



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

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“The landscape behind it”: Re-Visioning Some “Other” Subjects of Agriculture

But after reading a chapter or two a shadow seemed to lie across the page. It was a straight dark bar, a shadow shaped something like the letter “I.” One began dodging this way and that to catch a glimpse of the landscape behind it. Whether that was indeed a tree or a woman walking I was not quite sure.

– Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (1929)

But the face of the red man is now no longer seen. All traces of his footsteps are fast being obliterated from his once favourite haunts, and those who would see the aborigines of this country in their original state, or seek to study their native manners and customs, must travel far through the pathless forest to find them.

– Paul Kane, *Wanderings of an Artist among
the Indians of North America* (1859)

I am I because my little dog knows me.

– Gertrude Stein, *Everybody's Autobiography* (1937)

One of the most enduring cultural images of western land settlement is encompassed in a single tableau, one that recurs in prairie fiction, in television depictions of prairie life, and often in the memoirs studied here: that is, the image of the white (assumedly male) prairie farmer and the post-natural, agricultural landscape, usually devoid of any trace of either First Nations or non-human animal presence. It is an image that underscores the future-oriented, utopian, and large-scale cultural objectives of western settlement that have already been explored in Chapter Two. The final image in Douglas Durkin's *The Magpie* (1923), a relatively "obscure" novel that nonetheless is "importan[t] as a document of social history," represents the "adopt[ion]" of "one of the great themes of Canadian literature and intellectual thought, the agrarian myth" (Rider xii–xiii). As the main character Craig Forrester rejects city life and returns to the farm of his childhood, he witnesses the following picture: "a team of dark horses entered the field at the farther end and stood while their driver hitched them to a plough.... [Craig] watched them come down the full length of the field, leaving behind them a fresh new furrow through the stubble" (329). In this image, while the horses used to plough the land are mentioned, nevertheless it is the prairie farmer who controls them, and the reader's focus is ultimately turned towards the work accomplished. Also from Durkin's text, we see Craig Forrester walking alone across the prairie landscape in an image that optimistically suggests that the mere presence of the idealistic farmer ensures prosperity: "And in the sky before him as he walked steadily on, the shafts of gold shot to the zenith, flooding the earth with the faint glow of early dawn." The opening to the History Channel television series, *A Scattering of Seeds: The Creation of Canada*, similarly privileges the image of a lone human male seen literally and figuratively "scattering his seeds" in the cultivation of a nation. Although this series represents the family histories of people from across Canada's regions, and from a variety of cultural backgrounds, nevertheless it is this overriding image of "Man's" vertical relationship to the landscape as a symbol for the creation of a nation that has pertinence for a contextual understanding of land settlement issues.

The idealization of "Man" and agricultural production also often occurs within the prairie memoirs gathered for this study. In Marjorie Wilkins Campbell's *The Silent Song of Mary Eleanor* (1983), for example, the author

describes her father as “a typically lone figure, the oxen’s lines about his shoulders, his hands gripping the simple, single-share plough, [who] gloried in the prospect of mastering the virgin land” (28). In Campbell’s suggestion of the “typically lone figure” of the prairie farmer, we see the simultaneous absence of any prior cultural presence, any dynamic form of the natural landscape (except as “virgin” in need of “mastering”), or any farm animals (except in the “lines about his shoulders”), a crucial part of the farm family’s survival. This typical a “lone”ness is also evident in Sarah Ellen Roberts’s *Of Us and the Oxen* (1968), in which the author describes her son, Lathrop, as saying that “when he first plows in the spring, he rests under a sort of illusion, for it seems that it is he and not the team ahead that is forcing the plowshares through the stubborn soil. The grasp of the plow seems to give him a sense of power” (99).

The inevitable result of such images is that, borrowing from Josephine Donovan’s suggestion that “dominative modes pervade Western practice” (“Ecofeminist” 74), the mainstream narrative of western settlement privileges an agricultural discourse whereby such words as “cultivation,” “domestication,” and “improvement” refer to a geographic entity in which the naturally fertile landscape, different ways of being in that landscape, and non-human animals are absent. The “cultivated” landscape in Western Canada is a cultural construct, a human-made landscape, thereby eliding the natural state of the landscape that preceded the act of “domestication,” the presence of other modes of relationship with the land, and the living beings whose bodies (alive and dead) sustained human efforts at “improving” that landscape. One of the engaging differences that I feel emerges from within the memoir texts included in this study is the representation – the re-visioning – of these absented realities of agriculture as viable and integral subjects of prairie life and experience. When I began reading these memoirs simultaneous with contemporary and historiographical constructions of prairie life, I could not help but notice that the authors tended to focus less on the specifics of, say, the number of acres ploughed, the kinds of crops harvested, the importance of fields laying fallow, the minutia of farm machinery, the cycle of weather patterns, the politics of tariffs, etc., than one who is familiar with the traditional settlement story might expect to find. Those kinds of concerns are there, certainly, in varying degrees, but there is comparatively more narrative space devoted to

other, more personal, more tactile, subjects of the prairie story. In fact, I would suggest that, in the context of cultural constructions of the prairie settlement story, these memoirs extend the confrontational potential of the memoir genre by exhibiting an eco-consciousness that effectively re-visions the dominative and exploitive nature of large-scale agricultural practices.

It has been asserted that memoir writers encompass in their texts “a moral vision of the past” (Billson 261). Given that the writers examined here are providing us with the daily reality of lived experience of prairie settlement, the moral (and ecological) vision I see as an undercurrent at work in their narratives is a foregrounding of the immediate survival needs, both physical and psychological, of one’s family unit as opposed to the profit-seeking imperative of large-scale agriculture. Given that most of the memoirs studied here were written long after World War II, when agriculture and its products had become politicized in the discourse of environmentalism, an eco-conscious reading of these texts seems particularly apt. Written both from within and, as I assert, over against agriculture and its images, however, it is important to remember that these memoirs exist as part of a heritage context in which Canada’s agricultural past is lauded as the foundation of a nation, and to consider that such a context might well prevent an openly ecocritical purpose. Nevertheless, it is my desire as an eco-conscious reader to examine the tactics by which the authors of these prairie memoirs might implicitly confront agricultural narratives, thereby allowing other subjects of prairie life to erupt through a seemingly conventional surface.

In her “Introduction” to *The Ecocriticism Reader*, Cheryll Glotfelty states that “corresponding to the feminist interest in the lives of women authors, ecocritics have studied the environmental conditions of an author’s life – the influence of place on the imagination – demonstrating that where an author grew up, traveled, and wrote is pertinent to an understanding of his or her work” (xxiii). Especially given that many of the memoirs studied here are written by women who spent their childhood years growing up on the prairies, Glotfelty’s correspondence of “the environmental conditions of an author’s life” to literary criticism provides me with a suitable starting point for consideration of these memoir narratives as eco-conscious texts. Although Glotfelty was referring specifically to the study of fiction and poetry, the prairie memoirs

studied here also encompass the “fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it” (xix), and so can reveal an alternative vision of that “interconnection” than traditional agricultural images of land settlement will allow. Interconnection is an integral part of memoir writing anyway. Going back to the suggestion from Chapter One that the memoir genre is a unique narrative choice for those authors who are less interested in an exclusive focus on the development of a unique selfhood (traditional autobiography) and more concerned with writing about a self in context, an essential component of memoir texts is that the author/narrator “always memorializes the other”; that is, “the narrator finds her own self-performance through the exploration of the biography of significant others who occupy the text as fully as she does” (Buss, *Repossessing* 37). What “significant others” are available to the memoir author when dealing with her experiences of life on an isolated, western Canadian, homestead in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries? Husbands, parents, grandparents, siblings, children, neighbours, certainly, but the texts gathered here suggest another “act of looking back” at selfhood in context. In most critical considerations of the “other,” the “other” has always been the “same” on at least one level: that is, the “other” has always been human. However, for many settlers on the Canadian prairies, everyday life required a rather different, a rather more integrative, relationship with both the natural landscape and with non-human animals, as a means of physical and psychological survival. I would suggest that it is precisely by reading for the presence of these “other” relationships in memoir texts that we allow for the transformation of cultural images of western settlement.

The cultural image that I suggest has underscored mainstream representations of western settlement (the image of man’s vertical relationship to the landscape as a symbol for the creation of a nation), as innocuous as it might seem on the surface, is a good example of what Riane Eisler calls “the *dominator* model” of social organization. In such a model, the main focus is on “*ranking*” as an organizing principle, whether of one gender over another, one culture over another, or even of humans over nature, and the privileging of such values as “aggression, dominance, and conquest” as a means to “maintain this system” (“The Dynamics” 161–62). The language used here by Eisler is certainly reminiscent of much of the language of agriculture that emerged as

a product of the prairie settlement project. As noted in Chapter Two, prior to the mid-nineteenth century, the prairie region was considered to be nothing more than a veritable wasteland, an area “ill-suited for settlement and agriculture” (Owram, *Images* 1). From the 1850s/1860s, however, that negative assessment of the value of the region changed to the positive, and there was a corresponding transformation in cultural imagery that favoured the area as “an Agricultural and Commercial Hinterland” (74) that would help to achieve both national and imperial greatness. Speaking of “The Role of Illusion in North American Geography,” J. Wreford Watson notes that “it is the mental picture a man has about a region that will qualify his use of it” and, further, that “actuality exists, of course, but people project what they hope can be done with it, thus seeing it as something different” (10).¹ The radically transformed “mental picture” of the prairie west had powerful implications; indeed, taking possession of that area would do no less than to rank Canada as a country, as well as British cultural norms, high in relation to other nations and cultures of the world. As enunciated in 1859 by Alexander Morris, taking control of the “new Eden” would help the new dominion to “advance steadily toward that high position among the nations which they may yet attain” (qtd. in Owram 90). And it was this desire for international advancement that would result in the language of domination becoming paramount in constructions of the prairie settlement project.

From the moment that western settlement was conceived as a dream of national/imperial expansion, the federal government undertook a deliberately engineered program of land use that marked the final phase in the “complex of challenge-conquest-domestication” (Osborne 6). “Domestication” is an exceptionally pleasant word (as are its agricultural synonyms, “cultivation,” “colonization,” and “improvement”) that does much to obscure the cultural dedication to transform a land or region away from its natural state through use of force. All of these words imply inferiority, making something better/

1 Watson also makes the important point that “this often remains true even when the mental image is shown to be false, when it is in fact discovered to be an illusion” (10), which goes far to explain what I suggested in Chapter Two is a “next-year” dedication displayed by farm families that otherwise experience a dismal degree of economic failure at the project of homesteading.

more valuable, than it previously was; hence they again suggest a concern for ranking. As Stan Rowe asserts, “the land-use changes that began toward the end of the 19th century were no accident. They were the expression of European attitudes and perceptions of the prairies – occupied sparsely then by hunters-and-gatherers – as *nothing but* wilderness, waste, barren, desert and deserted until colonized and ‘improved’” (13). The prairie region was rhetorically transformed from wilderness to hinterland, but it only ever held the *promise* of abundance – a promise that required intervention and control by human beings in order to reach its potential. One of the first tasks needed to be accomplished in order to make intervention and control possible was to impose a geometric system of land ownership upon a shapely world that often betrayed its reputation for extremes of expansive flatness.² Bringing to fruition agricultural dreams of economic prosperity necessitated the domination of nature’s productions. In the land survey system adopted by the Canadian government as a means to prepare the vast untamed expanse for the advent of “civilization,” we see a cultural narrative in which “the imposition of [a] mathematical model upon reality reflects a psychology of domination” that “requires that the anomalous other be forced into ordered forms” (Donovan, “Animal” 361–62, 367). On the one hand, the survey system used in Canada was a by-product of the need for the erection of empirical boundaries, as

2 The incongruity of the land survey system with the prairie land itself was poignantly articulated in Stan Rowe’s 1987 essay “The First 100 Years: Land Use in the Prairies”: “As we look out from the rectangular lots and fields that enclose us today in town and country – the legacy of the grid land surveys of the 1870s and 1880s – we find it difficult to imagine the curvilinear sights, sounds and smells of the primeval grasslands, now reduced to a few forlorn and untypical fragments” (13). Appreciation for the natural state of the prairie landscape can be seen in the memoirs gathered here. For example, in Clara Middleton’s *Green Fields Afar: Memories of Alberta Days* (1947), the author makes the following note about the landscape just outside Carstairs, Alberta: “I noticed with delight that the prairie was not as dead-flat as in Saskatchewan or North Dakota” (4). Despite Middleton’s assessment of Saskatchewan, however, Nell Wilson Parsons notes in *Upon a Sagebrush Harp* (1969) that in southern Saskatchewan “the land lay seemingly flat in all directions, save for the multiple, unseen folds of the coulees. Standing at any given flat point you could scarcely believe the coulees were there, unless you had seen them” (104). Similarly, in *Barefoot on the Prairie: Memories of Life on a Prairie Homestead* (1989), Ferne Nelson speaks of “the gentle curves of the prairie” in Alberta (42).

distinct from another nation: “The first essential was to give physical reality to a boundary [Canada–U.S.] that so far had been drawn only by the pens of cartographers” (Thompson, John Herd 45). On the other hand, that same system was the condition necessary for control, or “settlement,” of the natural landscape at the level of the individual farmer. In 1912, Emily Ferguson recognized that the prairie landscape held “little practical value” before being surveyed, and she highlighted the notion of cultural imposition when she stated that “we may not write in the open volume of the land until the hardy young men of the transit have ruled off the pages” (*Open* 52). The “open volume of the land” merely awaited the “control” of individual farmers who would “cultivate” at the micro-level the larger cultural desire for profit. Accordingly, as indicated in Chapter One, for many settlers the important determination of their arrival upon the Canadian prairies was either the recitation of one’s exact homestead location along the survey grid or the discovery of the survey markers which set out the boundaries of the settler’s land ownership, and which in themselves symbolized the cultural and economic significance of the settler’s physical presence in that landscape.³

As suggested by Henry Kreisel, “to conquer a piece of the continent, to put one’s imprint upon virgin land, to say, ‘Here I am, for that I came,’ is as much a way of defining oneself, of proving one’s existence, as is Descartes’ *Cogito, ergo sum*” (48), thus establishing the importance of the land survey system as a Cartesian, I-centric, plane. The individual, hence cultural, “imprint” was made first by placing those survey markers in the earth, then by being present and beginning the process of “cultivation.” The desire to “conquer,” or to make an “imprint,” is an ego-centred approach to the prairie

3 More than that, these markers suggest a “devotion to an unseen order which must be the object of faith rather than reason”: referring to “a statue in the Alberta Provincial Museum” that depicts, “all in bronze,” a “kneeling” man “holding the bridle of a horse which bears his wife and infant child,” Dick Harrison asserts that “the grouping of man, woman, child, and patient beast suggests a nativity scene, but in this epiphany what the man kneels before with bared head is a squared mental [*sic*] survey stake with its cryptic notation of range, township, section, and quarter section” (79). For memoir examples illustrating the iconic status of the survey marker, see Campbell 23; Hiemstra 112–13; Holmes 74–75; McClung 48; Parsons 5–6, 16; Roberts 17; Schultz 36.

landscape, which I believe is best figured by what Laurence Ricou identifies as Man's "dramatic vertical presence" in an otherwise "entirely horizontal world" (ix–xi). This presence gains expression in Wallace Stegner's oft-quoted prairie memoir *Wolf Willow* (1966), in which the author asserts that the landscape "is flat, empty, nearly abstract, and in its flatness you are a challenging upright thing" (8). The figure of the prairie farmer as "upright thing" is also commonly expressed in the works of the major western fiction writers, such as Robert J.C. Stead, Frederick Philip Grove, Martha Ostenso, Sinclair Ross, and W.O. Mitchell. In Martha Ostenso's *Wild Geese* (1925), for example, Caleb Gare is described as having "a towering appearance" (10), and his family farm becomes a psychological prison, a world of oppression, greed and violence, all stemming from the patriarch's desire to conquer and control everything and everyone around him. Caleb is often shown walking across "his" landscape, monitoring its productions: thus we see him standing upon "a ridge from which he could look east and west, north and south, upon the land that was his" and upon the land that he wished to have (17). He surveys his possessions, as his daughter Judith suggests, "to assure himself that his land [is] still there," that he still controls "the yield of the earth" and is thus "a successful owner and user of the soil" (89, 213). Similarly, in Frederick Philip Grove's *Fruits of the Earth* (1933), Abe Spalding is noted as being "extraordinarily tall, measuring six feet four" and "built in proportion to his height, broad-shouldered and deep-chested" (19). Most importantly, "temperamentally, [he] was impulsive, bearing down obstacles by sheer impetuosity" (19). The goal of Abe's homesteading project is made quite clear when we are told that "for a year he had mentally lived on that open, flat prairie, planning and adjusting himself. He needed room; he needed a country which would give scope to the powers he felt within him. Forbidding as it looked, this was that country" (22). Ultimately, we are told, "he would conquer this wilderness; he would change it; he would set his own seal upon it!"⁴

4 Judy Schultz represents this agricultural manifesto in *Mamie's Children: Three Generations of Prairie Women* (1997), wherein she states that "the frontier and everything on it had to be conquered. Sod had to be busted, horses had to be broken, dogs and women had to be tamed" (117).

Setting one's "own seal" ultimately meant the settler's commitment of his own piece of the geographic pie to the larger cultural project of "cultivation," or what Frieda Knobloch calls the "arts and sciences of improving nature" (75). It is:

an act of transformation that takes "wild" territory – virgin land – and breaks it as one would break an animal or subjugate a slave, processes, incidentally, accompanying many agricultures supported by states and empires. It is a process of domestication by which a plowman enforces his domination over cropland in such a way as to render the land permanently "improved."

