

# Report of the Annual Meeting Rapports annuels de la Société historique du Canada

Report of the Annual Meeting

## Western Canada and the Frontier Thesis

George F. G. Stanley

Volume 19, Number 1, 1940

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/300209ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/300209ar>

[See table of contents](#)

### Publisher(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

### ISSN

0317-0594 (print)

1712-9095 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

### Cite this article

Stanley, G. F. G. (1940). Western Canada and the Frontier Thesis. *Report of the Annual Meeting / Rapports annuels de la Société historique du Canada*, 19(1), 105–117. <https://doi.org/10.7202/300209ar>

All rights reserved © The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada, 1940

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

**é**rudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

## WESTERN CANADA AND THE FRONTIER THESIS

By GEORGE F. G. STANLEY  
*Mount Allison University*

In 1893 Professor Frederick Jackson Turner read his now famous paper "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" before the American Historical Association. Earlier American historians had written of the frontier in terms of Indians and covered wagons—the impelling motif was romance and drama—but Turner dwelt upon the significance rather than the romance of the West, and his interpretation opened up an entirely new line of approach to American history. Turner's essay became one of the most widely read and probably one of the most influential ever written in North America, and the vitality of his interpretation has been demonstrated by its widespread adoption over forty years by such historians as James Truslow Adams, Frederic L. Paxson, Joseph Schafer, and others.

Briefly the Turner thesis was to the effect that "the greatest formative influence" in American history has been the existence of "the open frontier, the hither edge of free land" continually moving westwards; that the conditions of frontier society have determined the peculiar character of western institutions and that these, in turn, have reacted upon the older society of the East. In one of his most arresting passages Turner wrote: "American democracy was born of no theorist's dream; it was not carried in the *Susan Constant* to Virginia, nor in the *Mayflower* to Plymouth. It came out of the American forest and it gained new strength every time it touched a new frontier." Political organization, economic policy, the whole social process have, at one time or another, been attributed to the formative influence of the frontier background. It has become a commonplace of American historical writing to avow that America owes her all to the presence for three hundred years of this line of open frontier. One of the Canadian supporters of this school of thought has rung the changes on the Turner theme in this wise: "Neither George Washington nor Heaven has made this a continent of freedom and democracy. The frontier has been the corner stone of our democracy; the perennial preserver of our freedom."

As I see it the great weakness of historical interpretation in general has been the tendency to over-simplify. For instance, Karl Marx sought to explain historical and social phenomena in terms of economic determinism; Croce and Gentile have gone to the other extreme in attributing the social process to the spiritual and idealistic element. The scientific historian, however, must look with a critical eye upon any systematic attempt to explain the whole of civilization by means of a single formula. Historical interpretation is not as simple as that. And this very simplicity which renders the Turner thesis so attractive should also render it an object of suspicion.

The first criticism a study of the frontier theory suggests is already a familiar one. It is the tendency to isolate the frontier community from the general course of civilization. Seizing upon one important internal factor, it tends to exclude the many external factors essential to a complete understanding of our historical development. It is what Professor Wright

of Harvard has called "the scholarly equivalent of splendid isolation," with Turner as the historical Borah. We cannot ignore the fact that the influence of the Old World upon the New has been continuous and lasting. The early colonies in North America, whether of French, English, or Spanish origin, were in many respects reflections of conditions and ideas prevalent in their respective mother countries. Their cultures and their institutions were derivative rather than original. Thus we have autocratic, feudalistic Catholic New France side by side with self-governing, individualistic, Puritan Protestant New England. The frontier, if it possessed the peculiar qualities attributed to it by American historians, should have produced in each a similar pattern in contemporary society. The forest philosophy may be the philosophy of American democracy, as Turner has maintained, but it cannot at the same time be called the philosophy of Canadian feudalism.

