



WRITING ALBERTA: Alberta Building on a Literary Identity
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Writing Alberta's History

R. Douglas Francis

For over a century, historians of Alberta have chronicled the province's history. This labour has resulted in a rich harvest of books and articles. To date, however, no one has examined the historiography: the differing approaches, interpretations, and themes that Alberta historians have applied to the province's past. This chapter will examine this historiography through an analysis of survey histories of the province. Survey histories provide an overview of their subject and usually incorporate the most recent trends in research and interpretation. To date, there have been six survey histories of Alberta, a relatively small number but in line with survey histories of other provinces with the exception of Quebec where history and identity have consistently played a prominent role.

Archibald Oswald MacRae, the principal of Western Canada College, a private boys' school (and the forerunner of Western Canada high school), wrote the first history, simply entitled *History of the Province of Alberta*, in 1912. His history appeared seven years after the founding of the province and five years after the incorporation of the History Society of Alberta. The Society aimed to "encourage the study of the history of Alberta and Canada, to rescue from oblivion the memories of the original inhabitants, fur traders, explorers, and settlers of the north and west of Canada, to obtain and preserve narratives in print, manuscripts or otherwise of their travels, adventures, labor and observations" (Historical Society of Alberta). MacRae's history fulfilled the aspirations of the Society. His history records extensively the "memories of the original inhabitants" while focusing at length on their contribution to the province's history. He also incorporates the history of the fur traders, explorers, and settlers. As well, his history

contains documentation of Native myths and stories, lengthy excerpts from fur traders' and missionaries' accounts, along with extensive quotations from government reports, material that might otherwise have been lost.

John Blue, the Provincial Librarian, wrote the second history, *Alberta: Past and Present: Historical and Biographical*, in 1924. The decade of the 1920s was the heyday of Canadian nationalism, an offshoot of the pride engendered by Canada's contribution to the First World War. Blue reflected this national pride by focusing on the ways that Alberta was an integral part of Canada's history. He set out his aim in his "Foreword": "to trace the development of the political institutions of the newest province of the Dominion and compare it with the development of similar institutions in the older provinces of Canada" (Blue v).

Then a fifty-year hiatus prevailed before the next history appeared. This period was devoted to national history, culminating in the Canadian centennial in 1967. Only after the celebrations had died down did regional, provincial, and local histories come into vogue, along with the histories of specific groups that had not been included or given sufficient attention in national histories, such as Natives, women, and workers. What triggered the shift was an appeal by two prominent Canadian historians. Ramsay Cook urges Canadian historians in an article entitled "Canadian Historical Writing," written at the time of Canada's centennial, to explore ways in which Canadian historians can get beyond their obsession with national history. He recommends focusing on provincial and local history, and on groups that had been overlooked in national history. In a seminal article entitled "Limited Identities in Canada" (1969), J.M.S. Careless made a similar appeal. The term "Limited Identities" has stood for a major shift in Canadian history that took place beginning in the 1960s. James G. MacGregor's *History of Alberta*, published in 1972, was Alberta's contribution to "limited identities." MacGregor, an engineer by training but a historian by passion, wanted to write a popular history of the province that would promote the province as a success story. "Progress" became his mantra, reaching its peak, he believed, in the period in which he was writing.

Howard and Tamara Palmer produced the first authoritative history of Alberta. Entitled *Alberta: A New History* (1990), to distinguish it from MacGregor's, it incorporated the abundance of new historical research of the 1970s and 1980s. It also provided an extensive account of

groups overlooked in earlier histories, most notably ethnic groups. Howard Palmer was a historian of ethnicity at the University of Calgary while Tamara Palmer specialized in ethnic literature. Aritha van Herk, an English professor at the University of Calgary, trumped the Palmers' scholarly history with *Mavericks: An Incurable History of Alberta* in 2001. It received numerous public accolades, including being chosen by the Calgary Public Library Association as "the book that all Albertans should read" in 2011. She aimed to bring Alberta history to life and relevant to today's sensitivities by telling the stories of the "rebels" in the province's past, implying throughout that these "incurables" were what distinguished Alberta's history from that of other provinces and that gave Alberta its distinct identity.

The debate over popular versus scholarly histories of Alberta has been ongoing. It is evident in the most recent history, a two-volume history entitled *Alberta Formed – Alberta Transformed*, written for Alberta's centennial and published in 2006, only four years after *Mavericks*. The editors of the volumes, Michael Payne, Donald Wetherell, and Catherine Cavanaugh, asked contributors, the majority being professional historians, to choose a date or a limited time period in Alberta's past and to show its importance in the province's history. While acknowledged by professional historians for its incorporation of the most up-to-date research and for displaying recent trends in historical writing, the volumes have not penetrated beyond the walls of academia, while van Herk's *Mavericks* continues to elicit public praise. The remainder of this chapter will look at each of these survey histories in greater depth to show the changing interpretations and approach to the province's history.

