



LOOKING BACK: CANADIAN WOMEN'S PRAIRIE MEMOIRS AND INTERSECTIONS OF CULTURE, HISTORY, AND IDENTITY

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Introduction: “Untilled Fields”

Funny, how the stories you read when you are young take such a hold on you. They are like friends that mold and often seem to be a part of your own life, as if you had helped live them.

– Edna Jacques, *Uphill All the Way* (1977)

For the woman artist is not privileged or mandated to find her self-in-world except by facing (affronting?) and mounting an enormous struggle with the cultural fictions – myths, narratives, iconographies, languages – which heretofore have delimited the representation of women. And which are culturally and psychically saturating.

– Rachel Blau DuPlessis, “For the Etruscans” (1985)

Their sharing is a gift of themselves, and a gift to themselves also; a restoration of themselves into our history.

– Eliane Leslau Silverman, *The Last Best West: Women on the Alberta Frontier, 1880–1930* (1984)

Looking back now, I realize that the white, English-speaking image of the “Prairie Woman”¹ existed as a fairly dominant force in my early life and imagination. Indeed, I remember (still with a tremor of excitement) sitting down in front of the television in the fall of 1974 to watch the premiere of the series *Little House on the Prairie*, adapted from the autobiographical-inspired fiction by Laura Ingalls Wilder. Although I did eventually read the whole collection of books by Wilder, it was the visual images provided by the television series that became the stimulus to a considerable portion of my childhood imaginative life. Indeed, both myself and my younger sister once owned bonnets in the style of those worn by the women in Walnut Grove (the town of Wilder’s childhood reminiscences), and those bonnets, when worn with our ankle-length Christmas skirts, became the vehicle by which we imagined ourselves living on the Canadian prairies. In actual fact, we spent the majority of our childhood in Kamloops, British Columbia, a region of Canada more commonly known for its mountains, pine trees and sagebrush than for flat land and prairie grass. Despite this geographic difference, we imaginatively translated the half-acre gully that composed the backyard of our family home into our own *Little House* setting – complete with the child-size log home we used as a playhouse – and took special pleasure in recreating the television series’ opening scene, which depicted the Ingalls children, pure joy written across their faces, running down a grassy incline and headed towards a wagon sitting stationary and occupied by beaming parents Charles and Caroline Ingalls.

However, despite my immediate pleasure in such recreations, a problem ensued that seemed always to intervene in my psychological commitment to the project – a problem that would eventually direct the course of my professional literary studies. You see, as much as I loved the ritual of sitting down to watch *Little House* for an hour once a week, even as a young girl I already sensed a fairly glaring difference between the images presented to me on the screen and my own private (though limited) knowledge of prairie life. More specifically, I found myself confused by the apparent gap that existed between

1 I have chosen to capitalize the term “Prairie Woman” here because I agree with critics such as Terry Goldie who suggest that we should be careful to distinguish between a cultural image and “the people the image claims to represent” (6).

the always cheerful, fair-skinned television image of Caroline Ingalls and the endlessly mystifying reality of my own paternal grandmother's dark-skinned, deeply furrowed, and often unsmiling face. Unlike Caroline, whose dominion was primarily domestic, whose body was perfectly proportioned, and whose demure personality expressed itself with a slight smile accompanied by the words, "Oh, Charles," Sadie Victoria Landry Matthews inhabited her body, face weather-worn and back slightly curved, as a symbol of her life of labour. Indeed, as I instinctively recognized, she wore that body as an outright contradiction of the more sanitized television image.

Years later, when my academic exposure to both prairie history and prairie literature renewed my old interest in settler women, I was again intrigued by what I perceived to be the dominance of cultural images and the apparent poverty of sources representing the reality of prairie women's lives. The major problem with cultural images is that they so often deny complexity in favour of a stereotyped norm of experience. So it is with the white, English-speaking Prairie Woman image, which assumes a precise correspondence between the label itself and some culturally understood meaning that does not often allow for differences in experience, whether those differences are accounted for by personality, cultural background, class, geography, marital status, etc. Whether dealing with fictional texts, settlement propaganda literature (such as CPR or Dominion Government pamphlets), or even early historians' interpretations of the western settlement process, cultural representations of the Prairie Woman have provided a rather static either/or (Prairie Woman as "cheerful helpmate"/Prairie Woman as "reluctant emigrant/drudge") image. Both sides of the Prairie Woman coin are abundantly present in contemporary accounts of western settlement life. For example, in *Janey Canuck in the West* (1910), Emily Ferguson creates the image of the heroic farming couple when she writes about her travels across the prairies and her discovery of the process of nation-building at the level of the individual farm:

In one blessed spot, a ginger-headed Icelandic giant was turning over his first furrow... Behind, in the furrow, walked the mother and three little children. They were partners in this undertaking. It was a supreme moment for them. The turning of the civic sod

was never half so vital. They had crossed a hemisphere to turn this furrow. The stading was holy ground, and, metaphorically, I took off my shoes. These folk are of the few elect. (17)

On the other hand, in 1915, feminist and social reformer Nellie McClung recounts the stereotypical belief that farm women lived a life of unending drudgery:

“Poor girl!” say the kind friends. “She went West and married a farmer” – and forthwith a picture of the farmer’s wife rises up before their eyes; the poor, faded woman, in a rusty black luster skirt sagging in the back and puckering in the seams; coat that belonged to a suit in other days; a black sailor hat, gray with years and dust, with a sad cluster of faded violets, and torn tulle trimming, sitting crooked on her head; hair the color of last year’s grass, and teeth gone in front. (*In Times* 109)

Over time, such cultural images have tended to take on mythic proportions. In fact, one of the major motivations of Canadian women’s historiography has been to illustrate that the reality of prairie women’s lives rested somewhere on a continuum of experience encompassing both of the either/or extremes, and a great deal more in between. As anthropologists John W. Bennett and Seena B. Kohl note regarding the use of first-person sources when seeking to more fully understand western settlement, “in the older literature, westering women were often portrayed as either sunbonneted helpmates or reluctant pioneers, though our source material tells us that there was a considerable range of experience between these two extremes” (50–51).

In seeking to get a little bit closer to the “range of experience” of those white, English-speaking women who actually participated in western settlement, I longed to find a way to hear their voices. However, my initial foray (in the mid- to late 1990s) into the study of prairie women’s lives suggested that there were no first-hand accounts, readily available at least, that could be used for comparison to the cultural images as a means to complicate the traditional dichotomy. At first glance, it appeared that real

life prairie women had been silent partners in the project of western settlement. However, my understanding of the situation changed when I read a novel titled *The Curlew Cried: A Love Story of the Canadian Prairie* (1947), written by Nell Wilson Parsons. I was so enticed by Parsons's fictional representation of settlement life on the Canadian prairies – and especially by her dedication page, stating, “To my Mother, Ann Wilson, and my favorite Aunt, Rachel Jessop. Both knew the early days of the Canadian prairie” (5) – that I went back to the library catalogue and resubmitted her name. One other item appeared on the screen: something called *Upon a Sagebrush Harp* (1969), which sounded suspiciously like another romanticized vision of prairie life, but from the call letters I knew I would not be entering the fiction section of the library. I entered, rather, the Canadian history section, and found the text. *Upon a Sagebrush Harp* was the first Canadian prairie memoir I had ever read, and from it began an academic journey during which I discovered that there exists a body of prairie memoirs (in libraries, on used-bookstore shelves, in private collections, and usually under years of accumulated dust), most of which had been written and published after 1950 by women who had themselves experienced prairie life in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This unique and “virtually untilled field” (Siddall 923) of prairie memoirs suggested to me that, not only did these women have something they felt it necessary to write down – to enunciate and thereby preserve for posterity – but also that, through publication, they very deliberately sought to share that something with a public audience.

Despite their obvious attempts to be heard, however, these women's memoir voices have been all but lost to the Canadian cultural record, even within academic circles. While my own private collection of these texts derives almost completely from the bibliographic trails provided by historians,² nevertheless, as of yet, there has been no full-length study by a

2 In particular, the following were invaluable sources of information: Carol Fairbanks and Sara Brooks Sundberg's *Farm Women on the Prairie Frontier: A Sourcebook for Canada and the United States* (Metuchen, N.J. and London: Scarecrow Press, 1983) and Linda Rasmussen et al.'s *A Harvest Yet to Reap: A History of Prairie Women* (Toronto: The Women's Press, 1976).