No individual is able to cut himself off from his past experience for it is part of himself; and so the pioneer, when transplanted from the Old World to the New, or from east to west, invariably endeavours to reproduce that which he already knows, to build according to a familiar plan. It is one of the myths of our western history which pictures our early pioneers joyfully "throwing off the bedraggled garments of Europe and starting life afresh in the wilderness." Far from discarding the bedraggled garments of Europe, they continued to cling to them, even when they were manifestly unsuitable for the bitter climate. In other words the pioneer is usually imitative rather than creative. The colony of Cannington Manor provides an illustration of this point. During the 1880's William Pierce, a wealthy Englishman, set about to establish a colony or settlement in southern Saskatchewan. To this community came a number of well-to-do Englishmen, who, in a short time, reproduced upon the plains of western Canada, a typical English country community with its large roomy mansions, its beautifully decorated church, its fox hunting, racing, steeple-chasing, and cricket—and I should not be surprised to learn that *The Times* was to be found at every breakfast table! The colony prospered during a brief period, but eventually the failure of the Canadian Pacific Railway to construct the expected branch line through the settlement was a severe blow to the settlers, many of whom, their private means or remittances dwindling, were obliged to abandon the region and to take up elsewhere a more modest standard of living than that demanded of an English country gentleman.

While insisting upon the importance of the traditional background as a formative influence, I do not mean to suggest that the frontier develops no new habits or customs. Adaptation to environment is nature's first law. Let a plant or animal, man or society, be transplanted, and failure to adapt itself to the change will lead to death. Mental pliability is an essential quality of life in any society, and particularly so if that society be removed from an artificial, civilized environment and placed in a primitive, uncivilized environment. The members of that society will perforce be obliged to adopt many of the ways of their savage neighbours or to invent new ways and means to meet immediate needs. Thus we adopted the snowshoe, the moccasin, and the canoe in order to carry on the fur trade; we adopted the Red River cart as a means of transportation over the prairies; and we experimented with new grains and new methods of

farming and cultivation in order to counter the influence of a dry, and in many respects hostile, climate on the western plains. It will be noted, however, that these adaptations were economic in character. The settler's task is primarily that of keeping alive, and so it is the primary or economic *mores* which undergo the greatest degree of change or variation. The secondary *mores*, such as government, law, religion, and social institutions change to a far less degree. Eventually the frontier state ceases to be such, and reinforced by men and ideas from older communities, it arrives at a state of culture not far short of that of its mother country.

In the case of western Canada, this period of transition from the pioneer to the settled community, from the simple to the complex culture, has been only a matter of decades. Indeed the frontier in Canada is not yet closed. To the north, in Alberta and Saskatchewan, pioneer communities are passing through the same stage of transition through which the prairies passed a generation ago. Thus we have at our back door the source-materials for historians, sociologists, and all who would study the frontier folk ways at first hand.

The history of western Canada is a gallant one. For the Canadian West, no less than its American counterpart, has had its share of leaders who stir the imagination: Mackenzie, Thompson, Selkirk, Simpson, Riel, Big Bear, Poundmaker, Taché, Lacombe, and others. But we must avoid the temptation to view the history of the West in the light of its romantic figures, for the life with which we are concerned is to be found in the teepees, in the farms, and in the towns, among those whose names are either forgotten or are to be found only in some parish register or village cemetery. It will not be necessary in a paper of this nature to give the whole story of the expanding frontier in western Canada; but I should like to glance briefly at the three different periods into which it naturally falls. The first period opens with the establishment by Lord Selkirk of a Scottish colony on the banks of the muddy Red in the vicinity of what is today the City of Winnipeg. In 1870, the same colony was admitted into the Canadian Confederation as the Province of Manitoba and a new generation of settlers made its way towards the North-west. The third period began when Lord Strathcona drove the last spike in the Canadian Pacific Railway at Craigellachie in November, 1885, and thereby opened the frontier to the assault of unprecedented numbers of immigrants from all parts of the world.

It was on June 12, 1811, that the first generation which we are to examine began. On that day the Hudson's Bay Company granted to Lord Selkirk, in consideration of a payment of 10 shillings and "for divers good and other valuable causes," a region estimated at some 116,000 square miles, in what is now the southern part of the Provinces of Manitoba and Saskatchewan and the northern part of the State of Minnesota. Into this promised land trekked dour Scots from Glasgow, Stromness, and Lewis, and Irishmen from Sligo, led by their Scottish Canadian Moses, Miles Macdonnell. For three years they were assailed by the north-west Pharaoh. Then came the plagues of grasshoppers and floods. With the dogged determination characteristic of their race, the Red River settlers clung to their wretched homes on the edge of the western wilderness. Persistence was its own reward and in time the colony began to present the aspect of a thriving agricultural community.