As suggested here, "cultivation" often takes on an aggressive tone, thus suggesting a project of war-making, "an act of violence," as opposed to the more peaceful concept of land "settlement." In that cultivation project, the cultural/personal agenda was clear: the prairie farmer "had to conquer.... And his weapon was the plough" (Kamen-Kaye 6).⁵ Significantly, going back to Eisler's "*dominator* model" of social organization, she suggests that the overriding image for that model is the "blade," a symbol of "the ultimate power to establish

5 Despite the prominence of fictional representations of Man's dominating attitude towards the prairie landscape, some of these texts do contain alternative images of a human presence in the natural environment. For example, in *Wild Geese*, Ostenso presents a competing image when she depicts Judith Gare's psychological/physical escape from her father's self-engineered (farm) landscape to areas beyond Caleb's control – areas in which the "vertical man/horizontal world" image breaks down as we see the lone figure of Judith deliberately getting "horizontal" and embracing the earth for all it gives to her unforcedly. As Dick Harrison suggests, Judith's father "can be identified with the land only in the sense that 'land' is a human construct, property, a means to power" (111). Such a definition of "land" represents the dominant narrative of western settlement, in which "man's" chief motivation is to "capture the new space" by the processes of "surveying, fencing, building" (x) and the cultivation of cash crops. Meanwhile, says Harrison, the character of Judith Gare represents an alternative vision of the prairie landscape as "natural environment" (110) – as beyond man's verbal or physical control – a vision all too often left unseen by settlers whose responses to that environment were "conditioned" to focus upon agricultural success. I would suggest that by reading prairie fiction for this alternative image of a human relationship with the landscape we can establish a necessary context for more eco-conscious readings of prairie memoirs.

and enforce domination" (*The Chalice* xvii).⁶ This symbol thus connects to the technology of the plough as a central and romantic image in agriculture: as Knobloch notes,

The plow is more than simply a piece a technology; it implies a system of domestication of animals and people, an emphasis on commodity rather than food production (and a division of labor by gender that removed women's expertise, though certainly not labor, from the field), an ideology of "improvement," a language of cultivation, culture, and work as opposed to wilderness, nature and idleness. An entire colonial technics is embodied in the plow. (Knobloch 49–50)

There are a number of rankings going on here, not the least of which is the ranking of "culture, and work" over "nature and idleness," which implies, amongst other things, that the environment is somehow static and thus justifiably prey to a plundering mentality. We can see this mentality at work in Nell Wilson Parson's *Upon a Sagebrush Harp* (1969), in which the author quotes her father as saying, "We'll have that bumper crop one of these years! Why, one day all this land will be raising prime wheat, *not an idle acre anywhere*. Follow me, *and you'll wear diamonds yet!*" (134; emphasis added). The magnitude of Mr. Wilson's desire for a financial return on his cultural work is important to our understanding of the agricultural context of the memoirists gathered here, and of the more eco-conscious re-vision that I see happening in many of their texts.

It has been said that "one who looks on the world as simply a set of resources to be utilized is not thinking of it as an environment at all" (Evernden 99). This is certainly true in the transformation of the Canadian West from being feared as a wasteland to being subjected to "the concept of a vast agrarian empire, which emphasized the prosperity awaiting the farmer" (Owram, *Promise* 48). Moving quickly from one cultural construct to another, the natural

6 As seen in the title to her theorization of "Cultural Transformation," *The Chalice & the Blade: Our History, Our Future* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987).

environment of the prairie region was effectively eradicated. The cultural focus of western settlement rested on “commodity rather than food production,” as Knobloch notes, and the prairie farmer “was to be a man who bought and sold goods” (Owram, “The Promise” 24). Specifically, the focus was on the large-scale cultivation and production of a single crop, “King Wheat” (again we see a tendency to ranking as organizing principle in the adoption of that regal label), whether or not the soil conditions of the region were actually suited to that particular crop. As Owram explains, “from the time that the West had begun to be viewed as a potential agricultural region the greatest attention had been paid to the possibility of wheat cultivation. Its ability to produce wheat, more than any other single feature, would determine its worth to Canada” (112).⁷ “King Wheat” and all that he represented, including personal land ownership, monetary success, a “new start” for the children of immigrants, etc., became the cultural icon that inspired millions of individuals to leave their homes with their families and emigrate to “the Promised Land.” But this particular crop also had other implications, as “wheat, with beef, was the basic staple of the Anglo-Saxon and European world and as such had special qualities attributed to it”: that is, besides being intended for the world’s most highly “civilized” nations, wheat was also supposed to be productive of “the highest type of manhood” (Owram 112–13).

Despite the somewhat cozy ring to the word “domestication,” then, western settlement had little to do with any personal or intimate kind of “interconnection” between humans and the land. On the contrary, the phrase “vast agrarian empire” suggests the large-scale and absolute domination of

7 As Ian MacPherson and John Herd Thompson note regarding this agricultural monopoly, “since the early years of the century, ideologists of mixed farming ... had urged the western farmer to diversify into stock raising and end his precarious overdependence on wheat,” but it was not until after World War II that “‘King wheat’ had been toppled as undisputed ruler of the western plains” (12, 15). See MacPherson and Thompson’s “An Orderly Reconstruction: Prairie Agriculture in World War Two,” in *Canadian Papers in Rural History*, ed. Donald H. Akenson, vol. IV (Gananoque, Ontario: Langdale Press, 1984), 11–32, for a discussion of the politics of agricultural diversification in the prairie west. For memoir examples of the power of wheat culture in the west, see Campbell 43; Hiemstra 180; and McClung 369.

nature and its productive capabilities. Inevitably, in order to create an empire big enough for the reign of King Wheat, in order to satisfy the desire to be “a lord of lands” (Ferguson, *Janey* 204), individual farmers were encouraged (and they desired) to turn more furrows, to get more acres under cultivation, even to purchase more land than the original “free” homestead quarter-section. The pursuit of “prosperity” at the individual level, a micro-version of the larger cultural imperative to create that “vast agrarian empire,” was a rejection of any notion of self-sufficiency. From the beginning, prairie farming was conceived of as a business venture rather than a way of life, and the implications for the natural environment were clear: “The early insinuation into Prairie agriculture of the idea of farming as a *commercial enterprise*, as a business rather than as a provisioner of food for domestic consumption, lies at the root of the exploitive land uses that continue to plague the West today” (Rowe 14). Once again, we can see the accumulative approach to farming in contemporary prairie fiction. In Harold Bindloss’s *Prescott of Saskatchewan* (1913), for example, the title hero/farmer enunciates the prevailing credo of land settlement as follows: “Here one goes on from task to task, each one bigger and more venturesome than the last; acre added to acre, a gasoline tractor to the horse-plow, another quarter-section broken. Mind and body taxed all day and often half the night. One can’t sit down and mope” (33). Twenty years later, Grove’s *Fruits* illustrated that the desire for dominance had not waned, for the main character of the novel, Abe Spalding, is “possessed by ‘land hunger’” (17):

He *must* have more land! He *must* get to a point where he farmed on a scale which would double his net income from a decreasing margin of profit. Nicoll’s [his neighbour’s] way was not his. He could not be satisfied with the fact that, if he killed a pig and a calf in the fall, there was meat in the house. To him, farming was an industry, not an occupation. (51)

When Abe’s wife Ruth asks, “But why buy more and more machinery and land?,” her sister-in-law Mary simply responds, “It’s the way of the west” (53). In Abe’s mind, the answer to that question is in the dream “of a mansion such

as he had seen in Ontario, in the remnants of a colonial estate – a mansion dominating an extensive holding of land, imposed upon that holding as a sort of seigneurial sign-manual” (23). At about the same period, Ethel Chapman marked this frenzy about land ownership as an illness that sometimes threatened the farmer’s completion of the other obligations of homesteading: regarding the hero of *The Homesteaders* (1936), Chapman wrote that “there was scarcely a day when [Peter Shoedecker’s] axe could not be heard in the woods. Other work like building had to be done, but all the time an impatience to be at the business of making land possessed him – the ‘clearing fever,’ he called it” (191).⁸

Of course, it should be remembered that this seeming cultural mania for the establishment of a “vast agrarian empire” was inherently a future-oriented goal, and the reality for many settlers, as indeed for most of the memoirists studied here, was decidedly smaller in scale and focus. As Rodney C. Loehr suggests of the notion of “Self-Sufficiency on the Farm” in North America, it is “a nice dream of a golden age,” and while it was “possible that on the frontier for the first year or two, when access to market was difficult and before the storekeeper made his appearance, living conditions approached self-sufficiency,” nevertheless “when the storekeeper appeared and as transportation improved, self-sufficiency melted away” (41). But we are dealing with the power of rhetoric here, and how individual settlers both succumbed to and deferred from the stated cultural goals. In that regard, even without the inculcated quest for ever-increasing land-holdings, the original homesteading laws already represent the antithesis of self-sufficiency, as seen in the physical size of the homestead sites: “By orders-in-council in the spring of 1871, entries were to be accepted on ‘homesteads’ for 160 acres (a quarter-section) in exchange for a fee of ten dollars” (Friesen, *The Canadian* 183). The Canadian homestead system was based upon the American one (Spry 3), and as Knobloch says of the latter,

8 For memoir examples of this “land hunger,” see Campbell 133; Ebbers 7–9; Hewson 159; Hiemstra 180, 274; McClung 225; and Parsons 40–42.

[T]he size of the homestead indicates at least two things: the determination on the part of the federal government to recode a “wild” landscape as quickly as possible by creating vast domesticated fields and the commercial nature of western farming. When producing food, a household can live on the grains and food plants cultivated on about one to five acres, depending on the quality of the soil and the skill of the farmer....

The agriculture that came west with European settlement was ... a great devourer of farmland. Each 160-acre homestead on good land could have provided food for thirty households or more if every acre were under cultivation. If only a quarter of that acreage produced food, a homestead might still support eight households. Truly, the homestead plowman had become his own lord and tenant, the breadwinner, taking the produce of land that could otherwise have been divided exclusively for himself and his family. (54–55)

As Knobloch continues, “of course, any smaller scale of land division was unthinkable ... because it took 160 acres at least, and often more than that, to support only one family in a society and an agriculture based on the exchange of commodities for cash.” The real importance of Knobloch’s calculations is that they convey a sense of the mindset promoted by the homestead policy itself, one avidly adopted by so many immigrants to the west. We can see this “mindset” in Nellie L. McClung’s *Clearing in the West: My Own Story* (1935), wherein the author notes that her brother Will’s enthusiasm for the prospect of emigrating westward in the 1870s was based on comparisons with eastern farming standards: for example, he says, “Out West they do things in a big way... Fifty acres is the size of a field not a farm” (31).

The dominative and exploitive obsession with establishing a “vast agrarian empire” and producing “commodities for cash” seems to preclude the existence in the prairie west of Riane Eisler’s second model of social organization, the “*partnership* model,” in which “social relations are primarily based on the principle of *linking* rather than ranking” and “difference is not necessarily equated with inferiority or superiority” (*The Chalice* xvii). In contrast to the

dominator model, the values associated with the “*partnership* model” are “caring, compassion, empathy and non-violence” (“From Domination” 77). This second model, in addition to equalizing relationships between genders, cultures, and nations, would also inherently bring balance between humans and the natural environment. In fact, Eisler’s focus on the concept of “linking” is reminiscent of the principal of “ecology,”⁹ which is also about interconnection and balance as opposed to the hierarchical notions of domination and exploitation. We can see something similar happening in what Joseph W. Meeker refers to as a “climax community,” or

extremely diverse and complicated groupings of living things which exist in a relatively balanced state with one another and with their nonliving environment. A climax ecosystem is much more complicated than any human social organization, if only because it integrates the diverse needs and activities of a very large number of *different* species. (162)

In a phrasing that is eerily reflective of my discussion of land settlement in the Canadian West, Meeker goes on to assert that

no human has ever known what it means to live in a climax ecosystem, at least not since the emergence of consciousness which has made us human. We have generally acted the role of the pioneer species, dedicating ourselves to survival through the destruction of all our competitors and to achieving effective dominance over other forms of life. Civilization, at least in the West, has developed as a tragedy does, through the actions of pioneering leaders who break new ground and surmount huge obstacles. (162–63)

While the ideology behind cultural narratives of western settlement promoted the “*dominator*” type of relationship with the prairie landscape, nevertheless it

9 The word “ecology” was “coined in 1866 by Ernst Haeckel” as “a descriptive study of relations between organisms and their environments” (O’Brien, Susie 26).

would be my suggestion that in the gap between ideology and actual attainment of the future-oriented goals of that ideology, the daily reality of survival for many settlers demanded a greater degree of eco-consciousness than the agricultural vision appeared to allow, and that an “other,” more “partnership”-oriented consciousness is avidly represented in the memoirs gathered here. I am not speaking of some politically charged and explicitly environmental agenda to defer from mainstream cultural thinking. Rather, I am reading these memoirs for the ways in which the authors document a consciousness, an ongoing awareness, that there was another way of being in the prairie landscape; a different imperative for survival that focused on the immediate needs (physical and psychological) of the farm family unit, but that also respected other presences in the surrounding environment. I believe that this eco-conscious perspective is particularly prominent in the memoirs written by women as a result of their largely domestic role, one which necessitated (as already alluded to in Chapter Two) a “*subsistence perspective*,” a “necessary precondition for survival” (Mies and Shiva 297–98), as opposed to a commercial perspective. The work that women performed outside the home so often had to do with survival, with the need “to provide staple foods apart from grains” (Knobloch 53), as a means of filling the considerable gap between the ideal and the real.

Women “engaged in home food production as a direct contribution to the uncertain family economy” (Armitage 468), and one of the most common outdoor activities for prairie women was maintenance of a family vegetable garden, from which the family unit (as opposed to the world’s hungry masses) could be sustained throughout the year. A garden, then, acted as a small-scale literalization of one of the prevailing metaphors of the prairie west as a “Garden of Eden” or a “garden of abundance.” Much attention has been paid by historiographers to the importance of vegetable gardens. For example, Frieda Knobloch suggests that “gardening in the West was never seen as more than a supplement to the income gained from the fields, even if it provided the means of subsistence for a family improving a homestead” (72). She then quantifies the subsistence potential of the family garden by saying that, “in the West, gardens produced between 50 and 70 percent of a farm family’s food.” As Mary Kinnear discovered in her study of women’s “domestic economy,” “rural women did have one advantage over town dwellers: their large vegetable

gardens. Many could preserve a considerable amount of their food for their families. This would reduce their expenses, but added to their work load" (*A Female* 73). Contemporary writer Marion Dudley Cran provides an illustration of a prairie woman's concern for the productivity of the garden plot when she remarks on her experience of a

kitchen garden, where we gather some squaw corn for breakfast, and I have time to admire the pitch of cultivation to which it has been brought, – onions, beets, celery, potatoes, carrots, cabbages, turnips, peas, beans, all growing luxuriously in the rich black loam. "I love the garden," she says; "I do most of it myself." (131)

The diversity and the subsistence potential of this garden seems especially confrontational with the more metaphorical goals of wheat growing, as seen in the borrowed agricultural language which suggests that this prairie woman has "brought" her garden plot to the "pitch of cultivation."

Given the reality of their primarily domestic responsibilities, it was often difficult for prairie women to find the time to explore the natural environment beyond the immediate boundaries of the homestead, so that a relationship with the physical landscape was often confined to vegetable and/or flower gardening. The obvious first question here is to what extent can the activity of gardening, in which the human participant first changes the nature of the land being used, then to a large extent controls what that land will produce, be considered as anything different from the agricultural pursuits of their husbands? As Leonore Davidoff et al. suggest, historically gardens have been a space "where nature could be enjoyed but was also tamed and controlled" (160). Similarly, as Andrea Pinto Lebowitz asserts about a specific genre of nature writing called "garden writing," "it can be quite diametrically opposed to nature writing in its attempt to control and transform wilderness into human landscape rather than to appreciate the natural world in and for itself" (5).¹⁰ However, one obvious difference between the activity of gardening and

10 As Lebowitz continues, however, "yet the desire – and need – to garden is often part of a nature writer's life and the gardening events that happen spontaneously

large-scale agriculture is the size of the undertaking: that is, while the cultural project of prairie settlement sought to “transcend nature” (Mies and Shiva 8), to effectively obliterate any traces of “the non-humanized landscape” (Rowe 82), home gardens are decidedly small-scale and thus relatively non-interruptive to the continuing presence of that landscape. In addition, while the agricultural privileging of wheat farming reflects an exploitive motivation in the primary goal of “capital accumulation” (Mies and Shiva 2), vegetable gardening reflects “nature’s subsistence potential” and a motivation that stays within the “realm of necessity” (Mies and Shiva 8). And that “necessity” could be physical (vegetable gardening) or spiritual (flower gardening). In contrast to the rhetorical reign of “King Wheat,” the prairie memoirs make clear that subsistence gardening is about diversity and that prairie women often adapted their cultural expectations about what should be grown to the production capabilities of the prairie soil.

One of the things that needed to be learned in order to maximize the subsistence potential of a prairie garden was how the climate of any given part of the prairie region would affect different plants. In Donnie M. Ebbers’s *Land across the Border* (1978), a memoir of homesteading life “in the Shellbrook area” (21) of Saskatchewan in the late-nineteenth/early-twentieth centuries, the author writes about her family’s intimate awareness of seasonal growth patterns, both domestic and natural:

Everything grew rapidly in the new, rich soil and the long summer days. Vegetables grew extra large and tender and flower gardens were beautiful from June to September. A profusion of wild flowers covered the country-side, from May to September. The crocus in early May, fragrant pink roses in June and July, the red tiger, or prairie lilies in August (now named Saskatchewan’s Provincial flower) and the purple fire-weed and golden-rod and Indian Pinks in September. There was also white babybreath and daisies and

and with an unplanned felicity often bring garden writing into the sphere of nature writing” (5).

Brown-eyed Susans in summer and fall, and yellow buttercups in the spring. (40–41)

The equation of “vegetables,” “flower gardens” and “wild flowers” in this catalogue of “everything” that grows on the Saskatchewan prairies suggests a more balanced perspective of the human presence on the landscape than does the notion of a “vast agrarian empire.” I would even suggest that by devoting more narrative attention to natural productions than cultivated ones, Ebbers manages to reject the notion of the prairie landscape as “idle” and show it, rather, as being “more than object; it is presence” (Mann 49–50). As Ebbers’s narrative continues, she illustrates that awareness of seasonal growth patterns translates to knowledge about successful vegetable gardening:

The ground which was frozen one to four feet deep all winter, was not warm enough to plant garden till the middle of May, even then a late spring frost might nip off the bean sprouts, requiring a second planting of bean seed. Tomato plants (grown from seed in boxes in the house during the winter) might freeze if planted out in the garden before the first of June, but by August the vines were covered with large green tomatoes. When the men came in from doing chores saying, “Afraid we are going to get a frost tonight!” the women would run to the garden and cover tomato plants with old sheets, thin blankets, etc. to keep them from freezing so they could keep on growing and hopefully some would ripen in the warm days to follow. They seldom ripened on the vines but had to be gathered green. Those not used for pickles and relish were individually wrapped in newspaper and put in a warm dry place. They ripened beautifully in a month or two.

