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Review of *Mavericks: An Incurable History of Alberta* By Aritha van Herk

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Mavericks: An Incurable History of Alberta.
By Aritha van Herk. Toronto: Penguin Books
Canada, Ltd., 2001. Map, photographs, illus-
trations, selected bibliography, and index. xii
+ 434 pp. \$36.00.

Aritha van Herk's well-written and fast-
paced *Mavericks* provides an excellent intro-
duction to Alberta. Served up without

footnotes, *Mavericks* is not history, at least in the academic sense. What Aritha van Herk, a professor of English at the University of Calgary, provides instead is a fascinating personal view of Alberta's past. It contains valuable insights into how many Albertans view themselves and describes particularly well many Albertans' views about their relationship with the rest of Canada.

The first chapter, "Aggravating, Awful, Awkward, Awesome Alberta," is all about the Albertan attitude. What propels the book, what glues it together, is an intense animosity toward what the author terms the "Centre," undoubtedly Ontario, and most definitely Ottawa, the federal capital, and Toronto, Canada's financial capital. At the outset she declares: "It's the Centre we hate." Throughout the book she decries "the West's position as colonial property, to be traded and exploited." Chronology determines the form of the next nine chapters which clearly review the geological background of the province; First Peoples; early European visitors; the arrival of the Mounties, ranchers, settlers, then politicians. Four final chapters review other topics: Alberta's two largest cities, Calgary and Edmonton; the history of women; and Alberta's twentieth-century culture and society. The author compares Albertans to mavericks, range calves without owners, individuals resistant "to being caught, owned, herded, taxed, or identified." Yet in her political chap-

ters she confesses her confusion as to why the tough, hard to intimidate Albertans often behave "like a herd of lemmings," electing one party governments.

Van Herk, one of Alberta's best novelists, regales the reader with well-crafted word pictures. Tightly she describes the political philosophy of the transplanted American, Henry Wise Wood, an important Alberta farm leader: "He maintained that the world was divided into nasties and heroes; the nasties were competitive aristocrats who persistently tried to tread on the heroic co-operative democrats." Excellent job on Wise Wood, but her limited historical background occasionally trips her up. Her description of Dr. Walter Cheadle, an early English traveler, as one of an influx of "romantic ninnies" slights an acutely perceptive and reliable mid-nineteenth century observer. In England he later became one of the first supporters of the right of women to a medical career.

Putting down this wonderfully-written book, so full of bluster against the "Centre," one profound question remains: Why did the author choose a firm in the bad place to publish it? Yes, *Mavericks* was brought out by Viking Penguin in Toronto!

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