During the period from 1821 to 1870 the Red River Settlement was truly an outpost of empire. It was in no sense an outpost, or frontier, of Canada. The old north-west canoe route, the traditional "back door" from Canada, was shut and bolted after the amalgamation of the rival fur companies in 1821. There was no contact with the outside world except via the Bay and none at all with Canada until the westward expansion of the United States provided a means of communication south of the boundary in the 1850's. Immigration too, ceased after 1821, and the growth of the colony was due to accessions from the fur trade and to natural increase. It had been a condition of Selkirk's grant that one tenth of the area granted to the Earl should be set apart "to the use of such person or persons being or having been in the service or employ of the Governor and Company for a term of not less than three years," and Red River thus became the favourite retreat of Company servants with their squaws and half-breed progeny. Moreover, the union of the Hudson Bay and North West Companies threw many clerks and *voyageurs* out of employment with the result that the numbers of the colony were practically doubled in the space of a few years. In 1831 the population numbered 2,417; in 1849, 5,291; while in 1870 the Dominion census showed that there were, in the country, 5,270 French-speaking half-breeds, 4,080 English-speaking half-breeds, and 1,600 white settlers.

No early settlement was ever more exposed to the formative influence of the frontier than that at Red River. Here, if nowhere else in western Canada, must have been felt the full impact of the frontier. And yet withal, the Red River Settlement remained a stable, conservative society. In 1856, when communication was opened with St. Paul, American travellers expressed surprise to find Scottish highlanders emerging from the wilderness with all the marks of a European civilization. Like a transplanted tree, which sends out new roots but remains the same stock, the Red River settlers, while adopting the moccasin and the capote, underwent no fundamental political or social change. The French-speaking parishes west of Fort Garry on the Assiniboine and south along the Red were western reproductions of parishes along the St. Lawrence, while the trim little crofts of the thrifty, industrious Covenanters in Kildonan and other parishes north of the fort transformed the lower Red River valley into a little Scotland. Both groups, French and Scottish, retained the characteristics of their respective races, characteristics fully described by contemporary writers like Alexander Ross, John Maclean, Viscount Milton, and Dr Cheadle. Writing of the Scots Ross says: "A certain moral and religious discipline, of course, lays the foundation for the habits we have described. Every morning and evening the Bible is taken off the shelf, and family worship regularly observed. 'We see no caroling, gossiping, card-playing, or idling here,' observed my friend. 'Not to any great extent,' said I; 'the idler has no encouragement here.' In their social relations, the Scotch are sober, shrewd, and attentive to their several duties, both as Christians and subjects." Coming from the backwoods of Quebec, or the lonely crofts of Scotland where they had little to do with public affairs, the settlers accepted, for the most part without protest, the paternalistic administration of a Governor and Council appointed by the Hudson's Bay Company. The community, in the British tradition, remained quiet and law-abiding, and beyond the demand for freedom of trade in furs, the settlers, half-breed

and white, showed little desire to tinker with established rights or to indulge in political or social experiments. Surely if the Turner thesis that the frontier was the principal inspiration behind American democracy is a complete interpretation, then we should have had startling and original developments in this pioneer community.

Canadians had taken no part in the founding of the Red River Settlement and until the 1850's one can scarcely discern even a ripple of interest in western developments. This absence of interest may easily be explained. Canada had not yet found her feet: Canadians had, since the War of 1812, been absorbed in the struggle for responsible government. But more important than the political was the geographical factor. Extending southwards from Hudson Bay the Laurentian shield had placed a vast geological barrier between the east and west of Canada. With its scrubby vegetation, its meagre deposits of soil, and its rivers broken by innumerable rapids, this region held little attraction for the prospective settler. Thus while the American was drawn by fertile fields and easy water-ways into Ohio, Illinois, Indiana, or Wisconsin, the Canadian was repelled by the glacial horizon of northern Ontario. Canada has had no Middle West; nothing to parallel the steady westward advance of settlement from the Atlantic coast into the middle western states of America.

