SASKATCHEWAN WRITERS AND OTHER ANIMALS¹

I realize that my learned friends of the Bibliographical Society expect a speaker to come before them armed with a bibliography, festooned with footnotes, gleaming with erudition. Such is not to be the presentation tonight. I am going to speak to you of Saskatchewan, the entity and the concept, and the influence that both have on writings about Saskatchewan. I am, I say it humbly, an historian by training, a Westerner by instinct. I intend to accent the feeling for history that is evident in the West as it is in the Atlantic Provinces. I do not intend to read you a bibliography on Saskatchewan though I will comment on some little known works in this area. This will be more of a reading than a paper because I hope to have you feel with me the atmosphere created by Saskatchewan writers – to feel the immensity of sky, the starkness of land, the loneliness of distance and the laughter of the man at ease with his environment.

You do not find Westerners uncertain of their Canadianism. Westerners do not need to search for their identity. The Canadian historical experience, to them, is one history – part French, part British – but one history that began before 1760 and extended in unbroken sequence after 1760. This unbroken thread or course of Canadian history flows from our northern character, our historic background and tradition, and our committed national destiny which includes our form of government.

Canada is a northern nation.² Our ancient origins lie within the arm of the northern and maritime frontier of Europe. That economic and cultural force spread out from Norway and Scotland, Britain and France and it was this thrust which began the penetration and settlement of Canada. The frontier had its own northern economy. It was one dependent on extensive gathering of staples with good transport by river and sea an essential. It was an exchange economy requiring a base of arable land and habitable climate and an international trade. It requires no demonstration to show that most of Canada is simply a hinterland extensively exploited from the soil base of the St. Lawrence and Saskatchewan valleys and from the delta of the Fraser. The developing north will see the northern-flowing rivers fit into this pattern. The discovery and occupation of Canada was made by way of northern approaches and was separate and distinct from the discovery and occupation of the Americas.

This then is the first and fundamental fact that we, as Canadians, must

¹ A paper read at the Annual Meeting of the Society in Regina, June 12, 1972.

² I am indebted to W.L. Morton "The Relevance of Canadian History" in *Contexts of Canadian Criticism* edited by Eli Mandel (University of Chicago Press, 1971) for many of the ideas set out in this section.

appreciate. Canadian history is not a weak reflection of American history. Canada is not a second-rate United States and certainly it is not a U.S.A. that failed. Rather, Canadian history is an important chapter in a distinct and perhaps unique human endeavour, the civilizing of northern and arctic lands. As W. L. Morton, a Winnipeg historian, says so shrewdly, "From its deepest origins and remotest beginnings, Canadian history has been separate and distinct in America."³ It is because of this fact that Canadian life yesterday, and today, is and has been marked by a northern quality, a strong seasonal rhythm, a puritanical restraint which masks a tension ever present between northern wilderness and home discipline.

The fact of our being a northern nation has made us dependent economically, strategically and politically on external factors. Economically we have been a hinterland to more technologically developed areas exporting a few basic staples. Politically we have been dependent on the British navy, and on British parliamentary traditions which included personal allegiance to the crown and insistence on responsible and parliamentary government. It also meant avoidance of popular sovereignty lest we fall into the American orbit.

The relevance of our history lies in the morally defensible character of our Canadian purpose in maintaining a northern nation, independent and vigorous. We cannot turn our backs on the U.S.A. for we have never been self-sufficient but we must not turn our backs to our north lest we lose our national purpose.

It is a fact that the northern quality of Canadian life is maintained by a factor of deliberate choice. Canadians have always been free to live as Canadians or to become Americans. Many have become Americans, reluctantly, and for economic reasons. The result is that Canadians are Canadians by choice. To an extraordinary degree Canadians become northerners by choice. Canadian government has always been different from American government. In the U.S.A. government is subjective and it rests on popular assent periodically renewed. In Canada, government possesses an objective life of its own – popularly motivated but with its own impetus. In the U.S.A. government is held to provide for life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. The national government of Canada promises peace, order and good government with life, liberty and happiness being achieved individually, each according to his taste. This permits of bilingualism, even a two-culture policy, where there is a common allegiance in law and in spirit to our traditions and to the Crown.

Canadians have preserved a national society and elaborated a civilization in one of the largest, harshest, and most intimidating settings in the world. Canada has preserved the essentials of civilization in the grimmest of environments. This has come about through the development of a psychology of endurance and survival. We have met defeat but we have not surrendered. Our experience teaches us that what is important is not to have won, but rather to have endured to fight again. Price of victory passes but a people's traditions foster growth and strength of purpose.