History of the Province of Alberta

Archibald MacRae's history is listed as being three volumes in length. In actuality, history only constitutes three-quarters of the first volume. The remaining quarter of volume one, along with volumes two and three, consists of biographical sketches of prominent Albertans. Businessmen and professionals, a significant number of them being Calgarians, make up the majority of entries. These biographical sketches are informative but not of

historical value. MacRae does not attempt to set these individuals into a historical context or to show their historical importance.

This caveat aside, MacRae's history is impressive. One would expect a history of the province published in 1912, one of the banner years of Alberta's prosperity, to be Whiggish in approach, with a focus on the current period and a history that records an upward progression to the golden age of the present. MacRae's history is not of this nature. To him, the golden age is in the past, particularly the period when the Native people were dominant. His real interest is to present the "romantic traditions [and] the unique features of Indian tribes and people" (MacRae iv). He notes in his "Preface" what such a history would record:

What the Red Race said and did, how they loved and won and lost, fevered and fought and died; how this people of philosophic calm, if but of broken expression, viewed 'life's fitful dream.' ... [T]his people of the inscrutable face and lofty mien, had an ancestry as profound, as noble, as extraordinary, as any of the wonderful Orientals. (iv)

He laments and apologizes that too little of his history deals with the Native people. Yet of the first five of the histories reviewed in this chapter, MacRae's is the most extensive in coverage of Native history. As well, MacRae is highly sensitive to the Native view on issues of Native-white relations, and tells the history of these events from the Native perspective.

MacRae devotes three chapters and almost sixty pages to the Indian Tribes of Alberta, discussing their way of life, their beliefs, and their traditions on the eve of the coming of the Europeans. In a chapter on the early explorers and fur traders, he emphasizes their dependence on the Native population for survival and success. He points out that while others look at these Europeans as "the forerunners of civilisation in North America," he sees them as "ahead of that civilisation: they outran it, or ran away from it" (26), and adopted the better way of life of the Native people. He ends his discussion of the fur trade era with a reflection on Lieutenant Governor Morris, one of the sympathetic governors of the North West Territory with regards to Natives.

In referring to the future, the Lieutenant Governor advised the continuance of negotiations with the native tribes, looking to satisfactory regulations whereby the latter might be taught how to prolong their present sources of food and raiment, and at the same time learn of the agricultural methods of the white men. (258)

Even in the post-1870 period, he provides an overview chapter on the “Treaties With the Alberta Indians” along with a separate chapter on Treaty 6 and two chapters on Treaty 7. His chapter on the North West Rebellion of 1885 contains an extensive section on the Native perspective and involvement in that confrontation. MacRae attributes the Native involvement to starvation due to reduced rations on the part of the Canadian government, thus blaming the government rather than First Nations or Métis for their actions. He also sees 1885 as a critical turning point in First Nations history, marking the decline of this “noble race.” MacRae reveals his continued admiration for First Nations in the following excerpt:

It is not necessary to hold a brief for all the wild excesses, the bloody cruelty, the monstrous behavior of the Indian tribes, to feel a precious point of contact with their life in its romantic attachment to the beauty and wealth of Nature, untarnished by the machinery of modern industrial conditions. (430-31)

MacRae’s discussion of the fur trade era deserves praise beyond its focus on Native history. It also foretold trends in historical writing. He chastises the fur hunters for the “frightful slaughter of fur bearing animals in those days” (38) and provides statistics as to the number of beaver, marten, mink, musquash, and others slaughtered in the latter part of the eighteenth century. He might well have been Alberta’s first environmental historian. He might also be considered to be Alberta’s first social historian. He has a remarkable chapter on “Life in and about the Forts and Trading Posts,” in which he provides detail on the structure of the “typical fort,” the daily life of a fur trader, the social hierarchy in the fur trading posts, and the many festivities held at the forts to ward off boredom (141-52).

MacRae devotes a chapter to the Royal North West Mounted Police (NWMP). He describes the Mounties as “a truly magnificent force in its

history and traditions” (259). They were responsible for bringing “British Law and Justice ... over an immense area” (260). But their real value, in MacRae’s view, was their positive contribution to Indian-white relations, most evident in the North West Rebellion of 1885. He notes:

Because he [the Mountie] was pure in intention, because, without alloy, he carried the sense of British justice and a square deal, because his sympathy was unmixed, and he believed the Indian had rights as well as the white man, ... the Mounted Police will live in the History of Western Canada. (432)

MacRae’s final chapter, “Progress and Development of the Province of Alberta,” contains a compilation of statistics that show the remarkable growth in population, but especially in material progress since 1905—“in factories, mines, farms, and transportation” (466). However, in keeping with his romantic approach to history, he is equally intent on noting the “spiritual growth” of the province, “from the history of man subduing the earth to the History of the Church, and the Missionaries subduing man to the Kingdom” (468). He praises the work of the missionaries among the Native population and of the churches for bringing civility to the province. “The Canadian West,” he concludes, “has been saved the deterioration and destruction of a crass materialism by the service of the Christian Church” (469). It is an appropriate conclusion to a history that emphasizes the humanizing aspect of Alberta’s past, especially with regards to its Native population.