It was no pressure of *lebensraum* which brought home to Canadians the importance to Canada of the north-western territory, but a proposal put forward in 1856 by a London journalist, that the Hudson Bay territory might be used for the purpose of convict settlement. Australia having freed herself from the shackles of a penal colony, a substitute was being sought elsewhere in the waste places of the Empire. A second factor was the fear of American aggression; the fear that the great American flood might overflow its northern levees and swamp Red River as Texas, California, and Oregon had been swamped. Economic motives too were at work. Here was a vast fertile plain, unexplored and unexploited. Lecturers, pamphleteers, members of Parliament, and Boards of Trade expatiated, like our contemporary luncheon speakers, upon its illimitable resources and tremendous agricultural potentialities. Newspaper editors, with an enthusiasm born of ignorance and optimism, followed the lead of the *Globe* and the *North American*. Nothing seemed impossible, and the idea of linking the British possessions on the Atlantic with those on the Pacific captured the imagination of politicians and *entrepreneurs* alike. The North-west Passage, sought by sea since the days of Cabot, might be realized in a transcontinental railway. No less important in arousing Canadian interest in the North-west were the issues of domestic politics. George Brown saw in western expansion a means of breaking down French-Canadian influence in the colonial Legislature. A great Anglo-Saxon west would not only strengthen the Grit party, but would give the English a permanent majority at Ottawa. As a result of this new interest, Canadians began to make their way through American territory to the Red River valley, while the legislators undertook to negotiate with the Colonial Office for the transfer to Canada of the vast area known as Rupert's Land.

The actual transfer of territory, as we all know, was not achieved without considerable opposition. Led by Louis Riel, the French half-breeds of Red River refused to accept William McDougall, the Canadian Governor designate, set up a provisional government at Fort Garry, and

drew up their own terms for entrance into Confederation. We need not enter into a detailed discussion of the immediate causes of the insurrection, but we should glance for a moment at the fundamental character of the rising. Essentially the Riel Rebellion was a struggle for survival on the part of a primitive community. In all parts of the world, in South Africa, New Zealand, and North America, the penetration by white settlers of territories inhabited by native peoples has led to friction and wars, and Canadian expansion into the North-west led to similar results. By character and upbringing the half-breeds, no less than the Indians, were unfitted to compete with the whites in the competitive individualism of white civilization, or to share with them the duties and responsibilities of citizenship. The French Métis was content to remain in his solid social matrix. That he was behind the times did not worry him. His life suited him. He had no particular taste for politics and it was the great achievement of Louis Riel that he was able to organize this unpromising material into a provisional government and to force Canada to grant guarantees to his people. There was no nebulous idealism about this insurrection. It was a bread-and-butter movement. It is true that the half-breed leaders protested against the unrepresentative character of McDougall's proposed council and talked about government by consent, but it would be, to my mind, a great error to picture Louis Riel as a Manitoba Andrew Jackson or to read into his rising a struggle for democracy.

About the time that Canada began to show an interest in the western plains another frontier community was developing upon the Pacific coast. This far western colony of New Caledonia or British Columbia owed its sudden appearance upon the map to causes different from those which produced the Red River Settlement and later the Prairie Provinces. In this instance it was not the call of the wild or the prospect of free land or the anticipation of carving a new home out of the western wilderness, but the magnetic attraction of gold. Lured onwards by a golden will 'o the wisp, the motley thousands who had already trekked to Australia and California, and who were later to struggle over the Chilkoot Pass to the Klondike, pushed over the fur traders' trails to the valley of the Fraser River. But this mining population had little in common with the frontier agriculturists of the plains, and I do not, for that reason, propose to include the Pacific province in this discussion.

The second generation of frontier expansion in the Canadian West began on the 15th day of July, 1870. On that date Rupert's Land became part of the Dominion of Canada, and the frontier colony of Red River was admitted into Confederation as the Province of Manitoba. At once the Dominion was called upon to cope with new problems; the establishment of the machinery of government, the pacification of the Indians, and the encouragement and control of immigration. With regard to the first, a typical provincial, bicameral Legislature was set up for the miniature Province of Manitoba and temporary arrangements were made for the administration of that spacious area of grassy prairie, known as the North West Territories, which extended to the foot of the Rocky Mountains. Five years later the North West Territories Act gave that region a political existence separate from that of Manitoba. The Honourable David Laird was appointed Lieutenant-Governor and provision was made for the gradual

introduction into the Governor's Council of members elected by the people.

