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Writing Alberta: Building on a Literary Identity

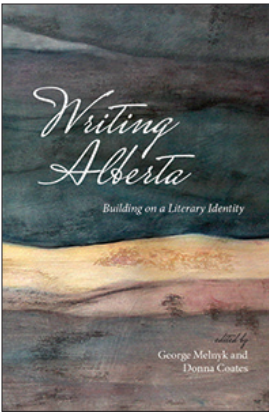
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WRITING ALBERTA: Alberta Building on a Literary Identity
Edited by George Melnyk and Donna Coates

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Introduction

Writing Alberta: Continuities, Interventions, and Lacunae

George Melnyk and Donna Coates

In 2005, art critic Mary-Beth Laviolette published *An Alberta Art Chronicle* covering the post-1970 art history of Alberta. Its length of five hundred pages suggested that there was something to say about the province's art scene. To talk about an Alberta art identity within the context of Canadian art does not seem strange or unusual. So, too, it should not seem strange to talk about an Alberta literary identity. The conversation started sixty years ago with the publication of the *Alberta Golden Jubilee Anthology* in 1955. It offered Albertans their first collection of Alberta writers and was followed in 1967 with *Chinook Arch* and *The Alberta Diamond Jubilee Anthology* in 1979. In 1986, Fred Stenson edited *Alberta Bound: Thirty Stories by Alberta Writers*, followed by Aritha van Herk's 1990 volume, *Alberta Rebound: Thirty More Stories by Alberta Writers*, and then *Boundless Alberta* in 1993. Clearly, at least as far as fiction was concerned, there was an acknowledgement that Alberta writers were producing valuable work and making a statement about the province. In 1999 a new anthology, *Threshold: An Anthology of Contemporary Writing from Alberta*, edited by Srjda Pavlovic, which included poetry, was published. Pavlovic was not afraid to use the term "Alberta literature" in his introduction. All seven volumes were statements of creativity, not critical studies. Then came George Melnyk's two-volume *Literary History of Alberta*, published in 1998-99, which argued for the distinct nature of Alberta's literary identity. It was followed by the four-hundred-page *Wild Rose Anthology of Alberta Prose* (2003), edited by George Melnyk and Tamara Palmer Seiler and, most recently,

Wild Words: Essays on Alberta Literature (2009), edited by Donna Coates and George Melnyk, which was the first collection of scholarly essays dealing specifically with Alberta writing.

Alberta writing has a distinctive literary identity, but there has been a pushback from traditional quarters tied to previous categories—Canadian Literature (1960s) and Prairie Literature (1970s). In Quebec, literature was viewed as independent of Canadian literature because of the post-1960 sovereignty movement and its distinctness within the context of a bi-national and bilingual literary identity. But what could justify a province like Alberta seeing its literary heritage as identifiable and distinct? If we examine how national literatures come to be defined, we can see that Alberta literature shares characteristics with the terms used to define a national literature without being a nation. First, Alberta literature has a *history* that is identifiable, traceable, and acknowledged. Second, its literature shares certain *thematic concerns* that link its writers. Third, its literature has a specific hierarchy of important writers and works. In short, it has a *canon*. Fourth, Alberta literature shares the limits placed on national literatures by having a political *boundary*. While these are categories normally applied to a national literature, a provincial literature can be studied much in the same way through history, authorship, literary styles, thematic concerns, and cultural identity.

The literary history of Alberta extends from the pictographs and winter counts of the First Nations, through the writing of explorers and fur traders to the fiction and non-fiction books of European settlers, and then through the emergence of the first voices of modernism through to the postmodernist experimentation and post-colonialism of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. This history has a number of unifying themes: the diverse geography and landscapes of the province, the socio-economic evolution of its peoples, the quest for a sense of selfhood that distinguishes it from the rest of Canada, and the desire to be expressive of, and connected to, literary trends in the western world. The literary history and its themes are united through a literary canon, which began with William Francis Butler's 1872 non-fiction classic, *The Great Lone Land*, followed by Robert Stead's trilogy of *Prairie* novels, and Georges Bugnet's masterful *La Forêt* (*The Forest*). W.O. Mitchell's much beloved *Who Has Seen the Wind* inaugurated a postwar literature that included Sheila Watson's *The Double Hook*, Robert Kroetsch's *The Studhorse Man*,

Rudy Wiebe's *The Temptations of Big Bear*, and Aritha van Herk's *Judith*. Together, these writers and their colleagues confirmed the power of Alberta writing in the second half of the twentieth century through both national and international recognition. More recently, the post-colonial sensibility has been expressed through Esi Edugyan's award-winning *Half-Blood Blues*, while the poetry of Christian Bök has challenged the boundaries of that genre. But there are complexities involved in cultural milieus that come from the overlap and interaction of cultural innovation across international boundaries. Alberta is not an isolated literary environment and never has been from the time of exploration literature.