MacRae’s history does not adhere to what we today judge history to be. Often it is little more than a compilation of facts and verbatim reports, with limited attempts at analysis or interpretation. As well, he does not acknowledge his sources. Still, the strength of his history lies in the comprehensive treatment of the early fur trade era, and especially of the Native population, albeit from an overly positive perspective. Also, it is valuable to have many of the reports and written accounts of the early “players” in Alberta’s history available in one source. Being the first overall history of the province, it is impressive in the topics he covers, and the insights he provides to the people and events that together constituted the history of the province to that point in time.

Alberta's Past and Present

John Blue's three-volume *Alberta's Past and Present* contains similarities to MacRae's in terms of approach, but also differences in interpretation. Only three-quarters of the first volume is historical, the remainder of the volume plus volumes two and three are biographical, with many of the entries being individuals who also appeared in MacRae's volume. Blue also begins with European exploration as did MacRae. Here the similarities end. Blue does not romanticize the past and the Native people. He presents a forward-looking Whiggish approach to history with the golden age in the present not the past. Blue provides an unusual periodization of Alberta's history. He writes: "The first period will cover the early explorations and rule of the Fur Traders. The second period concerns rival fur companies, the Selkirk Purchase, etc.—1811-1821. The third period, which in many ways is the most wonderful of all, deals with the events since 1821—tells the story of the marvelous transformation of the Great Lone Land into the rich and populous Alberta of today" (Blue v). What historians today emphasize as a critical turning point in western Canadian history—the Canadian takeover of the region by the Canadian government in 1870—Blue incorporates into the section dealing with the rule of the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) after 1821. He does so because he believes that the consolidation of the North West under the HBC and the influx of people into the region during the period 1840 to 1870 prepared the way for its incorporation into Confederation. Blue is clearly most anxious to deal with the third period and sees the first two as only preliminary acts to the final glorious moment when Alberta came into its own. Sections One and Two contain only four chapters (seventy-five pages in total). In Section Three, which covers all of Alberta's history since 1821, he devotes an entire chapter to George Simpson, the governor of HBC, and a chapter on early European explorers and travelers prior to 1870. He sees both Simpson and Lord Selkirk (the founder of the Red River colony) as "visionaries" in preparing the region for a Canadian takeover and large-scale settlement. These two chapters make up an additional twenty pages on the pre-1870 period. Thus all of the history of the region that constitutes Alberta up until the incorporation of the North West into Confederation, Blue tells in less than one hundred pages of a 425-page history. In contrast, MacRae devoted 240 out of 460 pages to the same period.

As noted earlier, Blue's objective in his history was to show ways in which Alberta has always been intricately associated with Canada. He emphasizes how Albertans achieved responsible government, and the importance of that accomplishment for the cultivation of civic citizens. He also dwells at length on how Alberta was integrated into Canadian Confederation, thus making it equal to other provinces as a contributor to the greatness of Canada. Blue discusses the scientific expedition of 1857 headed by Henry Youle Hind and sponsored by the government of the Canadas while overlooking the Palliser expedition sent out by the British government at the same time. Out of the Hind expedition came the vision of a transcontinental nation that would include the North West and be tied together by the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR). Blue sees this vision as fulfilling the work of the early explorers in the era of the HBC: "The pioneer work of [Alexander] Mackenzie and [David] Thompson was finished, and a new era was breaking over the Great Lone Land" (96).

Blue has a second objective in his history besides integrating Alberta's history with that of Canada as a whole: to chronicle the "wonderful material development" of the Province especially since 1905. In preparation for telling this "story of enthralling interest," he sketches out the contrast of past and present in his "Foreword":

Less than fifty years ago the Blackfeet and the Crees roamed the plains and camped on the sites of the principal cities of the province. They hunted the buffalo and the antelope over the unploughed acres that now comprise the farms and homesteads of half a million people. Elk and deer by thousands found shelter in the foothills and mountain passes where now scores of mining towns and villages prosper and flourish. Less than fifty years ago, there was not a mile of railway between the Red River and the Rocky Mountains. Today there are over six thousand miles of railway in the province of Alberta alone, connected with all the great transcontinental systems of Canada and the United States. The only civilized persons who had penetrated the Great Lone Land were the Hudson's Bay traders, the hunters and trappers, the missionaries and the prospectors on the way to the gold diggings of Yale and Caribou. (v)

By omission, the last sentence speaks volumes about Blue's views of the Native population, and contrasts markedly his views from those of MacRae's. To Blue, the Native people were a dying race whose passing was not only inevitable but also necessary for the "story of this wonderful transformation" to take place. As well, Blue was further removed from the frontier era than MacRae, writing at a time when the Métis and First Nations people had almost become a non-entity in the public psyche.

