



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

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Conclusions: “The Ragged Garment of Memory”

Such is the ragged garment of memory – the trivial remembered,
the unforgettable forgotten.

– Annora Brown, *Sketches from Life* (1981)

Some time in the fall of 2000, when I was writing the first full draft of this study, my father came to me with several pictures of my grandmother (and other members of my extended paternal family) and asked if there was anything in the collection that I would like to copy. Most of the pictures were black and white images of the past, including a picture of Sadie Matthews as a young woman standing in front of the family home on a farm in Saskatchewan. This image interested me at once, mainly because it represents my grandmother somewhere in her late twenties, and it is the first time I have seen her without the deeply entrenched facial lines and slightly curved back that became hers with old age. She looks to me to be a proud, capable, even fashionable, young woman, who, with a slight smile on her face, stands patiently waiting to have her place in history documented on film. Knowing that single images have an untrustworthy relationship to “truth” and that I needed recourse to the cumulative evidence provided by the memoirs that form the basis to this study,

nevertheless this picture provided me with the spectre of the individual prairie woman set against a background that is primarily domestic, while also exceeding that background, standing out from it and looking beyond to a larger picture of the Prairie Woman's reality.

Then my father turned over another picture on the pile, and my grandmother's black and white image became alive to me immediately. This second picture, taken when my grandmother was about eighty years old, shows her seated on a Yamaha motorcycle belonging to my Uncle (her youngest son), with whom she stayed while on a visit "home" to Saskatchewan. Although my earliest memories of my grandmother certainly include a woman who had a great sense of humour, was capable of a loving warmth, and tickled childhood imaginations with "daring" language (one of my greatest joys was when she would say, "You little shit," and pretend to swat at me when I did or said something to make her laugh), later memories suggest a woman who was reserved, resigned, possibly even a little bit scared of the constantly changing world around her; a woman who seemed out of place, incongruous, compared to the sturdier image in the black and white photograph. In the colour photograph, however, the dynamic grandmother of my childhood re-emerged, and, in its new position hanging directly above my desk at home, the picture provided a sort of spiritual inspiration to the production of this study of those women who, like her, called the prairies "home." Although this photograph is contrived (my grandmother, after all, never really rode the motorcycle, but merely posed seated upon it), it, too, like the first photograph, is nevertheless evocative in helping to destabilize a general cultural reliance upon "either/or"isms in representations of prairie women's lives.

Indeed, for me, this picture encapsulates the overarching purpose of this study; it forms a sort of visual "confrontation" between sanitized cultural images of what a Prairie Woman is/does and the lived experience – the experienced difference – of real life, white, English-speaking women who lived on the prairies across a broad spectrum of time. Cultural narratives of western settlement – those of the contemporary moment, of early historiography, and of the heritage discourse in the second half of the twentieth century – privilege a linear representation of prairie life; that is, they begin with the raw material of an "empty" landscape which is then pieced together through the

heroic, the “unforgettable,” efforts of pioneering individuals, the end result being a precisely tailored narrative of nation- and empire-building, a sort of golden age that obscures anything that deviates from the standard pattern. However, as I have attempted to illustrate in preceding chapters, at the level of individual experience is the more “ragged garment of memory,” which, when it is remembered in the act of looking back in the memoir text, figures daily detail and daily survival as the foundation of an accretive, non-linear, reality of prairie life. While cultural narratives follow the traditional autobiographical model of beginnings and endings, and favour projected images of success, the memoir text rejects expectations of some culminative or climactic moment in favour of attention to the thread and weave of life that happens along the way. In this way do the authors considered here provide us with an alternative heritage based in the politics of individual experience and survival. In this way do they “weave narratives like cloth, creating multipatterned garments that we inhabit as memory” (Cavanaugh and Warne, Introduction 3).

In the shadow of cultural narratives and images that predominate in the public imagination, this alternative heritage is often neglected until it is too late. My grandmother Sadie died in the spring of 1999, at the age of eighty-four, and later in the summer of that year her bodily remains were laid to rest beside those of her husband in a small community graveyard in Lestock, Saskatchewan. Although I did not participate in that event, my father told me that the funeral that had been intended for family members only was attended by some forty to fifty people from the local community, people who had, at one time or another, known my grandmother or my grandmother’s family and who clearly remembered her with fondness and respect, despite the fact that it had been more than twenty years since she had left the farm and just over a decade since she had moved away from the prairies entirely. This communal outpouring for my grandmother was apparently not an unusual event in rural prairie culture; it was not unusual that a prairie dweller’s life would be remembered by the settlement community to which they once belonged, for, as the choice of memoir form for the “act of looking back” tells us, prairie people possess an intense sense of personal experience as communal experience. The authors of the memoirs gathered here are motivated by the desire to represent themselves, their mothers, their grandmothers, as belonging to a

very specific cultural moment. Their memoir texts are a legacy, to their families, to their communities, and to their readers, of personal participation in a defining, if problematic, event of Canadian nation-building. Nevertheless, despite the desire to assert identification with a much-lauded heritage moment, it is important to discern that the memoirists examined here do not adhere unconditionally to popular and idealistic cultural images of prairie settlement; on the contrary, what I have attempted to illustrate in this study is that the authors of these texts make abundant space in which to negotiate between representing acts of complicity with cultural norms and also constructing personal experiences that “confront” those norms; between a “surface” conformity to readerly expectations of a western settlement text and those “undercurrents” of difference that allow for the (sometimes subtle) re-visioning of history.

