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Review of *The Frontier World of Edgar Dewdney* By Brian Titley

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The Frontier World of Edgar Dewdney. By Brian Titley. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1999. Photographs, notes, bibliography, index. ix + 171 pp. \$75.00 cloth, \$25.95 paper.

As a bureaucrat and politician, Edgar Dewdney figures prominently in the history of the Canadian West during the late nineteenth century. He was by turns Indian Commissioner (1879-1888), Lieutenant Governor of the North West Territories (1881-1888), a Member of Parliament (representing Assiniboia East), and Minister of the Interior and Superintendent General of Indian Affairs (1888-1892). This slim volume sheds new light on Dewdney and his legacy.

Dewdney's success in public life was, his biographer argues, the result of good luck, timing, and ability in various degrees. His appointment as Indian Commissioner was a case in point. Dewdney did have some relevant experience that qualified him for the job: before embarking on a political career in British Columbia this English-trained civil engineer had built roads there and had employed Native people as guides and packers. But luck was a factor as well: Titley notes that several other candidates had turned down the appointment by the time Dewdney was approached. Then in 1888 the sudden death of Minister of the Interior Thomas White opened the door for Dewdney's entrance into the federal cabinet. It also helped that Dewdney was well-connected. His lifelong friendship with prime

minister Sir John A. Macdonald was clearly important in advancing Dewdney's career.

In assessing his role as Indian Commissioner, historians have not been kind to Edgar Dewdney, portraying him as the author of a series of coercive policies directed against Native people, and the Cree especially, with disastrous consequences in 1884 and 1885. Titley, however, argues that the real villain was Lawrence Vankoughnet, Deputy Superintendent General of Indian Affairs (and Dewdney's immediate superior in Ottawa). Dewdney in fact "challenged the more mean-spirited details of policy emanating from Ottawa while supporting its general contours." And when the North-West Rebellion began in March 1885, Dewdney pursued a policy of "generosity and appeasement" to ensure that the Cree and the Blackfoot remained peaceful.

Brian Titley's assessment of Dewdney's accomplishments as a politician is harsher: he had no major impact on the national political stage. As Minister of the Interior Dewdney continued the policies of his predecessor: "there was no statesman-like vision, no spark of originality, no independent thought."

Unflattering though this biography is in places, *The Frontier World of Edgar Dewdney* is a welcome addition to the literature.

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