Canadian scholar of any disciplinary background on these published memoirs.³ However, the existence of autobiographical texts, including memoirs (sometimes called “reminiscences” or “personal accounts”) has often been noted, especially in the field of history, where acknowledgments of such texts and lamentations over their general dismissal have been fairly frequent. As early as 1980, in her article designating “Saskatchewan Women, 1880–1920” as a viable “Field for Study,” Ann Leger Anderson asserted that “little has yet been done to investigate thoroughly such items as newspapers, travel accounts, reminiscences, manuscript collections, local histories, or official records to rediscover the women of late-nineteenth century Saskatchewan and reconstruct their lives and its social context

3 This lack of concerted attention by Canadian scholars to personalized accounts of prairie settlement contrasts with the situation in American scholarship. For example, in the context of the American west, historian Sandra L. Myres noted the lack of attention to a “treasure trove of material” written by “frontierswomen” and published her own study, *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience 1800–1915* (1982), based “on the many diaries, journals, letters, and reminiscences” which had, until that point, been left “ignored or overlooked” in previous historical studies (xvii). In her study, Myres sought to combat cultural images of “westering women” that “did not conform to the reality of most women’s lives” (7). More recently, literary critic Brigitte Georgi-Findlay has explored *The Frontiers of Women’s Writing* (1996) in an effort to recover the “female voices that seemed to be missing from the story of westward expansion as told in the literature of frontier heroes, western discovery, exploration, and travel, and in the stories, novels, and movies that comprise the genre of the Western” (ix). See also John Mack Faragher, *Women and Men on the Overland Trail* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979), Lillian Schlissel, *Women’s Diaries of the Westward Journey* (New York: Schocken Books, 1982), Susan Armitage and Elizabeth Jameson, eds., *The Women’s West* (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), Glenda Riley, *The Female Frontier: A Comparative View of Women on the Prairie and the Plains* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1988), and Susan Armitage, *Women in the West: A Guide to Manuscript Sources* (New York: Garland Publishers, 1991). It should also be noted that American scholars have quite often included consideration of Canadian settlement texts of varying types, as well as images of the “pioneer” or “prairie” woman in Canadian writing, in studies with a transnational perspective, such as Fairbanks and Sundberg’s *Farm Women on the Prairie Frontier* (noted above), Carol Fairbanks’s *Prairie Women: Images in American and Canadian Fiction* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986), John W. Bennett and Seena B. Kohl’s *Settling the Canadian–American West, 1890–1915: Pioneer Adaptation and Community Building: An Anthropological History* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), and Janet Floyd’s *Writing the Pioneer Woman* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002).

in systematic fashion" (75). In addition, although she noted that "more is known about the first fifteen or so years of the twentieth century," Anderson warned that scholarship on Saskatchewan women in that period still presented "an exceedingly general picture" that required further and more complex investigation, the "personal record" being "highly desirable" in that regard (75–76). Similarly, in Susan Jackel's 1987 "stocktaking" of available resources in prairie women's history, the author referred to the existence of a vast body of "settlers' accounts by the wives, sisters and daughters of male preachers, farmers, ranchers and townsmen," "a considerable number" of which "have taken book form" (*Canadian* 6).⁴

More recently, assertions of the need to regard women's "accounts" of prairie life as legitimate historical source material are articulated in collections of essays that have been gathered in an effort to more fully flesh out the lived experience of all women in the prairie region. For example, in a 1993 essay titled "Remembering Together: Reclaiming Alberta Women's Past," Patricia Roome suggests that "since women's voices are seldom recorded in standard historical documents, pioneer women's accounts remain an invaluable source for understanding women's experience" (179). Similarly, in Aileen C. Moffatt's 1995 essay "Great Women, Separate Spheres, and Diversity: Comments on Saskatchewan Women's Historiography," the author, in reference to the popularity of the Barr Colony as historical subject matter, makes the following statement regarding Mary Hiemstra's largely

4 Jackel goes on to give two examples of such "book form" texts, *Of Us and the Oxen* (1968) by Sarah Ellen Roberts and *Two White Oxen: A Perspective of Early Saskatoon 1874–1905* (1974) by Barbara (Hunter) Anderson, both of which are included in my study. It is interesting to suggest that Jackel's own choice of words in acknowledging the existence of such texts may well be part of the problem in attracting critics to them as a worthwhile source of study: for example, I would mention especially the implied passivity of the female author in the suggestion that the accounts themselves "reach print" and "have taken book form," which detracts from any notion, as I contend in my study, that these women deliberately sought public articulation of their own experience in their own words. Jackel's acknowledgment also appears debilitating in that she gives primacy to the women's relationships to men – "settlers' accounts by the wives, sisters and daughters of male preachers, farmers, ranchers and townsmen" – when, as I see it, the very act of writing and seeking publication for such a text indicates the female author's assumption of personal importance as a participant in settlement history in her own right.

neglected memoir of that experience, *Gully Farm: A Story of Homesteading on the Canadian Prairies* (1955):

Perhaps because Mary Pinder Hiemstra was not a “great” woman, historians have largely overlooked her memoir. This is unfortunate because this type of personalized account is invaluable to historians. Ordinary women and men are central characters in Saskatchewan’s history. Historians need both to fully utilize these sources and to consider new ways of examining everyday life in order to more completely explicate the Saskatchewan experience. (15)

It is not a matter of mere coincidence that both Roome and Moffatt assert the “invaluable” nature of women’s personal accounts of prairie life; rather, this doubled claim is testimony to the need for such texts as the published memoirs gathered in this study to be recovered from obscurity and reconciled to the historical record. Most recently (and excitingly), recovery and reconciliation has begun in the work of Nanci L. Langford, Sheila McManus, and Brigitte Georgi-Findlay (all of whom examine a variety of genres, not just memoir), but there is certainly more exploration to be done.⁵

While women’s published memoirs of prairie settlement have only just begun to be used, however, the subject of prairie women more generally has certainly been fruitfully examined from a variety of perspectives. As the anthologies which include Roome’s and Moffatt’s essays attest to, the last three decades have witnessed a renewed interest, not only in the daily reality of women’s lives, but also in getting a clearer and less universalized notion of that reality through various non-traditional, first-hand sources. In fact, much

5 See specifically Nanci L. Langford’s “First Generation and Lasting Impressions: The Gendered Identities of Prairie Homestead Women” (Diss. University of Alberta, 1994), Sheila McManus’s article “Gender(ed) Tensions in the Work and Politics of Alberta Farm Women, 1905–29,” in *Telling Tales: Essays in Western Women’s History*, ed. Catherine A. Cavanaugh and Randi R. Warne (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2000, 123–46), and Brigitte Georgi-Findlay’s article “Women in the Canadian-American West” in *Zeitschrift für Kanada-Studien* 22, nos.1–2 (2002): 26–42.

of this work has been an explicit attempt to juxtapose lived experience with a static Prairie Woman image, as seen, for example, in Eliane Leslau Silverman's *The Last Best West* (1984), for which the author had "conversations" with 150 women in southern Alberta as a means to get past the "myths about frontier women" that "reduced them to a uniformity of experience" (vii–viii).⁶ One of the ways that Silverman manages to bring complexity to the study of prairie women's lives is through her consideration of women who "represent the heterogeneity of ethnic, religious, national, and class backgrounds" (iii). Multiplicity of

