

for historians to point out sexual asymmetry. It is not enough, either, to remind readers about “hegemonic masculinity in the ruling elite” of past societies. We are left with the old conclusion that boys will be boys and, as Jocelyn Wogan-Browne wrote gnominically in another collection of articles, that “women are always there”.

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CALDER, Alison, and Robert WARDHAUGH (eds.) — *History, Literature, and the Writing of the Canadian Prairies*. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2005. Pp. 310.

Social historians often read fiction to enhance their understanding of particular places and eras, and a book with the words “History” and “Literature” in the title promises to assist this endeavour. Unfortunately, this volume offers the historian little, although it may interest literary theorists. Four of the essays are concerned with analysing novels written since 1990 and thus are “contemporary” rather than “historical”. Almost all the contributors have been trained in literary studies rather than history, and their footnotes contain few references to the work of historians or to historical documents. Finally, most of the contributors are postmodernists who disdain such notions as fact, chronology, and coherent narrative. Thus much of the book is irrelevant to the work of historians, and the remainder is actively hostile towards it.

The editors quickly establish that the notion of “history” or even “time” is largely an arbitrary concept, if not entirely devoid of meaning. They asked each contributor to address the question “When is the prairie?” in order to produce “a recontextualization that both contests traditional models of prairie history that privilege the explorer or settler moment, and also seeks to deconstruct narratives of patriarchal, white authority” (p. 16). The statement suggests that bold, new ideas are sure to follow, but such challenges to traditional scholarship have now become so commonplace as to constitute a new orthodoxy. One advantage of postmodern thinking is the freedom it confers to utter astonishing statements without reference to such inconvenient conventions as “evidence” or “logic”. Thus we read, “we must re-evaluate the concept of ‘progress’, as this way of moving into the future has turned out to be profitable only for big business” (p. 18), or “[artifacts in prairie geology] ... insistently recall the brutal wiping out of First Nations people” (p. 58). The response of traditional humanists and modernist historians to postmodern assaults has been to fall on their backs and offer as much resistance as overturned turtles, fearing, perhaps, that any complaint they might register will brand them as racist, sexist, capitalist, or otherwise “privileged”.

Nonetheless, consider the three essays of most relevance to the social historian, two of which analyse memoirs rather than fiction. S. Leigh Matthews argues that memoirs authored by women, notably Kathleen Strange’s *With the West in Her Eyes* (1937) and Mary Hiemstra’s *Gully Farm* (1955), demonstrate how the challenges of the rural prairies forced women to deviate from the idealized behaviour prescribed for them by society and “internalized” by the women themselves. The observation is

valid, but why does it take so much theory and ponderous language to say something that historians of the rural prairies have said before, and often? Cam McEachern analyses the unpublished memoirs of Alfred J. Ostheimer, which record his experiences as a nineteen-year-old student who climbed the Rockies in the summer of 1927. Besides noting the white, male perceptions in the journal, McEachern argues that it illustrates classical liberal ideology with its notions of “possessiveness” and especially of “liberal time”, the idea that one should use time efficiently to accomplish goals, in this case rapidly climbing as many mountains as possible. These ideas may be imbedded in the memoir, but this interpretation might just as easily have been extracted from a memoir about tiger hunting in India, and therefore it tells us nothing about the history of the Rockies in the 1920s.

Russell Morton Brown provides the best written and most interesting essay in the book. He argues that the prairie region provided fertile soil for postmodern thought and that its first product was Robert Kroetsch’s *The Words of My Roaring* (1966). The novel is set in Alberta in 1935, the year that William Aberhart’s Social Credit movement won its first landslide victory in a provincial election. Brown claims that Kroetsch was influenced by the communications theory of another prairie intellectual, Marshall McLuhan, especially by his views on the dynamic power of radio, the medium that Aberhart exploited to great effect. Indeed, Brown even suggests that Aberhart was the first postmodern politician since he explicitly declined to know how to implement social credit theory, and thus rejected the concept of reason. The idea is intriguing, but it is difficult to see how either this essay or the novel itself can enhance our understanding of Social Credit history in Alberta. Indeed, social historians should skip this volume entirely and devote their time to reading literature written in the places and during the eras that interest them.

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CAMPBELL, Gwyn — *An Economic History of Imperial Madagascar, 1750–1895: The Rise and Fall of an Island Empire*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. Pp. 413.

Gwyn Campbell is the leading economic historian of Madagascar, a position he has established without publishing a book. For 25 years, he has been producing well-researched, well-argued, and carefully written articles on the economic history of Madagascar and the Indian Ocean. Recently he edited a series of books that emerged from conferences he organized in Avignon on the Indian Ocean, but this is the first book he has written. It is worth the wait. The book covers only a century and a half, but it does so in a comprehensive, almost encyclopedic way. Though packed with information, it marshals that information in a strong argument and subjects many other interpretations of Malgache history to careful criticism. Campbell also uses the prism of a series of larger theoretical concepts like secondary empire, demographic transition theory, and proto-industrialization to cast light on Malgache history.