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## Review of *Toward Defining the Prairies: Region, Culture, and History* Edited by Robert Wardhaugh

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*Toward Defining the Prairies: Region, Culture, and History.* Edited by Robert Wardhaugh. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2001. 234 pp. Notes, bibliographical references. \$22.95 paper.

**Prair'ie** n. a large treeless tract of level or undulating grassland esp. in N. America. (*The Concise Oxford Dictionary*)

"How does one define a place? How does one define a region?" asks editor Robert Wardhaugh. Postmodernism, poststructuralism, and postcolonialism have problematized the concept of definition in general and definition of place in particular. In this age of posts-, the dictionary becomes a site of mis-placed signposts bent on leading one astray. No matter the limitations of "definition," the Prairies can no longer be defined solely in a narrow, physical sense. Rather, we must "move beyond the transparency of geography to recognize the prairies as socially constituted space," as essayist Alison Calder notes. Because regional identity is shaped by individual and collective consciousness as well as by geography, it evolves dynamically over time. This compilation of thirteen essays, conceived as conference papers, constitutes "an attempt to highlight recent approaches 'toward defining the Prairies.'"

The jacket's promise that the contents are "as diverse as the region itself" is belied by both the essays' disciplinary representation and scope. Because eight are literary, including all in the second half, the reader is left with the sense that this collection is essentially literary criticism. Further, although several authors critique the homogeneity of conventional Prairie representations, only one addresses aboriginal issues at any length, with Royden Loewen's study of Mennonite diaries the only other extensive examination of a marginal community. A third complaint involves the sometimes tenuous connection between the anthology's ostensible purpose and individual essays. Although Wardhaugh's introduction suggests that Alvin Finkel's analysis of Alberta's So-

cial Credit government's resistance to federal policies is contextualized by other Prairie provinces, this isn't the case. Similarly, Wardhaugh's claim that Gerald Davidson posits climate as a determinant of Prairie "political and social structures" misrepresents the essay, however interesting Davidson's description of a scientific/historical approach to climate study may be.

These objections aside, the collection contains a number of strong pieces. Gerald Friesen's "Defining the Prairies: or, why the prairies don't exist," with its claim of the emergence of a "new West," is as provocative as its title suggests. R. Rory Henry illuminates a historically neglected field, the "Construction of Masculine Middle-Class Identity on the Canadian Prairies." And the playful exploration of the phrase "just prairie" by poet and novelist Robert Kroetsch, whose voice echoes through several of the essays, offers a fitting, if necessarily provisional, close to the text.

With a few exceptions—Jason Wiens's densely theoretical and Claire Omhové's heavily footnoted literary essays—the collection is readily accessible to an interdisciplinary readership. And, while the terrain is sometimes uneven, the anthology as a whole offers a useful consideration of the shifting meanings of "just prairie."

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