6 See also Silverman's "Women and the Victorian Work Ethic on the Alberta Frontier: Prescription and Description" in *The New Provinces: Alberta and Saskatchewan, 1905–1980*, ed. Howard Palmer and Donald Smith (Vancouver: Tantalus Research, 1980), which relies on the author's interviews with prairie women themselves as a means to interrogate the notion that reality actually "conform[ed] to the expectations of women's lives that sermons, marriage manuals, political speeches, and school textbooks described and yearned for" (92), and "Women's Perceptions of Marriage on the Alberta Frontier," in *Building Beyond the Homestead*, ed. David C. Jones and Ian MacPherson (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1988), in which the author again uses interviews to establish the "participants' perspective" (50) about the institution of marriage and its functioning within a new environment. Also valuable is the work of Mary Kinnear, whose essay "Do you want your daughter to marry a farmer?: Women's Work on the Farm, 1922," in Volume VI of *Canadian Papers in Rural History*, ed. Donald H. Akenson (Gananoque, ON: Langdale Press, 1988) combines information from two very different sources, "a survey of the work of members of the United Farm Women of Manitoba" and "an essay competition run by the *Grain Growers Guide*," in an effort to come to some conclusions regarding "a livelihood more common than industrial or service work to Canadian women before the Second World War" (137). See also Mary Kinnear's *First Days, Fighting Days: Women in Manitoba History* (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Center, University of Regina, 1987). Finally, there is the work of Angela E. Davis, whose two articles, "Valiant Servants: Women and Technology on the Canadian Prairies 1910–1940" in *Manitoba History* 25 (Spring 1993): 33–42, and "Country Homemakers: The Daily Lives of Prairie Women as Seen through the Woman's Page of the Grain Growers' Guide 1908–1928," in Volume VIII of *Canadian Papers in Rural History*, ed. Donald H. Akenson (Gananoque, ON: Langdale Press, 1992), acknowledge the historical importance attached to women's opinions about prairie life and help to further delineate the "daily lives of pioneer farm women" ("Country" 165). As Davis states of the "readers' letters" section of the *Grain Growers' Guide* woman's page, it was "a major outlet for airing their thoughts and feelings about rural life" and it was intended, "from the time Isobel Graham, the page's first editor, asked for their participation, until the end of the First World War," to be a forum for discussion of "all the political, social and economic issues of the day" (164–65).

experience is certainly also the motivation behind Catherine A. Cavanaugh and Randi R. Warne's *Standing on New Ground: Women in Alberta* (1993), David De Brou and Aileen Moffatt's *"Other" Voices: Historical Essays on Saskatchewan Women* (1995), and also Norah L. Lewis's *Dear Editor and Friends: Letters from Rural Women of the North-West, 1900–1920* (1998), in which the editor seeks to recapture the "clear, authentic voices of real women" who hail from "a variety of ethnic backgrounds and geographical locations" (4). Most recently, Cavanaugh and Warne's *Telling Tales: Essays in Western Women's History* (2000) presents a "cross-cultural/multicultural approach to western women's history" while also re-asserting the need to maintain the "basic task of recovering women's stories" and to "broaden" our understanding of western women's lives by including "women's diaries, letters, memoirs, arts and crafts, and oral histories" in our historical perspectives (Introduction 7, 11). Whether dealing with white, English-speaking women or women from different cultural or class backgrounds, the emphasis in these and other studies of prairie women's lives has been to get beyond simple generalizations and, by focusing on the voices of female participants themselves, to illustrate the experience of western settlement as an individual process within a larger cultural pattern.⁷

Similar to Canadian historians, Canadian literary critics have also simultaneously recognized the value of women's first-hand accounts in general as literary documents while neglecting to undertake any concerted study of the memoirs written by white, English-speaking women of the prairie provinces. For example, in the 1983 edition of *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature*, Marian Fowler suggested of the vast "field of pioneer memoirs" that "it contains rich insights into the nature of the collective Canadian psyche and its relationship to the land" and recommended "it is high time we turned the first critical sod" (Siddall 923). Fourteen years later, in the 1997 edition of the same text, Gillian Siddall was able to assert some improvement in academic attention to such texts, although she notes that "scholarly enquiry ... has been dominated by an interest in the

7 As Bruce Hutchinson suggests in his "Introduction" to Adeline (Nan) Clark's memoir *Prairie Dreams* (1991), "a library of excellent books has described a people who never escape the marks and mental climate of their origin. But, as individuals, they are generally forgotten" (x).

women of the nineteenth century.” As a necessary corollary to Siddall’s assertion, it should be stressed that scholarly attention to the field of pioneer literature written by women of the nineteenth century also, by virtue of Canada’s historical pattern of land settlement, means that that attention has been largely confined to the textual products of *eastern* Canada.⁸ For example, Fowler’s *The Embroidered Tent: Five Gentlewomen in Early Canada* (1982) focuses on Elizabeth Simcoe, Catharine Parr Traill, Susanna Moodie, Anna Jameson, and Lady Dufferin. Similarly, Lorraine McMullen’s 1990 anthology *Re(Dis)covering Our Foremothers*, a work meant to “recover those [Canadian women writers] once known but now forgotten and to discover those never publicly known whose diaries, letters, and autobiographical writings are – or should be – a valued part of Canadian tradition” (1), devotes six articles to the study of texts by Catharine Parr Traill and/or her sister, Susanna Moodie. The importance of these first-hand accounts lay primarily in the fact that, as McMullen suggests, the authors “express a different vision of Canada and Canadian experience than is conventionally held” (2).

Fairly frequently, literary readings of the texts that encompass this “different vision of Canada and Canadian experience” have tended to adhere to the

8 The special interest in nineteenth-century women’s writing can be seen, for example, in the several New Canadian Library “unabridged reprint[s] of the complete original text[s]” of Catharine Parr Traill’s *The Backwoods of Canada* (1989), Susanna Moodie’s *Roughing It in the Bush* (1989) and *Life in the Clearings versus the Bush* (1989), and Anna Jameson’s *Winter Studies and Summer Rambles in Canada* (1990). Decades earlier, there had already been editions of Anne Langton’s *A Gentlewoman in Upper Canada: The Journals of Anne Langton*, ed. H.H. Langton (Toronto: Irwin, 1950), *Mrs. Simcoe’s Diary*, ed. Mary Quayle Innis (Toronto: Macmillan, 1965), *The Journals of Mary O’Brien, 1828–1838*, ed. Audrey Saunders Miller (Toronto: Macmillan, 1968), and Anna Loveridge’s *Your Loving Anna; Letters from the Ontario Frontier*, ed. Louis Tivy (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972). One recent text that stands out as a starting point for the reconciliation of nineteenth- and twentieth-century writing, and of writing from eastern and western Canada, is R.G. Moyles’s anthology *Improved by Cultivation: English-Canadian Prose to 1914* (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 1994), which, although it explicitly seeks to “vivify the richness and variety of our pre-twentieth century prose literature beyond that manifest in recently reprinted novels” (8) does include alongside the words of Jameson, Traill and Moodie, excerpts from texts published in the early-twentieth century, such as Agnes Dean Cameron’s *The New North: A Woman’s Journey through Canada to the Arctic* (1909) and Georgina Binnie-Clark’s *Wheat and Woman* (1914).

traditional either/or image of women alluded to earlier in this chapter. Most commonly, such readings have tended to document the cheerful and relatively unproblematic adaptation of white, English-speaking, women settlers into the “New World” environment. Although I will be discussing her iconic status more fully in Chapter Three, it is important to note Catharine Parr Traill’s position as exemplar of the adaptive model: for example, as Elizabeth Thompson suggests, in her non-fiction texts Traill “creates a model of an ideal pioneer woman” (33). Thompson goes on to examine Traill’s literary importance in the inauguration of a distinctively female *Canadian Character Type*, one that eventually makes its appearance in prairie fiction. Traill’s cheerfully adaptive image, asserts Thompson, spans Canadian literary history and can be traced in its migration from nineteenth-century *eastern* to early-twentieth-century *western* narratives of land settlement. This type of literary mapping of an iconic image of the Pioneer/Prairie Woman across time and geography will certainly be helpful in establishing one portion of the cultural background against which white, English-speaking memoirists had to write their own experiences, especially given that the construction of such an ideal image necessarily means that those writers who do not wholeheartedly subscribe to the adaptive model are so often judged as failures. This complaint has most commonly been laid, at least until recently, against Traill’s sister, Susanna Moodie, whose *Roughing It in the Bush* (1852) is all too often and all too simplistically read as being “a condemnation of [settlement] life by someone who found herself to be unfit for it” (McCarthy 3).

