

The Historiography of the Great West

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THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE GREAT WEST

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This paper is offered in the hope that it will not be taken seriously. The author takes his audience seriously, but is unable to do the same with his chosen subject. The reason is that some, perhaps the best, of Western historians have faced a disconcerting fact in the history of the Great West. By traditional standards at least, the history of the Great West is improbable. From Lord Selkirk to Premier Bennett, it ought not to have happened.

It did, however. How is the historian to deal with this inherent improbability? Some historians at least of the Great West *have* implied that its history can't be true, but how very absurd it would be if it were.

The remark serves to introduce the first theme of the historiography of the Great West, the theme of the improbable and the absurd. Before others are brought forward, it is necessary to suggest some definitions, at least to use as twigs, with which to brush away the flies of criticism which may arise. By the Great West I mean Canada from Ontario to the Pacific, by the West, Canada from Ontario to the Rockies. By historiography I mean the reflections of intelligent men on experience immediate and mediate, experienced, that is, by action and by inquiry. The definition has at least the advantage of excluding the great body of historical literature of the Great West which is the result of exploration and observation, but not of reflection. It leaves the difficulty that the number of reflective historians of the Great West is now too great for extended comment. If some are not mentioned here, no disrespect is meant; their work simply has not lent itself to the limits chosen to enable this paper to have an end.

The historians selected for comment have been chosen because they are thought to have given fuller and more explicit expression to certain themes which, it is suggested, have informed the historiography of the Great West from its beginnings to the present. The first of those themes, after that of the absurd, is that of the contact of cultures, the meeting of European and Indian, the mingling of Europeans and Indians, and indeed of Europeans and Asians. The next is that of the origins of the state, of how political order replaced communal usage. The third is that of the character of the state when founded, the question of whether a society so pluralistic

and an economy so narrowly based as those of the Great West have not needed an order of politics peculiar to their own circumstances. The final theme is closely related, the theme of intervention, of how the weaknesses of the economic, social and political order are to be met if the inherent improbability of the economic and social order of the Great West asserts itself in drought, abundance, or economic depression.

Those are the tools of analysis to be used hereafter. The last theme, that of intervention, is also first and fundamental to the historiography of the Great West. Being fundamental, it is found, not surprisingly, in that great seminal document of western historiography, in itself to a degree a work of reflection, David Thompson's *Narrative*. Before the European discovery, he tells us, Canada was inhabited by "two distinct races of Beings, Man and the Beaver." Man lacked iron, however, and could not resist the industry and increase of the Beaver.

Every River where the current was moderately and sufficiently deep, the banks at the water edge were occupied by their houses. To every small Lake, and all the Ponds they builded Dams, and enlarged and deepened them to the height of the dams. Even to grounds occasionally overflowed, by heavy rains, they also made dams, and made them permanent Ponds, and as they heightened the dams [they] increased the extent and added to the depth of the water. Thus all the low lands were in possession of the Beaver, and all the hollows of the higher ground – the dry lands with the dominion of Man contracted, everywhere he was hemmed in by water without the power of preventing it.¹

So far Thompson. At this point my fancy took over and for years I remembered this passage as ending with the spectacle of Man crowded, standing room only, on the last high ground unflooded, invoking the Manitou to save him from the monotonous zeal of the Beaver. It was something of a disappointment, on checking, to recognize the historian's sober rejection of the delights of embellishment.

The passage serves, as it stands, to illustrate the fundamental characteristic of both the prairie and the mountain Wests, a relative fewness of resources coupled with extraordinary powers of multiplication in the individual resources, beaver or buffalo, salmon or timber, wheat or wood pulp. The result is a narrow economic base, or bases, which create not only economic and political instability, and carry with them the possibility of collapse and the need of intervention by an external saviour, whether the Keechee Manitou or Prime Minister Trudeau.

That theme, however, belongs rather to economic than to general history, and in any case is so fundamental that it informs and

¹ David Thompson, *Narrative* (Champlain Society Publications), p. 197.

affects all other historical themes without itself receiving explicit treatment in Western historiography. I turn therefore to the writings of the first of the historians of the Great West, Alexander Ross, at once the Herodotus and the Thucydides, inquirer and reporter, participant and critic, of history on both sides of the Rockies from 1810 to 1852. I do not make the allusion to the classical fathers of history lightly, although I hope I do so with some sense of proportion. Ross *does* achieve a classical quality in his better passages;² he learned by experience and by inquiry;³ he was concerned both to deliver a lively narrative and to get his facts straight; he is widely used as a source and even copied; his work is curiously general in that he raised historical themes, notably the contact of cultures and the origin of the state, which recur in later historiography. So much is this so that a re-reading of Ross is like a reading of the great Greeks. The reader is surprised again and again by the unflinching freshness of the text, its power to yield information not grasped before, and insights not realized. Finally, his books possess the essential classic quality, in that they deal with the elements of man and nature.