Canadian history has had a marked effect on Canadian writing. Unlike the

³*Ibid.* p.52.

early literary consciousness of Europe which goes back to ritual and myth, our Canadian literary consciousness was born literate and historical. This has meant that Western Canadian literature has been creative according to a sense of history. The English-Canadian literary tradition has its origins in accounts of explorations and travels centered on Hudson's Bay. The French, and later the French-Canadian, literary tradition held to the overland route from Montreal. Early writings on the great interior wilderness were centered on fur, Indians, flora and fauna and the weather – as viewed by travellers who wrote of their adventures after they returned home.

It was not until the coming of settlement to the West that new literary vistas were opened and new themes developed. Only when people had to live on the land, and off the produce of the land, did a native literary tradition take root. It was based on history and on environment. The themes were migration, homesteading, ranching, railroading, mining, lumbering – all having to do with human activities – and acclimatization, the intermingling of cultures and the development of new cultural patterns – all social themes describing man's reaction to environment. The influence of environment is primary in a new society and this was true in the Canadian West. Be the immigrant European, Eastern Canadian or American, the facts of climate, sun, space, and man's reaction to these elements, will indelibly colour his thinking and his writing. Western writers will not escape the influence of history or of geography. It is worthwhile to pay heed to these prime factors.

The Prairie Provinces constitute the most homogeneous of the great natural geographic divisions within Canada.⁴ In spite of the Rocky Mountains which uplift the western flank of Alberta, the three provinces are primarily flat and agricultural. The weather is hot in summer and cold in winter and the wind blows hard, and often, across these plains. The sun sets over them in a blaze of colour quite beyond the comprehension of anyone, stranger to the prairies. The great arch of the northern lights is a common sight in fall, through the winter and in spring. All three provinces are bordered by Americans on the south and a vast, lonely hinterland on the north. All three provinces are young, brash, heterogeneous in population, united in their hostility to any threatened domination by Central Canada.

There are differences, of course. Saskatchewan is flatter than Alberta and less wooded than Manitoba. Alberta has the largest ranching area. Manitoba's fertile belt is compressed by a southward plunging Canadian Shield which forces transportation routes from the West to funnel through Winnipeg. The wind blows hardest over the broad reaches of Saskatchewan. But for all the differences there is a remarkable union of spirit prevailing among prairie dwellers; and a way of life as distinctive as the region which fosters it. Saskatchewan is perhaps the most typical area in a distinctive region. Alberta is Far West while British Columbia is Near East. Manitoba is perilously near Central Canada. So marked is the distinction in prairie minds.

⁴I am indebted to Edward A. McCourt *The Canadian West in Fiction*, (Ryerson, 1970 revised) for some general ideas set down in this section.

Saskatchewan has been settled for less than three quarters of a century. The generation in high school and university today is second-generation-Saskatchewan born, in the main. But the history of the area, now Saskatchewan, goes back to Indian days, to Henry Kelsey in 1690-91, to fur traders and missionaries. The Mounties came West in 1874. New to plains conditions, faces swollen with mosquito bites, the bright scarlet tunics fading in rain and sun, they brought with them the majesty of the law and a tradition, a fearless lawful tradition of endurance and single-minded devotion to duty, which won the admiration of the world. Then came the settlers. If we are to believe Mark Twain, the typical American frontier community began with a saloon, followed almost immediately by a cemetery. In the Canadian West the first community seems to have been either a church or a police barracks, followed by a place of business and oft times a literary society. With the arrival of the flood of settlers at the turn of the century we plunge into the pioneering process, the struggle for survival in a harsh environment, the struggle to build a viable national entity, the struggle to gain some countervailing power to offset the economic power of the railways and the tariff lobby.

The elements that affect life in Saskatchewan are the prime factors of space, sun, earth and wind, with the scarcity of water an additional factor. All writings about Saskatchewan depend for their integrity on one or more of these factors. Life on the Saskatchewan frontier was not violent in the sense that the New England frontier or the American West was violent. There was little gunslinging, arson or lynch law, but the elements were cruel and the struggle for survival intense. The conquest of territory — land — is by definition a violent process. A measure of egocentricity is necessary if the huge task of taming a wilderness is to be accomplished. The necessity of survival dictated co-operative undertakings. Little wonder that Indians and fur traders appear but briefly in our western history. The dominant theme is the conquest of the land, and the price paid by the conqueror is clearly and memorably established.

The process of Western settlement was a huge gamble in which many lost. The wilderness uses human material in a wasteful way. The making of land is a kind of passionate seduction with the earth at once a willing and an unwilling mistress. Prairie puritanism is part of the price paid for conquest. Prairie puritanism is based on struggle and want and the need to marshall all one's forces to the work ethic and to take no chances with the Almighty — or the C.P.R. Austerity is a further keynote of prairie puritanism. The vastness of the land and the loneliness of the prairies is still with us and austerity begets puritanism. George Grant, an historian of note, called the primal, the beginning of western tradition, the meeting of the alien and yet conquerable land with English-speaking Protestants.