Because of the short summer season cucumbers, cantaloupe, pumpkin and watermelon were never grown; but the best beets, carrots, and potatoes in the world grow in Saskatchewan. The potatoes grew very large and yet were mealy and good flavored. (41)

Very often, the memoirs studied here represent women's gardening labours in narrative "juxtaposition" to the large-scale agricultural activities of the family farm. "Juxtaposition," or the "ironic arrangement" in written literature of, for example, "titles, epigraphs, the placements of stanzas, voices, or paragraphs," is often used by women writers as a "coding strategy," a means of "covert expression" of dissonance with the "dominant culture" (Radner and Lanser 13–14). We see this strategy at work in Jessie Browne Raber's *Pioneering in Alberta* (1951), a memoir of homesteading near Lacombe, Alberta, in the late-nineteenth/early-twentieth centuries. Raber's mother's gardening and preserving achievements often occupy more narrative space in juxtaposition with her father's less-than-successful farming activities. For example, Raber begins a paragraph speaking about the increase of her father's cultivated acreage, but very quickly and unexpectedly makes a narrative switch to a discussion of the "abundance" of her mother's and nature's gardens:

More land was being cleared. Dad hired Nels Neirgaard, to cut brush and plow for him. We had a lovely garden of potatoes, cabbage, turnips, rutabagas, carrots, parsnips and radishes, which Mother planted along with the turnips. They couldn't be found so readily, so we children couldn't eat them all up. The lettuce did well. We grew turnips and rutabagas in big patches because the cows liked them in winter. We also picked whatever berries grew wild. Raspberries were the best and grew abundantly during some years. Wherever brush had been left, after being cut down and piled, there lovely raspberries would be growing the next summer. Saskatoons were easy to pick and Mother dried a lot of them for winter use. Blueberries were our favorites, we went many times after them. (125)

It is imperative here that we read Raber's unannounced narrative slip from agriculture to home gardening and berry-picking within the context of the rest of the memoir in which the author clearly shows displeasure at her father's seemingly endless quest for more and better land. Indeed, Raber's rather cursory mention of land clearing versus her concentration on her mother's

subsistence practices suggests that narrative juxtaposition, or the relative amount of space devoted to these two acts, becomes a tool of confrontation with cultural expectations about appropriate subjects for the prairie memoir.

Both an intimate knowledge of the natural environment and an ability to provide subsistence for her family through her gardening labours are a part of Mamie Harris's experience of life in "the grasslands of southern Saskatchewan" (11), as seen in Judy Schultz's memoir *Mamie's Children: Three Generations of Prairie Women* (1997). For example, in a chapter titled "In Mamie's Gardens," the author works to establish both Mamie's, and hence her own, eco-conscious vision of the prairies:

Mamie had two gardens, and she loved them equally. One was the grassland itself, the whole blooming prairie, rolling out its scented carpet of flowers and shrubs from early spring until fall, and in any year with enough rain it was, and still is, a wonderful sight to behold. The other was the spot she worked so hard to tame, her private garden where she planted carefully hoarded seeds, coaxing an abundance of food and flower from the reluctant earth. (82)

Despite the implied ownership of the natural prairie here, what I find delightful is the fact that the author indicates the equal valuation of the "grassland itself" and Mamie's "private garden," a balancing act that confronts cultural notions that rank non-humanized land as *less than* "improved" land. In fact, Schultz goes on to indicate how the produce of the grasslands was quite valuable to prairie health, especially dandelions, those culturally denigrated "weeds":

Next would come the dandelion, despised by city folk, but one of Mamie's useful plants because of its bitter, vitamin-rich leaves, which nobody especially liked, but lots of people ate anyway, as they were such a tonic after a long winter. Cook them like beet greens, with a small onion, a discreet blob of bacon fat and a dribble of vinegar at the last minute; so says the Cash Book. (83)

Even in the previous description of Mamie's "private garden" we can see some confrontational tactics at work, specifically in some interesting juxtaposition of vocabulary. While it is clear that her grandmother cultivates, or "tames," the spot of earth that makes up her garden, nevertheless the use of the word "coaxes" rather than the cultural attitude of "conquering" suggests a different sort of human-landscape relationship, one that allows for her family's subsistence:

Her big garden was more than a pleasure. It was essential to her main job: feeding her family year round. Setting a good table was only possible if she grew an abundant garden, and while the planting and growing seasons were busy, the harvesting was an even bigger job because everything had to be readied for storage. *Putting things up for winter*, she called it. *Putting things by*.

Mamie grew every root vegetable that her well-thumbed seed catalogue offered. Uncle Ken remembers it as being from Stokes, or Burpees, but a woman in Rockglen thinks Mamie got her seeds from the Eaton's catalogue, like everybody else. She was right – among the pages of the Cash Book I find an Eaton's mail order form for farm and garden supplies. She grew cabbage and cauliflower and eventually kohlrabi my uncle thinks, but she never attempted a broccoli plant. Although there were green onions in spring and big paper-skinned granex for storage and even an experimental shallot given to her by a neighbor, she never attempted nor wanted garlic in her garden, associating it with the mysteriously aromatic cooking of the eastern Europeans she referred to as Galicians. Still, she learned to use it sparingly, one clove at a time, in her dill pickles.

She did grow tomatoes, cucumbers and dillweed. In these ways she was a sensualist: the smell of the tomato plant when she pinched out the sucker leaves – that intensely green, faintly dusty and totally tomato smell – was one she loved and pointed out to me on hot July mornings in my mother's small vegetable patch, long after she had left her own massive garden behind. Sometimes

she'd pick dillweed and crush it between her fingers. "Sniff," she'd say, sticking a crumpled dill frond under my nose. "Good? That's why the pickles taste the way they do." (89–90)¹¹

For Schultz, to explore her grandmother's gardens is to understand Mamie herself. For example, she writes of the "wild tiger lily," "an independent flower" that speaks to the emigrant woman's experience of place: "Mamie taught me not to pick them because the shock of being yanked from their chosen spot is too much to bear and they would wilt before we could get them home and into a fruit jar of water" (84). Speaking of her grandmother's "private garden," Schultz says, "like Mamie, this garden is a survivor" (85). Mamie's companionate relationship to both the natural landscape and her private garden has transformative power, for her physical aspect begins to mirror the natural elements:

Her skin dried up in the heat, wrinkled early, turned leathery, the color of a walnut. The photo album shows Mamie at forty-two with white hair, weathered face, looking like she was sixty. The relentless sun and wind turned her hair brittle and dry as straw. Lips and fingers cracked, eyes were gritty and sore because the wind was her constant companion in those early years. (87)

In this description of Mamie Harris, we start our return to the beginning of this study, to the original impetus to my consideration of these women's memoirs, for in this description we see the image of a prairie woman who, like my own grandmother, presents a physical rejection, and hence transformation, of predominant cultural images, such as the unweathered purity of Caroline Ingalls.

While prairie farmers were out in the fields attempting to harvest "the [metaphoric] fruits of the earth" as "commodities for cash," prairie women

11 For more examples of the importance of the settler woman's garden to family subsistence, see also Baldwin 207; Campbell 101; Johannson 16–17, 119–21; Magill 11; Nash 245–47; Parsons 3; and Strange 224.

were often attending to the more immediate nutritional needs of their family by going beyond the boundaries of the family farm to partake of the naturally occurring fruits of the prairie landscape. Indeed, many of the memoirists in this study represent the activity of berry-picking as traditionally within the female domain and as far more memorable than agricultural pursuits in terms of culinary bounty. In *Barefoot on the Prairie: Memories of Life on a Prairie Homestead* (1989), a memoir of life in Alberta's grasslands in the second and third decades of the twentieth century, Ferne Nelson illustrates "A Berry Bonanza" that would offset a winter season in which nutritional variety decreased considerably; indeed, the joy of knowing that there would be colour added to the family table during the white and grey expanse of winter went a long way to make up for the sometimes frustrating conditions of the task of berry-picking. As Nelson writes,

Some of the neighbours reported that the berry crop was very good this year, and when Mama heard that, she decided we would all go and stock up for the winter.

Mama was an ardent berry-picker. My earliest memories contain glimpses of her surrounded by tall grass and mosquitoes, patiently filling a dishpan with the biggest, juiciest wild strawberries I have ever seen. Since the sort of weather that produces an excellent strawberry crop also produces a hearty insect population, the bites had to be endured. Nothing could keep our mother from the berry patch. She would build a smudge in an old pail and pick on. (64)

Later on in the same chapter, the author provides an alluringly abundant description of the products gained from this natural harvest:

On the third day, it was time to start home. Every pot and pan was filled with berries, and yet all over the place, the bushes were loaded as though none had been picked.

Mama was ecstatic. There were gallons of saskatoons, ripe brown gooseberries, pincherries, chokecherries, wild cranberries,

raspberries – full of delicious promise of jams and jellies, preserves, and juicy pies. We had picked quarts and quarts of summer’s bounty, to be spooned from Mama’s mason jars when the winter winds blew and summer was only a memory.

...

Some busy days followed, with the preserving kettle bubbling away on the hot stove and rows and rows of jelly jars shining like clear red *jewels* as they cooled on the kitchen table. (66–67)

The Canadian West had been billed, amongst other things, as “The Promised Land,” but for many settlers the promise of a “vast agrarian empire” never materialized. In Nelson’s text we see the tactic of literalization used, for she borrows the propagandist language of western settlement when she refers to the berries as being “full of delicious promise,” then moves towards fruition of that promise when she ends this passage with the abundantly rewarding valuation of “rows and rows of jelly jars shining like clear red *jewels*.”

When reading Nelson’s text, I cannot help but wonder whether Myrtle Alexander’s “ardency” about picking berries comes more from pride about her contribution to the family’s subsistence purse or in response to the release from domestic routine. In Adeline (Nan) Clark’s *Prairie Dreams* (1991), a memoir of homesteading near Oxbow, Saskatchewan, in about the same time period as Nelson’s family was in Alberta, “Berry Picking,” because it often necessitated organized travel away from the homestead site, provided a rare occasion for female companionship:

In the late summer, berries ripened in the ravines along the Souris River. Then Mother joined the neighbours for a joyous excursion to the treed valley.

Early morning sun greeted our expedition. Horses stepped lively and wheels spun noisily along the deeply rutted prairie roads. All of us exchanged places in each other’s rigs, so that we could visit together, happy with this break in daily routine and long missed companionship.

The valley was at the bottom of a precariously steep hill, down which we walked the horses. The dramatic feat accomplished without spills or runaways, we clopped across the timbered wooden bridge above the Souris River. Not daring to stop, we glanced sideways at the river far below. An easy trail led to the ravines where saskatoon and chokecherry bushes crowded. In the Indian summer sunshine, clusters of berries hung, sweet smelling and richly purple. (76)

This movement of women away from the domestic space is interestingly labelled: it is an “excursion,” which is “a short journey or ramble for pleasure” (*OED*), thus making the task of berry-picking as much about self-gratification as domestic production, but it is also described as an “expedition,” which is “a journey or voyage for a particular purpose, esp. exploration, scientific research, or war,” which puts the significance of the undertaking the women are engaged in on a par with traditionally masculinist pursuits. This activity is a big deal, both personally and publicly. The non-agricultural landscape that the women move into, the “ravines,” become a physical as well as a psychological space of liberation from prairie isolation, a space in which adult women and nature become one intermingled identity:

With jam pails tied around our waists, we excitedly started our task. Mother moved with business-like quickness from bush to bush, as she gathered the dark purple fruit, while we shouted, played, and sometimes picked berries. Periodically our mothers called out orders.

“Remember to keep the saskatoons and chokecherries separate.”

Our mouths stained purple, we wandered idly from bush to bush, speculating on the contents of the picnic baskets everyone had brought.

But our mothers, like birds who had taken wing, revelled in the fall sunshine, the gossiping, the unaccustomed freedom from routine. Bright red-winged black birds gathered too, settling in

long lines on the fences, twittering, calling, gorging on the juicy berries. Restless with migratory fever, they would soon leave us with only a few winter bird-friends. (76–77)

When representing the morning hours of berry-picking, Clark's language is filled with expectancy and excitement, such as "joyous," "lively," "revelled," "twittering"; however, we are told that as the day progresses and a return to normal routine is closer, the mood of the group changes considerably:

But after lunch, berry picking became more serious. Our mothers urged us on to the task of serious picking. The great milk pails must be filled before the afternoon was over.

Early shadows began to fall as we quietly hitched the horses and began the slow, steep climb back to the town and along the main street, homeward. As each buggy left the caravan, everyone waved good-bye.

Once at home, there would be eggs to gather, chickens and turkeys to feed. Mother would light the kitchen range in order to prepare tea. Ruth would plod through the maples, gathering the next days kindling. Mother would plan her preserves for the winter ahead. (77)¹²

As seen in Clark's text, berry-picking often necessitated women's physical transgression of the confines of the family farm in favour of rambling along the many prairie trails that existed, some of which still left their imprint upon the landscape from the days when Native, Métis and fur trade people led a migratory life, and some created by cattle and wagons. Although the (invisible) land survey system could not literally be escaped, nonetheless much of the prairie landscape remained without actual physical boundaries far into the twentieth century, so that women could, and did, find a certain measure of freedom from domestic routine in the simple act of taking a walk. In

12 For more examples of women's berry-picking, see also Baldwin 207; Holmes 153; Nash 244–45, 272–73; Schroeder 82–83; Strange 72–74; and Thomson 155.

particular, women found freedom by taking to the trails which criss-crossed the prairies and which unsettled – or denied physical reality to – the straight lines imposed by agriculture. As Bill Waiser asserts regarding the ego-centric approach that had been taken in surveying the prairie landscape, “the system, based on astronomical observation, completely ignored the natural contours of the land in favour of an artificial, standard checkerboard ordering” (156). Many contemporary writers mocked the straitjacket approach to the environment that the land survey system presented and also remarked upon the liberatory facility of a trail: for example, in 1915 Elizabeth Mitchell wrote that *In Western Canada* “a *Trail* is a natural track made by traffic, following the lie of the land and running where people wish to go. As the country is settled and enclosed, these are superseded by a gridiron of wide made *Roads*, running perfectly straight north and south and east and west” (16). Similarly, three years earlier, Emily Ferguson, in her aptly titled *Open Trails*, wrote, “every day I explore a new trail, for the country is seamed with them. In the North, they are vastly appreciative of the straight line ... but the blessed trails are an exception; they wander free as the air” (150). Some forty years later, Wallace Stegner, in his seminal work *Wolf Willow* (1955), would also assert his preference for prairie trails, and yet his tone is crucially different from that of Mitchell and Ferguson:

And that was why I so loved the trails and paths we made. They were ceremonial, an insistence not only that we had a right to be in sight on the prairie but that we owned and controlled a piece of it. In a country practically without landmarks, as that part of Saskatchewan was, it might have been assumed that any road would comfort the soul. But I don't recall feeling anything special about the graded road that led us more than half of the way from town to homestead.... It was our own trail, lightly worn, its ruts a slightly fresher green where old cured grass had been rubbed away, that lifted my heart. It took off across the prairie like an extension of myself. (271)

In such words and phrases as “insistence,” “we had a right,” “owned and controlled” and “an extension of myself,” we again see the “*dominator mode*” in action. We see the cultural need to impose oneself on the landscape as a means to confirm the identity of the conquering hero: says Stegner, “here is the pioneer root-cause of the American cult of Progress, the satisfaction that *Homo fabricans* feels in altering to his own purposes the virgin earth” (272). Stegner’s reminiscence is perversely aggressive, as when he suggests that “wearing any such path in the earth’s rind is an intimate act, an act like love” (273). It is no wonder that Stegner’s text has become a popular and academic icon of prairie reminiscences in North American culture for, as suggested by Glen A. Love, “critical interpretation, taken as a whole, tends to regard ego-consciousness as the supreme evidence of literary and critical achievement” (230). In contrast with Stegner’s I-scape vision, I would suggest that for many of the memoirists included in this study, the paths and trails along which they wander represent the development of an “eco-consciousness,” an increasing groundedness in the prairie landscape as “other” presence; they allow for a transformation of our understanding of human survival on the prairies by revealing that “there’s no such thing as a self-enclosed, private piece of property, neither a deer nor a person nor a text nor a piece of land” (Campbell, SueEllen 133).

Returning to Adeline Clark’s *Prairie Dreams*, we see the author’s alignment of the women’s communal berry-picking expedition, an activity that forms a crucial part in the subsistence economy of women’s work, with the brief “settling in” of the birds represented as “gorging in” on the natural fruits. The birds are then overcome by a “migratory fever,” one in which the women themselves cannot participate, having instead to return to the isolation – one might even say, “unnatural” isolation, given that the homestead system is culturally designed – of living a settled and agricultural life. Subsistence and migration, an “other” way of living within the prairie landscape, is thus discernible when prairie women move beyond the homestead and head out upon the prairie trails; when they leave what Edith Hewson in *We Swept the Cornflakes Out the Door* (1980), a memoir of prairie life “on a Saskatchewan farm during the first thirty years of the century” (n.p.), calls the “world of flat dry fields” and enter the “magic land” accessible only by prairie trails (127).

For example, in Hewson's text an "expedition" to go berry-picking becomes a lesson, passed on from mother to daughter, in subsistence culture:

Indian summer came and everything sang with colour. At night the moon, big as a ripe pumpkin, rose and hung cloudy red-orange on the dark horizon. In the morning, blue skeins of mist trailed across the hills and frost touched the woods with yellow fire. The sun in the afternoon was a dull copper from the forest fires which burned in the mountains to the west. Down in the valley a patch of chokecherries hung in great purple clusters, ready for picking. "I just love chokecherries. Do you think the Indians liked chokecherries too, Mama?" Mary asked. She was helping get the children ready to go berry-picking.

"Yes, it was important for their health. They killed the buffalo and then hung the meat to dry and when it was dried they pounded in the chokecherry juice like Dad puts salt on the winter meat. The berries gave the meat a good taste and kept them healthy in the winter." (66–67)

Beyond re-visioning the natural landscape in this scene, Hewson also manages to re-vision another way of life on the prairie landscape than the agricultural one. She starts this passage, ironically, by using an idiom ("Indian summer") that, similar to the western settlement project itself, effectively erases the real presence of First Nations people, but then by representing her mother's simple, non-romantic and non-judgmental awareness of "Indian" culture the author manages to repudiate the "*dominator mode*" of ranking, the tendency to assert superiority, by suggesting the similarities between that culture and her own. Further, in fact, I would suggest that by recuperating the "Indian" way of doing things as a "healthy" approach to life on the prairies, Hewson implicitly re-values the berry-picking activity about to be undertaken. And re-valuation is clearly needed for, as we are told later on in the berry-picking scene, denigration of the activity sometimes comes from an intimate source: the author notes the presence of her brother, Willie, in this instance, and shows him complaining, "I don't like chokecherries! This here's a girl's job. I just like horses!"