However, there are also characteristics that reflect a specific socio-political environment. Alberta has had a non-conformist political history, with two political parties having ruled the province for a total of eighty years (Social Credit 1935-70 and Progressive Conservatives 1971-2015). This history played a role in developing the province's literary identity. For example, the first three anthologies of Alberta writing were all sponsored or funded by the Alberta government, a cultural intervention that is not the norm in English Canada. Cultural identity within a political discourse can be turned into a rhetoric of homogeneity, but the cultural material itself is diverse and offers resistance and a homogenous narrative. This is the main theme of this volume. What this volume suggests is that this homogeneity of political culture has generated counter-narratives that subvert the dominant conservative ideology that has come to characterize the province. In *Mavericks: An Incurable History of Alberta*, van Herk concludes: "The emblem of our province is the prickly wild rose, a hardly fenceline thorn, pretty and tough—just like Alberta" (405). The flowering pink thorn is an apt metaphor for Alberta writing.

An attempt to define an "Alberta writer" may be contentious, but identity is also an area of debate and disagreement in national literatures, especially in our postmodern, post-colonial age of major migration. When does a migrant writer's work become part of Canadian literature, especially if it deals with that writer's mother country? Place of birth is one designation; current residence is another; language is a third; and setting is a fourth. There are other possible criteria as well. In Alberta's pre-agrarian period, writers who passed through the geographic area—now designated as Alberta—but who did not live in it but wrote about it, should have their works on the territory considered part of Alberta writing, even

though they may also belong to another national literature, be it British or American. Their writings contribute to both Alberta's literary identity and to the identity of their national literature. A contemporary example, discussed in this collection, is David Albahari, born in the former Yugoslavia, who came to Alberta in 1994 and departed for Serbia in 2012. He wrote his novels and short stories in Serbian, and the greater part of his writing during his Alberta years was set in Europe. Only some of his fiction was Alberta-specific. We consider those works to be part of Alberta literature, though Albahari clearly belongs to the literature of the former Yugoslavia which was his birth country that existed until the twenty-first century, in name at least, but which is now politically constructed as Serbia. Today he is regarded as a Serbian writer, since Yugoslavia no longer exists. All the writers we discuss in this volume were either born in Alberta, have lived or live in Alberta, or have written about Alberta. It is the influence of the place on their writing that matters and how that writing has contributed to articulating the province. Likewise, a writer or a work can be considered as overlapping with, and connected to, other literary identities, whether national or regional. While political scientists may be attuned to drawing boundaries, literary scholars acknowledge that drawing boundaries around identities is problematic, contested, and open to revision.

This collection highlights the continuities, the interventions, and the lacunae that make up Alberta literature from the perspective of the twenty-first century. We have chosen these three concepts and the tensions they generate because they undermine the idea of a central theme or dominant concept. It is up to the reader, as much as the editors, to determine what may or may not be present in Alberta writing. In terms of continuity, the volume provides essays on playwriting of the 1930s, while also showing the role of Alberta-themed opera from the 2000s. Or, as in the case of the essay by the novelist Katherine Govier, there is valuable information on the role of place in her writing even though she is no longer resident in Alberta. But there are also other foci at play. There is the sense of interruption or intervention that comes whenever something new erupts on the literary scene, such as work or works that jerk literature out of its complacency and its accepted pathways to push the literary agenda to a new level or in a new direction. The literary postmodernism of Robert Kroetsch that Harry Vandervlist discusses in Chapter Eight is a good example. Finally, there are lacunae and gaps in a literature that are spaces that wait to be

filled, elements that have been ignored or forgotten that are resurrected and assert themselves in a way as to question all that has gone before them. Tasha Hubbard's discussion of First Nations and Métis writing brings to light sensibilities that formerly had no voice. By putting these three foci together, we believe this collection strengthens and expands our understanding of who has contributed to and what constitutes the strength of Alberta literature.

