managers could rapidly turn agrarian capitalists back into laborers working for another farmer to survive.

Quibbling aside, despite their time-honored role in good novels and bad jokes, the hired hands emerge from this book as wooden figures, their individuality hammered into this "conflictual" relationship between capital and labor. This is unfortunate since the primary and secondary literature is full of individual case studies of people triumphing over or suc-

cumbing to adversity because of individual personality and circumstance. Those from the much-criticized group of allegedly class-bound British harvesters brought over in 1923 and 1928 who eventually "made it" serve as cases in point.

The principal regret concerning *Hired Hands*, however, is for an opportunity missed. While the central subject may be about farm labor, outside of ten anemic pages entitled "The Nature of Work" there is little about the actual work done on farms before large-scale mechanization. While almost everyone resident in or passing through the prairie region in that half-century was exposed to farm work for at least a short period, the dramatic life and death struggle played out year after year by the farm operator, his family, and whoever else would pitch in and help (preferably without pay) is missing. Insufficiently emphasized also is the frenzied atmosphere when caution was cast to the wind in a sun-up to sun-down race against nature to "get the crop in," and later "get the crop off" and stored, either in brutal paint-blistering heat or bitter cold, when participants were either caked in mud or engulfed in dust. This was a way of life of which the modern farmer in his air-conditioned combine is not aware. Nor is there much evidence here of the long periods of mind-numbing boredom associated with tasks like picking stones, cleaning barns, or tending to the needs of livestock and poultry. There are also few references to the pre-Depression "rural way of life" with its lack of privacy, amenities, and services to compensate for the long hours of hard work. It is this workplace that contributed most to rural depopulation even before the War when opportunities still existed. No matter what the city or town had to offer, it was better than this, especially for the young. The prospect of outright ownership of the farm and the ascent into capitalism mattered little.

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