So much for the physical setting. It is primary, basic and it cannot be overlooked. It directly affects all who dwell on these plains. This Saskatchewan of ours is a country to breed mystical people, egocentric people, perhaps poetic people — but not humble people. There never was a country that in its good moments was more beautiful. It is never monotonous. You don't escape the wind — you lean into it. You don't, and cannot, escape the sun — you wear it in

your eyeballs. The world about you is large and expansive but you are not insignificant. What Westerner casting a shadow forty feet long in the evening sun could consider himself insignificant. It was not the prairie dwellers who invented the term "impotent man."

I have taken some pains to outline the backdrop of nature and the stage of history that provides the setting for the creative artist in Saskatchewan. I do this because there is no Saskatchewan writing as there are no "Saskatchewan" writers. There are, however, writers who have had experience of life in Saskatchewan, and have recorded that experience as clearly, as honestly, and as intensely as they could. There is a great body of Saskatchewan literature and it reveals how the land and the weather and the people of Saskatchewan have been represented in prose and poetry.

The writings of those who have studied, or lived, life in Saskatchewan bear a distinctive flavour. I do not include in this category those who kept fur journals, or who travelled across the prairies, or those who wrote diaries by the light of a bivoac fire. They were visitors commenting in a personalized way on geography, weather, flora and fauna bearing on conditions of the moment but not on life or society as one participated in this. There were exceptions and some fur trade journals and surveyors' notes carry illuminating commentaries on the early society of the Canadian Prairie West.

Any reader who would seek to understand the interpretation given Canadian history by Westerners should read "Clio in Canada: The Interpretation of Canadian History" by W. L. Morton, and "Frontierism, Metropolitanism, and Canadian History" by J. M. S. Careless. These two articles are found in *Approaches to Canadian History* (University of Toronto Press, 1967). This is not an interpretation developed in the halls of academia but rather it is a persuasive elucidation of the unspoken feeling of many Westerners. Douglas Hill's, *The Opening of the Canadian West* has a bouncy, breezy quality attractive to readers because it exudes, unconsciously, the Westerner's view of the history of his West.

There have been a number of writings on Indians, ranging from the cool official language of a government report to the angry prose of Henry Cardinal. In between there is the occasional work that focuses on the individual rather than the group. One such work is Norma Sluman's *Poundmaker* (Ryerson, 1967). Not a great historical biography, it nevertheless attempts to portray the Indian character and code as instilled by the group, and as judged by an alien society. Dan Kennedy's *Recollections of an Assiniboine Chief*, edited with an introduction by James R. Stevens (McClelland and Stewart, 1972) is partly a re-interpretation of oft told Indian tales and as such is interesting but not unusual. It has a further quality, however, which is unusual. It is told by a man who made it in the Indian's world and in the white man's world. His observations are tinged with sadness and with a poignant pride.

Joseph Kinsey Howard's *Strange Empire* (Morrow, 1952 and Swan, 1966) is one of the most forthright writings on the Metis, Louis Riel and the uprising of 1885. Present-day protagonists of some political creeds seek to use the work as a blanket condemnation of present-day political policies. In so doing they cheapen the obvious merit of the work as a spirited attack on the official policy of

integration and assimilation of the Indian and Metis. Furthermore, they cannot rightly claim the work as being historically accurate. It is somewhat disconcerting to find *Strange Empire* being attributed to a Howard Kinzey in a very recent book, *Read Canadian: A Book about Canadian Books* (James, Lewis, and Samuel, 1972). *Strange Empire* should be read as a companion piece to G. F. C. Stanley's *Birth of Western Canada* and *Louis Riel*.

One of the best books written about Saskatchewan is Wallace Stegner's *Wolf Willow* (Viking Press, 1955). The author stresses the prime ingredients of Saskatchewan reality — earth, wind, sun, weather, space. His theme is the immensity of the land, the limitless sky, the harshness of the seasons. The locale is the short grass country “between the Milk River and the main line of the Canadian Pacific and between approximately the Saskatchewan-Alberta line and Wood Mountain.”⁵ Stegner states that this is the place where the Plains, as an ecology, as a native Indian culture, and as a process of white settlement, came to their climax and to their end. To him, both personally and historically, that almost featureless prairie glowed with a myriad more colours than it reveals to the appalled and misdirected tourist who ventures on its domain. *Wolf Willow* is a fitting title for a book so buoyant with hope, so full of despair. The space is boundless. The courage of the cowboy is unlimited. The heartache of the winter of 1906-07 is ineradicable.