Wild Words: Essays on Alberta Literature signaled the academic recognition of a "distinct literary identity" that could be named Alberta literature, but it was not specific about the content of that distinctness (Coates and Melnyk vii). This introduction attempts to put meat on the bones of that concept while recognizing the complexity, inter-textuality, and non-generic qualities of Alberta writing. *Writing Alberta* is the next step in defining Alberta literature through scholarly analysis. The chapters are structured to emphasize the interplay of past and present in Alberta writing. This volume itself is an act of continuity (it follows on *Wild Words*) and an act of intervention (it brings something new to the study of the field), but it has its limitations because it leaves out numerous talented writers and significant works. Grounding itself in the contemporary, it seeks to connect with past manifestations of writing.

This non-chronological, non-thematic, and non-generic structure is a postmodernist response to the rationale of the first anthology, the *Alberta Golden Jubilee Anthology* (1955), whose editor W.G. Hardy, a historical novelist and classicist at the University of Alberta, stated that its goal was "to present chronologically the story of the province" (13). As a modernist of the late agrarian period, his ties were very much with a Euro-centric settler society wanting to celebrate a historical sense of itself through literature. Of the contributors to that early volume only a few remain significant—R. Ross Annett, Elsie Park Gowan, Henry Kreisel, W. O. Mitchell, and Kerry Wood. Twelve years later John Patrick Gillese edited *Chinook Arch: A Centennial Anthology of Alberta Writing* to commemorate Canada's centennial. While Hardy's volume drew one thousand submissions, Gillese's received two thousand. An increase in population could not justify such an explosion of submissions. Clearly there was something else at work. Gillese, using a rhetorical tone, states that "No people has ever become great without its own literature" (xi). With Canadian literature just beginning its age of self-consciousness, Gillese's placing Alberta squarely

in the mix was a welcome move. Among the new names that appear in his anthology that are central to Alberta literature are the Franco-Albertan novelist, Georges Bugnet; the genre novelist, Marie Jakober; the Ukrainian Alberta novelist, Illia Kiriak; the Icelandic Albertan poet, Stephan G. Stephansson; and the non-fiction writer, and later Lieutenant-Governor of Alberta, Grant MacEwan.

John W. Chalmers viewed the *Alberta Diamond Jubilee Anthology* as a reflection of the energy and diversity of Alberta's literary culture. Among the surprises in his volume were the first appearance of Nellie McClung and Wilfrid Eggleston. Why such valued writers were omitted earlier is a mystery. Perhaps the requirement of the first two volumes, that work had to be submitted by the authors, was a factor. By 1979, there was a growing sense of who were important Alberta writers. The 1979 anthology can be considered a proto-literary canon, but it remained very much a populist phenomenon, as were the previous two. It created an imaginary equality (a work by W. O. Mitchell was given the same space as a work by Elsie Wilson Colby) and it heralded the voice of the known and the unknown with equal vigour. Nevertheless, until George Melnyk's two-volume *Literary History of Alberta* appeared in the late 1990s, there had been little critical work done on the subject. Today Alberta literature is no longer a young literature. It has a history and a tradition. The subtitle of this volume, "Building on a Literary Identity," acknowledges that history.

In her "Introduction" to *Wild Words*, Aritha van Herk asks "What does an Alberta writer encompass?" She concludes that "there is simply no essential set of measures that can delineate an Alberta writer" (2). She's right. It is not the goal of this volume to delineate an essential Albertanism. Instead, it purports to expose the historically contingent nature of so much of Alberta writing and to show how defining a literary identity is always a work-in-progress. This volume contains thirteen essays that range from bio-literary discussions of historical figures to critical studies of single texts. The result is not a straight line from point A to point B. Rather, it is a tenuous thread that zigzags and spirals back and forth. While we gradually move the reader from now to then, the contributors mix genres, literary styles, and also make bold comparisons. It is the sign of the maturity of a literature that it can withstand deviation and controversy. It is also the sign of a mature literature that it can challenge, deconstruct, and resist the conventional and the official. If this volume demonstrates anything,

it is that Alberta writers, especially in the contemporary period, are not afraid to uncover, re-think, and re-imagine parts of Alberta history, exposing what had been laid to rest as unfinished business needing serious re-consideration. The work of Fred Stenson is a prime example.