For many readers of women’s first-hand accounts, however, the either/or readings described above did not accommodate the reality of human experience, which usually rests on a continuum.⁹ It is only fairly recently, though, that literary

9 A similar rejection of either/or cultural images in favour of “mediated realities” occurs in Carol Fairbanks’s *Prairie Women: Images in American and Canadian Fiction* (1986), a transnational perspective on prairie fiction written by women whose works indicate that “there was a sense of having a story to tell that had not been told before” (5). Asserting that no one single historical/literary image can account for the wide variety of women’s experiences of prairie settlement, Fairbanks suggests that when female authors eventually chose to take up their pens and “publish their own stories about the frontier,” they did so as an act of agency, for they “wanted to undermine or, at a minimum, modify the public’s image of the lives of women” settlers (25).

critics have begun to examine the possibility that white, English-speaking women who chose to write about their land settlement experiences might be capable of describing a reality that is simultaneously within and beyond cultural ideals. Women's personal narratives, even those written by women whose background positions them as part of the dominant colonizing culture, are capable of sometimes subtle subversions of conventional expectations. In *Mapping Our Selves: Canadian Women's Autobiography* (1993), for example, Helen M. Buss examines "Two Exemplary Early Texts," Moodie's *Roughing It* and Anna Jameson's *Winter Studies and Summer Rambles in Canada* (1838), and suggests that these two women authors consciously and adeptly manage to negotiate the narratives and discourses of Anglo culture as a means to represent their own stories/their own selves. Moodie, writes Buss, effectively inscribes her "own narrative strand to be interwoven with other narratives, an enabling mythology intertwined with many other mythologies" (94), while Jameson manages in her text to "inscribe her own desire by using the discourses of the patriarchy, brilliantly and subversively, against the grain of their own habitual functions" (95). By reading for the ways in which these early women writers mediate in their writing between personal need and cultural expectations, Buss creates a more dynamic background against which to examine the personal accounts produced by a long history of Canadian women writers, including the prairie memoirs gathered in my study. In fact, in *Mapping* she places her critical explorations of texts by nineteenth-century women such as Elizabeth Simcoe, Susan Allison, Moodie and Jameson alongside those by twentieth-century prairie women such as Mary Hiemstra, Georgina Binnie-Clark, and Nellie McClung.

It is my desire as a reader of the prairie memoirs gathered here to reconcile these lost or ignored texts with their historical/literary heritage and to amend the relative lack of critical attention from both historians and literary critics.¹⁰ More

10 This lack can be seen in the fact that, although Susan Jackel's 1982 collection, *A Flannel Shirt and Liberty: British Emigrant Gentlewomen in the Canadian West, 1880-1914*, provides excerpts from a number of life writing texts by women who experienced prairie settlement, and although there have been republished editions of such western "classics" as Binnie-Clark's *Wheat and Woman*, Elizabeth B. Mitchell's *In Western Canada Before the War: Impressions of Early Twentieth Century Prairie Communities* (Saskatoon, SK: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1981), Edith

specifically, I aim to read them as points of intersection with idealistic images of white, English-speaking women's participation in prairie land settlement. By "intersection," I mean to suggest the ways in which these texts simultaneously *confirm* and *challenge* cultural images of the Prairie Woman, as well as images of the goal/process/importance of settlement itself, thereby preventing complacency with simplistic either/or dichotomies that deny the reality of individual experience. My assertion that women's prairie memoirs can be productively read as narrative disruptions of cultural images thus necessitates some consideration of the possible reasons why these texts have continued to be overlooked in Canadian scholarship. Central to this discussion will be a generic consideration of the memoir form itself as an all-too-often unrecognized site of narrative intersection, particularly conducive to playing with/interrogation of cultural norms of representation.

Perhaps one of the reasons for the lack of academic attention to prairie memoirs is that the form seems to defy easy categorization and to subvert the expectations of different types of academic readers. Speaking in 1977 to the exclusion of memoir "from serious critical attention," despite the resurgence of "academic interest in forms of self-literature" at that time, Marcus Billson suggests that it is the form's generic instability that produces critical distrust: as he states it, "literary critics have faulted memoirs for being incomplete, superficial autobiographies; and, historiographers have criticized them for being inaccurate, overly personal histories" (259). For many readers, then, memoir texts appear to suffer from a lack of critical depth; they contain neither the fully developed and central Self-consciousness traditionally desired in autobiographical texts nor the objective distance traditionally assumed to be the priority of the professional historian, with the inevitable result that neither discipline wants to lay claim to such a field of works. In fact, the truth of memoir lies somewhere at the intersection of history and autobiography; somewhere between disciplinary misunderstandings of the form as being either too personal or not personal enough.

Hewson's *We Swept the Cornflakes Out the Door* (Regina, SK: Bradley Publications, 1993), and Mary Hiemstra's *Gully Farm: A Story of Homesteading on the Canadian Prairies* (Calgary: Fifth House, 1997), extensive critical treatment of such texts, with the exception of Buss's work, has lagged far behind.

In autobiographical terms, the “I” of memoirs is meant to be less Self-centred, less focused on the development of the unique Self, because it represents a self “*being-in-the-world* rather than *becoming-in-the-world*” (261; emphasis added). In contrast to traditional understandings of autobiographical self-representation wherein the author is assumed to “oppose himself to all others” and to privilege “individuality” over an “interdependent existence” (Gusdorf 29), the memoir represents a self “locate[d] ... in a history, an era, a relational and communal identity” (Buss, *Repossessing* xiv). In historical terms, then, “memoirs are *of* a person, but they are ‘really’ of an event, an era, an institution, a class identity” (Hart 195); indeed, as Billson suggests, “historicity is the mode of the memoir” and such a text “recounts a story of the author’s witnessing a real past which [she] considers to be of extraordinary interest and importance” (268, 261). In the representation of this “real past,” says Billson, the author implicitly acknowledges the impossibility of an absolutely objective perspective and, accordingly, adopts a complex narrative position as “the eyewitness, the participant, and the *histor*” (271). Writing as both an eyewitness to and a participant in history, the author establishes her “authority to narrate” on any given event. I was there: I saw, I did, so I can speak to this historical moment. In acknowledgment of the implicitly personal nature of these positions, however, the author also undertakes to play the role of “*histor*,”

whenever [she] narrates events [she] has not seen with [her] own eyes, whenever [she] tells what [she] has overheard, read about, or accumulated by research through historical records, or whenever [she] provides background material to elucidate the narration or to set the stage for [her] story. (278)

Perhaps the most inclusive sense of the term “memoir” is enunciated by Kate Adams, as follows:

In general, what does a memoir do? It encapsulates, through the telling of an individual’s story, a particular moment or era. A mix of the personal with the contextual, an autobiographical narrative intersecting with history, memoir gives its readers an author as guide, an informant whose presence lends a unique perspective to

the historical moment or event or actor being recorded; the author's status as participant observer lends the history she chronicles significance, humanity, insight. (8)

This type of recognition of memoir's position at the "intersection" of autobiography and history – of self and social/historical context – becomes especially important as a means to preserve such texts from pronouncements of failure according to the traditional expectations of either category.¹¹

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- 11 An illustrative example from a Canadian context might be helpful in understanding how memoir texts are often misread as *either* autobiography *or* history. Specifically, Nellie McClung's two personal volumes, *Clearing in the West* and *The Stream Runs Fast* (both of which are subtitled "My Own Story") have been misread as failed attempts at producing traditional autobiographical texts, largely because in both volumes the author "deflects attention away from herself and towards her family, her colleagues, and her domestic life" (Dean 88) rather than fully embracing a Self-centred focus. This kind of narrative deflection was recognized by some contemporary readers, as seen in McClung's own worry that her second volume, *The Stream Runs Fast*, may be judged as "too introspective," a worry that stemmed from her "good friend" Laura Goodman Salverson's reaction to the earlier volume, *Clearing in the West*.