Like Hewson, many of the memoirists gathered here do make a genuine (if sometimes amorphous and sometimes naïve) attempt to pay tribute to the First Nations presence on the prairie landscape prior to the imposition of agriculture. In *Porridge and Old Clothes* (1982), a memoir of homesteading life in Manitoba in the late-nineteenth/early-twentieth centuries, Eileen M. Scott has a chapter titled “Red is Beautiful,” for which she provides the following epigraph from a “Dakota Indian Prayer (author unknown)”: “Grandfather, Great Spirit, fill us with the light. Teach us to walk the soft earth as relatives to all that live” (51). After this very deliberate invocation of an ecological principle oft-repeated in a variety of First Nations stories, Scott goes on to begin her chapter in the following openly confrontational way:

I wonder what jackass, and I'm not referring to the four-legged variety, first claimed that the Indian people were savages? Frankly, I have never been able to understand how people can call themselves Christians and, at the same time, steal land from the Indian people, eliminate their source of food, and deny them their culture and religion. After all, they did believe in a spiritual god as we do. The only difference was that they called Him by another name. They believe in eternal life, as we do, the only difference being that they had a different name for Heaven. I seriously question who the real savages are.

The Indian people claim that they will, eventually, have their land returned to them. I don't know why they would want it after the unholy mess the white man has made of it but, if that is what they want, I hope they get it. They are, apparently, able to laugh at the horrible situation in which they find themselves. It takes a nation of indomitable people to laugh at themselves in the face of adversity. Maybe it's the only thing that keeps them sane in the white man's idiotic world.

No story of Manitoba, especially in the early days, would be complete without mention being made of the “red-man,” an intelligent, sensitive people whom the white man wantonly murdered or starved out of existence if they dared to protest the rape of their

land. It was once a beautiful and fertile country. Now, through incorrect farming methods and the use of artificial fertilizers and pesticides, the white man has succeeded in reducing this land to a mere shadow of its former self. Prairie wheat now produces only sixty-six percent of its original nutrition. Some of the land could be reclaimed and brought back to its former fertility by the use of natural fertilizers, but a great deal of it is now beyond help. In the not too distant future, the prairies will be another Sahara Desert. (51)

Writing in 1982, there is an astute awareness (and acceptance) of native political agenda here, especially in the use of such keywords as “claim” and “nation,” as well as in the assertion that “No story of Manitoba ... would be complete” without restoration of First Nations people. If Cole Harris is correct in asserting of First Nations people that, in the context of westward expansion, “their erasure was textual” rather than actual (408), then their restoration, or re-vision, can be textual as well, as it often is in memoirs such as Scott’s. The other striking element of the above passage is how Scott recuperates the idea of the natural environment as subject rather than object, as seen when she asserts that unconscionable farming practices have “reduce[ed] this land to a mere shadow of its former self.” The author goes on to enunciate the subsistence relationship that “Indian people” had with the natural landscape, and as she does so her narrative eventually slips into illustrating how her own grandparents, Agnes (Agabella) Rutherford Thomson and Robert Thomson, were similarly inclined:

The Indian people must have eaten well before the arrival of the white man. To augment their diet of bison meat, they had prairie chickens, ducks, rabbits, fish, and countless other species. They also had hazel nuts, wild berries, pigweed, rose hips, et cetera. The fruit of the chokecherry was pounded into a mush before being added to bison meat to make pemmican. Pigweed was the first edible green to appear in the spring and the homesteaders gathered it for food until their gardens began to produce. Rose hips, high in vitamin

C and bioflavonoids, were also eaten. The children who went to the Tarbolton school in the early days picked hazel nuts on their way to school. Grandpa Thomson made wine from chokecherries, dandelions, and rhubarb. Grandma gathered wild strawberries, Saskatoon berries, pincherries, cranberries, and gooseberries. They had a wonderful taste that no cultivated berry could match, and they made excellent jellies, jams, pies, and some of them were good eaten raw. It was truly a land of milk and honey. (51–52)

The final line of this delectable treatise on the landscape's natural productions – “It was truly a land of milk and honey” – represents a narrative appropriation, and subversion, I would suggest, of a key phrase in settlement propaganda, one that was meant to entice prospective emigrants to Canada with images of the wealth and abundance that would (supposedly) be easily achieved through agricultural efforts to “improve” the natural landscape.

Writing *Barefoot on the Prairie* from the temporal distance of 1989, Ferne Nelson is obviously aware of current debates regarding land ownership and use, an awareness that allows her to revise western settlement myths which figured the prairies as an “open volume” (Ferguson, *Open Trails* 52) awaiting “civilization's” imprint. Indeed, she seems acutely aware that the prairies were anything but “open,” which implies “empty,” or as *tabula rasa*, as when she provides the following glimpse into the Alberta grasslands, which were

crisscrossed with buffalo trails, [which] stretched all around my parents' farm. Here and there bare bones of these magnificent animals bleached on the short, woolly prairie grass. The terrain was gently rolling, dotted with poplar bluffs, willow, and the occasional small, scrubby birch. There were frequent sloughs, some ringed with a white alkali deposit in dry weather. There were no roads, only trails, and very few fences. In travelling, one took the shortest route, hampered only by nature's boundaries. (1)

In Nelson's description we see the difference between a tourist and a resident of a landscape, for it is only the latter that “sees a landscape not only

as a collection of physical forms, but as the evidence of what has occurred there” (Evernden 99). When she turns to representing the human presence on the prairie landscape prior to “contact,” Nelson, wittingly or not, taps into some familiar stereotypes, including the image of the “Noble Savage” and the concept of the “Vanishing Indian.”¹³ Nevertheless, I find it difficult to condemn any of the writers examined here for using the only language they had available to them (in most cases, the language of popular culture as opposed to academia) in making an honest attempt to acknowledge their own/their family’s/their culture’s role in radically altering the lives of another group of people. However unpalatable the language might sometimes be, I have found nothing openly racist, and the very fact that these women made space in their narratives to acknowledge native presence, and even to acknowledge the politics of land ownership, seems worthy of recognition. Most often, the representation of native peoples is an attempt to critique the rhetoric that transformed the prairie landscape into a mythical rather than a real agricultural paradise. For example, Nelson writes the following about her father’s participation in the land grab of the early twentieth century:

My father had stood in line all night in Edmonton to file claim on this worthless homestead on the Alberta prairie. Its alkali soil begrudged every bit of nourishment it gave to the crops. They were planted so hopefully every spring and watched so optimistically through rain and sun, but were usually ruined by an early frost or a steady rain of hail that dashed my father’s hopes for another year.

13 The concept of the “Noble Savage,” which posited the belief that native people are less corrupt and more admirable than “civilized” people, has generally been attributed to eighteenth-century philosopher and novelist Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In Canada (although it also occurred in other colonial settings), the idea of the “Vanishing Indian” arose in the second half of the nineteenth century and was a widespread (and erroneous) belief that “the Natives were disappearing from the face of the earth, victims of disease, starvation, alcohol and the remorseless ebb and flow of civilizations” (Francis, Daniel 23). In short, it was an idea well suited to allow white people to ignore the presence of living native people, both those living on reserves and those who had adapted to Anglo culture.

Looking at the flattened fields, deep in ice pellets, he knew in his heart that he would never make it on this poor farm. (42)

At the level of vocabulary choice, Nelson is providing us with a juxtaposition here between the “hope” and “optimism” which, as I indicate in Chapters Two and Three, was inculcated in settlers by the promotional materials for western settlement, and the reality of prairie farming for so many settlers, as contained in words such as “worthless,” “begrudged,” “ruined,” “dashed” and “flattened.” Having given the lie to Anglo-centred constructs of the settlement project, Nelson goes on to re-vision concepts of land ownership and appropriate usage:

In those days, our part of the prairie still bore evidence of the noble tribes who had called that land home. Bare buffalo bones bleached beside the rutted trails, worn by the animals’ hoofs as they sought the brown waters of the sloughs or the salt lick or the huge rock that was worn smooth as they rubbed off their heavy winter coats. This land had been Indian land, but we children were only faintly aware of it. In those days we were totally unconcerned that the rightful owners of this miserable terrain had been pushed back from their lands, lands so much better suited to their existence than the pitiful farming that Papa attempted. He had nothing else. Farther north, maybe thirty miles away, lived a few sad remnants of a band that had once chased the buffalo over the trails, picked the wild strawberries and saskatoons, killed the prairie chickens and rabbits. They had probably enjoyed a much better life than my poor parents, who struggled to somehow wrest a living from this unproductive tract. (43)

I think that all Nelson is guilty of here is overstatement – of the “much better life” experienced by the “noble tribes” prior to white western settlement and of her parents’ victimization in comparison. But again I find myself wanting to give her the benefit of the doubt; I want to recognize her confession of childhood “unconcern” for the rights of native peoples and also her memoir attempt to redress that unconcern by providing “evidence,” “faint” as it might be,

that First Nations people had existed, that they had done so differently, albeit legitimately, and that they had been dispossessed. When Nelson appears to devalue the prairie landscape itself, in phrases such as “this miserable terrain” and “this unproductive tract,” I do not believe that she is actually adopting an agricultural vision that determines the value of the natural environment based on an ability to control its productions; rather, in the context of the rest of the passage, I read these phrases as an appropriation of such a vision as a means to criticize the western settlement project itself. She is reflecting her anger at the mythologizing and homogenizing of the prairie region that obscured differences in soil conditions, climate, etc., and that “lured” (Preface n.p.) people like her parents to take up the agricultural dream in an effort to “wrest a living.”

For some of the memoirists, a movement into the natural environment did not reveal the presence of other people, but rather allowed for the development of an awareness of “what the prairie actually is” (Drake 127) and also sometimes of a strong consciousness of selfhood. Nature as presence, as vital subject as opposed to passive object, often becomes a vehicle of empowerment. In Marjorie Grace Johannson’s memoir about prairie life near Elfros, Saskatchewan, in the second decade of the twentieth century, the author remembers evenings walking barefoot along the “little cow paths [that] criss-crossed the open land” (79). As she writes in *The Pink House on the Hill* (1986), she and her siblings “knew all these little paths and every foot of the area,” and this familiarity allowed them to appreciate the natural rhythms of the prairie landscape:

I liked running along these little trails. The evening was always so alive, frogs croaking as you passed the sloughs and swampy areas, prairie chicken and partridges scuttling away through the long grass and brush, ducks quacking on the sloughs as they dive for bugs and insects. Woodpeckers with their rhythmic tapping, an occasional hooting of an owl and a chorus of birds singing, whistling and chirping. A little squirrel flicking his bushy tail, twittering excitedly, dashes up a tree and a little grey rabbit scoots quietly across our trail into the bushes. (79–80)

What an exciting passage, with Johansson moving from animal to animal, from backdrop to foreground, building an exciting crescendo of vibrancy that brings the prairie landscape “alive” for the reader. In *Upon a Sagebrush Harp*, a memoir of homesteading life in southern Saskatchewan in the early-twentieth century, Nell Parsons juxtaposes the constraints of cultural authority versus the liberatory potential to be found in a relationship with the natural environment. Speaking of a time when the population was increasing and when the old “wagon trail” had become “a well-travelled road,” Parsons notes the entrance in her community of certain institutional figureheads, including schoolteachers and a “scarlet-coated Mountie” (100). She also notes that

Twice that summer an “itinerant preacher” stopped. Once he paused for the noon meal, stayed long enough to conduct a brief prayer meeting afterward.

Kneeling beside my chair, at Mama’s bidding, I felt stiff and strange. Bedside prayers were one thing, but this kind of public confession was quite another. I preferred running against the wind outside. Strong wind and noon were synonymous on the prairie. Often it was almost a physical effort to stand against the wind.

Parsons’s brief but nonetheless compelling scene invites the reader to invert cultural assumptions that “nature is static and culture is dynamic” (Alaimo 4–5), for it is the preacher, the physical embodiment of religious culture and authority, whose presence threatens the young girl with stasis, with loss of personal identity (“bedside prayers”) by submission to social convention (“public confession”), while it is the “strong wind,” a vital and reliable physical element of the prairie landscape, which allows for self-definition in the act of “running against,” even “stand[ing] against,” the noon gale. In using the word “against” here, Parsons is not alluding to domination and control but rather is expressing a sense of invigoration, of life-giving, in the presence of this natural element, one which is so often stereotyped as the soul-draining symbol of prairie isolation and despair. As this scene from Parsons’s text illustrates, “once we engage in the extension of the boundary of the self into the ‘environment,’ then of

course we imbue it with life and can quite properly regard it as animate – it is animate because we are a part of it” (Evernden 101).

Jessie Raber, who often exhibits feelings of personal inadequacy in her memoir, also represents a childhood experience on the prairies that provides for a moment of self-definition, self-re(e)valuation: as she describes in *Pioneering in Alberta*,

One day Sis and I were scrubbed and cleaned up to go over to the neighbors, the Zuelhke’s, to get some eggs as our chickens were not laying. The place wasn’t many miles away, but the timber was very thick with spruce and tamarack and willows. There were no roads, just cow trails. But we were old enough to go. We got there all right. Their place was a regular farm, everything very plentiful. It looked queer to us to see the mother and children, all barefoot, working in their garden, which was a wonderful one. They were very kind to us, gave us bread, butter and milk to eat and drink, then filled a bag with some vegetables for us to take home. They also sent an invitation to the family to come over and visit.

The shadows were getting quite long, so Margaret and I thought we had better start for home. We started all right, but there were so many cow trails, and they all looked alike through the timber. So we kept on walking and walking.

I knew we were not getting on in the right direction but didn’t dare tell Sis. We were lost. Nothing to see but trees and cow trails. When happily we came to the big old muskeg. I knew it was the only one that size up around there. Now all we had to do was walk around the edge. Yes, but which edge? I thought, now which way is the sun. Oh, then I recognized an old tamarack tree, nearly by our path to the house. I gave a little sigh of relief, was I glad, but now we had all that brush to walk through. Sis was whimpering and saying, “I’ll tell Mother when I get home, you took me through all these old sticks and brush.” I thought, “All right, little Sis, but I’m not positive whether we’ll ever get home or not. No telling what we have to go through.” It was a long rough road around that

old muskeg but finally there was the path to our house. I was so thankful, I nearly cried, but not in front of Margaret. I never will forget that feeling of being uncertain of ever getting home. I didn't tell any one for years. (69–70)

Initially in this scene, the natural environment is depicted as concealing; it is threatening in its ability to appear as an alien environment. However, as Raber soon realizes, she is “at home” in nature, for her knowledge of successive landmarks – “the big old muskeg,” “the sun,” “an old tamarack tree,” and “our path to the house” – allows her to navigate safely the “long rough road” to home. The experience is so unsettling that she kept it secret for years, but the retrospective space of the prairie memoir empowers her to publicly represent the experience of self-in-environment, to confess her empowered part in the happy ending.¹⁴

In delineating how the memoirists gathered here provide an alternative “*partnership*” mode or “subsistence” perspective of human survival on the prairie landscape, some “other” subjects of western settlement keep appearing: that is, intermingled in discussions of gardening, berry-picking and prairie trails, mosquitoes, horses, birds, chickens, turkeys, frogs, partridges, squirrels, buffalo, ducks, rabbits, fish, and cows are an insistent presence. In fact, I would suggest that the non-human animal presence within women's eco-conscious texts allows for a particularly effective re-visioning of agricultural myths and images. As suggested at the beginning of this chapter, the dominant image of prairie settlement seems to favour homogenous “Man's” vertical relationship to the landscape, his role as sole protagonist in the fight to “settle” the natural environment. The image is an heroic one, and in putting humans at the apex of agricultural efforts, it effectively obscures the very real presence of “other” participants in the project. In prairie memoirs, however, we begin to find a narrative redress of that absence. In these texts, we are provided with more individualized, more down-to-earth, portraits of the homogenized

14 For more examples of women's experiences of prairie trails of all types, see also Baldwin 142–44; Hewson 111; Hopkins 64–65; Johansson 41–42; and Thomson 16, 125, 261.

heroes who have traditionally been the subjects of regional history and national heritage-seeking, and these portraits allow the authors to use “personal history to inquire into mythic construction” (Buss, “Memoir” 23) in a variety of ways. One way to provide such an “inquiry” is to “use” non-human animals as “bellwethers for judging people’s character” (Preece xxii), thereby allowing for the possibility of confrontation with the supposed moral/cultural superiority of heroic figures. We see this, for example, in *Land across the Border*, when Donnie Ebbers indicates the importance to women of being able to discern male character in this way: as her father says to her regarding his approval of her future husband, “that fellow of yours must be a good *farmer*. He sure knows how to handle his horses. When his team were nearly stuck with that load, he never used a whip. He just spoke quietly to urge them along and they got right down and pulled that load out for him” (103). In 1915, Elizabeth Mitchell asserted that *In Western Canada*, “it is noticeable how more than merciful the prairie man generally is to his beasts.... I heard of one man with a reputation for cruelty, and it stood as a mark against him for miles around” (43). Without supporting Mitchell’s general contention of “merciful” treatment by “prairie man,” I do agree that in the memoirs gathered here violence and aggression towards non-human beings is made a disreputable and public matter, while caring and empathy become valued qualities that allow for the re-visioning of animals as partners in the story of western settlement.

In childhood memoirs, fathers are often represented in terms of their treatment of animals. True to her dedication of *Upon a Sagebrush Harp* to “Papa,” Nell Parsons often represents her father as heroic in his endeavours to succeed at homesteading on the Canadian prairies, indicating through his kindness towards animals that he possesses all the qualities desired in a settler, including the ability to meet the needs of any situation, a courageous response to danger, and innovativeness. On a family trip to the watering hole, for example, Mr. Wilson’s commitment to the family horses is apparent:

We had reached the knoll where we had our picnic over a faint, grassy track from the main trail. A shorter way back to the trail led across one of the sun-baked mud flats, an expanse of bare earth probably sixty feet wide.

When we were ready to leave, Kit and Major moved into their collars and stepped confidently out on the cracked surface of the flat. Papa looked backward a moment, checking to see that the barrels rode well, that each of us was on the wagon.

In that instant something went wrong. Kit and Major were lunging, terrified, fighting to pull their feet from slimy, sucking mud which lay beneath that deceptive surface. That sun-baked surface hid a sea of treacherous alkali slime. (47)

Although Major manages to get loose, Kit sinks and lays “still as death in the dangerous ooze” (48), so that Mr. Wilson is forced to chain her neck and hook her to Major to pull her free, a sickening sight for the young author:

Startled, blind Major leaped. The tugs jerked taut. Kit’s thin neck stretched. I turned my back, but even when I did not look my stomach churned. Papa yelled again, a desperate yell that echoed from the coulee rim.

I turned to see Major straining, his belly almost flat to the ground. But Kit was not moving.