In accordance with British tradition, the Canadian government laid great emphasis upon the maintenance of law and order. Tales of rampant lawlessness, drunken orgies, and Indian unrest had reached the ears of the authorities at Ottawa and measures were adopted leading to the organization of a semi-military police force known as the North West Mounted Police. Under the command of Colonel George French this force set out from Manitoba in July, 1874, and spread itself over the western plains from Swan River to Edmonton and from Pelly to Fort Macleod. American whisky runners from over the Montana boundary were chased back to the country from which they had come and within a year the Indians bore witness to the "great satisfaction they derived from the presence of the Mounted Police in the country" and to the "security and peace that had succeeded to anarchy, disorder and drunkenness." The police were present at the conclusion of the Indian treaties; they shepherded Sitting Bull's Sioux back to the United States; they assisted the Department in gathering the plains tribes upon the reservations and brought justice to red and white man alike. Doors might henceforth be left unlocked and cattle unguarded; the drunken riots ceased and there was an end to Indian bloodshed.

Measures were also undertaken to prepare the way for settlement. A land reserve was set aside to extinguish the half-breed claim in Manitoba, while other blocks were reserved for the Hudson's Bay Company in accordance with the terms of the transfer. A survey of the remainder was undertaken upon the American model. At the same time Immigration Aid Societies were established, colonization companies founded, and government agencies set up in different European centres to attract settlers to a land where free homesteads were to be had for the asking in return for three years' occupancy and proof of cultivation.

The importance of these preparatory measures appears when we contrast the experience of Canada with that of her southern neighbour. In the United States the frontiersman quickly outdistanced effective administration, hence the lawlessness which characterized the history of the American West. Too often the frontier became the haven of refuge for the horsethief, the desperado, and the swindler. It provided an escape from the consequences of old, and offered opportunities for the perpetration of new crimes. Honest men were obliged to improvise for themselves the institutions of law and order; hence the Regulators and the Vigilantes, the lynch law, and the speedy informal justice of the plains. This same absence of restraint led to a disregard of native rights and to that long series of Indian wars which lasted throughout the nineteenth century. The fighting plainsman of American history, has, however, no counterpart north of the boundary. The Canadian frontier was peopled by peaceable, law-abiding ranchers, farmers, and government-encouraged colonists. Here the settler looked to organized justice and to the Mounted Police for his protection, and not to the rifle over his door. Biologists are, I believe, disposed to doubt the permanence of acquired characteristics, but in this instance it does appear that the inherent British respect for legal authority and desire to perpetuate the traditional, survived its period of exposure to the destructive influences of the frontier.

A second point of contrast is to be found in the almost complete



absence of the squatter problem in the history of western Canada. The Selkirk settlers and the half-breeds might possibly be considered as squatters, but their rights and claims received full recognition when the Dominion took over the administration of the North-west. After 1870 both the surveys and the homestead policy moved in advance of actual settlement with the result that the squatter problem and squatter's rights never became the source of political and sectional discord that they did in the case of the United States and Australia. Superficially Riel's agitation might be regarded as a demand for squatter's rights; but in this instance the difficulties arose, not out of the absence of surveys, but out of the type of survey used. The fundamental issue of the North-west Rebellion of 1885 was, however, like that of the Manitoba insurrection of 1869-70, namely, the failure of the half-breeds and Indians to cope with the demands of a new and complex civilization. Bishop Grandin, writing in 1887, placed his finger on the underlying cause of the half-breed rising when he wrote: "Les métis . . . ont grandement souffert des changements arrivés dans leur pays. Ils n'étaient pas assez préparés à cette civilisation qui tout à coup est venue fondre sur eux. . . . Je pourrais dire que c'est là toute l'explication de la guerre civile."