Blue devotes a chapter to the famed NWMP. However, his approach to the Force is different than that of MacRae's. While MacRae emphasized the role of the Mounties in helping the Natives to adjust to the coming of white settlers and to their new experience at farming, Blue stresses the roles of the Mounties in maintaining a federal and Canadian presence in the region, and in incorporating the West into Confederation. "No institution ever established by the Government of Canada has more fully realised the hopes of the country than the Mounted Police" (172). The other group that Blue identifies as "playing an heroic part in laying the foundations of civilization in the Great Lone Land" and integrating the region into Canadian Confederation is the missionaries. "For the joy of bearing the message of life to the savages and the pioneers of the plains, these sainted messengers," he writes, "endured perils and privations inconceivable" (223-24).

Blue ends his history with a chapter on Alberta women. This reflects the progress women had made in achieving the franchise by 1916. He claims "Alberta women participate in a greater degree in the economic and political life of the Province than in most Provinces of Canada" (419). He attributes their success not to "militant methods, nor denunciation and accusations of men, but by measuring up to the requirements of new surroundings and new duties; and also to the generous appreciation of Alberta men who have placed the women on an absolute equality in all the responsibilities and duties of full citizenship" (419). Blue argues—in a remarkably surprising statement—that "women suffrage was never opposed by any representative body of men in the entire Province" (420); he fails to mention that male representatives in the province never proposed female suffrage until pressured to do so.

A History of Alberta

The long period between Blue's history and James G. MacGregor's *History of Alberta*, published in 1972, was due in part to general trends in the writing of Canadian history, most notably the focus on national history as already noted. It can also be attributed to the lack of research on Alberta's past. Despite the presence of the Historical Society of Alberta, few historians took an interest in the province's history. In fact, MacGregor was instrumental in reviving the fledging Society in the 1950s, while also being involved in the creation of the *Alberta Historical Review* in 1953 (renamed *Alberta History* in 1975). These important developments coincided with a dramatic increase in the number of historians working on Canadian topics as a result of the baby boom generation of the 1960s. The fruit of that productivity would not yield results until the late 1970s and the 1980s. MacGregor's history was both a result of a renewed interest in local history and an impetus for further research on Alberta's past.

MacGregor's *History of Alberta* reflects the strengths and weaknesses of popular history. On the negative side, he does not provide footnotes or a bibliography of sources used. His account is also highly anecdotal. On the positive side, he presents a readable and passionate account of Alberta's past. MacGregor's approach is, like Blue's, Whiggish, an upward projectile towards a near-perfect present. Past individuals were great and worthy of respect, even admiration, in MacGregor's eyes, but their deeds were only preparation for future successes that stand out when compared to those of the past. If, for McRae, the great "heroes" in Alberta's past were the Native people, and for Blue, the NWMP and the missionaries, then for MacGregor, it was the pioneer homesteaders. They were the "enduring settlers" who every year at harvest time continued to contribute to the province's greatness.

MacGregor devotes even less of his book on the fur trade era than his predecessors (only ninety pages compared to 240 pages for MacRae and one hundred pages for Blue). Like MacRae, MacGregor romanticizes the Native peoples in this early period. He describes them as Alberta's first ecologists "content to take [their] place in the pristine ecology without upsetting its equilibrium" (19). He envisions each as "brave, generous, daring, intelligent, and infinitely patient in the chase, ... but rarely would he submit to authority long enough to gain some distant goal" (MacGregor 24).

MacGregor is critical of the NWMP, especially the rank and file. While he notes how fortunate Canadians are to have had in their history “men of the calibre of those who headed the NWMP, selected the recruits, instilled in them their own British ideals of conduct and duties of a police force and disciplined them into the most famous police body in the world” (96-97), he stresses how inexperienced and even incompetent the rank and file members were. Their ultimate success was due not to their innate qualities that they brought from the East, but from the qualities they acquired by being in the West.