We begin this volume with a work of creative non-fiction by the novelist Katherine Govier, in which she explores her relationship to Alberta, both personally and in her fiction. It is an acknowledgement that the writer is the primary focus of this volume and it is valuable to see how writers reflect on their own work. Born and raised in Edmonton, Govier spent her post-adolescence in central Canada, where she developed a major career as a novelist. “Where is home?” she asks, when she has spent half her life split between Alberta and Toronto. Her answer is that “home” is an interior concept that melds memory and experience into a sense of attachment, of belonging. After describing moments of remembrance from her days in Edmonton, she offers a synopsis of her writing and those of her works that were Alberta-influenced. Because she has seen Alberta from “afar” as well as lived its identity, her fiction carries the tension of her observer-participant status. Today her literary consciousness has returned to Alberta with a novel about Canmore and Banff National Park, *The Three Sisters Bar and Hotel* (2016).

The next chapter is a complex and intense discussion of First Nations writing by Tasha Hubbard. In “‘My Bones Have Known this Land Long Before Alberta Was Born’: Intersections in Indigenous Geography and Indigenous Creative Expression,” Hubbard points out that canonical prairie literature and criticism have been shaped by colonialism “entrenched” in a white-male-settler tradition. Even though the land was occupied by thousands of Indigenous peoples and as many as thirty million buffalo, settlers regarded the land as an empty space for them to conquer. Ironically, by the 1880s, as a result of what Hubbard terms a “lethal combination of military intervention, government policy, and private enterprise,” that empty space was achieved, the buffalo were extinct and the Indigenous Peoples ravaged in part through treaty promises which were ignored. Often with a comprehensive background to historic Indigenous concerns, Hubbard’s essay then examines the poetry of Indigenous poets Beth Cuthand, Marilyn Dumont, and Louise Halfe, who document the legacies of being removed and dislocated from the land the Indigenous peoples shared with the buffalo. Their poems suggest that the western conceptions of land are

far more complex when seen through the eyes of the Indigenous, who regard themselves to be part of an “interconnected and dynamic place filled with history and meaning.” As women, they not only seek to write back to the “imposition of white male space on the land,” but also through their poetry to “lament, remember, and rejuvenate the relationship between land, buffalo, and Indigenous peoples,” which may also be read as “acts of resistance” against historical injustices, including genocide. Hubbard’s essay stresses that Indigenous peoples and their stories of the buffalo are now a growing aspect of Indigenous literatures.

Tamara Palmer Seiler takes up the issue of historical justice or injustice in her comparative study of *Filumena*, an opera by John Estacio and John Murrell, and Betty Jane Hegerat’s creative non-fiction book, *the Boy*. Both works are creative treatments of murder and the execution of those found guilty of the crimes. Seiler argues that the two works have similar “narrative strategies,” since they are both hybrid art forms. The literary form is a hybrid of fiction and non-fiction, while the opera is a combination of performance and song (lyrics and music), drama and concert. Because both works are based on historical events that happened in Alberta, their Alberta authors have to retain a factual core, while meeting the demands of creativity and storytelling. Seiler’s goal is to identify “the similarities between seemingly dissimilar works.” The book tells the story of a family that was murdered in central Alberta in the 1950s and the young man who was executed for the crime. The opera tells the story of two Italian immigrants to the Crowsnest district of southern Alberta who were hanged for the murder of a policeman in the 1920s.

Seiler sees *Filumena* as a work of creative non-fiction. The librettist John Murrell worked with the known facts and with the prerequisites of grand opera and its tradition of tragic heroines. The result is “an accurate rendering of known facts,” while creating an intense experience of the “redemptive power of the human spirit.” She describes *the Boy* as a “work of historiographic metafiction,” by which she means a fiction “grounded in historical, social, and political realities.” Using two narratives, the author of the book offers non-fictional and fictional elements for consideration. This structure allows the author to surpass the strict limits imposed by journalistic accounts of events and personalities. Seiler points out that in both cases—the opera and the book—their narrative strategies are able to put a human face on formerly rigid categories like murderer and victim,

and she concludes by noting that if all narratives are captive to conventions in storytelling, the combining of fact and fiction allows the human spirit of those involved to receive a fuller representation.

The blend of fiction and history used in the counter-narratives of Seiler's study raises the issue of the current state of critical writing and thinking in Alberta. Whenever an ideological construct comes to dominate a subject matter through state and media loyalties, anti-narratives appear that question and challenge this discourse. This has certainly been the case on environmental issues and the contribution of Alberta's energy industry to pollution and climate change. Geo Takach analyzes the work of two Calgary-based non-fiction writers on environmental issues, Chris Turner and Andrew Nikiforuk, who have developed national and international reputations. Both writers represent a reaction to the unrelenting tar sands' development of this century that propelled Alberta into the forefront of climate change, sustainability, and Aboriginal rights debates on a global scale. Takach sees the tar sands as the defining issue for Alberta. That two Alberta writers should take on this history of unrelenting energy development is a noteworthy example of the crucial role that writers play in public discourse.