Ross brought to his writings on the Great West the sound general education of a Scottish schooling, and the fresh eye of a newcomer. He had taught school in the Canadas for six years before embarking as an adventurer in Astor's Oregon expedition.⁴ That is, he was one of a party organized to advance the fur trade into a region in which it had not been carried on directly before. Ross therefore saw the world of the Indian much as it had been before the white man came, and had to learn how to trade and live in that world. That he did *both* well was testified at once by his survival *and* by his superiors. The skill, the intelligence and the adeptness in dealing with people of another culture, revealed in his *Adventures of the First Settlers on the Oregon*, and his *The Fur Hunters of the Far West*, are evident from the events he recounts, not from any attempt to vindicate or exalt his own actions. Instead they reveal the competence in dealing with another culture than his own, and with people in general which Ross was also to exhibit in his career in the Red River Settlement.

² As Mr. Jay Edgerton notes in his Introduction to the Ross and Haines reproduction of the Red River Settlement (Minneapolis, 1957) fourth page, unnumbered.

³ Ross uses the term "inquiry," in the first paragraph of his book, *Adventures of the First Settlers on the Oregon or Columbia River*, conventionally enough, but it takes the reader's mind back to the first paragraph of Herodotus' with its "learned by inquiry" or ἰστορίη.

⁴ George Bryce, "Alexander Ross, Fur Trader, Author and Philanthropist," *Queen's Quarterly* 11, 1903-04, pp. 46-47.

His success in living in a society of mixed cultures was, however, not merely the result of native wit. By his marriage to an Okanagan chief's daughter, Ross committed himself to a private life of mixed culture. His concern with the problems of a mixed society was therefore neither practical nor intellectual only; it was domestic. Ross was a faithful husband to his Indian wife, and an affectionate father to his children of two races. This it no doubt was that led him to spend the remainder of his life in Red River, which he saw as mainly designed by Selkirk for the purpose of reconciling the cultures in a common civilisation.⁵

Any such process of reconciliation involved in a settlement just such conflicts of culture as Ross had encountered in the Indian world of the Columbia and the Snake. How could viable ways of dealing between two peoples be found in the contacts of Indian and trader? How to adopt the modes of a commercial society to those of a people who, if shrewd bargainers, did not exchange goods at a price, but conferred reciprocal favours in terms of personal honour? How to preserve order with a people who knew little of either authority or rank, but lived by sentiment and custom? In Red River, Ross was to note the shock given to Indian feeling by the hanging of a Saulteaux murderer in 1845; by Indian custom, he should have been persuaded to pay acceptable compensation to the man's kin.⁶ In such a mixed society, how was "social law, order and subordination" to be found?⁷ This was a continuing preoccupation of the Sheriff of Assiniboia as well as the fur trader of the Columbia and the historian of the West. (Ross indeed, despite George Bryce's thinking him a radical, was something of a Tory.) How, finally, was the Indian to be brought into a Christian communion, how was the half-breed to be accepted into white society? The relation of European and half-breed was the burning question of Red River life, as in their different ways the horse-whipping of Charlie Mair and the shooting of Thomas Scott were to testify.

To illustrate that sensitivity, I recall the story of Ross, when he learned his son James had won the gold medal in Classics at the University of Toronto, pacing the floor for some time in silent delight, then bursting out with "And what will they think of the *brulés* now?"⁸ It was a question from the soul of a man who had fathered half-breeds, and gambled his happiness on the reconciliation of cultures.

That is a deep note, and this paper is at best superficial. Ross was also concerned to avoid the lumbering gait of the common or

⁵ Ross, "Introduction," *Red River Settlement*, p. vi.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 332-333.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 172 and 241.