MacGregor notes the pros and cons of the Indian Treaties. On the positive side, he points out that the Treaties and the reserves “saved [the Natives] from extinction” (108). On the negative side, he admits that they were duped into signing treaties, unaware of the content. He criticizes the Canadian government for failing to fulfill their treaty obligations and promises. But he concludes that the real cause of the failure of the treaties was that “a stone-age people had no time to adjust to the ruthless new era ahead” (109). (He fails to mention that along with the “ruthless new era” came “ruthless men” intent on obliterating a race that they believed were already destined to die out.) MacGregor had sympathy for the Native people, but ultimately blamed them for their failure to embrace “progress.”

The chapter following the one on Indian Treaties is entitled “White Progress to 1881.” From this point on, the history of Alberta for MacGregor is the history of material growth and prosperity. Subsequent chapter titles attest to this upward projectile of progress: “Slow But Definite Progress 1885-1900”; “Boom times 1906-1914”; “The Roaring Twenties 1920-1929; “Oil Money 1947-1971.” MacGregor intriguingly pinpoints the transition to this new age of progress to “three days, all following within the same week in July 1881.”

On the nineteenth, Sitting Bull surrendered to the American authorities and Canada’s Sioux problem ended. The next day, five hundred miles to the northwest on their way to settle on their reserve, Crowfoot and his starving followers straggled into Fort Macleod; Canada’s prairie Indians had come to the end of their freedom. Less than a week later the first CPR train to cross the new bridge over the Red River rolled into Winnipeg to initiate the new era. (113)

MacGregor's final chapter, "Abounding Material Riches," continues his upbeat account of the province's material well-being. He begins the chapter with the observation, "Though oil was scarcely the Social Credit of which Aberhart had dreamed, it was nevertheless such a good substitute that his one-time followers lost their old-time fervor" (302). Under Ernest Manning, he notes, "Alberta became a mecca to which businessmen ... could entrust their savings" (304). MacGregor does point out that with the wealth came poverty, especially among First Nations and Métis. He also expresses concern about the quick depletion of the province's resources and the pollution resulting from an overheated economy. But these were "minor" concerns, according to MacGregor, that should not distract from marveling at the province's success over the years. He ends the chapter with a reflection on the province's greatest "resource," youth, and the challenge ahead for them. They will have to choose a path at a time when there is a "perilous fork in the road" (315), MacGregor writes. The easy path is to "the dead end of material success"; the other path, more difficult and even treacherous, "holds forth the promise that along it social values will supersede mercenary motives" (315). It is a strange conclusion to a chapter—and an entire history—that focuses on and celebrates Alberta's history of material progress.

Alberta: A New History

Howard and Tamara Palmer's *Alberta: A New History* is the first authoritative history of the province. It is extensively researched, with an annotated bibliography and endnotes for each chapter, along with being analytical and well written. At the outset, the authors highlight the ways that theirs is a *new* history of Alberta. They point out that it incorporates a wealth of new research done since MacGregor's history. It presents a new perspective on the past, and it focuses on new topics not covered by previous histories, such as coal mining, organized labour, education, sports and leisure, tourism, popular culture, the arts, and women. As well, they note, it "tells the story of the creation of a new society out of the interaction among varied personalities and a myriad of economic, political, and social forces" (Palmer and Palmer x).

In their chapter on the First Nations in the fur trade, they present the current trend in historiography that depicts the First Nations as active agents rather than passive victims of the European fur traders. They point out, for example, that “the fur-trade era was a period of equality between whites and Indians, when the Indians went about their own lives. The two groups met briefly at the posts, and exchanged goods. Each received from the other what it could not produce” (19). They also provide an extensive chapter on the missionaries, a topic overlooked or dealt with only briefly in earlier histories of the province. Instead of devoting a separate chapter to the NWMP, as earlier historians did, they discuss the Force in the context of Canadian expansionism and as a means of ensuring federal government control of the region. They deal extensively with the Indian Treaties, going out of their way to present both Native and white views of the treaties at the time and in recent historiography. They see the North West Rebellion of 1885 as a significant turning point in the province’s history: “it marks the end of native power” (49).

The Palmers’ history of Alberta really gains momentum in dealing with the period at the turn of the twentieth century. They devote three chapters—close to one hundred pages—to the years 1896 to 1914. They deal in depth with the diverse ethnic groups that came to populate Alberta, and remind their readers that from this point on, Alberta was “an immigrant society” (76). They also see the period as forming a political culture that would prevail throughout the province’s history: “one-party dominance, western alienation, agrarian unrest and a strong farmers’ protest movement, metropolitan rivalry between Calgary and Edmonton, and a preoccupation with the issues of transportation and resource development” (128). They explain how this unique political culture contributed to the success of the United Farmers of Alberta (UFA) government from 1921 to 1935, and Social Credit from 1935 to 1971. In their chapter on Social Credit, they compare the party to two other “populist” parties of the time, the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) and the UFA, in an effort to explain why the latter two parties succumbed to Social Credit (277-80).