Papa dropped the reins, fighting to keep his feet from sinking too deeply, and stooped to put his arms under Kit as if he would lift her bodily. Perhaps his touch roused the worn nag to make a final effort. More likely it was his urgent voice as he coaxed, ‘Come Kit, come on, old girl,’ that spurred her to effort.

She lifted her head. Major’s tugs tightened again. Papa gave a mighty heave. With him supporting her mud-covered frame, Kit fought to safety. (48)

The language used here is unequivocally not about domination and exploitation, and not about self-interest, as is sometimes seen when animal bodies are constructed as commodities to be lost and gained; rather, in words such as “desperate,” “stooped,” “urgent,” “coaxed” and “supporting” we see emotional connection to the non-human animal who shares in prairie life. This connection is confirmed afterwards in conversation about the event:

“I don’t know how you saved her, Amos,” Mama said.

“Why, I had to save her.” He looked at Mama in surprise. “I think I would have carried her out, if she hadn’t made it.”

I stood pressed against him, behind the seat, leaning against his shoulders, wanting to feel his power and his strength. (49)

Again, the “power” and “strength” here are not violence or aggression related; rather, they bespeak a moral capacity that encompasses caring for one of the most significant “others” in the western settlement story. And it is not only familiarity with Kit that allows for Mr. Wilson’s kindness, either; indeed, when in a later scene the horse is gored by a cow who has escaped from another farm, the author’s father does not react with revenge against the “other” animal, but instead shows consideration of a being in need: “He had milked the cow to relieve the strain on her overfull bag, and then he had turned her loose” (72) to find her way home.

Not all fathers are depicted as favourably as Parsons’s, however, as seen in Judy Schultz’s *Mamie’s Children*. In 1996 the author made a visit to the home of her Aunt Violet and there she sees a photograph that sparks the following public confession:

Another photo: the old corral I remember from my childhood visits. The roundup, calves bawling, pink tongues lolling, big calf eyes rolled back in terror, the smell of burning hair and burning flesh, the almost bloodless castration that I wasn’t supposed to see, my dad telling me the branding didn’t hurt the calf, he was just bawling for his mother; wanting to believe my dad, knowing it was a lie. (124)

Again we have an author who uses juxtaposition to critical advantage, as the words “bawling,” “lolling,” “terror,” and “burning,” and the accompanying images to those words, together pull more narrative weight than her father’s assertion that “branding didn’t hurt the calf,” and thereby cause not only the

young author but also the reader to give the “lie” to this particular use/abuse of an animal body.

Georgina H. Thomson’s *Crocus and Meadowlark Country: A Story of an Alberta Family* (1963), a memoir of homesteading near Nanton, Alberta, in the early decades of the twentieth century, also questions paternal authority about the subject of animals and their place on a family farm. After Thomson’s brother Jim is sent away to medical school, her father takes on a series of hired men, whom the author recalls positively or negatively depending upon their treatment of animals: for example, as she says of Harry Wakeman, “we girls always remembered him for his kindness to the horses” (247). Harry is immediately contrasted with another hired man:

Another man we had, Roy Butler, a cousin of John Wilson’s, was quite rough with the horses and careless about their grooming. His interest lay with the cows, and of his own accord he got up early and did the milking. This was a break for us “women-folk,” but we still didn’t like his treatment of the horses. One night he rode Dixie to see some girl friend and rode him very hard. He was a heavy man and not a particularly good rider, and we hated to see our little saddle horse ridden so hard. Mother said something to him about it, which annoyed him, and he went into his room, packed his trunk and hauled it out to the road without accepting help. Father said he was a good worker and he hated to lose him, but he thought he must have wanted an excuse to quit and used Mother’s few words of reproof as a pretext. (248–49)

Although Thomson certainly does not represent her father as unkind to the animals who work on his farm, nevertheless she uses this discussion of the hired men as a subtle means of paternal criticism; that is, while it is Mrs. Thomson who claims authority here on the issue of the use of animals’ bodies and who responds to evidence of cruelty with verbal confrontation, her father’s initial response to the situation is to show concern for the loss of a human labouring body as opposed to caring for a non-human one. Sometimes, in the farm economy, good work appears to have been privileged over the

humane treatment of the very animals without whom that work could not be accomplished. Mrs. Thomson has previously been shown to side with the non-human animals in her family, as seen with the family's first horse team:

Buck and Queen were not a very well matched team. Buck, or Billy Buckskin as we used to call him, was buckskin in colour, tall and rangy with a gentle head. When occasion demanded he could be taken out of harness and used as a saddle-horse, and had an easy, rocking gait. Queenie was a dark bay mare, shorter and heavier in build than Buck, with narrow suspicious eyes and a Roman nose. Both horses had reason to be disillusioned, as they had been overworked on a railway construction project before father bought them. Father was good to his horses, and while he got a good day's work out of them, he fed them well and was never rough with them. Jim was inclined to be impatient and when he held the lines, some current seemed to run along them to Queen, making her become difficult and sometimes even to balk. She had also a habit of jerking her head up when he went to put the bridle on her, and hitting him a crack with that hard Roman nose. This was probably due to some mistreatment by a previous owner, but it did not endear her to Jim. I remember one time when father was away and Jim was working the horses in the field. In the middle of the afternoon Queenie balked, and Jim got so angry he put some pieces of wire on the end of the whip to try to make her move. Mother went out to see what was the matter, and when she saw the wire on Jim's whip, she said, "Unhitch the team and put them in the stable." When mother spoke like this, no one questioned her authority. Jim's quick temper had already cooled anyway, and he felt a little sheepish, so he meekly did as he was told. In later years mother always said she was glad that by the time Jim became a doctor, automobiles had replaced the horse and buggy. (16–17)¹⁵

15 For more examples of this "bellwether" judgment of male character, see also Anderson 79–82; Clark 46–47; Inglis 46–51; Johannson 140–41, 175; McClung 112–13, 163; Roberts 191; Schroeder 32, 36–37, 53–54, 94–95; Schultz 48–49; and

As with Mrs. Thomson, many of the women memoirists studied here claim authority to speak on behalf of the labouring bodies of non-human animals by dedicating entire chapters to the representation of those beings who shared in the human struggle of western settlement. Indeed, in their considerable narrative attention to “other” animals, the authors indicate a desire to root the experience of western settlement in something other than agricultural success or failure; to value the production of human-animal relationships over and above “commodities for cash.” An ongoing concern in the debate on representations of animals, however, is the human tendency to anthropomorphize them. The double-bind is clear: as Onno Oerlemans states, “not representing animals at all robs them of their subjectivity and the influence they actually have on our lives. At the other extreme, casting them as fully developed and seemingly human characters robs them of their difference from us and among one another” (181). One of the greatest difficulties for people interested in animal representation, then, is finding some middle ground; but unfortunately, in the fear of committing the latter sin, too many people end up “not representing animals at all.” Most recently, however, the critical tide has begun to turn across the disciplinary spectrum and, as Oerlemans notes specifically regarding the world of science, it is now believed that “the interdiction against anthropomorphism is inherently speciesist, since it assumes that all qualities of mind we appear to perceive in animals are merely projections rather than similarities shared to differing degrees” (183). It is my belief that the memoirists studied here tend not to be naively or overly anthropomorphic; rather, they exhibit an honest desire to express a subject-subject paradigm of human-animal relationships. Sentimentality is normally eschewed in favour of respect.¹⁶ As Heather Gilead states in *The Maple Leaf for Quite a While* (1967), a memoir of homesteading life near Red Deer, Alberta, in the second quarter of the twentieth century, “in my day we were far too dependent upon our animals to feel superior

Scott 14, 37.

16 Which is not to suggest that these women alternatively conform to a rationalist “bias” regarding the “ethic[s] of animal treatment”; on the contrary, they often display a deep “sense of emotional bonding” (Donovan, “Animal” 351) with those non-human beings who become the subjects of the memorializing function of their texts.

to them or to sentimentalize them” (96). In some cases, the assumption of shared subjectivity occurs as a result of naming one’s animal companions, of conferring upon them a marker of individuality; nevertheless, it is not always necessary for animals to be named in order to make their presence felt, to recognize their “qualities of mind,” their capacity for individual character and their possession of a vibrant emotional life.

Barbara (Hunter) Anderson’s *Two White Oxen: A Perspective of Early Saskatoon 1874–1905* (1972) is dominated by the presence of non-human animals of all kinds, but especially by the titular “two white oxen,” who “were to be bought because they could live on the prairies and horse [*sic*] could not, so the circulars issued by the promoters of the Temperance Colonization Society said” (13). The two oxen chosen for the homesteading project are described simply at first as “a nice pair of cattle, well matched in color and disposition, ‘for they were twins, identical twins.’” It soon becomes obvious to Thomson that the patient and hard-working animals, together with the family’s “two cows,” are “the nucleus of a living for ourselves” (34). The family project is temporarily decentred, however, when the two white oxen are “lost” in mysterious circumstances: “In the summer of 1886 Father was making another trip to Moose Jaw for supplies. He had our two white oxen, ‘Brisk and Lively’ and camped for the night about 30 miles north of Moose Jaw. When he awakened in the morning, the oxen were gone.... We never saw or heard of them again” (76). After this experience, Thomson enunciates the difference between viewing animals as interchangeable objects versus knowing them as individual characters in one’s life:

The loss of our TWO WHITE OXEN “Brisk & Lively,” as we always called them, was a much greater loss than we at first realized, as we had felt if they did not turn up again we could easily replace them. We never again were able to get oxen with the intelligence, endurance and good dispositions as “Brisk and Lively,” our TWO WHITE OXEN, which on so many occasions had proved so reliable and trustworthy, and assisted us so greatly in establishing our new home in the Saskatchewan Valley. Although we never again heard of them, we often spoke of them in later years with fond memories and grateful hearts.

Sometimes animal images are used to confront ideals of technological “progress” in the search for agricultural success. For example, at about the same time period as Anderson’s family in Saskatchewan were appreciating the help of two oxen in the establishment of a family farm, in Manitoba, Nellie L. McClung’s family were anticipating “a great event,” the arrival of a new binder (126). As the author remembers in a chapter of *Clearing in the West: My Own Story* (1935) titled “Men, and Machines,” the new binder makes manifest “the excitement of the coming harvest” and brings “seeming security” to agricultural production on a vast scale; however, the “state of reverent expectation” is profaned slightly when one member of the horse team meant to pull the machine becomes ill, “so the first day of the cutting was robbed of part of its glory,” and the binder itself begins to break down (126–28). As a result, the Mooneys find it necessary to rely upon their one remaining horse, Kate, who is forced by necessity to do double duty:

Kate was hitched beside the oxen and although she gave every evidence of hating her work-mates, the binder was put into action; the wheels turned, the knives bit greedily into the yellow stalks, the canvas carried them aloft; they fell into the bundles and were tied by the binding twine and dropped on the stubble. Will drove the binder and the sheaves were set into stooks by Jack and Father. George was working for a neighbor.

The first round was accomplished with difficulty for Kate could not accustom her pace to the slow steps of the oxen, and could not refrain from nipping them. But this was remedied by checking her head up, so she could not reach them. The second round was better, but the third round the knotter broke – a casting was faulty and snapped off – and each sheaf was thrown down loose, and a piece of idle twine with it...

Father wanted to go on, he would bind the sheaves the old way, anything was better than to let the grain stand, for it was dead ripe and every minute was precious, but Will thought it would be

better to go to Millford and get a new knotter. The agent said there would be “parts” kept there and it would save time in the end.

In Millford, he found there were no knotters, so he had to push on to Brandon, thirty miles away, and could not get back until the next morning. So the first day was lost.

Kate made the trip to Brandon, gallant Kate, with her ears back and her head up. She was a quick traveller and evidently never tired. With a couple of hours rest, after coming back from Brandon she went on the binder again, leaning over to take a bite at the ox nearest to her, to let him know that, though she might be a little tired with the long hours, she still had her pride. I do not know how many times Kate was driven to Brandon through the night that harvest, but I do know that she showed no sign of weariness at any time. (128)

After documenting her obvious “reverence” for the non-human contribution of Kate in contrast with the new and “faulty” machine, it is no wonder that McClung chooses to end this chapter with narrative attention directed to this more than productive animal labourer: “Before I leave this part of my story, I want to pay my tribute to Kate, the horse who worked beside the two red oxen with such contempt for her humble helpers. Her bones lie deep in the soil of the farm she helped to make in the Souris valley, but her memory will endure as long as any of our family are in the land of remembering” (133). And, one might add, as long as there are sympathetic readers of McClung’s text.

For Jessie Raber, whose frame of reference when *Pioneering in Alberta* is “Grandfather’s [diversified] farm” back Home in England (43), the presence of animals rather than agricultural production becomes a measure of the growth of a “real” homestead. In preparation for emigration to Canada, we are told, the author’s father “read every book he could get, pertaining to Canada. They all told of the beautiful country where the head of the home could take up a farm of one hundred and sixty acres, and raise cattle, horses and hogs, all sorts of grain and vegetables” (10). Keeping this idealistic image in mind, Raber periodically provides for her readers a tally of her own family’s progress: for example, fairly early on in the homesteading project she tells us,

“Our farm” hadn’t anything on it yet. But one day Dad and my two oldest brothers went over to Mr. Zuelhke to see his farm. He told them they could buy a few hens if they wished. They came home to see what Mother thought, as we didn’t have a henhouse. Mother said he could buy three if he wished and we could manage somehow. Early next morning the three of them went over to buy the hens. We were pleased; now our farm would be starting. The ones that stayed home kept a watch for Dad and the boys to be coming home. Soon we saw three black specks away over by the hills. Yes, the specks were moving so it must be Dad and the boys. Soon we could tell it was them and they were carrying something. Oh, now we would be farmers. We raced down the hill to the creek where they would have to cross. (No bridge yet.) With grinning faces, they said they had a surprise for us.

Up we ran to tell Mother – oh, oh, three hens and Mrs. Zuelhke had given them a rooster. We were thrilled. When he was taken out of the sack, the poor bewildered bird looked around, as much as to say, “Some farm,” but walked a little way from us, flapped his wings, stretched his neck out and crowed. It certainly sounded grand, our first rooster. The hens didn’t seem very well pleased, either. We fed them some scraps which they ate.

Daddy fixed a little lean-to for them to roost in. That night, all was quiet until around daylight, when Mr. Rooster began to crow, but it sounded grand. (36–37)

Despite the fact that western society exhibits a “culturally conditioned indifference toward, and prejudice against, creatures whose lives appear too slavishly, too boringly, too stupidly female” (Davis, Karen 196), chickens being one of the most despised groups of animals, prior to these animals’ arrival Raber can only conceive of the family homestead in theoretical terms – hence the phrase “our farm” couched in quotation marks. Immediately upon their arrival at the “farm,” an event attended with great anticipation, the hens are rather humourously acknowledged by Raber as being vital characters in the

family undertaking. Later on that same page, after noting that “Daddy went to town one day and brought home a little kitten,” Raber considers the family’s progress, saying, “so there we were with three hens, one rooster and one kitten. Gradually growing” (37). The tally continues apace, and she is eventually able to note that “we had two cows, one heifer, three horses, a pony and colt, also a few chickens and the cat. So ‘our farm’ was growing” (65). It is interesting to note Raber’s continued use of quotation marks when speaking of “our farm,” a usage that suggests deferral of official farm status until the requisite level of participant animals was reached.

Raber’s assumption of the subjectivity of non-human animals is evident in an anecdote about one particular creature who does not belong to her own family circle. As seen in Chapter Two, one of the values most esteemed in prairie society is hospitality, “the friendly and generous reception and entertainment of guests or strangers” (*OEEED*), which often manifests itself as a willingness to lend a hand in times of crisis. While respect for hospitable values occurs on a daily basis, it becomes doubly important in the case of a prairie blizzard. One of the most unforgettable opening scenes in Canadian prairie fiction is to be found in Frederick Philip Grove’s *Settlers of the Marsh* (1925), in which Lars Nelson and Niels Lindstedt are fighting their way through the Manitoba bush in a snowstorm and are turned away from the home of another settler, an inhospitable act that becomes an immediate gauge for the reader of that character’s personality. In *Pioneering*, Raber provides a very similar scene, which, however, ends with a very different result:

One night was terribly stormy with snow and wind and cold. We finished the chores early and were playing games when suddenly we heard a scratching at the door. Dad said, “Quiet,” quite sharply, so we knew something was wrong. There it was again, so he opened it a tiny bit. A big blast of cold air came in and he couldn’t see a thing. He was just going to close the door, thinking it must be the wind, when down at his feet a large white thing crawled inside. We were all agape, it was so dark outside we couldn’t distinguish whether it was a man on all fours, or a wild animal, as it was covered with ice and snow. It could barely move. Dad took hold of it

and found out it was a large collie dog, almost giving its last breath. The people east of us had two beautiful collies. Evidently this one had started to follow someone or started to our place in the storm. It was almost four miles from home. We rubbed and picked ice off him as fast as it melted a little. His feet were nearly frozen. Mother warmed a little milk as Dad said not to give him too much to start with. The poor thing was nearly gone. When he was stronger, he would roll his big, brown eyes at each of us, as much as to say how grateful he was.

He slept all night on some old blankets. We kept him until the storm was over. Then Mr. Perkins, the young man, came looking for him. When Dad told him how we had found him and taken the poor dog in, the tears ran down his face and he could hardly talk. He said he had expected to run across him out on the trail, frozen to death. Mr. Perkins said the poor dog must have seen our light or heard our laughing and followed the noise, as I don't think it could see at all, the way the ice covered its face. Many poor animals were caught the same way and never reached a home. (58–59)

In this scene, there is not even a moment of doubt as to helping “the poor thing,” a homesteading neighbour of the four-legged kind, especially given an established prairie etiquette in which such a crisis demands attention (for the Rabers at least) whether it involves man or “beast.” In her discussion of how human beings can “restore power to the animal victim” in western culture, Marian Scholtmeijer examines the work of Philip P. Hallie on *Cruelty*,¹⁷ and especially his suggestion, as Scholtmeijer summarizes it, that “hospitality gives the necessary recognition of the victim’s identity, and replaces the ‘I-it’ power relation with ‘I-you’ equality” (*Animal* 66). Hallie’s proposal for human-animal relationships, says Scholtmeijer, is “a highly civilized one,” which is “what makes it so difficult to apply to animals. By convention, social graces like hospitality have been developed in opposition to animality” (67).

17 See Philip P. Hallie, *Cruelty* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1969; rpt. 1982).

More importantly, “hospitality coming from humankind to other species would likely imply to most people treating all animals as pets,” which would be “its own kind of trespass against [them].” In Raber’s scene, however, we are already looking at a “pet,” a domesticated animal, so in extending hospitality to the collie dog the Raber family are not guilty of trespass. Rather, Raber’s scene with the collie dog, in its direct invocation of a social convention created in response to the specific conditions of a specific environment – a convention that is then extended to an animal who is part of that environment, without question, and without any sign of the condescension assumed by some to be inherent to owner/pet relationships – puts Hallie’s hospitable “I-you” theorization into practice.