⁸ A vivid recollection from lost past research, of which no note survives.

garden historian. It is in Ross that one finds what I have ventured to call the absurd in the historiography of the Great West. As a writer he expressed his sense of the absurd, in a way very Scottish, very Burnsian in itself, by exaggeration. His depiction of the pleasures, equine and feminine, of Spokane House, cherished by the less conscientious Nor'Westers, is a fine example of his satiric rendering of flagrant misdoing.⁹

At Spokane House, too, there were handsome buildings. There was a ball room, and no females in the land so fair to look upon as the nymphs of Spokane. No damsels could dance so gracefully as they; none were so attractive. But Spokane House was not celebrated for fine women only, there were fine horses also. The race ground was admired, and the pleasures of the race. Altogether, Spokane House was a delightful place and time had confirmed its celebrity.

The account of the marriage of the Indian daughter of Chief How-How to the fur trader (his wife and Ross himself) is not satire — it is wry good fun, essentially tender, and a clear example of the comic twist which arises from the juxtaposition of opposites.¹⁰

At last however it was discovered that How-How had a daughter both lovely and fair, the flower of her tribe. Princess How-How was admired. Her ochre cheeks were delicate, her features incomparable! And yet her dress surpassed in lustre her person. Her robes were the first in the land. Her feathers, her bells, her tassels were unique, while the tint of her skin, her nose bob, girdle and girt were irresistible! A husband of high rank had to be provided for the Princess How-How and Prince How-How himself formally acquainted with the wishes and anticipations of the whites. This appeal the sagacious and calculating chief could not resist! How-How therefore with his fascinating daughter and train of followers arrived in their robes of state at headquarters. The bridal dress was beyond compare! Prince How-How now became the father-in-law of a white chief, and a fur trader became the happy son-in-law of Prince How-How.

The passage describing the early conduct of business in the Company's store in Red River is Rabelaisian.¹¹

The method of keeping the reckoning on these occasions deserves to be noticed, were it only for its novelty. In place of having recourse to the tedious process of pen and ink, the heel of a bottle was filled with wheat and set on the cask. This contrivance was, in technical phraseology, called the hour-glass, and for every flagon drawn off a grain of the wheat was taken out of the hour-glass, and put aside till the boose [boose] was over; the grains were then counted, and the amount of expenditure ascertained. From time to time the great man at the head of the table would display his moderation by calling out to his butler, "Bob, how stands the hour-glass?" "High, your honour! high!" was the general reply; as much as to say, they had drunk but little yet. Like the Chinese at Lamtschu, or a party of Indian chiefs smoking the pipe of peace, the challenges to empty

⁹ Ross, *Fur Hunters*, p. 96.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 130-131.

¹¹ Ross, *Red River Settlement*, pp. 64-65.

glasses went round and round so long as a man could keep his seat; and often the revel ended in a general *melée*, which led to the suspension of half a dozen officials and the postponement of business, till another bouse had made them all friends again. Unhappily, sober or drunk, the business they managed was as *fraudulent* as it was complicated.

The misfortunes of the Buffalo Wool Company and of the experimental farms of Red River, or of poor Baptiste, the *métis*, are again examples of Ross's sense of the absurd and his helpless feeling that only exaggeration can deal with such monumental failure of performance to meet with intention.¹²

Underlying all Ross's history is an acute perception of the narrow base of such economy as the Great West had. The fur trade of the Columbia was matched by the buffalo-hunt in Red River — an extension of the Indian economy into a mixed society, carrying with it the fragile stability, the ever-present instability, of a primitive economy dependent on wild life and climate. The magnificent account of the Canadian *métis* by Marcel Giraud, in which he analyses the interplay of the sedentary life of Red River Settlement with the nomadic life of the buffalo hunters, is a scientific study of what Ross experienced in daily life in Red River.¹³

Ross had, of course, experienced the same inherent instability in the Oregon. Yet was it the same? The Great West is two regions, the prairie and the mountain, the inland and the maritime Wests, each with its own historiography. I have always treated the two as distinct, and have never, except in one general text, attempted to tell the story of the farther West. In this paper, however, I am venturing to discuss the historiography of the two regions as one, at least in terms of the fundamental themes of the historiography of the Great West. In terms of those themes there is, certainly in the books of Ross, and I believe in the nature of their historiography, a basic unity.

I am not speaking, I must say at once, of their obvious similarity as frontier regions. That thesis is essentially a matter of time. The whole world once was a frontier to all mankind. I seek deeper significances than those possible from Turnerian analysis, the matters which arise out of the nature of regions and regional societies themselves, and not just those which arise from the contacts of regions historically, that is relatively, in time. From that point of view it is possible to see that in the maritime West there were the same narrow economic bases, the same contacts of cultures, the same

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 70-71; 77-78; 86-94; 212-213.