In the middle of the nineteenth century a major transformation took place in cultural constructions of the prairie region, a transformation from barren and unproductive “wasteland” to agricultural paradise. Given that this transformation was ideological rather than real, a vast and concerted promotional campaign was necessary to draw prospective settlers to the region as a means to effect that transformation in more than simply cultural images. But the gap between ideal and real remained when those settlers arrived. In the promotion of western settlement as an imperial and “civilized” undertaking, then, it was necessary to elide the sometimes rudimentary conditions of prairie life and maintain a cultural focus upon the apparently inevitable “future plenty and success” that was to accrue to those individuals who answered the call of immigration. In women’s memoirs, however, we see that remembrance of prairie life most often centres upon what Annora Brown in the epigraph above calls the “trivial,” the everyday details and needs of a world in which a “Home”stead is immediately constituted through the human senses rather than by ideology and images. Thus do we find the majority of narrative attention paid to the physical and psychological needs of today rather than the imagined riches of “next year country”; to issues of space and privacy in the construction of a prairie home; to the familial/cultural connectedness provided by “sacred objects” used in the creation of a Home place; and to the many creative productions that transform that Home into a vital economic centre.

When the futuristic focus of western settlement was secured in the contemporary cultural imagination, consideration had to be given to precisely what type of individuals would be best suited to the “civilizing” project. Perhaps first and foremost amongst those qualities desired in immigrants to the prairies was a spirit of “dauntless optimism,” a psychological fortitude that would stand the farm family in good stead when conditions proved to be tougher than what had been promised in propaganda literature. Thus were white, English-speaking prairie women expected to follow the typological Traill of Canada’s “pioneer” past, on pain of being judged as failures in a westward-looking culture. Although these women certainly represent an awareness of a Ruthian script of female adaptive behaviour, nevertheless they also indicate in various ways that lived experience complicated the Traill to cultural esteem; that lived experience “moodified” the prescription of “cheerful conformity” to circumstances which often ended up being a less than personally or economically fulfilling reality. The authors of these memoirs deviate from the established path and “jolt” their readers into an understanding that settlement success was a relative and all-too-often unromantic story, one in which prairie women participated on a “deep” emotional level, as seen through their tears, their homesickness, and their occasional psychological “incoherences.”

One of the ways that a reader is able to discern textual confrontations with prevailing cultural images and the rhetoric of western expansion is to begin to re-map the spatial politics of gender that dominated contemporary narratives of settlement. Constructed as a space in which women would assist in the creation of “a dream of the future,” the prairies inherited the ideological boundaries that had dictated female behaviour in Anglo-culture more generally; indeed, as prairie society cohered and gained stability, behavioural dictates lagged behind changes in gender norms in more cosmopolitan places. The cultural quest for a geographic space where moral and civic perfection would be attained, where the norms and values of the British Empire could be re-invigorated, necessitated that female bodies become a site of “transparency,” a readable space that could be judged for the “decency” of its reproductive performances. As seen in the memoirs written by prairie women, and the daughters and granddaughters of prairie women, cultural expectations often resulted in individual adherence, but room was certainly made for excessive

behaviours, for bodily transgressions of geographic boundaries, both in the moment of lived experience of prairie life and in the representation/recreation of that lived experience within the memoir text. Using the space of the memoir as a tool for cultural change, these authors reflect upon issues of female fashion and constructions of “women’s work” as a means to reveal the “precarious perch” of the “decent woman.”

To speak of the space of the prairies is to speak of a very specific cultural context in which the human relationship with the landscape has historically featured domination and exploitation as an inevitable consequence of large-scale agricultural designs. Indeed, cultural images of western settlement have privileged the prairie farmer as an heroic individual and “vertical” presence engaged in the act of “cultivation,” the control and production of “commodities for cash,” with little reference to the daily reality of an economy of “subsistence-survival” based on a subject-subject engagement between humans and nature, including both the natural environment and non-human animals. Into that crucial gap between filing a claim to a homestead site and attainment of the “vast agrarian empire” conceived in the wheat dreams of a dominative culture, prairie women poured their energies into the small intimate spaces of the family garden, they wandered down a prairie trail in search of the literal “fruits of the earth,” they recognized the traces of an “other” way of being in the prairie landscape, and they acknowledged the labour and companionship potential of those non-human “others” who contributed to the settlement project. By taking a re-visionary approach to the memoirs gathered here, we are thus able to glimpse “the landscape behind” agriculture; that is, we are able to re-present those subjects of prairie life that have otherwise been made absent in cultural narratives of western settlement.

In this study, the overriding purpose has been to “reveal a woman writer’s unstable and ambiguous positioning between cultural affirmation and cultural critique” (Georgi-Findlay xii). It has been to illustrate that, while the act of publishing a memoir of prairie life may well mark the woman writer as complicit with the late-twentieth century drive to document a shared and usually homogenous vision of the past, it is nevertheless important to recognize that women’s retrospective narratives also provide us with a very different heritage of settlement experience than the either/or-isms of cultural images tend to

allow. In the extra-ordinary act of letting their voices, their experiences, be heard, be reconciled to the public record of western settlement, these women's memoirs allow readers to confront simplistic visions of prairie life and to bring renewed life to otherwise static images. In changing our focus away from dominant cultural narratives, these women's memoirs bring lived experience to bear upon traditional versions of the past and, in the act of looking back, become a sort of narrative redress that allows us to re-vision our collective understanding of what it means to have been a "Prairie Woman."