Apparently, Salverson said I had not revealed myself in that book. I was too objective, too concerned with events, conditions and developments. Autobiography should have in it the mind and soul of the writer. "Be more personal in your new book," she said. "Break down and tell all! We want to see you and know how your mind was working." (McClung, *The Stream* 145)

In Salverson's desire for McClung to "be more personal," we see the truth of Francis Russell Hart's suggestion that "memoir is the autobiographical mode that thwarts generic expectations in readers who go to autobiography for 'that extra degree of privacy'" (195).

Clearly, McClung's "autobiographies" may more fruitfully be read as examples of the memoir genre and, in fact, I have chosen to include McClung's first volume, which deals with her family's emigration from eastern to western Canada, in this study, for it seems in the spirit of the author's own life philosophy that her text should not be held as something sacrosanct, something valued above the body of works produced by women who were either her contemporaries or her successors in the desire to document white, English-speaking women's lived experience of prairie life. Certainly we cannot ignore McClung's own tendency to deny self-importance beyond "events, conditions and developments."

In terms of the memoir authors who form the basis of this study, I would assert that they all adopt, in one degree or another, Billson's scholarly "*histor*" element; that they all in one way or another have conscientiously "taken the effort to inform [their] personal experience[s] with research" (Buss, "Memoir" 205). For example, Beulah Baldwin notes in the "Acknowledgements" page of *The Long Trail: The Story of a Pioneer Family* (1992) her use of several textual sources when recreating the history of settlement in the Peace River region, as well as the help that she received from "the Provincial Archives of Alberta" (ix). Similarly, in the "Dedication" page of *Land Across the Border* (1978), Donnie M. Ebbers expresses her gratitude to "Mrs. Bert Hodges for history books and material sent from Saskatoon, Saskatchewan" (3) to help the author complete her reminiscence of prairie life. In *Porridge and Old Clothes* (1982), Eileen M. Scott documents her scholarly frame of mind when she writes, "by way of dedication, my thanks goes out to the folks in the research department of the West Vancouver Memorial Library for their patience in answering my endless questions" (n.p.). Katherine Magill provides an entire chapter titled "Historically Speaking" in *Back o' Baffuf* (1977), in which she documents her efforts at "doing a local column for the weekly newspaper" (30). For this column, Magill researched and wrote about the history of the local place, including subjects like the Barr colonists' experiences and Native Indian legends. Anna Schroeder writes in the "Introduction" to *Changes: Anecdotal Tales of Changes in the Life of Anna Born, 1888–1992* (1995) that "the story of the century forms a background to the family history and it seemed good to at least hint at the events that shaped the 19 hundreds, hence the headlines and the price lists" (ix).

Despite the authors' efforts to provide a sense of historical context, however, another dismissal of these texts centres on the charge that memoir representations of prairie life suffer from nostalgia; that the authors as "participants" and as "eyewitnesses" too often exhibit a yearning for "the good old days." For example, as Jacqueline Bliss suggests of personal accounts by Saskatchewan women,

Written in retrospect, these documents have their limitations....

Memoirs and reminiscences were generally authored by those who

became successful ... and thus tend to offer a one-sided view of the pioneer experience. They also suffer from the temptation to view the past through rose-coloured glasses, but do contain useful material, as long as these limitations are borne in mind. (84)

While certainly a healthy skepticism is needed when reading any individual personal account, I believe that through examination of several such accounts a reader is able to discern when biases of perspective hinder understanding of a fuller picture of prairie life. In reading the prairie memoirs gathered here, for example, there is no overwhelming experience of “success” in agricultural terms. In fact, many of the memoirs end on a bittersweet note of mere comfortable survival or even a sense of failure. Another related dismissal of these texts results from the fact that many of them are visions of the authors’ *childhood* experiences of prairie settlement, thus making them especially problematic for some academic readers:

Since children generally do not write autobiographies, nearly all the accounts we have of childhood on the frontier were written by mature or aging adults years later, usually when the individual had moved away from the settlement district. The majority are rather-wistful, nostalgic re-creations of what it felt like to be a boy or girl growing up on the homestead frontier. (Bennett and Kohl 94)¹²

12 For example, as Wilfrid Eggleston admits in his essay on his childhood experience of homesteading in Southern Alberta:

When I think back to those faraway homestead days I cannot escape a sort of bi-focal image. I made my acquaintance with the old homestead first through the imagination and later on through the eyes of a sensitive boy. And after sixty-five years those early impressions still dominate. So I see the experience through a romantic veil. There is still an element of dream or fantasy in my memories. (341)

On the other hand, perhaps an author’s self-reflexive recognition of the “romantic veil” so often thrown over past experiences should be seen as an ultimate lack of naiveté and an invitation to the reader to be aware of the possibility of critical reflection. For example, Heather Gilead (one of the memoirists studied here) is acutely aware of the effects of nostalgic blindness, an awareness that allows her to provide a critique of the prairie woman image through the intermingling stories of her own

Certainly an initial examination of some of the titles of the memoirs gathered in this study might seem to confirm this tendency towards a “wistful, nostalgic” view – titles such as *Upon a Sagebrush Harp*, *Crocus and Meadowlark Country*, *Barefoot on the Prairie*, and *With the West in Her Eyes*. Nevertheless, it is important here to remember that these accounts are memoirs rather than “autobiographies,” so that those texts written by women who experienced childhood on the prairie are less concerned with exclusively the writer’s experiences (“what it felt like to be a boy or girl growing up”) and more concerned with establishing the multiple forces (national/cultural/social/familial) that affected their family’s experiences of prairie life. They talk about themselves, to be sure, but as part of a multi-pronged approach to the subject and not always with nostalgic reverence for some golden age of childhood.

The question of nostalgia is important, nevertheless, in terms of understanding the cultural context/probable motivation behind the production of many of the memoirs gathered for this study. As mentioned earlier, these texts were almost all produced between 1950 and the 1980s, decades in which the production of texts and images highlighting the days of white western settlement was taking place in the nation and in all three prairie provinces. As Carole Henderson Carpenter wrote in 1979, “the many ‘birthday’ celebrations of recent years, especially the centennial of Confederation, have fostered interest in both pioneer life and Canadian cultural heritage in general” (63).

childhood experience of prairie life and the very different experience of her mother bringing up a family in central Alberta in the early-twentieth century. In *The Maple Leaf for Quite a While* (1967), Gilead provides the vignette of an Englishman and his German wife coming to Canada in 1960, after a first visit nearly thirty years prior (in 1933) by him: first she says, “he was lyrical about the prairie harvest and summoned such excitement and sweetness from it as I had not remembered for many a long year,” then notes, “it was curiously touching to hear this agreeable, well-spoken stranger conferring romance upon that world of my childhood. I had not, until then, realized how remote that world had become, how utterly banished from my conscious mind – and indeed from the collective conscious mind” (65, 66). Gilead then warns against a totally romantic recall of prairie life with the critical reflection that the Englishman “had, incidentally, apparently not noticed that this world he was extolling was tolerable only for the young, the healthy and preferably the single” (67).

Similarly, Paul Voisey explains the “phenomenal appearance of community-sponsored local histories” in this period as follows:

[A]nniversary celebrations of Canada and the three prairie provinces in 1967, 1970, and 1980 ignited much of this growth because governments urged everyone to become more historically minded and provided funds for local history projects ... [and] death began claiming the last of the early pioneers at an alarming rate by the 1960s and 1970s. A desperate sense that important links to the past would soon be obliterated launched many local history societies. (504)

Carpenter reiterates this concern for the centrality of individual pioneers to the production of a prairie heritage when she states that “the popular interest in oral history frequently is a manifestation of a ‘get it before it dies’ attitude and often is associated with a variety of festivals and celebrations which attempt to portray and recapture life as it once was” (64).¹³ Added to the desire for local and oral histories were the calls from such periodicals as *The Western Producer*, *Saskatchewan History*, *Alberta History*, and *Manitoba History*, for completion of survey questionnaires regarding different topics of western settlement, as well as for short narratives documenting homesteading experiences. Speaking specifically of Saskatchewan’s fiftieth anniversary of provincial status, Carpenter notes that

a number of special newspaper editions appeared recounting pioneer life, customs and amusements. Additionally, a series of questionnaires concerning pioneer times was initiated, one of which dealt directly with folklore and several others indirectly through, for example, pioneer cooking or housing. These questionnaires are in the Saskatchewan Archives in Saskatoon. Some of the infor-

13 The reality behind this “get it before it dies” attitude is illustrated on the dedication page to Nell Wilson Parsons’s *Upon a Sagebrush Harp*, where it is noted that “the author died October 28, 1968, while working on proofs of this work” (n.p.).

mation gleaned from them was used in the preparation of several articles on pioneer life in *Saskatchewan History*... (61)

On top of it all was the “small explosion” (Buss, “Listening” 199) of reminiscent texts (some of which will be studied here) published by presses such as Western Producer Prairie Books, Banting Publishers, Fifth House, and NeWest Press, to name a few.