There is little distinctively “Saskatchewan” about the accounts of explorers, fur traders or travellers who dwelt on or passed over what was then termed “the wild northwest.” Missionary reports do tell of the harsh seasons, the tortuous trails and the lives of the Indians and Metis. But these are reports and as such rarely sparkle with human interest, wit or gaiety. The reports of the Mounted Police are terse and official. The rebellion accounts could as well have been localized in the Transvaal. The brochures of colonization companies are beyond belief. There had to be present the prime elements — wind, weather, land and people — mixed in a suitable dough, leavened with a suitable yeast, before the bread could rise. The mix and the yeast came with the rush of settlers at the turn of the century and shortly thereafter came a trickle of literary works — a trickle that has since swelled into a respectable stream. It is worthwhile to look back on some of the writers who blazed a trail in the homestead era and who left some guideposts for present-day writers to read and to mark.

The coming of thousands of immigrants and the process of pioneering provided themes for many of these writers. There are such standard works as *Ethnic Communities in Western Canada* and *Pioneering in the Prairie Provinces* which discuss the extent to which a harsh physical environment and the experience of isolation combined to shape attitudes and values of a developing prairie agricultural society. James F. C. Wright, in his *Slava Bohu* (Ryerson, 1940) wrote feelingly of one ethnic and religious group, the Doukhobors. A later work, *Elusive Paradise*, to be published shortly, will be an undoubted contribution to our understanding of social and ethnic history. Simon Belkin's *Through Narrow Gates* (Montreal, 1966) relates the problems met by Jewish immigrants to the

⁵Stegner, Wallace *Wolf Willow* (Viking Press, 1955) p.3.

Canadian West, while Clara Hoffer and F. H. Kahan in *Land of Hope* (Modern Press, 1960) describe in poignant detail the life of Jewish immigrants who established farm settlements in Saskatchewan. Emil J. Meilicke's *Leaves from the Life of a Pioneer* (Vancouver, 1948) tells of the experience of a Minnesota family who settled near Dundurn. Grant MacEwan has written numerous books on such Western subjects as agricultural machinery, agricultural fairs and biographies of prominent Westerners. The most successful book as a commercial venture and as a pioneering narrative is George Shepherd's *West of Yesterday* (McClelland and Stewart, 1965). Shepherd is a born *raconteur* and a career that carried him from Deal, in Kent, to Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, and which encompassed railway construction, farming, ranching, historical writing and museum work, provided ample scope for his gifts.

Writers of fiction also found in the frontier a rich source of materials for books.⁶ Ralph Connor, a nom de plume for Charles William Gordon, created through a telegrapher's misreading of Can. Nor., an abbreviation of Canadian North-West, comes first to mind. It is customary today to dismiss him as a writer of inconsequential little moral tales, popular because people of his day were more naïve and optimistic than we are today. But we cannot so easily dismiss him. His reading public in the U.S.A. and the United Kingdom did not so dismiss him. Beginning with *Black Rock*, a book of sketches in a mining camp first printed in a Presbyterian church paper, followed by *The Sky Pilot*, *The Doctor*, *The Prospector* and a Glengarry series and a score or so other works, sales confirmed his position as Canada's most successful writer. Well over five million Ralph Connor books have been sold. His works sold because, for all his faults as a writer, he wrote of the last frontier, a land of promise and of romance and this strong theme appealed to thousands in the teeming urban centres of the English-speaking world and was translated to thousands in crowded European countries.

Ralph Connor saw the West as a land where the misfit, the outcast, the weak, might make good. His "heroines" were of one pattern, modelled on his mother. He had no "bad" women. Yet his heroines are believable — for he writes of his mother, through these heroines, with conviction. Connor was a man with a message — only secondly was he a novelist. He had an intense spiritual awareness and this, combined with his belief in the tremendous mission of the church, impressed readers with his passionate sincerity. He made the novel a respectable vehicle for church men.

Arthur Stringer gained some prominence abroad because of his trilogy — *Prairie Wife*, *Prairie Mother*, and *Prairie Child* — three books written about the Canadian West. Stringer's works reveal little of the influence which is unmistakable and all-pervading in the West. He had established a reputation as a writer before he selected Western Canada as a setting and this fact perhaps explains why his works on Canada do not communicate the sense of real life here, though he does make shrewd observations on Western life and manners.