Tkach begins with a crash course in environmental literature and its history in the province. He then turns to Nikiforuk's work and what he terms his emphasis on "the land as a maternal shelter." He surveys each of his books, including his 2011 work on the voracious pine beetle and how global warming has contributed to its destruction of North American forests and his highly provocative 2012 book, *The Energy of Slaves: Oil and the New Servitude*, in which he draws parallels between the southern American plantation system and our own energy servitude. Takach concludes that Nikiforuk is fundamentally a moralist who "wants to scare, anger, and shame us into curing our addiction to fossil fuel." While Nikiforuk seeks to slay the beast with condemnation, Chris Turner seeks to slay it by offering alternatives.

Chris Turner burst on the national scene with his first environmental book *The Geography of Hope* (2007), which studies green innovations around the world and argues that their success (wind power) means that alternative energy sources can help us lower our carbon footprint and influence climate change through reducing greenhouse gas emissions. His second book, *The Leap: How to Survive and Thrive in the Sustainable*

Economy (2011), builds on the technological and scientific focus of the first book, with a call to re-thinking how we view economic growth and the costs of the status quo. Takach considers Turner a thinker who “wants to inspire us to leap into a brave new world of environmental sustainability.” Both writers, in Takach’s view, have produced a new corpus that “transcends much of the body of nature writing that preceded them in Alberta.” In an environmental apocalyptic age, they have provided two contrasting approaches to fundamental change. Turner’s techno-utopianism can find more traction in a corporate environment than Nikiforuk’s preaching about social and environmental evil. Turner is currently writing a book about the tar sands at a time when Alberta has a new government (NDP) ready to make *some* changes to the historical narrative about wealth, jobs, and the oil patch.

While First Nations writers, environmental writers, and creative non-fiction writers spar with established narratives about events and peoples, the immigrant writer engages with Alberta at a different level. Diasporic existence is a conflicted region of the mind. A writer formed in another world, through another language, and within a different culture, must navigate the shoals of the unfamiliar, the very strange, and the confusing when arriving in Alberta. Recent examples of that navigation have been the Alberta novels of David Albahari, a Serbian writer who came to Calgary in 1994 to take up a one-year post as Distinguished Writer-in-Residence at the University of Calgary. Because of the civil war in the former Yugoslavia (1991-99), he chose to stay in Calgary after his appointment ended, and to live in Alberta as a writer. He visited his homeland annually to launch new titles because he wrote all his books in Serbian. He is a prolific novelist, short story writer, essayist, and translator who published over a dozen novels, a few short story collections, and other work during his years in Calgary. Considered a literary giant in his birth country with work translated into thirty languages, he remains relatively unknown in Alberta and throughout Canada.

Albahari published three novels that deal specifically with Alberta during the time he lived in Calgary. The first is *Snow Man* (Serbian 1995, English 2005); the second is *Bait* (Serbian 1996, English 2001); and the third is *Globetrotter* (Serbian 2001, English 2014). Melnyk’s essay examines these three works and their avant-garde and postmodern writing style. Each novel appears as a surrealist narrative that is one paragraph and often

told in the first person by a disembodied voice. Melnyk views Albahari's Alberta novels as a twenty-first-century continuation of the European immigrant literature that began a century earlier with writers such as Stephan G. Stephansson, Georges Bugnet, Laura Salverson, and Illa Kiriak. While the split personality that inhabits diaspora writers generates hybridity in some, in others it casts a different shadow. In Albahari's case, the unwavering commitment to writing in Serbian has created a language barrier that was only occasionally breached by translation. It also meant that Albahari had a focus on Europe, with his Alberta novels being only a minor part of his output during his time in Calgary.

Melnyk points out that Albahari's novels are defined primarily by a postmodern sensibility that sees the world as a pastiche of impressions and subjectivities. Alberta appears in these three novels as a place in which his protagonists evolve from a state of uncertainty and confusion (*Snow Man*) to a genuine identification with place (*Globetrotter*). There is a movement from an initial world of shadows and fog to a concluding world of historical light that indicates that a new world has come to be understood. Melnyk concludes that Calgary was a place of refuge for Albahari from which he could observe his European roots in a state of creative peace. His European imagination was nurtured by the province's lack of ethnic strife and bloody history. It was a space of peace from which he developed a major reputation. He returned to Serbia in 2012 when he was in his mid-sixties.