The inevitable result of this concentrated cultural act of preservation was an heroic, popular, and generally white narrative of western settlement, one that has dominated the mainstream Canadian consciousness ever since. As the Anglo-centric story goes, immigrants arrived in this empty land, settling initially in the east and then, eventually, in the name of empire and nation building, journeying westward in an effort to domesticate and cultivate the vast, uninhabited, yet resource-rich, wilderness of what would become the prairie provinces. Nothing so simple as making a living here; rather, immigrants to the prairie region were the lynchpin presence in no less than the construction of a New World. Of course, the prior presence of First Nations people and the eventual arrival of and reliance on peoples of non-western-European background was not a central part of this particular version of the settlement story, which was originally constructed as an explicitly Anglo-centred effort. Although the reality is now widely understood to have been multicultural, the mid-twentieth-century passion to preserve a prairie heritage inevitably resulted in a predominantly white, English-speaking version of history. This kind of narrative homogenization is not unexpected, for as Katarzyna Rukszto suggests in a discussion of the Canadian heritage movement and the production of history, “heritage ... is about re-telling, re-imagining and entrenching the idealized and selective renditions of the past” (16).¹⁴ In addition to being a predominantly white story, for a long time another “selective” feature of the prairie settlement story was its inherent masculinity. As recently as 2005, the editors of the anthology *Unsettled Pasts: Reconceiving the West through Women’s*

14 Rukszto’s study is of the popular “Heritage Minutes,” the “series of television commercials aired as part of the CRB (Charles R. Bronfman) Foundation Heritage Project” (2), of which series two “Minutes” represent prairie history.

History still found cause to make the following assertion: “After nearly three decades of increasingly sophisticated work in women’s and gender history, popular and academic narratives of the West continue to privilege the masculine and to be dominated by the powerful images of the whisky trader, Indian chief, cowboy, Mountie, missionary, stalwart pioneer, farmer, and politician” (4). Indeed, the image of the individual and heroic prairie farmer (always assumed to be male) could be said to have attained membership in the exclusive world of “Canadian iconography” (Rukszto 9), and when he was given a female counterpart, it was one half or the other of the Prairie Woman dichotomy who generally stood by his side.

The heroic and homogenized vision of prairie settlement does seem consistently present in the memoirs, especially within the dedicatory and prefatory pages of the texts. Reverence for the people and for the task undertaken by them is paramount. For example, Nell Parsons’s *Upon a Sagebrush Harp* is dedicated to “Papa and all those other forgotten homesteaders who toiled to make the Prairies the land of their dreams for future generations” (n.p.). Similarly, Beulah Baldwin writes the following in the “Acknowledgments” page of *The Long Trail*:

As a child listening to my parents talk of their adventures along the Grouard Trail, I never thought of them as remarkable people. Nor did they see themselves as anything but ordinary.

It was only after I was grown, and later when I was working on this book, that I began to recognize them, and their contemporaries, for what they were. True pioneers! People with the courage and fortitude to follow their dreams. They came and, more importantly, they endured, staying to settle a new land. (ix)

The claims made by Parsons and Baldwin about early immigrants following “dreams” and “settling a new land” seems relatively humble in comparison to Franklin Foster’s “Foreword” to Mary Hiemstra’s *Gully Farm*, in which he poses the rhetorical question, “What is it like to create the world?” then continues on to suggest that “the settlement pioneers of western Canada came as close as any humans are likely to come to this experience” (vii). This potentially ethnocentric assertion aptly conveys the heroic underpinning of heritage projects.

It would appear that the memoirs gathered here are at least partially motivated by and can be read as the authors' desire to enter into the ongoing conversation about and construction of a prairie heritage.¹⁵ Writing such a memoir is to seek after "historical validation" (Silverman, *The Last* viii). It is to claim one's personal experience – or one's mother's or grandmother's experience – as having been intertwined with an important cultural moment, especially when the author of such a text belongs to the dominant culture being represented within the heritage discourse. That sense of belonging certainly illustrates how the memoirists studied here were empowered to write, and why their full-length texts were published. This suggestion of empowerment, in fact, might be seen as being contrary to the oft-repeated opinion within women's historiography that "women have seldom felt themselves to be makers of history" (Rasmussen et al. 8).¹⁶ If we accept this general assertion of modesty as a truism – indeed, I felt it

15 I deliberately use the word "conversation" here in order to tap into what is an explicitly oral storytelling atmosphere in many of these memoirs. The authors sometimes directly address the reader, as we see in *The Bridges I Have Crossed* (1973) when Myrtle E.J. Hicks tells about how her father gathered logs for the building of a new barn and says, "I don't know if you younger folks know what a cross-cut saw is," then goes on to provide an explanation (8). In *Rut Hog or Die* (1974), Sylvia Bannert makes the following deliberate invocation of an oral tradition of storytelling: "I was sitting in my old rocking chair and thinking of the past, and what the future holds for me. I hope you will listen to the story of my life. I will try and tell it as I lived it in Monessen, Pa.; Derby, Iowa; Truax, Saskatchewan and Grand Forks, British Columbia" (1). When Anna Schroeder came to write *Changes*, her memoir of her grandmother, she subtitled it *Anecdotal Tales of Changes in the Life of Anna Born, 1888–1992*, and in her "Acknowledgements" page she advises the reader that "if the voices change as the story unfolds, it is because I have tried to preserve the sound of the speaker who told this or that incident" (vii). One of the voices she uses is her grandmother's, who was the subject of an oral interview by schoolchildren in the late-twentieth century. In *Two White Oxen: A Perspective of Early Saskatoon, 1874–1905* (1972), Barbara (Hunter) Anderson also shares a storytelling atmosphere: for example, in a chapter titled "Bonheur's Gift on a Bush Overnight," the author begins by narratively begging her readers to draw near, "That dollars do not grow on bushes has often been averred, but a Gold Coin valued at about \$20.00, hung on a bush by the side of a path to the river for at least 24 hours, right in the centre of Saskatoon. Once Upon a Time... This is the story" (83; her ellipsis).

16 We see this reticence to claim significance, for example, in Anna Schroeder's "Introduction" to *Changes: Anecdotal Tales of Changes in the Life of Anna Born 1888–1992* (1995), which is supposedly "the story of one rather typical pioneer woman's

presence in conversations with my own grandmother – then the existence of this relatively unexplored body of memoirs motivates my further consideration of the effects of these women having undertaken the *extraordinary* act of writing their lives for public consumption. Beyond the desire to stake a claim in the heritage story of western settlement, beyond participating in what is often an explicitly nostalgic undertaking, I would argue that the memoirists studied here are also concerned with fleshing out, or making real, the public and popular version of events. That is, as women – even as white, English-speaking women – the authors of these texts still stand in some degree of opposition to both the traditionally heroic and masculine-centred vision of the heritage story and to the idealized Prairie Woman image that emerged as part and parcel of that vision. It has been said that women’s “hesitation about their historical value revealed and reflected the lesson that history is so often about men” (Silverman, *The Last* iii), so that when that traditional hesitation has so clearly been overcome, politicized purpose of one kind or another seems, to me, to be revealed.