While Americans and Canadians were reading Zane Grey's stirring books on

⁶I have drawn from Edward A McCourt's *The Canadian West in Fiction* for thoughts on early writers on the Canadian West.

the American West, two Western Canadian writers, Nellie McLung and Robert Stead, turned away from bad men, good men, sheriffs and Indians to give an honest picture of prairie life in the Canadian West. Nellie McLung is best remembered for her militant position on prohibition and women's rights. In the literary world she is best remembered for such books as *Sowing Seeds in Danny*, *Second Chance* and *Purple Springs*. She knew the pioneer West and she was part of the pioneer society of the day.

Nellie McLung writes in autobiographical vein in the story of Mrs. Dawson who goes to Ottawa to address a convention of Arts and Crafts. Mrs. Dawson is not fashionable. Her hands bear evidence of hard work. She has lived isolated from the world of culture and comfortable living. But she tells her story with the naturalness and honesty of purpose that comes to those who live in lonely places. I quote:

"They found themselves looking with her at broad sunlit spaces, where struggling hearts work out novel destinies, without any thought of heroism. They saw the moonlight and its drifting shadows on the wheat, and smelled again the ripening grain at dawn. They heard the whirr of the prairie chickens' wings among the golden stubble on the hillside, and the glamour of some old forgotten afternoon stole over them. Men and women country born, who had forgotten the voices of their youth, heard them calling across the years, and heard them, too, with open hearts and sudden tears. There was one pathetic story she sold them, of the lonely prairie woman — the woman who wished she was back, the woman to whom the broad outlook and far horizon were terrible and full of fear. She told them how, at night, this lonely woman drew down the blinds and pinned them closed to keep out the great white outside that stared at her through every chink with wide pitiless eyes."⁷

But then Nellie McLung turns to the cheerful twelve year old, Pearl Watson, who writes in her diary:

"The little lambs are beautiful
Their cotes are soft and nice,
The little calves have ringworm,
And the 2-year olds have lice."

Robert Stead writes of farm life in Manitoba. His best novel, *Grain*, was written in 1926. The hero is Gander Stake, born on a Manitoba farm:

"For Gander was a farmer born and bred; he had an eye for a horse and a knack with machinery; the mysteries of the self-binder he had solved before he was nine, but the mysteries of the cube root he had not solved before he left school — nor since. He knew more than any of his teachers

⁷ McLung, Nellie *You Can Never Tell*, quoted in McCourt, *op. cit.* p. 88

about the profession by which he was to make his livelihood, and he regarded their book-learning as non-essential and irrelevant — neither of which words he would have understood.”⁸

Gander was not bound to the earth through force of circumstance but through an inarticulate, all-powerful love of the earth itself. His pretty sister, Minnie, who appears again in *The Smoking Flax*, twits him about his ignorance:

“Do you know the difference between a noun and a pronoun?” she demanded of her brother one evening at supper.

“Don’t know as I do,” Gander admitted without apologies.

“Huh. Teacher’d call you a dunce.”

“Would she?” said Gander. “Well, I know the difference between a (McCormick) Deering and a Massey Harris across a fifty-acre field and I bet she don’t”⁹

From Gander’s point of view this is a completely crushing rejoinder. Gander is a completely believable person.

Agrarian unrest, the development of co-operative movements, the puritan ethic as applied in such areas as liquor control and women’s rights, the Ku Klux Klan experience, the depression and medicare, contributed to, or grew into, a political awareness more marked in Saskatchewan than in any other Canadian province. Some, but by no means all, of this awareness has been recorded in published works. Seymour in Lipset’s *Agrarian Socialism* (Berkley, 1950, updated, 1968) is indispensable to an understanding of the C.C.F. movement. Norman Ward and Duff Spafford in *Politics in Saskatchewan* (Longman, 1968) add much to our understanding of the political and social forces that have motivated parties and politicians. Robert Tyre’s *Douglas in Saskatchewan* (Vancouver, 1962) is a somewhat bitter political commentary on a political opponent though rancour has not submerged the generally high level of competence of the author as a writer. Chris H. Higginbotham’s *Off the Record* (McClelland and Stewart, 1968) is a thoroughly readable commentary on political creeds in Saskatchewan with much emphasis on the C.C.F. regime. Medicare attracted supporters and critics. E. A. Tollefson in *Better Medicine* (Modern Press, 1963) discussed the topic from a legal viewpoint. R. F. Badgby and Sam Wolfe in *Doctor’s Strike* (MacMillan, 1967) wrote from a socio-political standpoint.

There are two works which stand out from the foregoing almost as the alpha and omega of a Western credo. The alpha is E. A. Partridge’s, *A War on Poverty* (Santaluta, 1925). Partridge was a visionary, an idealist, a man of action and a social gospeller. He was an early exponent of a co-operative commonwealth:

To me the Kingdom of Heaven suggests a Co-operative Commonwealth.