There is one animal in particular whom I would suggest provides an especially effective narrative pivot upon which to mount an alternative representation of prairie life as being about more than agricultural success: the gopher, the supposed bane to every farmer’s productive existence. For example, in a chapter of Ferne Nelson’s *Barefoot on the Prairie* titled “Papa Vanquishes a Bogeyman,” the author begins with the following seemingly complicit scene:

We were out to poison gophers. After harrowing the north field, Papa had been very alarmed at the number of gophers running about and had decided to take some action to get rid of the little pests. So he had sent us out, on this breezy day, in an effort to cut down the population before the field was planted. Papa had furnished each of us with an old pail filled with a sloppy wet mash, which was laced with some sort of poison. Along with our bucket went a piece of shingle – Mama couldn’t spare any old spoons – and all we had to do was put one scoop of the mixture in every gopher hole we could find.

We hated the gophers because everyone told us we should. Papa said they were a nuisance. The government took an even stronger attitude and paid us – in cash – two cents apiece for gopher tails. We had to agree with wiser heads, but in our secret childish hearts, I think we really liked the lively little brown animals.

For one thing, gophers were always one of the first signs of spring, and we longed for spring after the long cruel winter. When the days grew warm and the crocuses bloomed on Tidy's Hill, they would appear, as sure as the early buttercups. All over the prairie, the cheeky little animals would stand erect at the entrance to their burrows, their shrill whistles piercing the air on all sides. They scurried back and forth, beady eyes bright and watchful, sometimes disappearing into the safety of their underground homes just a whisker ahead of Rover.

But the holes riddled the knolls and fields. Old Buck stepped in them frequently, causing my poor old roan to stumble. In the grain fields, the pesky little rodents did a lot of damage. So we pursued the gophers in a sort of love-hate relationship, drowning them out of their burrows and always eager to add to our frowsty collection of tails.

Papa said it was war, and we were to put out poison. So today, here we were in the north field with our deadly meal for the brown creatures that even now were running all over the place. (52–53)¹⁸

Nelson's delineation of the children's task, a sort of "love-hate relationship," remains nicely ambiguous as the author vacillates between calling the gophers "little pests," "lively little brown animals," "cheeky little animals," "pesky little

18 It is amazing to what extent the language here used by Nelson about gophers duplicates Western culture's obsession with "weeds": as Knobloch writes of the latter menace,

Weeds become objectionable not because they are inherently ugly or useless, or because their growth is rapid and unchecked, but because they take territory and profit away from agriculture in some way. This may seem obvious – certainly every society must deal with weeds that interfere with food production – but the *form* of food production that developed in the West guaranteed a short list of useful plants and a growing list of weeds and determined how losses to weeds would be described and controlled. (114)

The connection between weeds and gophers can also be seen in one of the prairie memoirs: see Johansson 129–30.

rodents,” and “brown creatures.” She enunciates the ways that gophers pose a problem for agricultural interests, albeit fairly vaguely (“a lot of damage”), but she also questions cultural authority on the matter of gophers, as when she notes that “we hated the gophers because everyone told us we should,” “everyone” being “Papa” and “the government.” This cultural construction of the gopher as “bogeyman” to the land settlement project is encapsulated in Papa’s hyperbolic declaration of “war” against them. Thus does the reflective adult-author use the innocence of childhood to oppose the official version of the gopher menace with a more harmonious view of the animals as being a vital part of the natural environment; as being harbingers of spring and living symbols of a new cycle of growth and sustenance on the prairies.¹⁹

Like Nelson, Georgina Thomson and her sister were supposed to attend to the unpleasant task of murdering gophers: as the author remembers in *Crocus and Meadowlark Country*,

With the sprouting of our first crop Chaddy and I acquired a new job. The gophers much preferred the tender green shoots of grain to the tough prairie grass, and they soon began to make inroads on the crop. Instructions were published by the Agriculture Department at Regina on how to deal with them. Strychnine had to be mixed with soaked grain and a spoonful of this put at the mouth of each gopher hole. Chaddy and I had to go back and forth, systematically covering the ground, each of us with an old spoon and a lard pail of the dangerous mixture. We were told to put the stuff far down in the holes so none of our pets or stock or wild birds could get at it, and we certainly took no chance. Unfortunately a cat was likely to get a poisoned gopher, and then there was grief and tears. At first we had only one cat, Laddie, and he and Buckles would be closely guarded at poisoning time. This gopher poisoning was not

19 In *Upon a Sagebrush Harp*, Nell Parsons provides a similar springtime image of the prairie gopher, this time using language that reflects domestic homesteading life: as she describes, “gophers came out of their winter lairs to stand straight as *eight-inch wooden pegs* beside their holes whistling gaily at each other like neighbors exchanging happy greetings after a snowbound winter” (17–18).

a job Chaddy and I liked, but our opinion wasn't asked. At this time there were quite a few striped gophers left, though later they entirely disappeared, driven out, it was said, by their bigger grey cousins. One day after a poisoning job I sat down and wrote a story about one of these little striped gophers who ran away from home. I called it "Stripes the Prodigal" and told about all the adventures he had and how glad he was to get home again. This was the story I have already mentioned in a previous chapter, which I sent to the Prairie Chicken Club in the Winnipeg Telegram. (132–33)

Once again we see an author use the reflective space of the memoir text to juxtapose official opinion on the de-valuation of gophers' lives in the pursuit of agricultural success with her own sympathetic identification with these intriguing little characters, whom she feels are worthy of considerable narrative space. In the production and publication of Thomson's fictional story we see the young girl's rebellion against dominant discourse – a behavioural precursor, I would suggest, of the act of writing a memoir text of western settlement – through the construction of a narrative that values an "other" side of the gopher tale.²⁰

Both Nelson's and Thomson's narrative appreciations of gophers bring to light another issue that receives notable attention in women's memoir texts: animalcide, the deliberate putting to death of an "other" living being, one of the more gruesome realities of human survival on the prairie landscape. The two forms of animalcide, the hunting of wild animals and the slaughter of domestic animals, were traditionally within the masculine domain, as John Mack Faragher suggests: "work which nonetheless played an important role in male thinking, was hunting. For the early pioneers game provided most of the protein in the family diet.... The hunting legacy had one practical consequence for male work loads: men had primary responsibility for slaughtering and

20 Sympathetic identification with non-human animals in women's memoir texts occurs so often that it is impossible to note every instance here, however the following examples are particularly interesting: Clark 22–25, 36–42, 50–51; Ebberts 73–74; Holmes 94; Johansson 140–50, 158; Keyes 12–14, 19–20; McClung *passim*; Nash 301–15; Schroeder 57; and Scott 50, 85, 88–90.

butchering large farm animals” (50). While I do believe that the memoirists considered here accept the necessity of animalcide as a part of the subsistence perspective of settlement life²¹ – indeed, I do not intend to interrogate this acceptance by foisting an animal rights/vegetarian agenda upon their written reminiscences – nevertheless I do want to suggest that the considerable amount of textual space devoted to the re-presentation of the animal behind the act of killing provides modern-day readers with an opportunity to re-vision an agricultural myth that pervades much public knowledge, especially childhood knowledge, about farming life: specifically, the myth of Old MacDonald’s Farm, which poses a static vision of rural life, devoid of any reality regarding one of the primary ways that animals contribute to human survival. As Carol J. Adams suggests, “Western culture” is characterized by “patriarchal texts of meat,” in which the animal source from which meat derives is made absent through the use of “gastronomic language”: “Animals in name and body are made absent *as animals* for meat to exist. Animals’ lives precede and enable the existence of meat” (14, 40). The very term “meat” – like all other terms of concealment related to meat-eating, such as “pork chops, hamburger, sirloins, and so on” (67) – is a linguistic “mystification” that works to “rename dead [and previously whole] bodies before consumers participate in eating them,” so that “we do not conjure dead, butchered animals” but, rather, focus upon “cuisine” (40). However, it is obvious from even a brief examination of women’s prairie memoirs that settlement culture was very different from what is now an urban-centric world in which children’s closest relationship to animals is with “frozen meat wrapped in plastic” (Sanders 193).²² The authors of these texts undoubt-

21 For examples of how animalcide functions in the subsistence economy of the family farm, see Hooks 55; Hopkins 50; Inglis 3, 51, 76; Magill 15–16, 43–44; Moorhouse 33; Nash 32–33, 248–51; Parsons 64–65, 131–32; Schroeder 7; Scott 65; and Thomson 225–26.

22 As Upton Sinclair’s groundbreaking 1906 novel *The Jungle* made clear, and as Adams re-asserts, “patriarchal culture surrounds actual butchering with silence. Geographically, slaughterhouses are cloistered. We do not see or hear what transpires there” (49). She goes on to suggest that “the institution of butchering is unique to human beings. All carnivorous animals kill and consume their prey themselves. They see and hear their victims before they eat them. There is no absent referent, only a dead one” (50).

edly accept the “expectation that people should eat animals and that meat is good for you” (Adams, Carol J. 14), but their fairly frequent representations of such activities as hunting, butchering, and slaughtering in the context of the family farm allow readers to “re-member” animal bodies and, hence, to “make animals present” (40) in the story of western settlement.

Hunting wild animals for food was a generally accepted practice on the prairies, and for the memoirists studied here it was clearly a matter of subsistence necessity. However, for Donnie Ebbers, the masculinist culture behind the act of hunting provides a narrative moment in which to privilege the animal as living being prior to the act of killing. As she remembers in *Land Across the Border*, hunting was a measure of manhood for her brothers, as evidenced in a scene in which her little brother Joe, jealous of his older brother’s hunting skills, tries to measure up:

Donnie had three experiences with wild animals which were still vivid pictures in her memory: One morning a big moose came close enough to the house to see him plainly. It was early autumn, and a light snow had fallen the night before, spreading a white blanket of sparkling diamonds on the hillside in the morning sunshine. Joe had gone to the wood-pile for an armful of wood for the kitchen stove. He came running back exclaiming, “Look out the North window! See that big moose! On the hill, across the valley, over there!” She, Gertie and Mama had run to the window.

In *The Maple Leaf*, Gilead illustrates the social change from present to absent referent when she contrasts her own childhood with that of the nieces and nephews she visits on a return trip to her mother’s prairie home in the 1960s: as she states,

I suppose that mine was almost the last generation, in our civilization at least, for whom the ancient symbiotic relationship of man with animal kept its meaning intact; the last generation for which, during childhood, the animals worked their immemorial magic of mediation between child and the earth. Henceforth, however, animals may be chemical processes producing protein, mere pets, performers of tricks, curios and exhibits, tourist attractions, or emblems of conspicuous consumption, but they cannot conceivably mediate between anything and anything. (95)

There, silhouetted against the sparkling white hillside, was the biggest animal they had ever seen, and his big flat forked horns were really frightening.

That morning Papa, Jackson, and Ottie had gone to haul hay. Ottie was the one who hunted (and got) the deer and moose. Joe had only hunted prairie-chickens, partridge, and rabbits with a twenty-two rifle. But Joe declared, "I'm going to try to get that moose, myself, with the big rifle."

He was only thirteen years old and not sturdy or large for his age, but he hurriedly loaded the heavy rifle and ran out with it, as Mama called a warning after him, "Don't get too close to that huge animal! If you should just wound him, he might charge at you. Be careful!"

Joe didn't have time to listen to warnings. He was gone! She, Gertie and Mama had kept anxious watch at the window as Joe ran quickly, but silently in his moccasin clad feet, towards the moose. The window framed a life-sized picture, still vividly etched on her memory, of that beautiful moose. He was as quiet as a statue, his big head with the huge horns, held high, standing majestically [*sic*] there as if he knew he was king of the Canadian woods. (34)

Rather than go on immediately to describe the end result of Joe's exertions – a miserable failure, by the way, as the moose's own olfactory hunting skills, his ability to pay attention to "others" in his environment, helps him to effect an escape – Ebbers interrupts the hunting narrative of chase and conquest with the above "majestic" tableau, an ironic inversion of the prevalent belief in Anglo culture that "Meat is King" (Adams, Carol J. 32). In addition to this word image, Ebbers provides her reader with a picture of the whole animal, a "Canadian Moose," to offset the intentions of her brother. Later in her memoir, in a chapter titled "Butchering and Fall Work," Ebbers writes about subsistence necessity on a family farm and implicitly questions the notion of "meat" being "raised and butchered" – it is, after all, the animal who is raised and butchered – by providing a lengthy and painstakingly detailed description

of the task of turning every last part of the dead animal into usable products for the consumption needs of a family:

There were no butcher stores or even grocery stores near enough to buy meat, so the homesteaders raised and butchered their own meat.

For the summer's supply of pork, a pig was usually butchered in the spring or early summer. Butchering was a day's job for men and women. It was a job Donnie hated, but it had to be done to have meat for the family, and hard-working men needed meat.

The killing of the pig and cutting up of the meat all seemed so gruesome, and all the greasy smells in the kitchen when Mama was working with the lard, head-cheese, etc. made her feel ill.

On butchering day, early in the morning the copper boiler was filled with well-water and put on the kitchen stove to heat. The big iron boiler was also filled with water and set on four smooth rocks over an outside fire. After the pig was killed, all this boiling water was poured into a big wooden barrel and the dead pig was plunged into the scalding water to loosen the bristles (hair) on its skin. Then the pig was laid on a make-shift table of boards outside, where Papa and the boys scraped all the bristles off with dull knives until the rind (skin) was white and clean. Then they cut off the head and hung the carcass up by the front feet and removed the heart, liver and intestines. Then Mama's disagreeable work began! (45)

The description of "Mama's disagreeable work" and all the products created from the body of one dead pig goes on for another page, but already we can see Ebbers re-presenting the animal behind the "meat," first by the seemingly simple suggestion that in order to obtain "the summer's supply of pork, a pig was usually butchered," then by making reference to the "dead pig," and also by using words denoting carcass details followed by live animal explanations in brackets (e.g., "bristles" followed by "hair," "rind" followed by "skin"). That the reader can infer some level of critique of "patriarchal texts of meat" is also

evident in the paragraph that immediately follows this scene, wherein Ebbbers juxtaposes the less gruesome harvest of garden produce:

Autumn was also a busy time on Saskatchewan farms. As soon as threshing was over the vegetables had to be taken from the garden before a heavy frost, or the cold fall rains, or an early snow. A quiet team of horses was hitched to a walking plow and the long rows of potatoes were plowed out of the ground. Then everyone of the family who was able to carry a pail and stoop over, got busy picking up potatoes out of the loose dirt. In the new soil potatoes grew big and mealy, some were as wide as a man's hand and long enough to lay across a large dinner-plate. They kept well all winter in a big bin in the cellar under the house and were one of the main articles of food served daily all year. Mama cooked them many different ways for variety. Fried and eaten with cabbage cold-slaw and onions they were *as satisfying as a steak dinner*. Scalloped with milk and butter in casserole or boiled and mashed with cream and butter, or even baked in their jackets and served with butter or thick sour cream they were always good. She had disliked potato-digging time; picking them out of the dirt made her hands rough and chapped. But she had to admit no potatoes bought in a store ever had the good satisfying taste of those she had helped pick up in Saskatchewan. (46; emphasis added)

The farm animal is generally assumed to be available in one way or another to satisfy domestic consumption/production needs; however, in the context of the family farm, is there any truth to the assertion that the difference between a pet and a farm animal is that the latter "is dispatched and dismantled with as little feeling as that which attends a car to the scrap heap" (Scholtmeijer, *Animal* 81)? In *The Pink House on the Hill*, Marjorie Johannson writes fairly unemotionally about her father's hunting activities, but when it comes to the killing of farm animals she is willing to court family disapproval rather than participate:

The time I hated most of all was in the fall, when twenty or thirty roasters and turkeys had to be killed, plucked and dressed. Butchering time always made me ill and I could not touch meat for days. I didn't get much sympathy nor did they have time to think about my gentle and humane feelings, but were very cross with me because I was nowhere to be found when they needed some help. (115)

What Johansson indicates here – being unable to “touch meat for days” after becoming aware of the animals behind the food produced from their bodies – is not an unusual reaction for children who realize where meat comes from, and neither is the lack of sympathy for that reaction unusual, especially in a subsistence economy that requires a realistic focus on survival needs. In *Crocus and Meadowlark Country*, Georgina Thomson also appears to dispute the distinction between pets and farm animals:

Most of our meat was our home-cured pork which kept well. Once we began to raise pigs we always had plenty of this. They were butchered in the fall, and it was a sad day for Chaddy and me. We would go to the farthest corner of the house and plug our ears so we would not hear their despairing shrieks. Father would never stick a pig nor even kill a chicken. He always had a neighbor come to kill the pigs, and Mother used to wring the necks of chickens. She didn't like doing it any better than he did, but she was realistic and if we were going to eat, someone had to do the deed. She did it as she did many of the unpleasant things that had to be done. I can't remember Father doing anything he didn't want to do. (225)

There seems to be a bit of a split agenda here. On the one hand, Thomson notes the difficulty with which she, her sister, and her father endured the act of killing animals and she makes clear her belief in animal sentience when she uses the phrase “despairing shrieks.” On the other hand, she is also using this moment to clarify the subsistence necessity of such an act (“if we were going to eat”), which allows her to represent her mother as the more “realistic”

participant in prairie life. Thomson is not going to allow her reader to ignore the “unpleasant things” that happened in farm culture. While Thomson is open about the ugly realities of prairie life, she nevertheless does draw some clear emotional boundaries across the subject of meat-eating:

But when one of the calves we had raised was slaughtered, it was different. When Father brought home a big roast from the carcass of “Ben Hur” it was too much for Chaddy and me. We would have felt like cannibals if we had eaten any. Probably farmers who do not name their animals, or otherwise show interest and affection, save themselves a lot of grief, for farming is a business, though a sad business at times. (226)

Thomson’s invocation here of the image of “cannibalism,” “the ultimate savage act” (Adams, Carol J. 31), is important because it implies something more than mere “interest and affection” in Ben Hur’s existence; rather, it implies a recognition of independent subjecthood normally reserved for other humans. This assumption of animal subjectivity is what stimulates the sense of a personal boundary or taboo regarding meat-eating, and it is Thomson’s evident “grief,” her “activation of conscience,” that helps the reader to re-member Ben Hur’s presence in the “patriarchal texts of meat.” But do animals first need to be named and individualized, be made subjects rather than objects, before they can be re-membered in this way? Is it unequivocally true that “farm animals are so profoundly entrenched in society as economic units that the attempt to find moral significance in their situation seems foolish” (Scholtmeijer, *Animals* 81)? Not for Nellie McClung, who, no stranger to making the personal political, includes in *Clearing in the West* the following (rather lengthy) lament for the fate of her family’s pigs on a farm in Ontario: writing of “a mellow evening in early autumn,” she notes,

I was being taken down to the lower meadow by Lizzie, the good angel of my childhood, for this was the evening when the pigs were being killed, and my heart was ready to break. Not that I had a pet pig or cared about the pigs as individuals. I was a little afraid

of pigs, and thought they were greedy, ill-mannered brutes, but even so, I felt they had a right to live, or at least to die without pain. All day I knew what was coming! The pigs were being starved for the killing, and they squealed in their pens and quarrelled among themselves. The hole was dug for the barrel, which would be filled with boiling water from the boiler set on stones with wood laid under. The gruesome scaffold had been erected, and the whole farmyard had been changed from a friendly playground, to a place of evil.

