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## Review of *Saskatchewan: A New History* By Bill Waiser

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## BOOK REVIEWS

*Saskatchewan: A New History*. By Bill Waiser. Calgary, AB: Fifth House Publishers, 2005. 563 pp. Maps, color photographs, illustrations, appendix, notes, index. C\$49.95.

Bill Waiser's sweeping narrative of the history of Canada's most identifiable agricultural province was published as part of Saskatchewan's centennial celebrations. Wonderfully written in an authoritative but engaging style, Waiser's "Saskatchewan" is a story of challenge where buoyant hopes and dashed dreams were acted out by generations of people whose origins and backgrounds were as diverse as the physical environment they settled.

Two dominant themes underpin Waiser's narrative. The first is the enduring presence of a rural order built around "King Wheat," one that through the years, in both good times and bad, became the focus around which Saskatchewan defined its identity and future. Using a successful blend of narrative and analysis, Waiser demonstrates how Saskatchewan rose to national prominence via the production and export of wheat. Especially convincing is his discussion of the various official strategies taken to support this rural order in lean times, and more latterly how the province is struggling to remake itself in an age of significant change in the nature and importance of farming (and agriculture itself).

Waiser also successfully paints a vivid picture of Saskatchewan's multicultural society. He covers familiar ground as he details the various waves of European immigrants who settled Saskatchewan and lifted it to a lofty position in 1927 as the country's third most populace province and, arguably, the best example of rural Canadian ethnic diversity. However, Waiser is very critical of the treatment suffered by those who did not cleave to Anglo-Saxon

values and norms. And while documenting the official sanctions generally accorded these nativist sentiments, he is most critical of the injustices endured by Saskatchewan's aboriginal peoples. Waiser pursues this theme consistently throughout his narrative, and it emerges as one of its strongest features. Also of note is his discussion of women and their overlooked status.

*Great Plains Quarterly* readers will have much to gain from reading *Saskatchewan: A New History*. The strong American influence on the ranching industry, for example, was a phenomenon much more pronounced in southwest Saskatchewan than in the foothills ranching country of neighboring Alberta. The role of dry farming techniques in transforming semiarid country into a short-lived cereal crop paradise had their parallels in the United States. In this sense it is unfortunate that Waiser did not deal more extensively with the Canadian response in the 1930s by the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration. His excellent discussion of the beginnings of Saskatchewan's famed Medicare program with its rural roots should provide useful comparisons, and possibly add insights into Saskatchewan's unique rural political mentality.

This book will appeal to scholars and general and serious readers alike. I particularly enjoyed the way Waiser interspersed his serious themes with lively anecdotes and fascinating descriptions of specific events: the Canadian soldier from Saskatchewan killed two minutes before the armistice in 1918; Boris Karloff of horror film fame helping clean up after the Regina tornado in 1912; the description of the opening of the Saskatchewan Legislative Building. The historic photographs tell their own graphic story while the marvellous color plates evoke the heart and soul of this unique

Canadian province. While I may have some minor reservations over the predominance of politics in the more modern chapters, this is a fine book well worth reading, especially for those interested in singular regional identities and the challenges they face with transformations.

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