I have no desire to take it by violence, being content to help bring it in by

⁸Stead, Robert *Grain*, quoted in McCourt, *op. cit.* p. 96

⁹*Ibid.* pp. 97-98.

spreading a conviction of its desirability, and the practicability of its establishment, among my fellows by means of the printed page.

(p. XI)

He called for a new war, on poverty, and a force of men, volunteers, who would undertake a new campaign.

A war on poverty, pursued with the object of providing every member of the force with a comfortable home and an earned competence, with full security against want in misfortune, accident, sickness and old age — and beyond all this, make possible the rearing of an industrious, competent, cultured, rent-free, debt-free, care-free, healthy, happy progeny, that will continue so from generation to generation.

(p. 181)

The Social Change by Richard Allen (University of Toronto Press, 1971) is the omega, the definitive work on the puritan ethic, the do-gooders, the temperance advocates, the prohibitionists. No student of the social history of the prairies can afford to ignore this comprehensive, well written book.

The thirties, that decade of drought, dust, and dry despair, gave birth to political tracts, economic theses, royal commissions and critical articles. One or two authors have gained a rightful stature as reporters on the period. James H. Gray's *Winter Years* (Macmillan, 1966) and *Men against the Desert* (Prairie Books, 1967) will stand the test of history and of literary merit. The first work describes life and conditions during the depression. The second recounts the victory gained by patient researchers and dedicated civil servants in the fight to find a cure for soil drifting and wind erosion on the Saskatchewan prairies. Abe L. Plotkin's *Struggle for Survival* (Exposition Press, 1960) tells of an immigrant's life in Saskatchewan with particular emphasis on the political and social changes evoked by the crisis of the thirties.

With the thirties came the depression when dust, wind, grasshoppers, drought, and low prices combined to inflict a decade of want, hardship and despair on prairie Canada. Such authors as W. O. Mitchell, E. A. McCourt, A. L. Plotkin, Kahan, Hoffer, have described this decade in terms of people while political scientists and historians have written of it in terms of philosophies and economics.

Probably our best known author is W. O. Mitchell and his best known book is *Who Has Seen the Wind*. This is a story of the thirties and the prairies and of Weyburn, a hard hit community during the depression. The sting of the book is hardly disguised by humour nor did Mitchell expect humour to modify the intolerance. You must remember that this book was written of the thirties — a gaunt and sour time when the nettles and spikes of hatred and nationalism flourished, and when stark poverty and black despair stalked our prairie land. Old Mrs. Abercrombie presides over the town. She doesn't permit the citizens to become personalities. Old Sammy presides over the prairie and there the individual self wanders beyond the sphere of the human community. Old Sammy is

really the most fearsome – and the most loved – because the open emptiness of the prairie is most feared and people huddle into the pettiness of the small town. Mitchell's humour cannot sugar-coat old Mrs. Abercrombie nor can it sweeten the desolation felt by Brian.

Henry Kreisel, in his book *The Broken Globe*, declares that "the prairie is a state of mind." He tells of a Ukrainian settler of the old medieval faith who believed the earth to be flat and the centre of the universe. He felt his son was being corrupted by a devil because he would go to the University of Saskatchewan. The boy did well but confided his home situation to a professor. The professor went to see the old man after the son had graduated and had gained honour as a scientist. The professor tells of his leaving in these words: "Together we walked out of the house. When I was about to get into my car, he touched me lightly on the arm. I turned. His eyes surveyed the vast expanse of sky and land, stretching far into the distance, reddish clouds in the sky and blue shadows on the land. With a gesture of great dignity and power he lifted his arm and stood pointing into the distance, at the flat land and the low hanging sky.

"'Look,' he said, very slowly and very quietly, 'she is flat and she stands still.'

"There was something heroic about the old man. Then he dropped his eyes and said, 'Send greetings to my son.'"¹⁰

The prairie is indeed a state of mind and the writer who knows the prairie will use imagery and nostalgia and pathos and humour. Imagery will take the form of mild hyperbole – a grant of a man, a lord of the land, the lonely figure towering against the flat prairie backdrop, the dumb shifting of forces. Consider this line – a man plowing, outlined as he was against a tilted and spoked sunset in the western sky.

But there is more than imagery in western writing. Consider this report of a prairie congregation in the drought-haunted 1930s.

"The last hymn was staidly orthodox, but through it there seemed to mount something primitive, something that was less a response to Philip's sermon and scripture reading than to the grim futility of their own lives. Five years in succession now they've been blown out, dried out, hailed out; and it was as if in the face of so blind and uncaring a universe they were trying to assert themselves, to insist upon their own meaning and importance."¹¹

And Mitchell's description of the prairie as seen by a four-year-old boy is at once imagery and personification.