There was a certain uniformity about the immigration to the Canadian West in the early years. The majority of those who entered the prairies during the second generation of settlement came, not as a result of the efforts of the colonization companies, but upon their own initiative. Many of them possessed a limited amount of capital and these purchased farms in the settled areas of Manitoba or opened small shops to serve the needs of the growing communities. Other more adventurous souls followed the beaten paths to occupy homesteads in outlying parts of the province. Evidence as to the character of these early settlers is afforded by the report of the immigration agent at Winnipeg for the year 1881: "It consisted, without exception, of a superior class of agriculturalists, possessed of sufficient means to provide themselves with the outfit necessary to start upon homesteads, and in many cases on improved farms. . . . Another class of immigrants was a number of extensive stock-raisers who are of great importance, and for which enterprise the North-West is so well adapted." Not only were the early settlers of a better-to-do class of society, but they were to a great extent racially homogeneous and not infrequently Conservative in politics; men from Ontario and the old country, they brought, not only their household effects, but the social and political patterns of Canada and Great Britain. There was also a suggestion of religious solidarity. The churches of Rome and England, notably absent from the group of religions which served the American West, were, with the Methodists, in the forefront of the home mission field in Canada. These facts are not without their significance. The more traditional the society, the less likely it is to take to variations of its established *mores*; hence we in Canada appear to have been spared the hundred and one idealistic social experiments and the religious diversities of the American frontier which excited comment from Mrs Trollope as early as 1828.

The last generation of the Canadian frontier differed from the two preceding generations in the mechanical and scientific accompaniments which presided at its birth. The ancient pioneer had made his slow, laborious way by canoe or Red River cart, the modern immigrant was

easily and speedily borne to his destination in the railway colonist car. The completion of the C.P.R. was thus one of the most important events in the history of the Canadian frontier. Free land and fertile soil might have beckoned in vain but for the railway. It was the task of the railway to people the plains; for only thus could it hope to pay for its axle grease.

During the second generation, western colonization had proceeded but slowly; after 1885 it became a headlong rush. Immigrants came not only from eastern Canada and Great Britain, but from all parts of the world, from Iceland, Germany, Belgium, Sweden, the Ukraine, Hungary, and the United States. In the years between 1888 and 1897 the annual rate of immigration to the four territorial divisions of Alberta, Athabaska, Saskatchewan, and Assiniboia, increased fivefold over that of the previous decade. In 1897 Clifford Sifton became Minister of the Interior and still greater efforts were made to attract settlers to the Canadian West. With the one idea of settling the vacant territories with producing farmers and turning the bald prairie into waving wheat fields, Sifton inaugurated a vigorous policy of advertising. Western products were displayed at exhibitions; agencies were established in Great Britain, continental Europe, and the United States; pamphlets with striking illustrations and attractively worded appeals in a dozen different languages were distributed in as many different countries. Religious organizations too added their efforts to those of Sifton and the railways, hence the Jewish, the Mennonite, the Doukhobor, the Hutterite, and the Mormon communities in western Canada. By 1911 the prairies had become the great mixing bowl of Canada with a polyglot population not far short of one and a half million people.

The railway not only added to the number but also determined the location of the settled areas. Water routes and well-defined prairie trails had led the earlier settlers to the Saskatchewan Valley, to St. Laurent, Prince Albert, Battleford, and Edmonton. Prior to the building of the C.P.R. only one settlement, Willow Bunch, was to be found in Saskatchewan south of what was to be the main line of the Canadian Pacific. After the construction of railway the north Saskatchewan settlements were sidetracked. Settlers rushed in along the southern route and towns sprang up along the path of the C.P.R., Moosomin, Regina, Moose Jaw, Maple Creek, Medicine Hat, and Calgary. This southward deflection of immigration was signalized by the removal of the capital of the North West Territories from Battleford to Regina. Later branch lines were built. Two more transcontinentals extended their steel tentacles across the Dominion and settlement spread like a vast network over the plains.

This third generation of settlement is marked by the institutionalizing of the prairies; but of more significance for the purpose of this study than the demand for responsible government and the granting of provincial autonomy, was the growth of militant agrarianism. Conditions in western Canada were ripe for such a development. A ruinous speculative mania, a great frost, and a general economic depression combined to render farming a precarious occupation. Following the example of the Grangers, the Patrons of Industry, and the Populists south of the boundary, western Canadian farmers organized their farmers' unions, their settlers' unions, and their patrons of husbandry. In each instance the railway, a bloodless, monopolistic corporation owned by distant wealth, and a tariff which