While the diasporic imagination engages with a new reality through tension and uncertainty, an imagination that feels at home in Alberta seeks to know the place through a careful study of its aura. This is the case of the poet Alice Major, who has spent many years in Edmonton. In "Science and the City: The Poetics of Alice Major's Edmonton," Neil Querengesser notes that Edmonton's first poet laureate, Alice Major (2005-07), has expressed her empathy and love for her adopted city throughout eleven books of poetry. Querengesser's essay, a penetrating and insightful study, convincingly demonstrates how Major incorporates the ideas, facts, and discourse of science into much of her work, particularly that dealing with her adopted city since the 1980s. Through a close reading of several poems that apply such perspectives as the psychological, anthropological, and geographical to the people and places of Edmonton, from the denizens of funky cafés to the bedrock of the North Saskatchewan River, Querengesser effectively complements Major's own unique and sometimes startling renditions of

this rich and varied urban landscape. He further notes that Major's poetry also contains numerous allusions to literary works and their writers, which add to her creation of vivid poetic images. While Querengesser observes that Major "has the advantage of seeing this city from fresh and imaginative perspectives," his essay suggests those who read her challenging poetry (with Querengesser as an informed tour guide) will also undoubtedly find their own perspectives on this northern prairie city much enhanced.

Alberta has a murky and sometimes unsavoury past, which contemporary writers have worked hard to expose, so that the province's history has become an important element or source for writing in Alberta. In "Double Vision and *Jennie's Story*," Cynthia Zimmerman writes that *Jennie's Story* (1987), a play by Calgary-born Betty Lambert, is based on a true story about Jennie, a prairie teenager sexually abused by a priest who employed her as a domestic during the 1930s. Told she needed to have her appendix removed, Jennie was taken to Calgary for the operation. Years later, happily married but unable to conceive, Jennie discovers that she had been lied to—that she had, in fact, been legally sterilized under The Sexual Sterilization Act (Alberta 1928). Zimmerman's essay explains why, given the heart-breaking dimensions of the story, Lambert should have chosen to give the play a happy ending, a question that has puzzled many critics and reviewers. The wretched tale of *Jennie's Story*, by Betty Lambert, should be familiar to many Alberta readers, who will recall that Leilani Muir, who had been unjustly sterilized as "mentally defective" in 1959, sought legal counsel to sue the Alberta Government for wrongful sterilization. The success of that case, launched in 1995, led to the Alberta Government's apology for the forced sterilization of more than two thousand and eight hundred people, as well as the rewarding of large sums of money in damages to survivors.

It is clear from the range of work discussed to this point that Alberta's socio-economic history and its treatment of human beings and the environment falls short on a number of fronts. How a writer generates new insights from selecting historical forms of writing such as "hornbooks" is evident in Harry Vandervlist's highly imaginative and insightful comparison of Robert Kroetsch's *The Hornbooks of Rita K.*, a reflection on poetics, with the work of the American minimalist conceptual artist, James Turrell. In particular, Vandervlist examines Turrell's "Twilight Arch" installation from 1991, referenced on several occasions in *The Hornbooks*.

A hornbook was simply a piece of wood with a handle on which there was writing. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, they were used to teach children when books were not available. Because Vandervlist decides that both works are “unusual,” he delves into the nature of their deviation from generic norms. He sees both works as engaging with “the concepts of framing and transparency” and being self-reflective on “fundamental artistic processes,” and how both attempt to transcend the “ordinary experience” of art. Vandervlist explores the convergence of two different media by searching for their commonalities. The focus of the convergence is their framing of absence and the tools each creator uses to *highlight* a presence through absence. He concludes that the main difference between Turrell’s art and Kroetsch’s can be understood as the former’s individual-response goals, while the latter’s work “retains irreducibly social elements.” Vandervlist’s exploration of the elemental features of both works brings a new perspective to Kroetsch’s engagement with writing at a reflective point in his career. Like Seiler’s comparison of creative non-fiction with an opera, Vandervlist’s comparison of literature and art opens the door to trans-generic art forms and the cross-fertilization of different media. This cross-fertilization is particularly important for expanding the traditional boundaries of the written word in Alberta.