"He looked up to find that the street had stopped. Ahead lay the sudden emptiness of the prairie. For the first time in his four years of life he was alone on the prairie. He had seen it often, from the veranda of his uncle's farmhouse, or at the end of a long street, but till now he had never heard it. The hum of telephone wires along the road, the ring of hidden crickets, the stitching sound of grasshoppers, the sudden relief of a meadowlark's song, were deliciously strange to him . . .

¹⁰Quoted in Mandel, *op. cit.* p. 255.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 257.

All about him was the wind now, a pervasive sighing through great emptiness, unhampered by the buildings of the town, warm and living against his face and his hair."¹²

The prairie is so like the sea. When Mrs. Bentley in *As for Me and My House* records in her diary that "there's a high, rocking wind that rattles the windows and creaks the walls. It's strong and steady like a great tide after the winter pouring north again, and I have a quiver, helpless sense of being lost miles out in the middle of it," we know that she might be adrift on the sea.¹³

The post-World War II era saw the development of a varied and sophisticated literary output. Such writers as Ralph Allen, Illingsworth Kerr, W. O. Mitchell, Sinclair Ross, E. A. McCourt, Max Braithwaite, R. D. Symons, Billy Bock, George Spence, Fred Wilkes, Ken Liddell, Robert Moon, Robert Tyre, Muriel Clements, Charles Schwartz, James Gray, Carlyle King, Eli Mandel, rediscovered Saskatchewan and found in the basic elements of land, sky, wind, and people fitting ingredients for works of fiction and non-fiction. The best book on certain aspects of the depression in Saskatchewan is Sinclair Ross's *As for Me and My House* (Toronto, 1941 and 1957). It tells of a churchman of shallow faith and his wife who find life unbearable in towns they detest. Mrs. Bentley seeks escape in the form of a diary. Philip wears a mask which is a symbol of sterile human relations. E. A. McCourt's *Music at the Close* (Ryerson, 1947) revolves around life in Saskatchewan in the thirties and a man's place there and in the holocaust of war. W. O. Mitchell's *Who Has Seen the Wind* (Macmillan, 1947) is an unforgettable story set in a small Saskatchewan city on the prairies. Other writers found themes in the credit union movement, the marketing of agricultural products, travelogues, history in fiction, pioneering sagas, war novels, life in small communities, the history of the University of Saskatchewan, the search for water, and in humour.

The golden jubilee anniversary celebration of 1955 brought a spate of local history writings – the result of energetic and far-sighted pump priming by the Saskatchewan Jubilee Committee. More than two hundred communities prepared and published local histories. More than six hundred school districts prepared district histories. Interest in local history, then sparked, has continued and this past five years alone has seen the publication of scores of further community histories and a significant number of regional or area histories. A random sample of these later works includes these titles: *Those Were the Days in Swift Current*, *On the Banks of the Little Pipestone*, *Griffin Prairie Wool*, *Willow Bunch*, *Dad and His Six Women*, *Echoes of the Past*, *Proud Heritage*, *The Big Muddy Valley*, *So Soon Forgotten*, *Poems of a Farmer's Son*, *Dew Upon the Grass*, *A Too Short Yesterday*, *Upon a Sagebrush Harp*, *Our Own People*, *They Rose From the Dust*, *Of Us and Oxen*, *The Best of Billie Bock*, *Saskatchewan Harvest*.

There is one aspect of writing on Saskatchewan that deserves special mention. This aspect is humour. There is a vein of humour that runs through most Sas-

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 260.

katchewan writing. It is rather broad in context and is usually closely related to farming, to ethnic eccentricities, and to greenhorns. It is not cruel nor witty. It has to do with life, and it is not always subtle. Another vein has to do with attempts to make light of the optimism of the pioneer, the ebullient westerner of the twenties, and the tragedy of the thirties.

"To start at the beginning," as the Queen of Hearts said to Alice. William Donkin, a corporal in the Mounties wrote a book entitled *Trooper and Redskin* (London, 1889) describing his experiences as a policeman in the West. He tells of Saskatoon's early boom years in this fashion.

"During the bustle of landing at Quebec, beset on every side by touts of every description, I found a pamphlet thrust into my hand by a clerical looking fellow in seedy dress. This paper-backed volume professed to show the glorious future which awaited anyone who took up land near the South Saskatchewan under the aegis of the Temperance Colonization Company. There was even an illustration of Saskatoon, above the title of "a North West City." Tall chimneys were emitting volumes of smoke, there were wharves stocked with merchandise; and huge steamers, such as adorn the levees at New Orleans, were taking in cargo. Subsequently I found Saskatoon to consist of six houses at intervals and a store."