¹³ Marcel Giraud, *Le Métis Canadien* (Paris, 1945).

questions of the nature of political society. The economic bases, however, if narrow, were not as narrow as those of the inland West; the salmon, recruited from the vast reaches of the Pacific, were unfailing as the buffalo confined to the prairie grasses could not be. And there were more bases, minerals and timber, as well as game. Yet none, by reasons of depletion or variable demand, could form the foundation of a stable economic society. The result was that the economic instability of the continental West, simple and sometimes catastrophic in operation, was present in operation as violent, but more complex, more repercussive, in the maritime West. And the impinging influences of the sea were much more various and powerful than those to which the inland West was subject. Hence the demand of the maritime West in trouble was not, like that of the continental West, for intervention for help, but for freedom to attack the next resource, to assault the latest frontier.¹⁴ And the greater wealth accumulated from each particular economic base permitted such extravaganzas as the potlatch, or Premier Bennett's burning of the last provincial bonds. The fluctuations of the fortunes of the maritime West have always been gaudy, of the continental West sombre.

If there is some truth in so general a consideration of what is at bottom a matter for statistical analysis, this paper may continue to talk of the Great West, as did the next historian considered, Alexander Begg. At the mention of his name, an aside is necessary. There were two historians of the identical name of Alexander Begg. As every student of the history of Western Canada knows, the Muse of History has been abundantly generous in providing a region of no history, comparatively speaking, with a largess of historians, but has been singularly chary in the supply of surnames among them. And this is not to mention that three were christened Alexander, a name more associated with the making than the writing of history. The matter defies explanation, unless western historians are born under the Sign of Gemini. At any rate, in the historiography of the Great West there were in the last century two historians of the name of Alexander Begg; in this century there have been two Mortons and two Thomases, not to conjecture about those who will succeed them. To the historians so blessed with co-surnames the results have been good so far; every pair of them is credited — so far I think I may use that word — with the work of the other, and so enjoys a double reputation. (This, perhaps, is the absurd at work again.)

¹⁴ I owe this perception, which I hope I may not have distorted, to a paper by Professor Martin Robin, "The Politics of the Far West," read at the Western Studies Conference, Calgary, February 26-27, 1970, and to a brilliant chapter in a forthcoming book by the same author.

But it has been a matter of some difficulty for the student of Western historiography.

I must therefore point out that one Alexander Begg was a collector of customs in Winnipeg and Victoria, and wrote only one historical work, his *History of British Columbia*, much the least distinguished book on that theme. To distinguish himself from his co-nomen, he signed himself, "Alexander Begg, C.C.," which letters meant "Collector of Customs," but were an extraordinary premonition of those our most distinguished colleagues now add to their names. The other Begg was born in Quebec, and moved to Red River in 1867 to work for A. G. B. Bannatyne, the Red River trader and merchant. He was a fun-loving, observant man, given to taking notes. He soon sensed the approach of the historic crunch of the transfer of the Northwest to Canada. When that event came he began to record the daily happenings in his journal, as indeed he persevered in doing during the seventies in Winnipeg.

From his journal he published his *Creation of Manitoba*, the liveliest account of the Red River troubles, curiously dispassionate and moderate. Out of the fun the whole improbable series of events gave him, he wrote his *Dot-It-Down*, itself something of a journal and a historical document, but chiefly a comic satire of the doings and persons of the Canada party, particularly John Schultz and Charles Mair. Begg obviously thought they took themselves over seriously in their self-appointed role as heralds of Canadian civilization. *Dot-It-Down* is the most amusing and sustained expression of the absurd in western historiography. Nowhere else has so strong a sense of how comic people are when the roles they enact are out of context. Begg was roguishly daring in a Victorian way, foreshadowing James H. Gray in our own time. Dash (that is Charles Mair) calls at the door of Mrs. Cool (that is Schultz). When the good lady opens, Dash says, "Madam, I would like a few minutes intercourse with you." "Sir"! exclaimed the offended dame and slammed the door.