A move beyond traditional prose styles had occurred several decades earlier in the groundbreaking novel *The Double Hook* by Sheila Watson. Although the novel is not situated in Alberta (it is set in the analogous ranching country of British Columbia), it was written by a writer who devoted much of her professional academic life to the literary arts in her adopted province. Joseph Pivato’s essay is a bio-critical study of the works of Sheila Watson, in which Pivato points out the modernist interests and influences which gave biblical and mythological depth to her writing. Watson’s Catholicism informed her literary consciousness and was foundational to her sensibility as a writer. Pivato provides a brief overview of Watson’s life but devotes most of his chapter to comments on the critical approaches to her work over the past half-century. He provides a synopsis of the thinking found in George Bowering’s edited collection, *Sheila Watson and The Double Hook* (1985) and Stephen Scobie’s insightful volume, *Sheila Watson and Her Works* (1984), with an emphasis on her mytho-poetic approaches. Pivato is particularly impressed with Barbara Godard’s 1979 essay on language style in *The Double Hook* and discusses it at some length.

Pivato notes that interest in Watson continued into the 1990s with chapters on her work in Arnold Davidson's *Coyote Country: Fiction of the Canadian West* (1994) and Margaret Turner's *Imagining Culture: New World Narrative and the Writing of Canada* (1995). He also discusses Fred Flahiff's 2005 biography of Watson, titled *Always Someone to Kill the Doves: A Life of Sheila Watson*. The essay's bibliographic and biographical focus is not about textual analysis, but rather summarizes clearly the relationship between creativity and literary reputation as developed through critical commentaries. What Pivato makes clear is that Sheila Watson's work continues to challenge critical thinking, an indication of the importance of her writing.

The contribution of women writers to Alberta's literary identity is significant as the case of Sheila Watson indicates. In fact, the majority of the writers studied in the volume are women—women as poets, women as novelists, creative non-fiction writers, and playwrights. The originality and vitality of drama in Alberta's literary history are captured in the work of two outstanding playwrights—Gwen Pharis Ringwood and Elsie Park Gowan. Their writing, covering five decades, is discussed by Moira Day in "Gwen Pharis Ringwood and Elsie Park Gowan: Writing the Land, 1933-1979." Day observes that both playwrights moved to the "boom" province of Alberta—Gowan, from Scotland to Edmonton in 1912, and Ringwood, from Washington State to McGrath in 1913—at a time when radical change in terms of immigration, feminism, and populism were altering the nature of "the province's social, political, intellectual, and physical landscape." This stimulating environment compelled both playwrights to produce, from the 1930s to the 1970s, distinctively Canadian radio and stage plays which engaged with the land, their depiction always "complicated by the forces of industrialization, urbanization, commercialization (including logging and entertainment), and economic self-interest." Both playwrights insisted that their audiences, comprised of people who inhabited the prairies, forests, and mountains, would regard works about their own land and local issues of far more interest than imperial British plays or men's drawing-room comedies.

Day's essay provides a fascinating overview of the amazing scope and range of these authors' subjects, dramatized both on stage and radio. Gowan's documented the history of Manitoba from 1812 to 1870, including the Riel Uprising, the story of Edmonton, the impact of the fur trade and

the arrival of the railway, as well as the lure of the gold rush. Ringwood, too, documented life in towns and cities such as Edson and Edmonton. Both women's dramatic works reflected the arrival of immigrant groups such as Ukrainians, Asians, and Africans to the prairies; both playwrights often incorporated aboriginal characters into their early works. But in spite of their prodigious output, at the end of their lives—Ringwood died in 1984 and Gowan in 1999—both were disappointed that they had not created a climate in which it was possible to be “female, Canadian, western Canadian, and a playwright without contradiction or inequity.” Nevertheless, Day argues that these courageous playwrights' efforts to write the land—to “make place”—paved the way for the burgeoning of western Canadian theatre.

When historians study the work of other historians, they quickly develop the context and limitations of this work. Doug Francis has provided an essay on Alberta historiography that surveys a century of historical writing in Alberta. In general he finds Alberta history “a rich harvest of books and articles.” What he provides is a historiography of six “survey histories of the province” and what they tell us about the evolution of historical interpretation over ninety years. The first work is Archibald MacRae's *History of the Province of Alberta* (1912), which was followed a dozen years later by John Blue's *Alberta: Past and Present: Historical and Biographical*. These preliminary surveys had to wait for fifty years before the next book appeared—James G. MacGregor's *History of Alberta* (1972). The early volumes were biographical in nature, with a focus on prominent figures from the early years. According to Francis, even MacGregor's volume was “highly anecdotal.” It was not until 1990, with the publication of Howard and Tamara Palmer's *Alberta: A New History*, that we finally had a history informed by academic standards. A decade later, there was a return to popular history of the sort written by MacGregor, but with a decidedly postmodern sensibility with the appearance of Aritha van Herk's entertaining *Mavericks: An Incurable History of Alberta* (2001). When Alberta celebrated its centenary a few years later, a number of academics marked the event with a collective history titled *Alberta Formed, Alberta Transformed* (2006).