Even within discussions of the exclusionary nature of heritage movements there exists the possibility for a more politicized approach to the memoir texts of white, English-speaking women. For example, when Rukszto states that “heritage must construct a past by elevating some events to the status of legends, while omitting, hiding and generally sanitizing any traces of the past that are less than exemplary” (17), she permits the possibility of reading these supposedly nostalgic texts quite differently. Specifically, if we peer beyond what might sometimes be only a surface adherence to the heroic story/the masculine-centred story/the Prairie Woman story, then we might just begin to find some of those “traces of the past that are less than exemplary.” Even the nostalgia which is one of the motivating forces behind heritage movements and which is often read conservatively as something “necessarily static and unchanging in its attempt to retrieve a lost utopian space,” as something that “upholds the status quo” (Huffer 19), might be more strategically read as a tool or a guise that allows the memoirist to attain a public hearing, with the result that traces of difference in the personal

life” (ix). As Schroeder writes of her grandmother Born, she “never thought she had accomplished anything noteworthy.”

experience of prairie life might also get heard.¹⁷ In this vein, I would suggest that the “nostalgia” in white, English-speaking, women’s memoirs might be most fruitfully read as an ironic narrative and critical veneer through which the representation of a Prairie Woman’s life gets “re-visioned,” a process that Adrienne Rich defines as “the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction” (35). But “old texts” (or images/narratives), and especially ones that have a tendency to dichotomize the Prairie Woman, are often difficult to re-vision. Judy Schultz alludes to this difficulty in her memoir titled *Mamie’s Children: Three Generations of Prairie Women* (1997) when she answers the question, “Why hasn’t more been written about the role of the ordinary rural woman in the West?”:

Maybe because her frontier-bred, grin-and-bear-it tradition didn’t allow for public soul-bearing. To complain about anything more personal than the weather would have been an admission of weakness or defeat, and it wasn’t done. On the other hand, a woman had to be cautiously circumspect about even her smallest personal victories because to talk about them might be construed as tooting her own horn, and that wasn’t done either. Modesty, like frugality

17 Feminist scholarship on the function of nostalgia in women’s texts illustrates that “nostalgia” can no longer be simply viewed as “just a sentiment,” but must also be read as a deliberate “rhetorical practice” (Doane and Hodges 3). For example, Carolyn Heilbrun suggests that in women’s autobiographical texts “nostalgia ... is likely to be a mask for unrecognized anger,” an emotion traditionally “forbidden” to women, who then “could find no voice in which publicly to complain” (15). Linda Wagner-Martin examines the function of nostalgia in the work of Edith Wharton, including *The Age of Innocence* (1920). Wagner-Martin notes that after World War I, when Wharton “was in her late 50s” and “in an introspective mood,” she chose to write “about New York in the 1870s” because it was a time and place in which “people saw life as promising” (5). Nevertheless, Wharton’s use of nostalgia is ironic for she seeks also to suggest that, “in some ways, the age of apparent innocence and propriety had foreshadowed the brutality of the coming war” (6). Wharton thus uses the guise of nostalgia in her historical novel as a means of cultural critique. Another useful reference on the subject of nostalgia in women’s texts is Anne G. Balay’s “‘Hands Full of Living’: Birth Control, Nostalgia, and Kathleen Norris,” in *American Literary History* 8, no. 3 (Fall 1986): 471–95.

and the work ethic, was an essential virtue in a good farm woman.
(55)

So what is the role of the memoir genre specifically in relation to the act of re-visioning, amongst other things, the seemingly monolithic image of “a good farm woman”? According to Helen Buss, memoir has long been seen as an “attractive form for those wishing to make them selves ‘real’ in terms of a history and a culture that denies their experience” (“Memoir” 207). In the years since Marcus Billson first sought to theorize the specificities of this “forgotten genre,” there have been other critics who have undertaken to provide a more dynamic treatment of this particular literary form that presents a self in historical context. For example, in her 1992 consideration of “The Subject of Memoirs,” Lee Quinby provides a re-reading of Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* (1975), a text that, despite the fact that its subtitle “specifies its genre” as *Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, has been consistently misread as an autobiographical text. Such misreadings are damaging, suggests Quinby, because they “ignore or resist the implications” of an author’s specific choice of the memoir form as a means to “negotiat[e] a confrontation with disciplinary power relations” (299). More recently, but similarly, in a 1997 article titled “Memoir with an Attitude” – an article that, like Quinby’s, provides a feminist re-reading of Kingston’s frequently misread *The Woman Warrior* – Buss highlights the genre’s radical nature when she asserts that, because of the author’s preoccupation with historicity, the memoir text allows for “‘confrontation’ with accepted versions of subjectivity” (“Memoir” 206). For both of these critics, “confrontation” is a deliberate rhetorical choice on the part of the memoir writer, although Buss also highlights the importance of an aware reader – aware of the specificities of the memoir form – in discerning where such deferrals from cultural norms and expectations might occur.

Buss’s work with other, lesser-known, women’s writings also provides a crucial backdrop to my desire to read the prairie memoirs gathered here for the ways in which they “confront” heroic/masculinist/Prairie Woman narratives. In an article titled “Settling the Score with Myths of Settlement” (1997), Buss examines “women settlers’ memoirs in archival collections” and finds herself engaged in a process of “unlearning myths of ‘settlement’” (167). More

specifically, she realizes that, “although the writers may try to conform obediently to these heroic stereotypes, they are in fact writing accounts that also contradict these myths of settlement.” Buss goes on to acknowledge that there is a crucial distinction to be made between the “surface” and “undercurrent” narrative layers of such texts, a distinction that ultimately reveals “a different reality than the heroic myths.” Discerning this “different reality,” however, demands a particularly active reader, one who is aware of the pressure on writers for seeming conformity but who is also ready to “[seek] the small breaks in the codes, not obvious on the surface” of the text (168). Buss’s explorations of the gap that occurs between cultural narratives and the “different reality” that women so often seek to represent in their personal writings, and also her consideration of the “concern” to at least appear to adhere to those ideals, is invaluable to my own treatment of memoirs by white, English-speaking women, especially given the heritage context in which so many of these memoirs were published. As Buss recognizes with archival sources, so, too, it is time to acknowledge that *published* first-hand accounts of prairie life provide us with “the opportunity to revise our cultural myths and settle the score for women involved in the history of the settlement of the West” (182). In seeking to take up that opportunity here, it is important to note that my background is literary critical rather than historical or some other disciplinary perspective, and I believe strongly in the crucial role of the reader in the discernment of narrative tactics used to “revise” predominant myths.

To “revise,” to “re-vision,” is to actively engage with or interrogate – indeed, to adhere/conform to *or* to undermine/refuse – those historical narratives and cultural images which have predominated in public representations of prairie settlement. For white, English-speaking women in the second half of the twentieth century who desired to write about their experiences on the Canadian prairies in the late nineteenth/early twentieth centuries, it must have appeared that there was little room for representations of experience beyond the homogenous ones of heritage discourse. Between contemporary propaganda encouraging the settlement of the prairie region, the heritage movement in Canada, and such cultural imagery as the *Little House on the Prairie* television series that overarched my own childhood understanding of prairie life, there must have seemed little chance for the individual woman

writer to give her own story “equal footing” (Buss, *Repossessing* xvii) with more entrenched visions. Nevertheless, it is precisely by choosing the memoir form of writing, and by making that choice in the midst of the national/regional predilection to preserve the heritage moment of prairie settlement, that these women acknowledge their awareness of the historical/cultural contexts that have, in some measure, defined their/their mothers'/their grandmothers' lives while also illustrating the ability of the individual to provide a “different reality” experienced within those contexts. Human beings are not completely self-determining subjects, but neither are they completely subjected to the power structures of the world. As Alison Weir theorizes, for example, we cannot allow the individual the power of agency – or the power of “intervening action” (*Oxford Encyclopedic English Dictionary*; hereinafter *OEED*) – without

a recognition that subjects, while they do not originate, do *participate* in the ongoing process of the constitution of subjectivity. For of course we are constituted as subjects, but from the time we begin to be constituted, we also participate in our own constitution, through our spontaneous acts and responses to others, through the development of our capacities for reflection, deliberation, and intention, through our constant attempts to make meaning, to understand ourselves and others, to express ourselves to others, to act in accordance with ideals, to account for our failures and our incoherences. (Weir, 127–28)

The prairie memoir text, coupled with the nostalgic veneer of the prairie heritage story, becomes a narrative vehicle through which, in all the ways expressed by Weir, the individual author engages with cultural understandings of what a Prairie Woman is/does and participates in a reconstitution of that image. By simultaneously adhering to the Anglo-centric norms of representation of the prairie settlement story while also engaging in “the expression or realization of one’s specificity,” the memoir author and the memoir reader, together, find “a capacity for the critique of norms” (187).