In these two works, rather like Ross in his first two books, Begg was reporting and enjoying himself. In 1881, however, he became an immigration officer and publicist in the great drive to settle the West and sustain the Pacific railway. His new job turned Begg to the Great West as a whole and led to the publication of his *History of the North West* in three volumes in 1894. This major work is a serious and sustained variation of Canadian history told in terms of the acquisition and settlement of the Great West. In that it is indeed unique, and something of a monument to its times; its period speaks through it. Much of it, like Ross's *Red River*, is the result of study and documentation; much of it, also like Ross's work, is

from Begg's own experience and record. The work, that is, balances on his experience in Red River and Manitoba from 1867 to 1880, and thereafter turns to his widened experience to the Northwest.

It is therefore satisfying to note how Begg's work takes up, if without the deep personal commitment of Ross, the basic themes of the latter's work. Begg did not, it is true, live in Indian country or follow the fur trade. He did, however, live at the heart of the Red River Settlement during those years when Canada's preparations to take over the Northwest caused unease in all Red River, and provoked resistance in one-half of its population, the half accustomed to the use of arms.

Here was a contact of cultures indeed. One was that of the *métis*, the descendants of mixed European and Indian marriages, at once French and Indian-speaking, the semi-nomadic people of Giraud's analysis, the organizers of the annual buffalo-hunt, and in their own eyes the "new nation," which shared both the Indian title to the land and the political rights of Europeans. The other was that of the Scottish settlers and their cousins, the Orkneymen half-breeds of the English parishes. The contact of cultures, which had made due order and subordination difficult before in 1849, in this new form was to precipitate the "Red River Rebellion." The *métis* followers of Louis Riel, himself much more by blood and education a European than an Indian, sought terms from Canada that would reconcile the old order of the river-lot and the buffalo hunt (to put the matter symbolically) with the square-survey and farm settlement.

The clash, fought out in Red River in the winter of 1869-1870 with much argument and some gun-waving, but singularly little shooting – a higher percentage of the population must have marched peacefully to jail in those days than ever since – was at bottom a debate as to how a place was to be found for the *métis* and the onlooking Indian, who fortunately did nothing more, in the new order of intensive settlement and the railway. Begg followed the conflict word by word, blow by blow, always with sympathy, good humour and moderation. He is not wholly unbiased; clearly he thought Schultz a clever rascal and Mair a pompous ass, but then too he treats good humouredly.

From his journal it is abundantly clear that Begg was aware that the difficulty was at bottom how to found a political order which Canada could accept and in which the settlers and the *métis* would be able to protect themselves during a rush of Canadian incomers. The second theme of the origin of the state here appears in a more advanced form than in Ross. As in the Transvaal a few years later, the franchise became in Begg's little village of Winnipeg, and by implication in all Red River, the ultimate issue. Who in a

society which had never exercised the franchise could vote, only old settlers, or both settlers and newcomers? There was, as any who reads the journal may see, a good deal of voting done in the election of two conventions and one legislative council. The franchise was never settled, but the edge was taken off the issue by the Canadians being in jail (except in Portage la Prairie) or on their way to St. Paul. The surprising thing was that both the Red River convention and the Legislative Council heard such sober debate, recorded by shorthand reporter William Coldwell in a style at least as good as the Parliament of Canada had attained, and that the legislative assembly passed a complete, if modest, code of laws in the summer of 1870. When Governor Archibald replaced President Riel and the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba the Legislative Council, there was little actual change. Red River had formed its own government and apparently had preserved itself, as the river-lot survey, on which we are met, makes plain to this day to any traveller by air.

The reconciliation of old and new was in fact to be more apparent than real, as the Saskatchewan Rebellion was to signify. Begg was to deal with that also in due course. Meantime he greatly enjoyed the much more high-toned and less tragic Red River affair. His writings are full of the comic spirit of western historiography. Through the pages of his journal weaves the ever-vociferous, ever-drunken character of Jimmy-from-Cork, whose presence always reminds the too serious reader that Winnipeg, when a frontier village, was by no means wholly inhabited by sober Presbyterians such as Alexander Ross. Nor does Begg disdain to lighten the pages of his magisterial *North-West* with a good story of a sudden collapse of a too serious agitator. In a convention at Winnipeg in 1884 a disgruntled westerner, recently from the East, startled his audience by urging secession from Canada to cure the intolerable ills of the West. A tumult of protest broke loose; the threat of secession would hurt real estate values. At last the famous raconteur, George Ham, made himself heard to move a motion that the advocate of secession be appointed "a committee of one, to *secede*." That ended secession talk for that time.