Francis concludes that each work is “unique in its approach and emphasis.” He views the writing of provincial history as a challenge in which the historian argues for the distinct nature of the province, while placing

its evolution in “a larger history, be it regional, national, continental or global.” With so few general surveys of Alberta history during the past century, there continues to be a need for future historians to rise to face the challenge.

The genre of fiction continues to dominate the articulation of an Alberta identity. Of contemporary writers who have made Alberta a focus for their fiction, Fred Stenson has moved to prominence. Like other writers studied in this volume, he has used Alberta history as a foundation. In “Fin de Siècle Lunacy in Fred Stenson’s *The Great Karoo*,” Donna Coates points out that this is the first novel to fictionalize Canadian participation in the South African War (1899-1902), even though Stenson’s characters step straight out of history. In his attempt to explore issues of national identity at the outbreak of war, Stenson asks why Albertans were “different” and “what right they had to be different,” which are the questions Coates also attempts to answer in her essay. She observes that regional variation in the composition of the reputedly better-educated eastern Canadian Dragoons and the working-class western cowboys who comprised the Canadian Mounted Rifle (CMR) troops played a role. But like Joseph Boyden’s First World War novel *Three Day Road* (2005), *The Great Karoo* draws attention to the previously neglected contributions of Métis soldiers who become superb scouts, trackers, and snipers during these conflicts. Stenson’s novel also stresses the vital role that horses played in the war, and again points out that the men from Western Canada were much more knowledgeable about their selection of horses and how to help them survive the war than the British. While the CMR officers may not have decided the course of the war, they proved that, having stemmed from a non-militaristic, non-violent country where deference to rank and hierarchy played no role, when given a chance to lead, were intelligent and compassionate men who cared about their subordinates. Ultimately, Coates argues that Stenson’s novel ought to be required reading for those contemplating how positive interactions between superiors and their subalterns might be stimulated, and moreover how men in command should react under the appalling conditions of war.

The period that Stenson uses for his fictional account (the South African War) was also the period in which eastern European settlers began their great trek to Western Canada by ship and train. Jars Balan’s account of the work of Nestor Dmytrow, a Ukrainian clergyman who visited

Alberta at the turn of the twentieth century, reflects a vision of Alberta framed by foreign experience like that of David Albahari a century later. Dmytrow began by penning a journalistic account of his travels to the early Ukrainian settlements in Alberta (1897) for a Ukrainian-language newspaper in Pennsylvania. The articles were collected into a fifty-six-page book and sold to its readers. Dmytrow also provided pieces of short fiction to the same journal as an alternative way of describing what he saw and heard. His was the first piece of literary prose in the Ukrainian language written in Canada that was published. Balan provides a biography of the writer and quotes extensively from his reports. He also describes Dmytrow's longer prose fiction, including a novel about the immigrant experience. Balan assesses the clergyman's writing as an "entertaining" and "fascinating record" of the agrarian settlement period.

The continuities, interventions, and lacunae that this volume articulates are a contemporary reading of Alberta writing. This reading indicates that Alberta is not a monolithic sensibility. It takes into account the anomalies of Alberta identity, such as Edmonton and Calgary having as their current mayors two of the most progressive figures in Canadian politics, or the surprise election of the provincial New Democratic Party led by Rachel Notley in 2015 after eighty years of conservative government. Clearly Alberta is a multi-cultural, multi-racial, and diverse province. Its two urban centres are the foci of new populations and new thinking. The scholarly criticism presented here suggests that Alberta writing is rich enough and deep enough for fruitful academic research. This research shows that Alberta writing has a self-consciousness that is not afraid to challenge official discourse about problematic events and institutions in its past. By reflecting on the failures, wrongdoing, and oppression found in the past, contemporary Alberta writing moves beyond nostalgia and self-congratulation to a tone of vigorous investigative courage. It would not be a stretch to say that Alberta writing has come of age in the period from 1970 to 2015, and that this maturity is a phenomenon that scholars need to continue investigating.

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