The memoirist’s “capacity for the critique of norms” is perhaps heightened in the case of those authors who are recalling their prairie childhood. Many

of the authors in this study have chosen to reconstruct not only their own experiences of homesteading life (Billson's "participant" role), but also those of their mothers and grandmothers (Billson's "witness" role), those women who may or may not have had the skill, time or desire to enter into the public act of writing. For example, in *Mamie's Children*, Judy Schultz begins her narrative acknowledging that

this is Mamie's story, it's also her mother's and her grandmother's. It belongs as well to Pearl, Mamie's youngest daughter, my mother. And in a way it becomes my story too because the thread my small, ordinary grandmother began spinning more than one hundred years ago on the Saskatchewan prairies was long and strong. She wove it back and forth among the women who were part of her past and future family, and in the weaving, she bound all of us – together. (12)

As Schultz later remembers, she herself was the "chief audience" for the "stories that passed between [her] mother [Pearl] and [grandmother] Mamie" (104), thus allowing her to pass those stories on to us. The daughter/author does seem to manage a particularly privileged viewpoint in these texts, given that, not only has she been a participant in and eyewitness to the events of prairie life, but she also stands temporally and (very often) geographically distant from the period and place of settlement, which allows her to cast a more critical eye on "the informing contexts that make the personal story a part of a larger cultural framework" (Buss, *Repossessing* 18) – Billson's *histor* role. Through an act of memoir, a genre that is part literature and part history, the (grand)daughter-author is able to combine "imaginative construction and factual testimony" (158) as a means to "look back" with "fresh eyes" (Rich 35), to re-vision, cultural norms of representation.

My readings of white, English-speaking, women's, prairie memoirs for the re-visions they provide will be divided into four chapters. I have chosen to take a thematic approach in order to demonstrate just some of the ways that the texts considered here manage to confront traditional beliefs about and representations of prairie settlement and the Prairie Woman. Chapter

Two will trace the ideas which have dominated our historical understanding of prairie settlement – the heroic story, the masculinist story – as a means to illustrate how the memoirs gathered here simultaneously invoke and reject those ideas in favour of re-visioning our focus from the larger cultural project of land settlement to the more localized concerns of the individual family farm; to effectively move narrative stress from the “stead” to the “home.” Chapter Three will trace the female images that have dominated our literary understanding of land settlement in Canada. Specifically, I will examine Catharine Parr Traill’s position as cultural icon in a “cheerfully adaptive” model of women’s participation in land settlement and then establish the presence of a different model of behaviour available to white, English-speaking women – what might perhaps be called a more “moodified” image based on the less “dauntlessly optimistic” account of Traill’s sister, Susanna Moodie. By invoking Moodie in this way, however, I do not seek to construct another false binary, another either/or simplicity, but rather to allow for a more inclusive representation of white women’s lived experience of the prairie settlement process. In Chapter Four, I want to examine how gender is constructed within specifically located spaces, including the geographic space of the Canadian west, the physical space of the white female body, and the textual space in which memoir writers represent their life experiences. As I hope to illustrate, contemporary Anglo-centric attitudes focused on the female body as a space reflective of the larger cultural project of land settlement, and the memoir text functions as a temporally safe space in which the female author is able to document the prairie woman’s modes of resistance to those attitudes. Finally, in Chapter Five I will turn my attention to the natural environment behind women’s memoirs of western “settlement”; that is, I will seek to get beyond those images which are dominant in agriculture – such as the white farmer and his plow set against a backdrop of lush wheatfields – and which effectively result in the absence of “others” in the prairie landscape. By casting an eco-critical eye on this “untilled field” of memoirs, we can acknowledge that the seemingly isolated conditions of prairie life allowed white, English-speaking women a chance to appreciate the presence of the natural landscape, First Nations people, and non-human animals, and thereby to provide a different vision, even a critique, of the land settlement project.

In choosing which texts would form the corpus of this study of prairie memoirs produced by white, English-speaking women, I had to construct a variety of critical parameters as a means to control what could otherwise result in a rather unwieldy (although fascinating) body of texts and an inability to provide close readings of textual passages. First, I am interested in individually-authored, full-length, and *published* texts, precisely because I am fascinated by the sheer number of women who, although we are often reminded of women's reticence to speak, found it necessary not only to write but also to seek (and found acceptance for) publication of their voices. Second, I have chosen to focus on texts written by or about married women, largely because the predominant Prairie Woman image is inherently the dependent of a prairie farmer, whether she is the cheerful or the drudge version of that image.¹⁸ Third, I wanted to maintain a consistent geographic focus, so I have chosen only those texts in which a majority of the narrative treats of an individual's experience of life in rural/homesteading situations in any of the three prairie provinces – Manitoba, Saskatchewan, or Alberta. Although there are many interesting texts which deal with small town life in the Canadian west, I have nonetheless preferred to stay with those women whose families relied upon a farm economy and for whom the female members were instrumental to survival. This has meant that certain texts by prominent Canadian women which have an exclusively urban focus – for example, Fredelle Bruser Maynard's *Raisins and Almonds* (1964) and Annora Brown's *Sketches from Life* (1981) – have not been included in my chosen corpus of texts. My time range, however, is quite vast, with texts that document western land settlement from around 1870 to 1950, this latter period representing the final post-World War II migration northward, most notably to the Peace River regions of both Alberta and British Columbia. Fourth, the texts which I have chosen to rely upon for this study vary considerably in literary quality, with some works being written by sophisticated and experienced

18 In her study titled *Land in Her Own Name: Women as Homesteaders in North Dakota* (Fargo: North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, 1991), Elaine Lindgren begins by documenting “what was to become a common response” to her focus on women who themselves filed land claims, and that was the lack of knowledge about such women and the assumption that women only performed “secondary or ‘helpmate’ roles” in the homesteading project (iii–vi).

writers (for example, Nellie McClung, Marjorie Wilkins Campbell, Nell Wilson Parsons, and Judy Schultz) and others being written by women with more modest narrative skills. However, each text represents a woman's attempt to articulate, within the realm of her own capabilities, personal experiences of prairie life. Accordingly, any text that has fulfilled the strict parameters of my study has been included for some degree of consideration, although I have not deliberately sought to pay equal attention to every one of the thirty memoirs gathered here. Indeed, I will here invoke the words used by the author of another similarly broad-based study of texts and state that, "given the very considerable number of texts involved ... I have made no attempt to refer to each one individually but have preferred to concentrate on following a line of argument, using the richest and most appropriate texts as illustrations" (Coe xiii–xiv). The central idea here is to bring these texts, these women's voices, to public attention and to illustrate the rich potential of them to continue the scholarly dialogue about issues of prairie history.

Potential can be fostered or lost. On May 6, 1999, when I was first working on this study, I received a phone call from my father telling me that my grandmother Sadie had died after a year of struggling against lung cancer. More than two decades after her husband had died and she had moved westward to live with one of my uncles on the coast of British Columbia, I had only just begun to renew my relationship with my grandmother (mostly by telephone) towards the final few years of her life. My academic interest in prairie women had inspired me to begin to ask questions of the woman whose figure had cut so large an influence in both my personal and professional life. However, ever since her geographical re-placement to the coast, Sadie had seemed to resign herself to a conscious refusal, at least with me, to remember much of anything about her past experience of life on the Canadian prairies. I, in turn, resigned myself to never knowing my grandmother's personal experience. Now, her death has reinforced my knowledge that, while real prairie women will eventually pass on and fade from memory, static images will continue to dominate our understanding, unless we continue the effort to take up their textual remains and read them back into Canadian cultural history.