So much was suggested by a fresh reading of the first two historians of the Great West. The argument of the paper, however, is that certain themes were shared in their writings and persist in some at least of their successors. This recurrence, to be significant, must occur not only in reworking the periods covered by Ross and Begg, but also in the opening of new subjects and new periods of study. I believe both the persistence and extension of those themes may be seen to a significant degree in later historians of the Great West.

The persistence is most evident in the work of A. S. Morton — except, of course, for the vein of the absurd, which academic history avoids, sadly enough in this instance, because Morton himself had a shrewd sense of humour. The historian of the fur trade of the Great West, and especially of the Hudson's Bay Company, could not but be aware of the central difficulty of the fur trade, that of commercial exchange between a non-commercial culture and one highly commercialized. Morton it was who first brought to light from the Archives of the Hudson's Bay Company the *métis* concept of themselves as a new nation, with all that meant in resistance to annexation to Canada. Hence Morton too lays bare again the question that haunted Ross, the creation of social order in a mixed society. The last chapter of his great *History of the Canadian West to 1870-71* still seems to me to be in both respects one of the finer pieces of historical exposition and explanation in Canadian historiography.

That *History* thus constitutes a monumental base — in sequence of development, not of time — to G. F. G. Stanley's work on the western rebellions and on Riel. Stanley's work, as a whole, is pre-eminent and practically alone among that of Canadian historians in its concern with the contacts of Indian and *métis* with the Europeans. He treats the theme, of course, as a historian, not as a social anthropologist, but the underlying theme of how the nomadic life of hunter and tripman was to be reconciled with the sedentary life of the farmer and the city dweller, underlies the quick and passionate events he so firmly and sympathetically analyses and depicts without malice and without extenuation. Dispassionate scholarship illuminated the documents and the perspectives not available to Ross and Begg.

With Stanley, however, one leaves the historians of the Great West as a unity and comes to those of either the continental or the maritime West. Professional history perhaps narrowed the limits while increasing the interest of historical work. The result is to open the division in the historiography of the Great West mentioned at the beginning of this paper. The question therefore arises, is this division a real one, or an accident of regional or professional preoccupation?

On reflection, it seems apparent there were great differences, not only in the character of the economic base, but also in the contact of cultures and the origins of the state. The coastal Indians, so splendidly secure and artistic, so committed to a life of totem and ritual, neither served the fur trader as the gentle Cree of the woods did, nor held him off as did the horsed warriors of the plains. They developed no proto-polity, such as the plains Indians and

métis had in the buffalo hunt, to challenge the foundation of the state. And in Vancouver Island the transition from Company rule to Crown colony was made without pause to lift the foundations of the state beyond check or question. Thus it was strong enough, with a little judicious imperial aid, to master the turbulent gold rush settlement and to hold the proud tribes in reasonable awe. In Red River the transition from Company colony to Crown colony was never made more than a matter of Colonial Office correspondence; the alternative of union with Canada was too imminent.

Yet the character of the state in the maritime West was to come to resemble that of the state in the continental West. Is it possible, then, that the other themes also prevailed, if undergoing some maritime change?

Reflection on the work of the historians of the coastal West, Begg, Howay, Lamb, and Ormsby, for example, does not at first suggest that they did. True, in Howay and Lamb, the contact of culture is much of the story, yet neither historian seems aware of the theme. The peaceful, if unhappy, resolution of that contact meant that it did not come to the forefront of their work. Similarly, the stresses of building the political order and the strains of working it are treated quietly in the work of Howay and Ormsby, not so much by omission of the stridencies of conflict, as by reducing the actual discords to the traditional harmonies of representative government and the two-party system. This was to carry into history that tradition of gentility which was one of the sea's gifts to British Columbia, a polite veneer to its raucous native colours. The multiple instabilities of its narrow economic bases still worked beneath the gentle surface, and its political tensions writhed towards the effectual ending of representative and party government in the Social Credit victory of 1952. That turned political government into an a-political administration; Her Majesty's loyal opposition from an alternative government to an electoral bugaboo of periodical plebiscites.

The emergence of the theme of the character of the state as the principal element of the historiography of the Great West in British Columbia was paralleled in the historiography of the prairie West. It may be seen in the work of W. L. Morton on the Progressives, of Lewis G. Thomas on the Liberal party of Alberta, and of Lewis H. Thomas on the struggle for responsible government in the Territories.¹⁵ It of course appears in most of the volumes of the Social Credit Series, notably in D. C. Masters' study of the Winnipeg

¹⁵ W. L. Morton, *The Progressive Party in Canada*, 2nd ed. (Toronto, 1967). Lewis G. Thomas, *The Liberal Party in Alberta* (Toronto, 1959). Lewis H. Thomas, *The Struggle for Responsible Government in the Northwest Territories, 1870-97* (Toronto, 1956).