In their chapter on “Boom and Bust: The Lougheed Years and After,” the authors focus on federal-provincial tensions, particularly while Pierre Trudeau was prime minister. Many Albertans, they point out, saw the actions of the federal government, particularly the National Energy Policy,

as an attempt to take control of the province's natural resources. They note that such policies resulted in the rise of western alienation, manifested in the formation of a series of small right-wing separatist parties. They attribute Loughheed's success to being "pragmatic, a good organizer, a team builder, and a tough negotiator" (349).

They end their history on an optimistic note: "Despite the uncertainty of their economic prospects, Albertans face the future with pride in their past achievements. Alberta's relative prosperity, its diverse and enterprising population, vast wilderness and resources, and its natural beauty all combine to suggest much potential for the twenty-first century" (370). While such a conclusion belies the tensions of the time, it does rightly suggest reasons why Albertans could be optimistic about the future.

Mavericks: An Incurable History of Alberta

Aritha van Herk's *Mavericks: An Incurable History of Alberta* is a highly readable, engaging and informative history of the province. The book title tells a great deal: it is a history of individuals who do not fit the mainstream, who are on the margin, and who are fiercely independent. She argues that Alberta has produced its share of "incurable mavericks"; indeed, she sees this as the trademark of the province. Van Herk is her own "incurable maverick," going against the mainstream history of the province to find idiosyncratic characteristics or the "dark side" of individuals that do not appear in earlier histories of the province. She reminds readers that "history is about what we keep; its secret story is about what is lost" (van Herk xi). Her objective is to discover "what is lost" and what to her is the more interesting aspect of the province's history.

Given that *Mavericks* is written from her own perspective, she is very much a part of that history. Each chapter begins with a personal experience or reminiscence that sets the stage for the topic she discusses. These evocations link the past to the present and make her account of the past personable. As well, she interjects her own views and opinions throughout the text. One should not, however, get the impression that her history is only of her own making. She has consulted the primary sources and shows a knowledge of the major secondary sources. What she does is to

“embellish” the facts and at times to stretch their credibility so as to make her history entertaining.

What has made Albertans mavericks, van Herk argues, is their constant fight against outsiders—“the Centre”—the latter threatening their security, their sense of themselves, and their freedom to be who they are. If there is one weakness in her book, it lies in her nebulous reference to what constitutes “the Centre.” It appears at times to refer to the elite in the province of Ontario, but at other times to all Ontarians. In other instances, it refers to what we would call central Canada (Ontario and Quebec). In other contexts, it refers to Ottawa and the politicians and mandarins in the federal government. More generally she uses the term to identify anyone who challenges, criticizes, or simply fails to understand or stands in the way of Albertans doing what they want. In many respects, the term serves as a “scapegoat” for blaming others for unfulfilled hopes or aspirations of Albertans.

She writes an entertaining chapter on the fur traders, which focuses on Anthony Henday, Peter Pond, Alexander Mackenzie, David Thompson, George Simpson, and John Rowland. Her summation of Pond is indicative of her imaginative and lively account of these individuals:

He never wrote a word about that remote country. What we know about him is mostly second-hand, derived from the journals and writings of his contemporaries, especially his young apprentice, Alexander Mackenzie. And yet it seems a fitting harbinger for Europeans in the area that would become Alberta. An American and a murderer who drew a map that misled more than a few people, he fits right into the tradition of this province, long before anyone could have predicted the maverick place it would become. (42)

She discusses the First Nations in the context of the fur trade as opposed to examining their way of life prior to the coming of the Europeans. She brings her account up to the late nineteenth century, discussing the trials and tribulations they experienced as they were forced to transition from fur trading to farming. She ends the chapter with the reminder: “The Alberta Advantage is advantageous for only a few” (108).

Van Herk romanticizes two groups in her history: the NWMP and ranchers. In regards to the Mounties, she notes how this imperialistic force, created by the Centre, came ironically to be one of the great symbols of pride and joy for western Canadians, including Albertans. As for ranchers, she captures the nostalgia for the ranching era in her conclusion to the chapter in which she deals with ranching:

The great ranching era lasted only briefly, but that time still sounds ghostly hoof beats in small-town rodeos, in the dust of summer roundups, in the slow loll of grazing cattle scattered over sage-grass hills within sight of the serrated Rockies. Alberta is still, between that old world and this, a wide-open rangeland. (180)

She overlooks the fact that ranching is another Centre-dominated enterprise with many of the owners of western ranches coming from Canada. Senator Matthew Cochrane is a prime example. Both Mounties and ranchers have been designated in contemporary public discourse as essential elements of identity in southern Alberta, thus contributing to the book's popularity.