We walked over the hill behind the house just as the sun was dipping into the mist of evening, and a queer green light came into the upper and eastern sky. Lizzie's hand was very comforting in mine now that my world had gone wrong, and the sorrows of life were overflowing. She told me she had a new pattern for a dress for me, with a little scalloped collar, which would be edged with turkey-red, and the tie-backs would have scalloped ends, and the dress would have red pearl buttons, with one on each pocket.

We sat beside the little stream just before it lost itself in the meadow, and she found stovepipe grass for me to piece together into a chain.

She thought that by taking me over the hill the sounds would not come through, but just as I had almost forgotten why we had come, in my delight and surprise at the honey sandwiches which she had produced from under her coat – the terrible cry came drilling through the hill, and tore through us like a thousand poisoned arrows. I knew then, that life was a place of horror, in spite of flowers and trees, and streams, and I flung myself down on the grass and cried my heart out in an agony of helplessness. I remember how she put her two kind hands over my ears, but that piercing cry came in at every pore of my body.

Lizzie told me God made pigs for meat for people. They were of no other use and if they were all let live there would be pigs everywhere, and how would I like that? But I asked her why they had to suffer like this; why didn't God make them like trees or grain?

They didn't squeal when they were cut down. God could have done that, if He wanted to. He made everything. Lizzie admitted she did not know why there had to be such pain in the world; she said she often wondered, but it wasn't right to criticize God, His ways were always right. But I was rebellious. I didn't think much of the world, and I was through with being a Christian. (22–24)

For the reader concerned for animal rights, McClung's inclusion of this gut-wrenching episode in her memoir illustrates the political power of "describing exactly how an animal dies, kicking, screaming, and is fragmented" (Adams, Carol J. 51–52). However hard her sister tries to prevent young Nellie's awareness of the brutal nature of the slaughterhouse, for McClung this experience is a painfully transformative lesson in cultural realities: specifically, she learns about the non-recognition of the "rights" of "others," as well as the power of religion to justify human cruelty.²³

In some cases, the memoir authors included in this study find power in self-identification with non-human animals, a suggestion that may seem to be contradicted by the historical truth that "the ideological justification for women's alleged inferiority has been made by appropriating them to animals" (Donovan and Adams 1). Without in any way desiring to contradict this awareness of the alignment of sexism and speciesism, I would still like to suggest, borrowing from Marian Scholtmeijer's readings of twentieth-century women's fiction, that non-human animals often provide a means of "defiance" for female authors; indeed, that these "other" figures provide "a double source of power: recognition of the degree to which women are victimized by androcentric culture, and realization of solidarity in defiance of cultural authority" ("The Power" 232–33). I would suggest that prairie women's "defiance of cultural authority" is located in the politics of personal experience as represented in their memoir texts and that, by simultaneously aligning themselves with the oppressed image of the domesticated farm animal and appropriating the strengths of any given species, these women manage, however subtly,

23 For more examples of the absent (animal) referent made present, see Hewson 101–2; Hicks 17; Holmes 116–17; and Magill 15–16.

to contradict those cultural constructions of prairie settlement which deny the free range of women's sometimes less than positive experiences of prairie life. For example, fairly quickly upon her arrival on an Alberta homestead, Sarah Roberts begins to align herself with the family's team of oxen, Tom and Bruce, who, says the author of *Of Us and the Oxen*, "are faithful, patient, long-suffering animals" (11). This is possibly the best description we could be provided of Roberts herself in relation to the decision to homestead. She is certainly "faithful" to what she describes as her husband's air of "dauntless optimism" (37) about western Canada's prospects and his belief in the "glowing accounts" provided by others (2). Indeed, throughout the text, whenever the family faces some crisis of faith in the homesteading project, Roberts is there to ensure that "no one admit[s] discouragement" (124) and to reaffirm their unwritten agreement to maintain a deliberately optimistic spirit in the face of adversity. She is certainly also "patient," especially when work on the family home is repeatedly and (necessarily) delayed in favour of farming operations and she must endure living in a "style to which [she is] not accustomed" (7). As she writes,

we lived in terrible confusion for five or six weeks, and until some of these things were done I couldn't bring order out of chaos, while the dust and dirt were simply terrible. I thought at times that I would just go crazy, but I've tried to be as patient as possible, for I knew that Papa and the boys were bringing things to pass as fast as they could. (52-53)

Finally, she is definitely "long-suffering" for, especially during the long winters, she finds herself "constantly confined" (65) within her modest house, very often alone as the men usually work together. In the extremity of her experience of isolation, Roberts searches for emotional support, and at one point she finds it in an appreciation of the presence of some non-human animals who provide a poetic image of something "other" than the circumstances in which she finds herself: as she remarks, "there were times when the loneliness was so oppressive that to see even a herd of cattle moving toward a little meadow

where the grass looked greener gave me a distinct sense of relief and companionship” (31).

Despite her surface appearance of “faithful, patient, long-suffering” conformity to the settlement project, however, Roberts also provides herself with a space for active rebellion. Going back to her characterization of the oxen, Roberts tells us that although they “*seemed* very gentle and thoroughly broken,” “however, in certain circumstances, this *appearance* of gentleness was deceptive” (9; emphasis added), and she goes on to tell the following story:

The boys, Jack Gatliff, and Papa were standing near the oxen one day when Jack remarked that he had touched Tom in the ribs and Tom had kicked at him. Lathrop, strong in his faith in Tom said, “Aw, Tom won’t kick,” and accompanied the words by putting his toe up and touching Tom in the ribs. With a quickness almost unbelievable in a creature usually so slow, Tom brought his hoof forward and landed it with force on Lathrop’s shin. (9)

If we accept the alignment of the author with the nature of the oxen, then clearly Roberts is a more complicated person than her surface narrative suggests. Although she seems to characterize the family’s move to Alberta as a mutually desirable “adventure” (2), Roberts provides another animal image that I would suggest encapsulates her true feelings about having to participate in the undertaking. Juxtaposed with the image of the subtly rebellious oxen, those figures of physical and psychological endurance, is another of the farm animals:

About this time, Papa bought a cow with a young calf. She was a good milk cow, but had one serious fault: she did not like to be milked and usually protested by kicking vigorously. However, Papa managed to milk her by tying a rope around her body in front of her udder and drawing it so tight that she was not able to use, with any ease, the muscles required for kicking. It was because of this amiable trait that she was promptly dubbed “Crabby,” a name that she still bears even though she has, to a considerable degree,

reformed. However, she still resents having anyone milk her but Papa. (11)

Like Roberts, Crabby has an “unlovely disposition” in terms of total psychological commitment to the settlement project, yet even she is appreciated for her “perseverance and skill,” and for being the “old standby” (143–44).

Beulah Baldwin, whose memoir *The Long Trail: The Story of a Pioneer Family* (1992) depicts her family’s homesteading experience in the Peace River region in the second and third decades of the twentieth century, sometimes represents her mother’s feelings about participating in her husband’s “adventure” in northern Alberta through animal images. For example, when representing her family’s preparation to leave their hotel business and home in Edmonton to seek their fortunes further north, Baldwin provides a comic deflection of the pain of departure onto the family dogs:

“Look,” said Sam, pointing to the window above. Brownie, my parents’ beautiful red setter stood on her hind legs with such a mournful expression at being left behind, that tears were quickly forgotten as everyone burst into laughter. Dad had bought Brownie when she was only a few weeks old, hoping she would become a watchdog, but his real intention had been to take Mother’s mind off her homesickness. Brownie was leaving with Sam the next day. Their other dog, Trixie, was also sad at being left behind. Trixie, a fox terrier so tiny that when Dad brought him home as a puppy he fit into the bib pocket of Dad’s overalls, would not be joining them for several months. Sam helped Beulah out of the sleigh, saying, “Let’s you and I go upstairs and cheer up the dogs.” (4)

After Olive Freeland has made the trip north, and has even begun to feel a bit of the adventurous spirit possessed by her husband in spades, Baldwin provides another image of Brownie, this time parodying the stereotyped cultural image of the courageous settler woman arriving in the Promised Land: “An hour later they heard the jingle of harnesses and, looking back, saw Sam’s rig approaching at a brisk pace. Mother and Dad laughed at Brownie proudly

perched on the seat beside Sam, 'Looking,' according to Mother, 'for all the world like a princess being driven through the streets of her capital by her coachman'" (17). Baldwin's mother also experiences a psychological closeness with the family's other dog, Trixie: as the author explains,

Sam had brought Trixie to Grouard on his last trip from Edmonton. "Never again," he told my parents. "That little dog thinks he's a Doberman. He stood his ground against an Indian's husky. The big brute lunged at him and would have torn him to pieces if the animal's chain had been a few inches longer." Glaring at Mother, Dad said, "I told you, Ollie; we should have left him with the Henderson's. Now, he could be killed by one of the big brutes that roams the streets." She refused to be intimidated. Her answer was, "And so could I be killed by one of the drunken brutes that roam the streets. Trixie helped me through my homesickness, Wilbur, and I won't abandon him now." (140)

Olive Freeland's alignment of herself and Trixie in terms of potential victimization, as well as her alignment of the "drunken brutes" and the "big brutes" "roaming the streets" of Grouard, calls into question her husband's essentially selfish decision to seek after adventure in the "wilds" of northern Alberta when he should have been, according to his promises at the beginning of the book, "settling" down to life with his wife and children. However, it is equally important to note that Baldwin's mother equates herself with the little dog who, despite her disadvantageous situation, possesses a fighting and courageous spirit that demands admiration. In the parallel movement from identification with Brownie's sadness at departure to her regal entrance at a northern stopping-house, from identification with Trixie's physical vulnerability to her psychological strength, we see Baldwin's use of human-animal relationships to represent the transformative potential of her mother's settlement experience.

Non-human animals were also a vital part of identity-making for prairie children who often had little access to playmates beyond their own family circle. In their study of written reminiscences of pioneer life in the United States and Canada, John W. Bennett and Seena B. Kohl assert that

siblings were the primary playmates, which led to many nostalgic comments in the local history books about the closeness of family members. A more complex record is presented in the longer autobiographies that contain descriptions of differences among siblings and among parents, leading toward a recognition that close interaction among family members can both reinforce family ties and also exacerbate conflict. (101)

This is certainly the case in Georgina Thomson's *Crocus*, wherein the author uses animal images to delineate a sense of personal discontinuity with the family circle in general and an outright antagonistic relationship with her older brother in particular. It all begins with her family's acquisition of one of the most common – and certainly most crucial in terms of subsistence potential – farm animals:

“There were two [cows] we liked,” said Father, “but we couldn't decide which to take so we came home to ask the rest of you. One was a big roan muley, rather shaggy-looking but quiet, and the other was red and white.”

“What's a roan and what's a muley?” Chaddy asked.

“A muley hasn't any horns,” explained Jim rather importantly, “and a roan has a mixture of red and white hairs all over.”

“Let's get the roan, Father,” I said. “Plain red and white cows are so common.”

The rest of the family agreed, so next day the two men made another trip to Nanton to fetch the cow. Late in the afternoon they came home again without her.

“The roan opened the gate of her pasture and is now wandering on the prairie,” Father explained, “we should have been warned.”

“So many trips for one old cow,” grumbled Jim.

“Another day of canned milk,” complained Chaddy.

But the day passed quickly as days did then, and toward evening the wagon drove into the yard with a big cow trailing behind,

and a little roan calf, the image of his mother, in the back of the wagon.

“His name is Samson,” said Jim, “because he’s the strongest calf I ever saw. I’ve had a dickens of a time holding him in all the way from Nanton.”

“What’s the cow’s name?” I asked.

“I guess we’ll have to call her Roany,” said Father.

“Oh not Roany!” I objected. “That’s so obvious.”

“I think it’s quite good enough for her,” sniffed Chaddy. She had been walking around our new possession taking a good look. “She’s as ugly and stupid looking as can be.”

“Well we might call her Roany for everyday,” I compromised, “but her real name will be ‘Annie Rooney.’ If anyone asks, we’ll tell them that.” (27)

It is significant to the rest of her memoir that Thomson herself leads the decision-making process here and shows a special concern for the animal, who is named to give her an identity beyond the “obvious,” and who immediately proves to have a less than complacent nature.

Thomson’s relationship with the cow deepens when she and her sister Chaddy are given the task of taking Annie Rooney to the watering hole, where they promptly attempt to ride the animal, who is described as having an “ungainly figure,” an activity that affords the author narrative space for self-reflection:

One day as we moved slowly along the trail in gloomy silence, we saw a small bunch of range cattle in a little hollow near the spring. “What would you do if they chased us?” Chaddy asked hopefully.

“I’d jump on Annie Rooney and ride away,” I bragged.

This made her hoot with laughter, for I was short and fat, and to picture me climbing on the cow at all, and then ambling over the prairie on her back, needed quite a bit of imagination.

I was a bit nettled at being laughed at. “It isn’t as if I couldn’t do it,” I said, and catching Roany by the shoulder, I tried to spring

on, but couldn't make it. Chaddy stopped laughing and came to help me, but she was too small and slight to boost me up. Then we tried leading the cow to a buffalo wallow, and I would stand on the higher ground and jump, but in vain. At last, quite red in the face and annoyed by Chaddy's giggles, I caught hold of her.

"See if you can do it," I said and gave her a powerful hoist. She was quite active, and easily scrambled astride Roany's shoulders. I picked up the rope and away we went.

"It's grand up here," Chaddy called from her perch.

"You look like those people in India who ride elephants and have their pictures in the geography," I said, a bit enviously, as I plodded along on the ground. I felt that Chaddy always succeeded where I failed. She was slim and pretty with big blue eyes and white skin. I was fat and freckled, and red hair wasn't fashionable in those days. Everyone liked her better than they liked me, I thought morbidly. (33)²⁴

The author's negative self-image is evident in the balancing of terms to describe herself and her sister, as we move from "short and fat" to "small and slight," from "easily scrambled" to "plodded," and from "slim and pretty" to "fat and freckled." Thomson's freckled features and red hair recuperate a sense of sisterhood, however, although with Annie Rooney rather than her human sister.

Both girl and cow certainly share the experience of being relative outsiders to the family unit, as evidenced, for example, in Thomson's recounting of her family's treatment of another animal she loved:

There was a happy reunion at Mrs. White's front door. Mine was marred by Jim's answer to my immediate inquiry if "Muff" had

24 Interestingly, despite the belief that our cultural obsession with weight is a product of contemporary society, more than one of the women memoirists in this study shows a concern with being fat: for example, Parsons says at one point, "I was, frankly, plump" (96) and Nelson admits to being called "Fatty" by another member of her family (51).

arrived. She had been my pet cat in Galt, a pretty tortoise-shell, but not popular with the rest of the family for a number of reasons. She liked to lie on the most comfortable chair and left her hairs there. She was always having kittens, on one of the beds if she could arrange it, and the kittens had to be given away or drowned. One of her favorite foods was a plain boiled potato which she did not leave on her dish but dragged on to the floor, leaving bits to be stepped on. She howled a lot, and over and above all this, was not completely housebroken, making the odd “mistake.”

Once she was taken by father away out into the country and left at a farm. I was not told this and hunted the place for her. However, I need not have worried. Two nights later I heard her cry at my bedroom window and calling joyfully, “Muff’s home,” I let her in. Then my eldest sister, Winnie, bought poison for her, but just hadn’t the heart to give it to her. At that time there were no veterinarians in our town such as now put animals “to sleep” swiftly and painlessly. (14–15)

Despite the attitude against Thomson’s cat, the family decides to take the animal on their journey west, although, after having been “probably terrified by the noise and strangeness of her new surroundings,” Muff escapes from the train car full of “settlers’ effects” and leaves behind “her current family of kittens,” who are then given “to a kind-faced woman’ in Gravenhurst” (15). Upon hearing the story from her brother Jim, Thomson expresses her discontinuity with the family’s “happy reunion”: “I turned my face to the wall and had a little weep, and for years was to be haunted by the idea of Muff, the pampered household pet, trying to survive in the wilds of Muskoka.”

Thomson also shares another anecdote which makes clear her sense of incongruity with her family unit, an anecdote about having a family picture taken, an extraordinary “event” in those early days. She explains the fury of preparation on the farm:

Then the whole farm went into a state of action, for in those old-time photographs every person and every animal on the place had

to be seen. We had to bring the cows in so that they would be in the picture. Winnie and Ethel, our two sisters back in Galt, Aunt Mary and all the other relatives there simply had to see what Annie Rooney looked like. Buck and Queen were turned loose inside the yard and given oats on the ground to keep them quiet. Jim saddled and mounted Dixie and posed in the foreground complete with sombrero and rope. The rest of the family grouped themselves in front of the house according to directions from the professor as he emerged from time to time from under the dark cloth of his camera on its tall tripod.

“My, but the folks will think Dod [the author] has certainly got fat when they see the picture,” called Jim.

Being fat was a sore point with me and Jim knew it. I immediately flew into a temper.

“You eat so much you get thin carrying it around,” I shouted back angrily, and then ran weeping into the house. Mother coaxed me out again but my red swollen eyes and rumpled hair didn’t improve my looks. (66–67)

Up to this point in the text, Thomson’s relationship with her brother Jim has been less than harmonious; indeed, when she says of her brother’s effect upon one of the family horses that when “he held the lines, some current seemed to run along them to Queen, making her become difficult and sometimes even to balk,” she is reflecting what happens in her own narrative at any point that she mentions her brother. It is interesting to note that with her “swollen eyes and rumpled hair” Thomson almost mirrors the “rough and shaggy” Annie Rooney, who becomes the subject of the author’s further sense of isolation in terms of the finished portrait:

A few days later the professor brought over the finished photograph and we all gathered eagerly around to have a look at it.

