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Book Review: *The Ordinary Genius: A Life of Arnold Platt* By Ken Hoeppe

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The Ordinary Genius: A Life of Arnold Platt. By Ken Hoepfner. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2007. xxii + 308 pp. Photographs, notes, references, index. \$29.95 paper.

Arnold Platt, the Canadian plant breeder, farmer, and farmers' union president in the mid-twentieth century, was probably not a very likable person due to his abrasive and pushy personality. But

Ken Hoepfner's book about his life and works shows clearly that Platt should be recognized as one of the most important figures in the agricultural history of western Canada and perhaps the entire Great Plains region. I am sometimes skeptical of anyone taking on biography, but Hoepfner's is a model in resurrecting someone not well known outside the world of Canadian horticulture and agricultural politics. This well-conceived, carefully researched, and clearly written work brings the importance of the often unrecognized life and times of Arnold Platt to light.

Platt is perhaps best remembered for his efforts to hybridize Rescue—a pest-resistant variety of wheat. Prairie crops in the 1930s and 1940s had been stricken with an infestation of the wheat stem sawfly that bred inside the hollow stalks of wheat. But Rescue, bred to have a solid stem that sawflies could not penetrate, literally rescued thousands of family farms across western Canada. Hoepfner unfortunately does not offer any critical discussion of genetically modifying plants, but he does reflect the spirit of the times that celebrated this advance that helped to save thousands of hectares of grain in the aftermath of the Great Depression and when the Commonwealth needed vast amounts of wheat for its armies in World War II. The fascinating story of how Platt worked so hard and quickly to develop Rescue, relying on experimental fields in southern California that offered two harvests of seed wheat a year, is told here, much of it for the first time in the agricultural literature. Chapters also deal with Platt's childhood and education, his role in the Farmer's Union of Alberta, his work on a Hutterite communal land commission, and later as CEO of the United Farmers of Alberta and member of Canada's Royal Commission on Transportation. In all of these positions Platt labored for family farmers, a tradition he was brought up in, loved, and wanted to help keep alive.

The Ordinary Genius is a handsome book richly illustrated with photographs. The biographical research was made all the more difficult because Platt had burned most of his papers and records. Thus readers will notice a great deal of patchwork couched in terms like "I speculate," "likely," and "circumstantial evidence seems to support." Hoepfner should be forgiven for this as his sources were truly limited. But the book is perhaps unwittingly far more than biography. It frames Platt's life and work in the broader contexts of agricultural and Prairie Province history, making the book useful for courses and general reading on those topics. **Sterling Evans**, *Department of History, Brandon University*.