Van Herk provides an insightful chapter on Alberta's fight to become a province. The great hero is the one who lost: Frederick Haultain, thus reinforcing her image of westerners as those who have consistently had to fight the Centre to get what they wanted and have frequently lost. In the case of Haultain, he wanted Saskatchewan and Alberta to be one big province—big enough to challenge Ontario—but got two. He wanted this province to be called "Buffalo," a more exotic name than Alberta and Saskatchewan; he wanted non-partisan politics, and got party politics with a vengeance; he wanted greater local government control, including control over their own land and resources, but was thwarted by Ottawa; he wanted only non-sectarian schools but got separate schools. In the end, Haultain was not even invited to the ceremonies that brought the two new provinces into existence. Van Herk is right that Haultain has never got his due recognition for the province of Alberta—at least not until she demonstrates his importance in her history.

Her last three chapters consist of freewheeling discussions of prominent Albertans who do not fit into earlier chapters. In Chapter Twelve:

“Bread and Circuses, Culture and Bigotry,” she deals with sports and cultural figures who have made a name for themselves inside and outside Alberta. She then offsets these famed people with a discussion of the Centre’s image of Alberta as “redneck, intolerant and racist, conservative and neo-Christian, suspicious of anything new, home of white supremacists, gun lovers, and not a few book-banning school boards” (341). While she does not deny that there is some truth to the stereotype, she reminds readers that, “Unstable, eccentric, susceptible to unpredictable fluctuations in opinion and moment, Alberta rides a bucking bronco, sometimes called pluralism, sometimes called grassroots, sometimes called populism, and sometimes called downright mean and ornery” (349).

Chapter Thirteen: Ladies, Women and Broads” is devoted to spirited women in Alberta’s history, both “respectable” and “disrespectable.” Well researched and well written, the chapter covers Native women, women reformers, and prostitutes. She is especially good at dealing with the “Famous Five”—Nellie McClung, Louise McKinney, Henrietta Muir Edwards, Emily Murphy, and Irene Parlby—who fought to have women recognized as persons, and thus eligible to be appointed to the Senate. But ultimately, she notes, it was a fight for equality. They persevered through three judicial levels to win their case on 18 October 1929. This case fits van Herk’s theme of Albertans against Ottawa, except this time Alberta won.

Her final chapter is, as the title “Buffalo and Beaver, Bluster and Blood” indicates, a series of issues of interest that could not be included in earlier chapters. These issues are presented in alphabetical order, and thus in random fashion rather than in a historical continuum. She begins with “Beaver, Buffalo, Bears,” all animals associated with the early fur trade era, and ends, appropriately, with “Western Alienation,” a theme very much at the heart of *Mavericks*. To show this to be so, she begins her discussion of western alienation with the following reminder: “Just to be repetitious, alienation is a habit we’ve developed into an art, a sport, a way of making Ottawa nervous.” She ends by giving another twist to the popular Alberta government’s slogan: The Alberta Advantage. It is, she claims, “that we know more about the rest of Canada than they know about us. And as for what the Centre thinks it knows about Alberta ... well, beware the smoke and mirrors. The emblem of our province is the prickly wild rose, a hardy fenceline thorn, pretty and tough—just like Alberta” (405).

Alberta Formed—Alberta Transformed

Michael Payne, Donald Wetherell, and Catherine Cavanaugh are the editors of, and contributors to, a two-volume collection of historical essays, entitled *Alberta Formed—Alberta Transformed*, published for Alberta's centennial in 2005. Thirteen of the essays (over three hundred and fifty pages) are devoted to the pre-1905 period and sixteen (over four hundred pages) to the post-1905 period, thus giving almost equal treatment to both periods. The editors emphasize this is not a history of Alberta in the conventional sense. Rather, they assigned to each author a year or brief time period in Alberta's history—dating back to pre-historic times—to show its significance in the province's history. Obviously, it is impossible to review all the essays. Instead, I will discuss the two-volume history from a reflective summation article by the three editors, entitled "Looking Back on Alberta History: Reflections in a Rear-View Mirror" (2006), that deals with themes, topics, and reflections in the preceding essays. The subtitle comes from an observation by Marshall McLuhan, the guru of communication technology and a native of Alberta, that "we look at the present through a rear-view mirror. We march backwards into the future" (Payne et al. 770).

