
In this elegantly written book, Shannon Stunden Bower brings meaning and clarity to the complex topic of drainage and agricultural settlement in southern Manitoba’s “wet prairie” in the late-nineteenth and twentieth century. Occupying the southeastern quadrant of the province, the wet prairie formed what has been described as a “soup bowl,” with “slopes seemingly designed to collect precipitation and relatively impermeable soils that ensured the water pooled” (p. 2). A rich agricultural landscape, its topography meant that in many years it was too wet to farm. Stunden Bower tells the story of Manitobans’ efforts to alter this landscape for permanent agricultural settlement, from early drainage efforts by municipalities to the provincial government’s establishment of a district system of drainage in the 1890s, and the extensive and often problematic drainage projects that resulted in the 1910s and 1920s.

This is an unusual prairie history. While most scholars of prairie environments have concentrated on the issue of drought, Stunden Bower turns her attention to the subject of surface water and its effects both on the experiences of residents and the nature of governance in southern Manitoba’s distinctly wet, flood-prone landscape. Settlers faced not only inconvenience from lands that were sometimes wet, sometimes dry, but very tangible threats of starvation when conditions were too wet to grow crops. Efforts to address these problems, Stunden Bower argues, “bore on the ultimate shape of the government itself” (p. 9). The expense of drainage, and the considerable coordination it required across municipalities and regions, directly influenced the size and character of the Manitoba government. The environmental circumstances of the wet prairie also affected relations between the province and the Dominion government, whose limited understanding of the particular challenges of the region made the process of renegotiating Manitoba’s terms in Confederation even more problematic. Here, maps and illustrations are used effectively to clarify what is at times a complicated story.

In exploring the role of the state in the provision of drainage, Stunden Bower engages a growing scholarly literature on the expression and effects of liberal ideology in the Canadian context. With its core tenets of individualism, property ownership, self-determination, and capitalism, liberalism defined the logic of Canadian institutions and elites as they rose to power between 1870 and 1930. Applied to the circumstances of
southern Manitoba farmers and their struggles with a wet and dynamic terrain, the liberal state facilitated the generation of wealth on privately owned farms. Drainage, in this context, became “part of the infrastructure of settlement” (p.12).

Surface water, however, did not affect all farmers equally. The topographical conditions of the “soup bowl,” with its steep sides and flat bottom, meant that “surface water ran from the lands of some (those on the sides) and pooled on the lands of others (those on the bottom)” (p.12). The result was a conflict between “highlanders” and “lowlanders”: those on higher ground were unwilling to contribute to the costs of draining the water that flowed off their lands, while those on low ground felt wrongfully burdened with the task of disposing water that flowed from elsewhere. These divergent interpretations of property rights and responsibilities exemplify what Stunden Bower calls “colloquial liberalism,” the ways that non-experts understood and applied abstract liberal principles based on their daily experience and the position and character of the land they worked (p.13).

The second half of the book explores the history of transboundary water management. In her study of agreements between Canada and the United States in the 1920s and 30s over transboundary flooding, and the novel approaches pursued by the American conservation organization Ducks Unlimited to restore waterfowl habitat in Canada, she shows how Manitoba’s wet prairie was significant to those outside Canadian borders.

Especially interesting here is the narrative of opportunities lost. Although international influences and conservationist ideas contributed to a gradual shift among Manitobans from an “ideal of permanence” to recognition of the need for adaptable drainage infrastructure, conservationists failed in their wider efforts to convince farmers to retain standing water on their lands. Widespread negativity and distrust towards the provincial government as a result of past failures in drainage infrastructure also hampered efforts to adopt a watershed approach to surface water problem – in Stunden Bower’s assessment, an opportunity missed for progressive management of the wet prairie. And yet the history of difficulties surrounding drainage projects cannot be attributed, she argues, solely to administrative failures or ineffective land management systems. Instead, she concludes, periodic flooding is an intrinsic feature of the southern Manitoba environment; accommodation, rather than control, of this variability, is the best way forward for successful surface water management.

*Wet Prairie* gives the particular environment of southern Manitoba its due in the history of the province and the legacy of the antagonistic relationship between farmers and the provincial government. One of just a small number of works on the history of wetlands, it builds upon the work of Mark Fiege (*Irrigated Eden*, 1999) and others in enriching our understanding of “mobile natures” and the varied strategies employed in their management over time. By linking these concepts with an appreciation of liberalism and its offspring, private property, Stundén Bower shows how the movement of water created an “ecological commons” that overlaid the private property landscape. As it flowed from one farmer’s land onto another’s, water linked individual property owners together, necessitating cooperation to address shared concerns. It also operated at larger jurisdictional scales, prompting the adoption of collaborative management strategies between municipalities, and ultimately, in its flow across international borders, between nations. Here a profitable connection might have been made to the
rich and prolific international literature on the history and management of common property resources.

_Wet Prairie_ also contributes to Canadian historiography more broadly. In forwarding the concept of “colloquial liberalism,” it enriches current debates about the role of liberal ideology in our understanding of the Canadian past, and the less examined question of how local environments shaped, and were shaped by, these ideas. For social and political historians, Stunden Bower offers environmental history as a “method” of analysis, making a case for the study of places like the wet prairie as “signal landscapes” that seem “particularly likely to cast into relief broadly significant cultural ideologies”(p.168).

Drawing upon extensive archival research and a deep understanding of prairie history and prairie environments, this book will find a ready audience among Canadian historical geographers, agricultural and environmental historians. Social, political, and economic historians of Manitoba and the prairie region will find significant insights here, as will members of the international community of historians and geographers interested in prairie landscapes. A challenging read for undergraduates, _Wet Prairie_ nevertheless offers a valuable addition to the growing number of undergraduate survey courses in North American environmental history, and for graduate seminars in regional, environmental or agricultural history in Canada.

Jennifer Bonnell

*University of Guelph*


Dans cet ouvrage, Bettina Bradbury traite de la transition qui mène les Montréalaises de l'état d'épouse à celui de veuve dans la première moitié du XIXe siècle. Elle étudie plus précisément le destin des veuves qui deviennent veuves de 1823 à 1826 et de 1842 à 1845. L'ouvrage est un fascinant mélange d'histoire sociale, d'histoire du genre, d'histoire légale, d'histoire politique et d'histoire culturelle et matérielle portant sur l'institution du mariage ainsi que sur les questions de propriété et d'héritage. Ayant choisi d'étudier la réalité montréalaise, l'auteure discute à la fois de l'expérience des Canadiennes françaises et des Irlandaises catholiques, des Anglo-protestantes et des Juives. Elle analyse aussi bien le vécu des femmes de la classe ouvrière que celui des femmes appartenant à la grande bourgeoisie de la métropole. Elle démontre en fin de compte la grande diversité des expériences de veuvage au Bas-Canada au XIXe siècle.

Les conclusions de l'auteure reposent sur une recherche exhaustive très impressionnante. Les veuves ayant laissé peu de traces écrites (comme la majorité des femmes d'ailleurs), l'auteure et ses assistants de recherche ont dû visiter plusieurs dépôts d'archives et dépouiller nombres de documents afin de reconstituer leur histoire. Ils ont ainsi consulté les registres paroissiaux et les archives des cimetières afin d'analyser la réalité démographique du veuvage (y compris les mariages, les enterrements et les remariages). Ces sources ont été jumelées aux contrats de mariage, aux testaments et aux inventaires après décès se trouvant dans les greffes de notaires. Elles ont été complétées