

## Expansion on the American and Canadian Plains

### A Review Essay by Jesse Hickman

Bennett, John W. and Seena B. Kohl. *Settling the Canadian American West, 1890-1915: Pioneer Adaptation and Community Building: An Anthropological History*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995

Ens, Gerhard J. *Homeland to Hinterland: The Changing Worlds of the Red River Metis in the Nineteenth Century*. Toronto; Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1996

Fairbanks, Carol. *Prairie Women: Images in American and Canadian Fiction*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986

Owram, Doug. *Promise of Eden: The Canadian Expansionist Movement and the Idea of the West 1856-1900*. Toronto; Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1980.

Sharp, Paul. *Whoop-Up Country; the Canadian-American West, 1865-1885*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1955

While Reading Wallace Stegner's *Wolf Willow*, I was struck by the question of how the often physically unnoticed international boundary between the U.S. and Canada, as it ran through the Great Plains really impacted the lives and fortunes of nations and the people who settled there. How did each nation approach the settlement and at that time, expected "conquest" of the west? Both in Canada and the United States, outright imperialism and a search for wealth and prestige pushed for settlement of the Great Plains to make them an agricultural Oz or land of wonder and plenty. When all was finished, disappointment among those who pushed for expansion as well as among those who actually settled was common if not widespread. While the details of when and who settled and how they got to that point differ, the base motivations of wealth and expansion were the same as was the disappointment in both nations when the west failed to become all that it had been promoted and perhaps expected to be.

I first read Doug Owram's *Promise of Eden* so that I could learn more about Canada's history of western expansionism. In *Promise of Eden*, Owram deals primarily with the history of how the idea of expansion to the West (in what is today Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta) was handled at various times by individuals, companies and the British and Canadian governments in turn. For a comparison to an American work in the same vein, check out the text that Owram cites in his introduction as having been a "methodological inspiration," Henry Nash Smith's, *Virgin Land: the American West as a Symbol*. (6) While a number of historians have focused on the experience of the settler family or plains community, Owram deals with the idea of expansionism. Instead of a Walter Webb-like look at adaptation of methods, technology, and society to the physical realities of the plains, Owram deals with the adaptation of views to serve the needs of the time.

Over the course of the text, Owram, very successfully in my estimation, traces the transition of opinions on the West from disdain to great promise based upon the entity delivering that message and their interests on the plains. For example, during the reign of the Hudson's Bay Company, in order to maintain their monopoly the company conveyed an "image of the North West as a harsh and dangerous wilderness; the geography, isolation, and climate was thought to make the region suited for nothing but the fur trade and thus capable of supporting only a primitive state of society." (29) Later on, as Owram indicates, new expeditions imbued with the expansionist spirit were sent west the difficult conditions found on the plains were "downplayed and replaced with quite different attributes...the North West began to be described in terms more appropriate to the estate of a well-to-do landowner." (74) This transition is very similar to that which seems to

have occurred in the United States, as the once named Great American Desert became a much advertised and vaunted agricultural Mecca.

Owram goes on in the text to note that in Canada, law came before settlement in most cases and that this fact allowed for much more peaceful relationships with Native American tribes. This I found interesting as it supports some of the Stegner claims in *Wolf Willow* that got me interested in the first place. But in the end, *Promise of Eden* maintains that settlers on the Canadian plains met with many of the same challenges related to climate, Eastern business practices, and economic impossibilities faced in the United States.

Overall, I think that Owram captures the spirit of expansionism well. His chronological examination of changing attitudes on the west and the reasons for those changes does much to aid in the understanding of how so many people could be convinced to take such a great gamble in moving to what was once known as a wasteland.

While Owram dealt with the expansionist movement on an academic's level, Paul Sharp in *Whoop-Up Country* tells the tale in a much more personal and interesting fashion. Sharp's text focuses on one region, then called the Whoop-Up country after the Whoop-Up trail and primarily includes sections of what are now Montana, Saskatchewan, and Alberta. This book proved to be one of my favorites. It presents very interesting characters and personalities from the West while providing a great look at the similarities and differences produced by the 49th parallel.

Like any good Great Plains history text, Sharp begins with early exploration on the Great Plains, followed by trade and economically driven exploration. Where Owram

focused on the Hudson's Bay Company, Sharp focuses his attention on the introduction of the free traders to the American and eventually the Canadian side of the Whoop-Up Country.

In the middle of his work, Sharp explains very clearly the differences between government institutional organization in the American and Canadian west. In the case of the Whoop-Up country, the Canadian government made provisions for law in the form of mounted police at a time when Native American tribes, traders, and few settlers populated its plains regions. Across the border, the Americans had no such institution and according to Sharp the Americans suffered at the hands of local power grabbers and corrupt traders “in striking contrast to the solution contrived across the international boundary. There the Imperial experience of a constabulary force, such as those organized in Ireland and India, was applied to the sparsely settled West.” (110)

After a review and discussion, Dr. Tom Isern informed me that Sharp intended *Whoop-Up Country* to be a test of whether Walter Webb's thesis applied without regard to national boundary. With this in mind, I think it appropriate to note that Sharp closes his work with a direct look at expansionism in both countries. Both countries looked to the west for expansion driven by economic visions of success from a productive interior and a nation that spans from ocean to ocean. In this race to the west, Sharp summarizes, “expansion seemed as much a Divine mandate to Canadians as to Americans, though northern politicians couched their ambitions in less provocative language.” (302)

John Bennett and Seena Kohl in their work, *Settling the Canadian American West* take a very scientific, anthropological approach to the Great Plains settler's experience. This account of western settlement reads much more personally as the authors used first

hand accounts from local histories, autobiographies, letters, and diaries very skillfully. The personal stories of the pioneer spirit that drove settlement on the promise of free land and the later disappointment for most are inspirational at times and heart-wrenching at others. The expansionist spirit, dealt with so technically and academically by Owram and Sharp are conveyed to the reader through the eyes of those who were taken in by the promise that spirit provided as evidenced in several letters that made reference to moving west after the "fever of pioneer" was upon someone.