discriminated in favour of eastern industrialists, provided scapegoats for hard times. These early efforts, however, came to nought. Radicalism and a willingness to resort to extra-legal methods discredited the Farmers' Union; an unsavoury association with the ill-fated Métis rebellion ended the Settlers' Union; and an unfortunate essay into politics led to the disintegration of the third organization. The following decade—the first of the new century—eschewed politics. It endeavoured to find an economic solution for an economic question and not without considerable success. Whereas the political movements of the eighties and nineties, foreign in their inception, failed to achieve any positive results, the co-operative selling agencies, such as the Grain Growers, did much to better the lot of the farmer. The post-war recession and the great depression of the early thirties again provided the raw materials of revolt, and recourse was had to such political expedients as the Progressive party, the United Farmers, Social Credit, and to a limited extent the C.C.F.—although this last has a Marxist socialist basis which carries it beyond the narrow field of agrarian protest politics.

The question naturally arises, how far were these agrarian movements the product of the frontier? Were these elements of discontent not largely the product of geography, of the climate, and of world conditions rather than the dynamic influence of the western ozone? Of the short growing season, the uncertain rainfall, and the high transportation costs, rather than the hither edge of free land? Is it not significant that protest politics gave way to co-operative marketing with the development of early maturing varieties of wheat and improvements in the technique of dry farming in the late nineties, and with the return of prosperity after the post-war depression of the twenties? It may be urged that westerners have shown themselves more responsive to radicalism than easterners, but this is surely the outcome of that conflict between urban and rural economies, between the producers of primary products selling in the open market and the producers of secondary products selling in a closed market. The problem of the prairie farmer is not, after all, fundamentally different from that of the Atlantic coast fisherman. Radicalism is the natural concomitant of hard times, and it is no novelty that debtor farmers believe they can save themselves by monetary panaceas and political organization.

As time passes the West will tend more and more to approximate the East. Intercommunication, facilitated by the motor car, the airplane, the radio, and the syndicated press, will lead to a greater standardization of tastes, habits, and opinions. And yet for the present it must be admitted that the West possesses a personality of its own. Whether this distinctive character is the result of seventy years' exposure to the prairie frontier; whether it is that the West is still essentially an agricultural in contrast to an industrial or a maritime society; or whether it is the complex polyglot character of the population, I shall leave to you to decide. My last word is to recall to your minds the thesis stated earlier in this paper that our institutions, habits, and general outlook have been shaped, not only by our material environment, the frontier, but by our past experience and the whole body of acquired tradition. Environment has largely conditioned our economic; tradition, our political ways of life. The history of western Canada cannot be explained in terms of either of these factors alone.

## DISCUSSION

[The following discussion took place at the conclusion of the session during which papers were read by Mr Aiton, Mr Stanley, and Mr Burt.]

Mr Marion said that Mr Burt's paper had given the whole gist of the French Canadian régime. One point in particular he wished to mention. If there is one legend deeply woven into the history of French Canada, it is that the French Canadians looked to the clergy for guidance in political matters. Mr Burt had shown that this had not been true down to the conquest—nor had it been true at any time since 1763. Mr Marion mentioned two instances in support of this statement. He said that the minute it was understood that French Canadians take "their religion from Rome, their politics from home," a great service will be done to the cause of better understanding between French and English Canadians.

Mr Brebner called attention to a study by Ernest Martin in regard to the exiled Acadians and their establishment in Poitou. These Acadians had proved utterly intractable in their new surroundings in France. This seemed to demonstrate the existence of a frontier type.

Mr Adair suggested that Mr Burt had painted his picture too much in black and white, as for instance, in the adroit contrast between Old France and New France. It must be remembered, however, that he had been really comparing the Old France of the fifteenth century with New France of the seventeenth. In the seventeenth century, the peasants of France were better off than most of those elsewhere in Europe. Moreover, the French Canadians came from that part of France where the peasants were the most independent and progressive, and where certainly they were not simply slaves. He suggested that the frontier thesis must be applied to New France with discrimination. For instance, there was no movement from New France to take up land on the frontier, no migration of families or women to follow up the advances of the *coureurs de bois*. It should be noted also that the normal family in New France before 1763 was not a very large one.

