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## Review of *Forging the Prairie West*, by John Herd Thompson.

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*Forging the Prairie West*. By John Herd Thompson. Toronto and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998. Illustrations, maps, notes, selected bibliography, index. xii + 212 pp. \$29.95 paper.

John Herd Thompson's *Forging the Prairie West* is a wise, clever, and decisive book, though not an especially consistent one. But that hardly matters: Thompson's lively prose, trenchant observations, and firm portrayal of the Prairie West's history make for an analysis both accessible and engaging.

*Forging the Prairie West* is the second volume in Oxford University Press's Illustrated

History of Canada series, written by leading regional historians with undergraduates in mind, that aims "to trace the country's development through the stories of its major regions." Thompson's volume confirms the analytic skills evident in his *Harvests of War: The Prairie West, 1914-1918* (1978) and the powers of summary behind *Canada 1922-1939: Decades of Discord* (1985).

What vision of the Prairie West does Thompson offer? Temporally, it is essentially a modern one, the years before the nineteenth-century serving as backdrop to the central story. Geographically, Thompson's Prairie West encompasses the Plains provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta, with a distinct emphasis on their southern parts. This Prairie West is a resolutely North American one. Thompson makes extensive use of the "New Western History" and regularly compares Western Canada to its southern neighbor. These juxtapositions—and the lack of comparisons with other Canadian regions or British colonies—suggest that Thompson's West is one where geography rules above nation or empire.

Who lives in Thompson's Prairie West? The society evoked is a multicultural and multiracial one, where migrants from Europe and Asia persistently challenge efforts to construct the West as a bastion of British culture. To a lesser extent, Thompson's West is also an Aboriginal one. Yet his efforts to write Native history into his narrative is somewhat half-hearted. His claim that "To write of 'Native people of the Canadian prairies' in the period before the arrival of Europeans . . . would be to impose our Euro-Canadian present upon the Aboriginal past" takes the proverbial easy way out. Women make similarly intermittent appearances, surfacing during homesteading, the suffrage movement, and other places where a rich secondary literature eases their inclusion, but disappearing for large stretches of the narrative.

Thompson's topical omissions are accompanied by an uneven methodology. His admirable effort to integrate visual sources yields

especially mixed results. The many illustrations are instructive, but Thompson's analysis of them is insufficiently integrated into the narrative, creating, in effect, two parallel analyses—one of the visual evidence, the other of the historical record as it is traditionally conceived. Thompson's more successful efforts to mix historical narrative with historiographical analysis manage to integrate discussions of scholarly debates without rendering the text incomprehensible to general or undergraduate readers. Whatever its analytic virtues or defects, the narrative is written with literary aplomb—its transition sentences are small marvels to behold.

There are strengths and weaknesses in *Forging the Prairie West*, but the strengths are mighty, the weaknesses comparatively puny. Thompson provides the expert and the general reader alike with a specific vision of Canada's Prairie West. His portrayal may not suit everyone, but students, expert readers, and Western Canadian historiography as a whole will all be the richer for it.

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