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Review of *Mackenzie King and the Prairie West* By Robert A. Wardhaugh

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Mackenzie King and the Prairie West. By Robert A. Wardhaugh. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. 328 pp. \$55.00.

William Lyon Mackenzie King was prime minister of Canada almost continuously between 1921 and his retirement in 1948. The main exception was the Conservative government of R. B. Bennett between 1930 and 1935. Yet at the very same time, in all sorts of ways, the Prairie West was, apparently, not part of this victorious parade. The Prairie West instead chose to go a-whoring after strange, sectional, political gods of its own invention: first the Progressive farmers movement after 1921; then Social Credit after 1935; and finally the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation, which formed, if we are to believe Seymour Martin Lipset, the first socialist government in North America in Saskatchewan in 1944. The region was, it seems, a cantankerous and alienated one, out of step with the national political mainstream, or at least the mainstream as defined by the most populous part of the country. This is the thesis of the author of this thoroughly researched and well-written though ultimately contentious book.

Robert Wardhaugh in his concluding chapter offers the following general claims: "The demise of the Liberal party in the West occurred mainly in the Age of Mackenzie King. . . . The primary cause was perhaps inevitable and far beyond the control of one politician or party: Canada was changing from a rural-agricultural to an urban-industrial nation. The accompanying transition of political influence from the Prairies to central Canada coincided with the entrenchment of the Liberals as the 'Government Party' in Ottawa." It is hard to see, however, that this thesis is confirmed by the evidence of the secondary literature and of this book, which is nevertheless an exhaustive and impressive analysis of the documentary sources that relate to King and his political correspondents on the Prairies. King, we know, was an avid diarist and letter-writer, and *Mackenzie King*

and the Prairie West might more properly be entitled: *An Examination of the King Government's Documentary Coverage of the Political Management of the Canadian West!*

Certainly it is a complex story. The Liberal Party on the Prairies at the time was a welter of many schisms and sections: old Laurierites and anti-conscriptionists from the First World War; old anti-Laurierites and pro-conscriptionists from the same time; free traders; farmer sympathizers; provincial sections, machines, and patrons and their federal counterparts. All had somehow to co-exist within a region that was certainly capable of generating an invigorating, vertiginous, and radical melange of new parties and movements. And, as is well known, holding the long, fractious archipelago of Canadian settlements together is no easy matter and requires constant attention, accommodation, and compromise from Ottawa. This Wardhaugh successfully captures. He is most adept in unpacking the details of all the documentation that instantiates the official attempt to bind the region to the center in some successful way in the inter-war years and after. But to this mastery of detail on the author's part is added a general conclusion that seems to emerge from nowhere and to offer an overarching thesis that is just not proven.

The devil, we know, is in the details. Documentary, empirical history is about an ever more subtle and complicated interpretation of the past. Wardhaugh's conclusion, on his and others' evidence, should have been much more a matter of nuance and greyness. Let's take the thesis about the loss of federal Liberal support during the period of Mackenzie King. This is true, but only of Alberta. Saskatchewan and Manitoba held up rather nicely in the Liberal column. The author should have made use of much more precise data of party support rather than relying on the far vaguer figures of the number of seats won per political party. Even at that, the number of seats won sustains very well the notion that the Liberals more than held their own in the non-Albertan areas of the Prairie. It is well known that the Canadian first-past-the-post system distorts

significantly the ratio of votes-to-seats won. Looking at electoral support on the Prairies in the period from 1921 to 1950 we find that, apart from the election of 1921, federal Liberal support held up rather successfully in Saskatchewan and Manitoba. As late as 1940 its voting strength was 43% and 48% respectively in the two provinces. Even in 1949, the federal Liberals received 48% in Manitoba and 43% in Saskatchewan. Alberta, I recognize, was a different story, but even by 1940 Liberals gained 38% and in 1949 gained 35% in federal elections. I don't believe this sustains the thesis that the Liberals on the Prairies were in a state of "demise" by the end of King's tenure as prime minister.

If the party was not in decline, doubts arise about the other part of Wardhaugh's general thesis that the West was alienated because it was dismissed. Or is it the other way around? It does not matter. Only in Alberta did the public significantly withdraw from the Liberals. That being so, we cannot make generalizations about the grand fate of the agricultural region of the entire West as industrialism takes over in central Canada, as if there were no farmers in central and eastern Canada and no industrial centers in the West. More refinement is what we need. That said, the documentary part of this book is fascinating and valuable. *Mackenzie King and the Prairie West* should be read for the details it conveys and not its overarching thesis.

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