With reference to the radical opposition to the tithe, the really vital point is that in a good many such matters the habitants were backed up by the civil authorities, who wanted to show New France as an attractive place, where the control of the clergy was not so great. Moreover, in the eighteenth century there was no further immigration to New France, no real pressure of population westward, no economic expansion, and all the very real attempts in the past of the government to establish industries and a growing prosperity went by the board; the French Canadians would not even develop their own fisheries for anything beyond their own local consumption. This is not in accord with the supposed psychological effect of frontier conditions as developing an active and ingenious population. If you leave out of account one small section of the population, the *coureurs de bois*, the whole frontier thesis as applied to French Canada seems to go by the board.

Mr Sage said that you could not make the Turner thesis apply to western Canada if you regard the international boundary as one dividing Canadian from American influences across the continent. There was one frontier of settlement for the whole of America. The Canadian West is

not a frontier of Quebec or Ontario alone; the "swing" of the frontier must be kept in mind.

The American frontier, he said, did not really reach western Canada until after the building of the Canadian Pacific Railway. The Red River settlement was not really a frontier community. There was no pressure of population there, as there was on the real frontier. In regard to the mining frontier, he pointed out that the whole Turner thesis is not based on the agricultural frontier alone. There were other frontiers—the range, for example, and the mining frontier. The latter, which came to Canada from California, was also an American movement.

Mr Trotter said that the Turner thesis was not intended to be a thesis of universal application. Turner's object had been to give a fuller understanding of the history of the United States, and he had stimulated a much more intelligent study of United States history. Mr Trotter said that he recalled a conversation with Turner in which the latter had said that he did not pretend to know anything about Canadian history, and that his theories were not built with the intention of fitting Canadian history.

Mr Trotter went on to suggest that, besides tradition and the influence of the frontier in the creation of a new community, there must be considered also the later influence of the "old country," exerted continuously after settlement had taken place. Constitutional and technical progress alike in Canada must be understood in terms of what had been happening in Britain as well as on this continent. In some respects the growth of a distinctive Canadian type had been due to the fact that Canadians depended more directly and more consciously on England than did people in the United States, who tended to look inwards to a greater extent than we do.

Mr Brown said that he preferred to think of historians as explorers, who sometimes made their way through jungles, and at other times came out on broad uplands, where long views were possible. Mr Brown said that we were now in a period when we could see panoramas in history, and that he was greatly moved by two which had been revealed in the discussions. One was the history of the Atlantic world. We have tended to take this for granted, and have written history in terms of the conflict between the colony and the Mother Country rather than in terms of the greater cultural bonds which unite the Atlantic world. Now that the bastions of this world are crumbling, we are beginning to realize its significance. We have been unwilling to show enthusiasm for it, but now we look back and see that it was bigger than we had thought. It must be taken into account in our historical writing and, indeed, already there were American historians who were presenting the history of colonial America in terms, not of quarrels, but of a great system.

The second panorama was that which displayed the settlement of these two continents. This process had been one of magnificent proportions, one which inspired enthusiasm. The problem of scholarship, Mr Brown added, was the problem of combining detailed study with some feeling of imaginative outlook, capable of presenting these wider views. Both these qualities were present in the Presidential Address, which had opened with references to scholarship, and had ended on a note of conviction and enthusiasm. Mr Brown thought that a realization of the need

for combining these qualities of scholarship had been apparent in these meetings of the Society.

Mr Kenney referred to his own experience as a student of Turner's. He said that Turner had been a man of great humanity and common sense. Though he was no fanatic, he had enthusiasm which he was able to pass on to others. He always insisted that, in his theory of the frontier, he was trying to set forth one aspect of the story of the growth of the nation which had been neglected but was of importance. He himself suggested many of the limitations to the theory that later had been developed. The essential characteristic of Turner has been his enthusiasm for truth.

Mr Burt, in reply, denied that he had confused France of the fifteenth century with New France of the seventeenth, and said that there was nothing in his paper which was not true of France during the later period. The fact that French Canadians came originally from parts of France where there had been more independence of spirit supported his views. North America had been a frontier of Europe, and no examination of the society of New France could be made to show that it was like Old France. In regard to the fact that there had been no movement westward of settlement from New France, he pointed out that New France, to the end of the French régime, was itself a frontier, and that there was no need to move further westward.