The authors note three periods of significant change in the province's history: "a period before the mid-1700s, another from about 1750 to about 1870, and a third from 1870 to the present" (770), a fairly conventional division. The importance and nature of the first period are the least studied and little known, but what is emerging, they point out, is how connected the First Nations were to places and events beyond their own domain. New technologies, for example, "the different ways that stone tools were shaped" (770), were borrowed from other places or brought into the region with new inhabitants; the same was true of cultural practices, as archeologists and ethnologists unveil beliefs inherited from elsewhere but modified for local conditions. In the second period, from the mid-eighteenth century to 1870, fur trading connected Natives in the area of present-day Alberta to other tribes outside their domain, and eventually put them into contact with European fur traders. The authors emphasize that the connections prevailed because they benefitted both parties.

The annexation of the North West by Canada in 1870 began the third major period of change. It was marked by imperial ambitions on the part of the Canadian government to control the region politically, militarily,

and economically. The authors note that the very name of the province indicates how English Canada saw the West as its preserve. Here, too, outside events and individuals have shaped the province's history—"two world wars, the economic collapse of the 1930s, the vagaries of world markets for wheat and oil and, among others, the evolution of the Canadian constitution—originated outside of the province" (774). The authors raise the question as to who constitutes an "Albertan" if, from earliest times, all Albertans have come from elsewhere? They note that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the dominant Anglo-Canadian male population began to exclude certain individuals from basic rights, such groups as the First Nations, Métis, French Canadians, ethnics, and even women. The authors conclude that the challenge of the future will be to recognize and embrace the province's diversity.

Summing up the Surveys

The six histories of Alberta range in publication dates from 1912 to 2006. Each one is unique in its approach and emphasis. Archibald MacRae's is a romantic account, looking back with admiration on the First Nations. John Blue's is Whiggish in approach, with emphasis on the material progress of the province. He emphasizes the important role that the NWMP and the missionaries played in integrating Alberta into Confederation. James MacGregor sees farmers as the enduring settlers who have been the mainstay of the province. His approach is also Whiggish, focusing on the material prosperity of the post-Second World War period. Howard and Tamara Palmer note the importance of ethnic immigrants who helped create a diversified province. They also shed light on the peculiar political culture of the province. Aritha van Herk unearths the "mavericks" in Alberta's history and brings them to life in her lively and engaging history. Her "hero" is Frederick Haultain, who fought the Centre courageously if unsuccessfully. Michael Payne, Donald Wetherell, and Catherine Cavanaugh's edited volume for the 2005 centennial emphasizes the province's contact to the outside world throughout its history, which has contributed to the province's diversity.

The challenge in writing a provincial history is to emphasize the province's uniqueness while showing how it is part of a larger history, be it

regional, national, continental, or global. In the case of Alberta, its history has been intricately tied up with the region of the Prairie West and after 1870, with the Canadian nation-state. In the mid-twentieth century, continental and global forces have also played a significant role. The province's history can only be seen as unique by showing how its response to national, continental, or global forces is different than that of other provinces. While Alberta since 1905 has had its own unique politics, the general nature of its resource economy and its cultural values has not been that different than other provinces. As well, standard themes of "progress" or "diversity" do not set the province apart. These themes can be found in the history of most of the provinces.

The one history that has set the province apart from the others is Aritha van Herk's *Mavericks*. This unique theme, along with her engaging writing style, has made her book a bestseller, at least in Alberta. But she distorts by exaggeration the province's uniqueness, and fails to show how the province has been part of a broader history beyond its own provincial borders. It is a garrison-type of history, looking inward, rejecting outside forces as threats to the province's identity. The implication of her thesis is that Alberta's history has been shaped only from within and only by rejecting all attempts to be part of a larger regional, national, or international history. The challenge ahead for historians of Alberta is to find a theme that both speaks to the uniqueness of the province while being able to be true to the fact that the province's history has been shaped as much by outside forces as from within.

Historiography is a branch of intellectual history. It is an attempt to examine the beliefs and values of earlier periods in history by looking at the view of historians themselves. Historiography in essence turns the historian's role of examining the ideas of individuals, groups, or eras in the past on the historian herself or himself by revealing her or his biases. While historians aspire to be objective and impartial, they are nevertheless a product of their times. With regards to the six histories discussed, all six were written in "good times" in the province's history. Archibald MacRae wrote his history in the "boom period" that lasted from 1896 to 1914. This period saw the largest influx of immigrants of any period in the province's history. This was also the "golden age" when Alberta achieved provincial status, and had a booming economy. John Blue's history was written during the "booming twenties." His history would no doubt have

had a different ending if it had been written in the “dirty thirties.” James MacGregor’s history followed the celebration of Canada’s centennial year. Alberta glowed in the glory of the event as much as all the other provinces. The oil boom was on, and the provincial economy looked rosy. Aritha van Herk’s *Mavericks* and the collected work, *Alberta Formed - Alberta Transformed* were written around the time of the province’s centennial. While the authors admit to trials and tribulations in the past, they celebrate the province’s success at not only “surviving,” but also thriving.

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