There was the house looking plain and unadorned, the stable, and the other little building which was sure to appear in all the pictures we took. There was Buckles with his back to the camera,

Dixie with arched neck and Jim proudly in the saddle, while Bee reclined gracefully on the front doorstep. Father posed as the landed proprietor, with Mother nearby. Chaddy stood rather belligerently in the foreground, and while I looked as broad as I was long, no one would have noticed that my eyes were swollen.

The grind-stone and the wood-pile were near the house and the manure-pile near the stable, but suddenly I realized there was something missing.

“Annie Rooney isn’t there! Oh the mean old professor to leave old Roany out!”

Sure enough, Buck and Queen were where they should be, Fanny Fern and Lassie were eating at the haystack. We could make out the pigs and the odd hen, but not a sign of Roany was to be seen. At the last moment she had taken it into her stubborn head to go behind the stack, so Winnie and Ethel would have to wait till they came west to see what she looked like after all. (67–68)

Thomson details the photograph of the family farm and its members so precisely that there is an overwhelming sense of artistic unity and coherence, an aesthetic nevertheless undermined for the reader who is aware of the earlier emotional state of the memoir’s author.

Annie Rooney’s “stubborn” nature becomes figured as a tendency towards rebellion against authority, as when she displays a penchant for escape from the confines of the family farm: speaking of the gate positioned “at the entrance to the barnyard” (125), Thomson notes:

It was a very annoying kind of gate to open or shut, especially if you were a girl and were short and had short arms. It was often stiff to manipulate and one’s sleeve would catch on the barbed wire. But it was a point of honour and still is never to leave a man’s gate open. Annie Rooney, unfortunately, soon became very adept at opening of this type of gate. She would work patiently at the top loop, which was of plain wire with no barbs, till she got it free, and the other cows came to know that she could do this and would line up

behind her at the gate waiting to be let through. Of course she was much too sly to do it when we were around, but if the cows were shut in the barnyard or pasture overnight, we would often find them gone in the morning. It taxed all Jim's and Father's ingenuity to invent a fastener she could not open. One common device instead of a loop was to have a sharpened stick on the end of a piece of wire attached to the side post. This would be brought around the top of the gate end and stuck into a small loop of wire, but it was child's play for the old roan cow to open this. They eventually figured out something that fooled her, but she was never really resigned to defeat and kept on trying. (126)

In this context of animal-identification, then, it might not seem unimportant to note that Thomson's "favorite Shakespeare plays" were "'The Taming of the Shrew' and 'King Lear,' not exactly children's fare, but good stories" (53), and both tales which feature daughters who are not exactly calmly obedient to patriarchal authority. As Thomson's narrative moves forward in time, her connection to the rebellious cow becomes further entrenched. For example, one day Georgina goes Saskatoon-picking with her sisters and some neighbours and, although she is given charge of one of the younger boys present, she nevertheless decides to go home early as she is suffering from headache and heat exhaustion (151–52). When she arrives home, however, she finds maternal sympathy for her condition to be less than forthcoming:

The mile and a half seemed much longer than it did on the way down, and when at last I got home to the cool haven of our sitting-room, I found the minister (I forget which one) there.

I went out to the kitchen to tell Mother my troubles but she was getting supper for the minister and had no time to listen.

"I'm sorry your head's aching," she said "but we have no sugar for tea, and I wonder if you could go to Ellison's or Louis Roy's and borrow some."

Thomson does as she is told, but the situation gets worse while she's away from the homestead and, once again, she positions herself as emotional outcast in need of retreat from the family unit:

Meantime Bee and Chaddy had arrived home in an indignant frame of mind, because not only had I deserted them, but in my haste I had left my saskatoons in the shade, so they had to carry them as well as their own. Actually Mrs. Lowther had given them a lift as far as Ellison's corner so they hadn't so far to carry them, but Mrs. Lowther was annoyed because I had cuffed Leslie and they had to bear the brunt of it.

When I got back they couldn't say much because the minister was there but they gave me black looks. They had washed themselves and put on clean dresses, while I looked and felt in disgrace with my rumpled dress and hot sweaty face. I wouldn't come in to supper but went off to the garden to eat green peas and indulge in bitter thoughts.

"Even if I did leave them to carry the berries, they should have let me know where they were. It wasn't any fun looking after Leslie," I thought. I could hear the cheerful supper sounds of laughing voices and clinking dishes and felt very sorry for myself.
(153)

Thomson's language here is precise – she speaks of cleanliness and dirtiness, of disgrace, personal indulgence and non-charitable thoughts – and sharply discontinuous with the presence of the minister within the family home.

After reading Thomson's evocation of the cozy domestic atmosphere indoors, the reader almost expects the young girl to feel chastened of her stubbornness and to make a move towards reunion with this scene of cultural authority; however, the rebellious Thomson ultimately moves in a completely different direction, towards the barnyard:

Then weeping with frustration I went over to old Roany, set my stool down beside her, and burying my head against her shaggy

side, began to milk her rather roughly, but the big cow never stirred. After a time the soft churn-churn of the milk in the pail began to have a soothing effect on me. I wiped my tears and stopped scowling. Roany went on peacefully chewing her cud and gazing with dreamy eyes at the sunset above the Rockies.

“Roany doesn’t care a bit if I’m freckled and fat and bad-tempered,” I thought.

I began to feel rather ashamed and confessed as much to Roany there in the barnyard in the quiet of the twilight. Father came and carried my pail of frothing milk to the house. I told him I would take the cows down to the pasture. (154)

Thomson’s barnyard “confession” effectively undermines cultural authority, as she herself humorously realizes when she returns from the pasture:

Buckles and I raced happily home and I ran into the house just as the minister was leaving.

“Good-bye Georgina,” he said to me, shaking hands in a friendly way. He probably wondered at the improvement in my expression, and if he had known that a shaggy old cow had anything to do with it, he would have wondered more. (155)²⁵

Most of the memoirs examined here document emigration to Canada, or movement from eastern Canada to the prairies, as a means to provide a more independent living than could be achieved “back home,” economic security for children, and sometimes even health benefits; but these positives were gained, at least initially, at the expense of extended family and community. Sylvia Bannert’s *Rut Hog or Die* (1974), however, tells the story of a lower-class family already experiencing dislocation and breakup after a father’s death. Hers is a

25 Thomson’s humorously irreverent tone regarding this figure of organized religion also occurs in her remark that “the Lintons [neighbours] had two cats, Quaker and Booker T. Washington who used to come to the [church] services and one Sunday Quaker came in and rubbed endearingly around the minister’s legs, which added to Chaddy’s and my interest in the service” (136).

family for whom the move to Canada from the United States in 1911 represents, in addition to supposed economic renewal, a chance to gather together the family unit. It is no wonder then that they easily fall prey to propaganda claims:

They had got hold of some papers from Canada advertising for settlers. Homesteads of one hundred and sixty acres of land were going for ten dollars. There were special rates on the train and you could bring anything in the box car except gold. Aunt Bea and Uncle Frank were planning to move out there and they wanted Mama and O.W. to come also. Mama could get her own homestead and we could all be together again. Mama decided we would go, but said it would be a while before we could get enough money for the trip. By the end of their visit we had all made big plans for Canada. (19–20)

As Bannert suggests, “Canada was our hope for the future,” “we would get rich [there] and then go back to Iowa” (22, 26). Nevertheless, the very title of Bannert’s text provides us with a clue as to the results of that early optimism. This title is a fortunate misrepresentation of the well-known cultural phrase, “root hog or die,” which appropriates the resourcefulness of the pig species and is generally interpreted as “the necessity of labour or exertion to maintain life or prosperity” (*OEED*). In addition, in the context of a prairie settlement text, the word “root” provides a sense of establishing one’s roots, of achieving a stability and endurance of the family unit. If Bannert had chosen this “correct” phrasing, her text would be fronted by the optimistic “promised land” (24) image of prairie settlement. However, her slippage into the phrase “rut hog or die,” and her decision to make it the title image of her text, conveys a less positive lived reality of prairie life. Indeed, the word “rut” itself is highly negative, as to be “in a rut” means to experience a “fixed (esp. tedious or dreary) pattern of behaviour that is difficult to change” (*OEED*), which certainly picks up on the reality of the farm animal’s life. The Bannert family, like most immigrants to the Canadian west, discovered upon their arrival to the prairies that life was not going to be as easy as suggested in the settlement pamphlets. In fact,

life continues in much the same “rut” for the Bannerts as it had in the United States, with all members of the family again finding it necessary to disperse and go out to various places to work – far from the expected ideal of the whole family gathered together and working towards the agricultural fruits of the homesteading project.²⁶

Indeed, Bannert’s story of her life on the Canadian prairies is the complete antithesis of most settlement memoirs, which usually begin with a nuclear family’s decision to emigrate, the parting from friends and extended family, arrival in the new land, initial feelings of isolation and deprivation, with the gradual re-establishment of community and varying degrees of economic success. In contrast, Bannert’s family experiences a far more chaotic version of the typical settlement pattern, for, at the time of her family’s arrival in Canada, the author was only ten years old, her father was dead, and, despite the fact that an older brother and an uncle are both already established on homesteads, her mother and older sister had to go out to work in order to save the money required for the purchase of their own land and the building of a house. When the older women are gone, the young author is variously housed with her Uncle Frank or whatever other family needs cheap labour. While Bannert never openly criticizes the state of affairs in which she finds herself, nonetheless through all the episodes represented in the text (some of which are frankly abusive),²⁷ the author’s title begins to take on another meaning as

26 That ideal image is provided by Bannert, briefly, in her presentation of a small family, significantly named “the Farmers,” also originally from Iowa, who live next to her older brother’s homestead (35).

27 For example, when staying one time at her Uncle Frank’s place, a particularly hostile environment, Bannert indicates through animal images her depression over her family situation as well as a sense of familial neglect. On this occasion, Bannert has had to take some of her family’s animals with her to her Uncle’s farm, including a favourite horse named Sue: as Bannert unemotionally remembers, “Uncle Frank told me I had better go see how Sue had fared during the night. I went out and saw that she had ‘fared’ very badly. She was dead, in fact. She had twisted herself in her rope and committed suicide. Don’t know as I blamed her much” (63). The probability of a horse committing suicide is slim; however Bannert’s decision to read the event in this way has repercussions for our understanding of her own state of mind at the time. Indeed, she goes on to suggest her feeling of being merely an extra mouth to feed, an appendage to her family’s settlement project, when she notes that her Uncle

the words “root” and “rut” slip into the word “runt,” which the author repeatedly uses to describe both her position in the family unit and her seeming physical unfitness for the hard work of prairie life. We are told that Bannert was considered by her parents as the “runt” of the family litter (25, 29), which immediately implies a certain neglect in how she is treated. Indeed, as her father once explained to her, “a mama pig has twenty-one dinner baskets; the last two are small ones and the runts feed on them” (29). By appropriating this image of maternal lack, Bannert implicitly criticizes the lack of nurturance and support that she experiences in her own family. Here we see that it is not so much the cultural ideology of prairie settlement itself with which the author finds fault, but rather her own family’s, and especially her mother’s, inability to materialize their expectations and achieve the desired ideal of the nuclear family farm.

Once she is in Canada, Bannert continually notes people’s reaction to her as being “runty” for her age, which does not bode well for her success as a “pioneer,” given that, as she is told by a neighbour named Mr. Daniels, “it was a hard country and you had to be strong to take it” (28). Before filing on a homestead, the women have to find work to make money:

Later, when Mrs. Daniels was talking to Mama, she said, “Your son must be a good boy. It will be hard for him to look after you and the girls, him being only eighteen.”

“Merlie and I will have to find work,” Mama answered. “But what to do with Sylvia? She is so little, she can’t do very much.”
(29)

The designation of “runt” is thus a condemnatory evaluation of the author’s worth, her market value in the settlement project, and this valuation is reflected in her physical weight. Indeed, while she is working for the Mac family we find out that Bannert is incredibly small:

“said the chickens, the cats and I were only a bill of expense and that it was a good thing old Sue had died. At least that saved the expense of feeding her.”

The town was called Patterson and it had one general store and post office. At the store [Mrs. Mac] bought candy for the children and for me, too. She told the storekeeper all about me and my family and how we were going to have our house built by fall.

“You must be about six years old,” said the storekeeper.

“Oh, no! I will be eleven in August!”

“I’ll bet you don’t weigh forty pounds,” he said.

He put me on the scales. I weighed only thirty-five pounds. (41)

It is thus significant that, not even one year later, after having proven her emotional strength, she has almost doubled her weight:

One day Brother said he was going by the Davies and I could come along. They took one look at me and said, “My, you have grown! Let’s see how much you weigh.”

They put me on the scale. What a surprise! I now weighed sixty-five pounds. “Well,” they said, “the little Yank will soon be a big Yank.” (53)

This dramatic change in Bannert’s weight documents a change in her status within the family unit as she appropriates the feisty fighter status of the “runty” underdog and begins to take action against her oppressive circumstances. Although Bannert appears on the surface to be fairly philosophical about the failure of her widowed mother’s dream to keep her family together and provide a stable home by emigrating to a homestead in Canada, nevertheless there are moments when Mrs. Cooper is clearly held accountable by the reminiscent author for not taking charge. Almost as soon as they arrive in Canada, the Cooper family begins to disperse in search of work. Sylvia’s older brother, who has filed for his own homestead, initially stays on his mother’s land in order to build a home for the family, and the young author, who has been living at an Uncle’s home temporarily, eventually goes to help him in that task. Indeed, she becomes instrumental, despite her small size, in completing the family dwelling, although anticipation of the moment of reunion is effectively quashed for the young author:

When I finally cleaned up the floor, the place had begun to look like a home.

The next day dawned cold and snowy. It was November eleventh, nineteen hundred and eleven, and we were to be united at last in our new home. We were expecting Mother and Merlie and they arrived about noon. I was so proud of our little home, but Mother took one look and said, "How will we live in this little place?"

However, she unlocked the trunks, got out the bedding, and she and Merlie made up the beds. After we had eaten supper, Mother and Merlie went to bed and bawled like babies.

"Oh, this awful country!" Mother wailed. "Our money nearly gone and no coal or wood!"

After all the work Brother had done to get the place ready, he felt really bad about their reaction, but he never let on. (52–53)

Bannert's decision to describe the elder women of her family as "bawling like babies" clearly indicates her sense of their (and especially her mother's) abdication of domestic responsibilities, but it is interesting to note her deflection of disappointment upon the figure of her brother who, like herself, worked very hard and "felt really bad about their [ungrateful] reaction."

After this inauspicious beginning, Bannert is forced to go out to work to contribute to the family purse (57, 59–60), as is her mother, a situation that indicates there is no real home for the young girl to return to, so that she ends up moving to her uncle's place, then a neighbour's place, then eventually home again with her mother. Years of unsettlement now ensue for the Cooper family, until finally Sylvia attains a permanent home through marriage to a young farmer, Frank Bannert. Despite her mother's reluctance to let her daughter marry at the age of sixteen, as Sylvia's older brother (and the authority figure of the family) assures Mrs. Cooper, "I know Frank. He is a good man. Sylvia will be better off looking after her own home than working for all kinds of people" (110). By taking over the maternal role of provider, both before and after her marriage, she breaks free from the family "rut" and "roots"

out an existence for everyone, thus defying her “runty” position. In fact, it is after her first act of independence helping her brother to build the family home that Bannert experiences personal growth, both physical and emotional. She effectively summarizes her own story by representing an experience with another of her mother’s employers:

Before she left the farm, I went out in the pasture and found a heifer with a calf that was so little it would not suck the mother. I picked it up and carried it home over my shoulder. The mother followed me. I put the calf in the barn and the mother went in, too. Just then Mr. Sandy came along and saw it. “What a little calf!” he said. It’s no bigger than a jack rabbit. I might just as well knock it in the head. It will never survive.”

“Oh, no, Mr. Sandy! It’s a girl calf. Can’t I milk the cow and feed it?”

He told me to go ahead, so I got a little bowl, milked the cow into it and the little calf drank the milk. By the next day, I had that calf feeding from its mother.

“Well, you saved the calf’s life,” said Mr. Sandy as he turned the cow and calf out to pasture. “I never thought that calf would make it.”

“He wouldn’t have, if it hadn’t been for that girl,” his mother said. (61)

Bannert’s immediate personal identification with the abandoned and frail calf reinforces the ambiguity of her memoir’s title, and the anecdote assures the reader that the calf, like the author herself, survives against all the odds of human devaluation and transforms to become a productive part of prairie life.²⁸

For Bannert and many other of the memoirists whose texts are the subject of this study, agricultural myths failed to live up to settlers’ dreams, thus

28 For more examples of self-identification with non-human animals, see also Hiemstra 63–64, 79–81, 96, 102, 138, 194–95; Keyes 7–14; Moorhouse 7; Parsons 70, 79, 87; Raber 63–64, 71–76, 92–94, 107; Schultz 117; and Strange 186–205.

making it inevitable that a narrative consideration of self in environmental context would find expression in some things “other” than a “vast agrarian empire.” For many settlers, prairie life necessitated a rejection of notions of dominance and exploitation and the adoption of a “subsistence perspective” that regarded the natural environment as an active and productive partner in the work of survival. Whether in prairie gardens or in partaking of the literal “fruits of the earth,” the natural environment had presence, and recognition and knowledge of that presence allowed for both physical and psychological survival. Sometimes in the act of recuperation of a subsistence perspective there is recognition that an Anglo-centred belief in the need to “conquer” and “control” the productive capabilities of the prairie landscape, as well as the goal of transforming that landscape into an agricultural Eden, were not the only visions available to participants in western settlement. There had been “other” ways of relating to the natural environment, as evidenced by the (sometimes painfully generalized) lifestyles of the “Indian people,” and practising such ways would prove to be more valuable to prairie families in the gap between ideals of agricultural success and the reality of settlement life. It has long been recognized that the “*dominator* mode” of relationship between humans and nature leaves people “spiritually alienated” (Harrison 101) from the landscape, and many of the memoirists examined here prefer to represent an intimate relationship to nature as presence, as dynamic force inspiring self-reflection as well as cultural critique. But perhaps one of the most surprising elements of these women’s texts has to do with the amount of narrative space they devote to re-membering the animals who shared in the realities of prairie life. While settlement narratives have tended to privilege the lone human, memoir writers have re-visioned our focus onto the labouring and sacrificial bodies of those animals without whom the work of prairie life could never have been accomplished. In the restoration of some “other” subjects of western settlement, then, the writers examined here provide us with a more fully fleshed, more eco-conscious, re-vision of an agricultural story.



*Sadie Victoria Landry Matthews,
Regina, Saskatchewan, circa 1995.*