Bennett and Kohl do not spend much time noting differences between the Canadian and American West. Rather, they use stories, letters, and diary entries from both countries in a Great Plains look that does not bow to international borders. To mark the disappointment of many plains settlers on both sides of the border, Bennett and Kohl add that: "from certain perspectives, the whole homesteading venture in the northern plains was a mistake--a mistake paid for with hardship and loss of community in later years. But on the other hand, the whole effort produced remarkable human beings...and a valid footnote to the history of North America." (181)

The three previous works have dealt with the larger ideas of expansionism on the Great Plains. However, they have all done so from a white, and with the exception of the Bennett and Kohl work, from a white-male perspective. One of my reasons for choosing Gerhard Ens' *Homeland to Hinterland: The Changing Worlds of the Red River Metis in the Nineteenth Century* was that it deals with a group unique to the Plains region. The Red River Metis of the 1800s, I learned through this text, were a group that lived, or at least tried to make a living with a foot in each of two worlds. One was the prairie region of the Red River Valley based on the society of the fur trader and European interests and

the other was the Great Plains based upon the nomadic hunt and the Metis' Native American roots. According to Ens, the Metis remained connected to the plains with annual, organized excursions on which they engaged primarily in hunting and trading in buffalo robes. Ens contends that the Metis tried to harvest the best of two regions by using the fertile farmland of the Red River Valley and the resources of the plains in a complimentary manner instead of in competition with one another. (Ens 1996, 38)

As a whole, I found his work to be unique and challenging at the same time as one would have to be well versed in the entire written history on the Metis to fully understand some of Ens' reasoning and his approach. A great part of the text is spent dealing with what he sees as misinterpretations, racial or religious bias, and in general, history based on weak evidence that existed in works prior to his own. Ens relies heavily on statistical analysis to separate his work from any accusations of racial or religious bias.

With regard to expansionism, Ens does not deal with it as a focus of his text but its presence is clearly a part of the history he relates. The Riel Rebellion is dealt with in some detail by Ens and within that period, resistance to the impending storm of settlers from the East is an issue of real concern, especially for the Metis who were caught in the middle between the Plains and those in the East who sought to push settlement there.

Some repetitive examples and anecdotes were bothersome but I think the work on the whole is a good example of modern attempts to analyze the work of past historians to sift out the bias that has clouded historical realities. In addition, he provides some very good descriptions of buffalo hunting and meat preservation by plains people.

To round out my reading on the Canadian American West, I chose to read a book that focuses on women's views and female images. *Prairie Women*, by Carol Fairbanks

is an in-depth look at the images of female settlers and characters in the American and Canadian West. I was at first uneasy about the word "prairie" in the title as this course, particularly Walter Prescott Webb, has clearly made a distinction between a prairie environment and the Great Plains environment. However, I was pleased to find a look at characters in Willa Cather's *My Antonia* in this text as well as references to the O'Wram work noted earlier in this essay.

Fairbanks begins with a discussion on the environment and the usual Great Plains descriptions. She also describes how other authors pointed out differences between the settlement of Canadian and American plains regions. All of which seems to follow the lines established by O'Wram and Sharp as covered in this essay. I found that Fairbanks doesn't focus on the climate as much as other writers on the West. She focuses on spatial images and the social realities of living in areas prone to social isolation, especially for females.

As the reader moves through the text, Fairbanks provides a female perspective from literature on almost every aspect of the prairie existence from sod-busting settlers, to European-Native American relationships, to small town organization and social patterns. In her efforts to provide a more realistic view of women in this segment of history she borders on the romanticism that plagued Great Plains histories written by men for decades. Overall, her systematic and very thorough approach does give her work legitimacy and does much to correct the oversight of the experience of women on the frontier. In addition, by including the works of Canadian and American authors, Fairbanks provides more evidence of common experiences created by a similar environment that crossed international boundaries.

The Great Plains is an environment that transcends international boundaries. In the United States and in Canada, people and governments were faced with the same problem of what to do with the Great Plains and when and how that should be accomplished. In both the United States and Canada, the environment was initially viewed as an enormous obstacle. Later, as interests changed, those views changed to suit the political and economic mood. Certainly the governments of the U.S. and Canada dealt with Great Plains settlement in a strikingly different manner. However, it is important to note that both nations began with the same raw materials in a sometimes-harsh environment and both nations sought to take economic and political advantage in that region. Equally important is the similar nature of the outcomes reached in both nations. Native American populations were reduced drastically and eventually relegated to reservations for government sponsored assimilation, and white settlement based on idealistic hopes of success would lead to devastating failure for many in both countries. In short, the governments of two nations attempted to adapt their populations and systems to fit the Great Plains region and neither of them was able to reach its ultimate professed goal, leaving the Great Plains as the conqueror and not the conquered.