Donkin divided the Western Canadian year into five parts — the mosquito season, the black fly season, the horse-fly season, the house-fly season and winter. He also made the observation, "in Western Canada there are no barmaids; society is not sufficiently educated for them." Donkin was not a native Westerner and he never warmed to the wilderness, as he called it, though he did his job competently.

Kathleen Strange's *With the West in Her Eyes* (MacLead, 1937) is a fine perceptive story of homesteading. An autobiographical work, it is at once forthright and humorous. Every Westerner will appreciate the scene wherein the authoress attempts to take a tub bath back of the house with a binder canvas hung on posts as a screen. The dog spied a cow in the vegetable garden where no cow ought to be and flew to the rescue. The cow hurtled up the path at the back of the house, met the hired man with two buckets of milk, swerved, hooked her horn in the canvas and fled with it flying behind her. The hired man saw the lady of the house standing in the tub. His eyes goggled, his Adam's apple trembled and he stuttered, "Gee! You'll shore catch a cold standing naked like that in the shade."

The day of the hired man is past as technology spells the doom of rural communities and the family farm neighbourhood. There was a day when the hired man was an indispensable factor in the farm operation. He was part of the family and part of rural society. You get some view of this in W. O. Mitchell's *Jake and the Kid* (Macmillan, 1961) a Saskatchewan story. You get an Alberta view in John Blackburn's *Land of Promise* (Macmillan, 1970). No one has yet done justice to the essential role of the hired man in the twenties, but some of the humour has persisted. To recount but one story:

In the mid-twenties farm people near Regina had opportunity to listen to radio. This opened up whole new worlds of enjoyment and excitement. One of the facets of radio that stirred farm wives was the long series of contests that

offered to the winner bright vistas of cash prizes. One farm wife took up the challenge of Borden's Milk. Borden's invited all listeners to complete the following jingle:

Borden's milk is simply grand
The finest milk in all the land

by composing three more lines to form a limerick. The good lady worked hard and discussed her poetic efforts with husband, children and hired man. Came the last Sunday before the contest closed. The family prepared for church — the hired man prepared for a lazy day. The wife asked him to take a last look at her entry, to add any bright last thought and to mail the letter as he went to town to see his pals. He did. The family waited anxiously for a week — ten days. At last a letter came. The woman of the house opened it with mixed feelings of apprehension and hope. A frown puckered her face as she read the letter.

"I don't understand it," she said and read out,

"Dear Madam: Thank you for your entry. Of course we can't use your jingle but we thought it so appropriate that we are awarding you a special prize of \$10.00." Signed by the President of Borden's Milk.

The good lady was so intrigued by the letter and so sure that her entry could be used that she decided to write to Borden's explaining that she had lost her copy of the entry submitted and would like the company to send her one. The hired man looked uncomfortable. The week passed — another week passed — and another letter came from Borden's. The lady of the house opened it at the dinner table, read it silently, blushed and turned to look at the hired man. The man of the house reached over and read the letter. He burst into delighted laughter as he read it.

"Borden's milk is simply grand
The finest milk in all the land.
No teats to pull
No hay to pitch
Just punch a hole in the son of a bitch! "

But it is time to close — time to harvest the last thoughts and comments. So far the work of western writers has been uneven in character. Yet even the weakest works possess a characteristic flavour born of the author's involvement with a physical environment which makes a stunning impact on the transient visitor, and which haunts the native-born, wherever he may wander. The prairie environment has an aura of inviolability about it. Prairie people, in harmony with this environment, have developed a measure of inviolability also. They have not accepted that man's life must be urban, commercialized and fog-bound. The prairie is a part of nature in keeping with the philosophical. One cannot conceive of smog blacking out the enormous vault of the sky. The vast land has not yet been finally subdued and altered. In winter one has but to take a few steps from the thin and tenuous ribbon of highway to be alone in vast sea lands of snow sculptured by the untamed breath of the everlasting wind.

Yet it is harvest time that Saskatchewan people will remember. The smell of harvest! That stirring, heavy, poignant smell of goldenrod crushed under the harvest wheel. The sickly, overpowering smell of vetch and wild fern curing in the mower swath. The dust of harvest and the pregnant fullness of a hot autumnal day, dying into the dampness of dew thrown out with wasteful profusion on swath and sheaf alike. The night, splendid with the magnificence of the harvest moon. The farmer now knows the urgent compulsion to gather in the fruits of the year's enterprise. The birds and bees revel in a last feast of haws and fruits. The migrating flocks above give warning that soon all will be snatched away into the jaws of the black frost.

For no matter what great literature may spring from the minds of Saskatchewan writers, the basic themes will be of earth, sun, wind, space and people. If true to its heritage it may be boisterous and broad but never mean or petty.

JOHN H. ARCHER,