General Strike, and in C. B. MacPherson's *Democracy in Alberta*.¹⁶ The coming of industry to the cities, and the passing of the agrarian order over the watershed of economic and political domination in the prairies, provoked the new insurgencies of 1919-1921. In the uncertain light of historiography it is possible to see some similarity between Indians holding the Dalles of the Columbia against the fur traders and the striking dock workers of Vancouver, between the plains horsemen flooding to battle and the farmers marching to the polls. If the scrutiny of the student is maintained, it becomes apparent that in both, a fundamental protest against a new economic order, or an old political one, was being made. The character of the economy and of the state, both affected by the inherent instability of a narrow-based economy, were in challenge.

As always, the methods and the language were superficially conventional enough. After all, the most startling thing about the history of the Great West was that most westerners, except for the Indian and the *métis*, were immigrants. It is startling because no Westerner is quite as western as an Easterner come West. Below the froth of rhetoric, however, a deeper current runs, and it is possible that it flows from the very sources of the historiography of the Great West, and follows the channel cut by its main current. The striking workers challenged, for example, the doctrine of the prerogative rights of property; like the Indians they felt that the fruits of labour, like those of nature, should be fully shared. The farmers in revolt challenged the "autocracy," to use Henry Wise Wood's supreme pejoration, of the caucus of the organized party and its domination of the people's assembly. In the Territories the strange idea of political non-partisanship had flowered for a generation with the buffalo grass and the tumble-weed. Perhaps men isolated on the prairies were not deeply divided by remembered hostilities and creeds of alien origin. Perhaps the state was the simple instrument of the community, affording not an arena of political struggle for place and patronage, but ministering in the collective needs of society. How elementary, how Utopian, but how sensible! The dissolvent of the Non-Partisan League and the gospel of Social Credit — not to be taken too literally, of course — eroded the old political loyalties and in Alberta and British Columbia brought in governments in character and disposition not merely non-partisan but also a-political.

The implication of the above remarks is clear and intended: it may be that the Great West is a region so distinctive that it is

¹⁶ D. C. Masters, *The Winnipeg General Strike* (Toronto, 1950). C. B. MacPherson, *Democracy in Alberta*, 2nd ed. (Toronto, 1962).

working out by growth and struggle an outlook, and attitudes and institutions suitable to the conditions of its historic life of the last one hundred and sixty years. The historiographer of the Great West, however, is doubly bound, by prudence and by his subject, to remember the fugitive theme of its historiography, that of the absurd. Is it possible that this paper too is absurd? The odds, I suspect, are for it.

What concerns me rather is that the theme, perhaps through the work of David Thompson's Wesakejauk, the flatterer and deceiver, the anti-Manitou of the Crees, disappeared from western historiography when the professional historian appeared, as no doubt you noted. Those dignified and solemn gentlemen, hardened by the rigorous training of the schools, have not deigned to listen to the whisperings of Wesakejauk. Can it be that their own powers of self-deception have been so great that his subtle ministrations were unnecessary? I fervently hope not.

It is, however, a great pleasure to be able to conclude by reporting that the absurd, so long resigned by historians to philosophic scientists like Paul Hebert and irreverent political scientists like Norman Ward, or irresponsible journalists like Bob Edwards, has once more been taken up with all the authority and vigour it demands by James Gray, the historian of the Great Depression, that time when the West gazed deep into the eyes of its fate. At the Calgary Conference of February, 1970, Gray delivered a paper on "Sex and the Single Settler," and the absurd arose full-blown once more on the pages of the historiography of the Great West. I was proud to discover that I had myself referred to the subject in my *Manitoba*, but only, I now regret, in passing and as an issue of a Winnipeg mayoralty election, and with all the reticent dignity of a junior member of the craft. Now, however, with Mr. Bennett practising anti-politics in British Columbia, and with the absurd riding the plains again, all the great themes of the historiography of the Great West have free rein once more. I toss the reins to you to ride where you like.

For myself, I must frankly say that I suspect that after two centuries of endeavour we have at best only got back to the pleasures of Spokane House. Alexander Ross would not have approved.