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Review of *With Unshakeable Persistence: Rural Teachers of the Depression Era* By Elizabeth McLachlan

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With Unshakeable Persistence: Rural Teachers of the Depression Era. By Elizabeth McLachlan. Introduction by Robert Kroetsch. Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1999. 187 pp. \$24.00 paper.

In 1905 the Canadian government separated several districts from the Northwest Territories to establish the Provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan. Both provinces continued the centralized education system of the Territories. The newly-formed Departments of Education were expected to provide schooling in the recently settled agricultural areas, but were often unable to persuade parents to erect school districts. In 1910 the situation was bleak; Alberta and Saskatchewan had the lowest school age enrollment figures in the country.

Over the next twenty years, both departments accelerated the establishment of school districts administered by locally elected trustees and funded by local property taxes and small government grants. In rural locations this usually meant a one-room school of six to eight grades serving a four-square-mile area. In 1935 Alberta had 3,800 such districts; while not all were active, most operated single-room, multi-grade, one-teacher schools.

Elizabeth McLachlan's *With Unshakeable Persistence* contains the recollections of two men and five women who taught in one-room schools in Alberta and Saskatchewan during the Great Depression. The recollections of another forty teachers are drawn upon in discussions of the teachers' role, their accommodation, social life, and the schools themselves. The reader is also reminded of the devastating effects the 1930s Depression and natural disasters had on prairie life which led to many farm abandonments and a dwindling number of schools.

One result of these conditions was a surplus of teachers, including many recent normal school graduates with first-class teaching certificates. One-room school job notices prompted hundreds of applications. As a McLachlan interviewee put it, "My teaching

career began in 1931. That was the year when teachers were a dime a dozen." School trustees negotiated salaries well below the average annual wage of \$1,076 in Saskatchewan and \$1,055 in Alberta at the beginning of the Depression. For example, a teacher's salary was \$90 a month in the Wealthy School District in Alberta in 1929 but dropped the next year to \$50. By 1932 the annual salary in Saskatchewan fell to \$476, but as McLachlan notes, "Many teachers received far less and some nothing at all." Sometimes room and board was provided in lieu of part of a teacher's salary.

Department officials, school trustees, and parents believed the women teachers who staffed these one-room schools had the wherewithal to serve them well. They were expected to teach a full range of subjects and grades, and while they were sometimes overwhelmed by the task, most held on. The interviewees, without exception, feared the visits of school inspectors and were not given to complaining for fear of losing their jobs.

McLachlan has written a small and interesting study, and her efforts to gather the views of the teachers themselves turns out to have been much more than an anecdotal or hagiographic exercise. The book leaves the strong impression that the children who had the benefit and care of these teachers were shaped in unique, positive, and advantageous ways during the years of the Great Depression.

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