

Right, Left, and Centre News and Views from the Canadian West

Allen Seager

Volume 18, 1986

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/llt18re02>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (imprimé)

1911-4842 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce document

Seager, A. (1986). Right, Left, and Centre: News and Views from the Canadian West. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 18, 209–216.

Right, Left, and Centre:

News and Views from the Canadian West

Allen Seager

Hugh A. Dempsey, ed., *CPR West: The Iron Road and the Building of a Nation* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre 1984).

David Leadbeater, ed., *Essays in the Political Economy of Alberta* (Toronto: New Hogtown Press 1984).

Gerald Friesen, *The Canadian Prairies: A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1984).

I

"RIEL! POUNDMAKER! BIG BEAR! Clear the Track!" crowed an advertisement placed by a major Canadian manufacturer in the *Toronto Globe* on 18 July 1885. It celebrated the end of the rebellion and anticipated by only a few months the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway; the driving of industrial capital's "last spike" into the coffin of the old order in the northwest. Although the CPR may have won the West in the 1880s, it has not, until recently, won the hearts of western historians, whether those sympathetic to the native population, the incoming settlers, or populist provincial governments. But the times, in Canada and in the West, are "a changin'." Canadian Pacific itself can no longer be realistically described as an "eastern" trust bending the prairie farmer and business owner to pay tribute to Montreal. Several of its largest subsidiaries make their headquarters in Vancouver or Calgary, while its seedy edifices and neighbouring vacant lots in Montreal pay equal testimony to the transitory nature of capital's regional loyalties. In July 1985 federal trans-

Allen Seager, "Right, Left, and Centre: News and Views from the Canadian West," *Labour/Le Travail*, 18 (Fall 1986), 209-215.

port minister Don Mazankowski announced the deregulation of the railroads — further dismantling the structures erected under western political pressure after the 1897 Crow's Nest Pass Agreement — without so much as a squeak of protest from the Tory governments of his native region. It was perhaps inevitable that such changes (especially the lionization of "free enterprise" in the modern West) would eventually be reflected in the more prosaic realms of historical interpretation. This we see in the publication of *CPR West: The Iron Road and the Building of a Nation* which, despite an occasional bow to dissenting opinion, constitutes a document of surrender by at least one group of western historians to Donald Creighton's interpretation of the Canadian Pacific Railway.

This anthology is composed of fifteen scholarly papers given at the Glenbow Museum's "Great CPR Exposition," a centenary event that received, in editor Hugh Dempsey's prefatory words, the "full support and co-operation of Canadian Pacific Ltd." Billed on the dustjacket as "social history at its finest," its working definition of social history appears to have been any sort of history with the politics left out. There is not one serious discussion of the business history of the CPR, railway labour receives equally short shrift, and one does not finish the volume with any appreciation of the crucial role of the state in organizing, financing, and nurturing Canada's largest corporate trust since 1881. A number of the essays do address aspects of the relationship between the CPR and the main lines of socio-economic development in the region; others deal with matters of frankly antiquarian interest.

Patricia Roy's lead article on Chinese migrant workers in the 1880s helps redeem the volume in the eyes of a labour historian, although technically speaking, the several thousand Chinese "coolies" (like much else about Oriental workers on

the West Coast, the actual numbers are unknown) recruited by British Columbia contractor Andrew Onderdonk in 1880 were never employed by the Canadian Pacific Railway. It may be unkind but it is nonetheless accurate to surmise that the inclusion of this otherwise admirable contribution was a concession to the grim *realpolitik* of multiculturalism, not the working class. The great majority of railway construction workers in the 1880s and after were Canadians, Americans, Britons, or Europeans. These labourers appear as shadowy malcontents in the second essay in the volume, T.D. Regehr's "Letters From the End of the Track." With the ending of the initial construction phase, the working man and woman disappear completely from the stage. The CPR of *CPR West* is a railway without unions, strikes, collective bargaining, landmark cases in Canadian industrial relations, or technological change — in short, a company without employees.

Contributions by Sheilagh Jamieson on the ranching industry to 1914, A. Mitchner on irrigation, Joan Eagle on Sir Thomas Shaughnessy's prairie development policies, David Breen on the origins of the oil and gas industry, Max Foran on urban development, and others, taken collectively and subject to the kind of broad gauge analysis that is entirely lacking here, do critique some traditional economic assumptions. By illustrating the diversity of prairie enterprise embraced by the CPR during its first half-century — that is to say, the diversity of prairie enterprise in this period! — they challenge the notion of a monolithic wheat economy automatically brought into being by the railway and the National Policy. Some of the conclusions suggest not the economic complexity of the iron road but the iron discipline of *CPR West's* capitalistic propaganda line. We are told that Shaughnessy and his colleagues in the Montreal boardroom "all demonstrated, time and time again, their faith in the economic potential of the west" — as if such

"faith" had nothing to do with the corporate portfolio's 25 million acres of prime public lands in the prairie provinces or half of the city of Vancouver. (148) For skeptical farmers in the Wild Rose Country we have a lecture on the CPR's water diversions that "bestowed a profound, long-term benefit to the agricultural industry in Alberta" — despite the acknowledged fact that the CPR gave up on irrigation 70 years ago, dumping its investments on Alberta taxpayers. (273) (Mormonism made a much more "profound" contribution to irrigation than ever did monopoly capitalism.) Finally, we learn that "the CPR contributed profoundly to the formation and organization of the petroleum industry in western Canada" — a golden calf before which millions will bow down and worship, one assumes. (244)

David Jones' "It's All Lies They Tell You," a study of the CPR and immigration in the 1920s, is a refreshing reprise on the original social history theme, as is Hugh Dempsey's own contribution on the Plains Indian response to the railway's "Fear-some Firewagons." A.A. den Otter's survey of the rise and fall of the Alberta coal industry constitutes a minority report on the economic question. Entitled "The Bondage of Steam," the essay argues, in somewhat too dramatic language, that the "tragedy of the western Canadian coal industry . . . was that it never escaped railway domination." (207) (The killing and maiming of thousands of mine workers, in the railway-owned "captive mines" and all other pits during the heyday of underground mining, 1905-45, was surely the greater tragedy.) But the dilemma of the coal industry, a complex matrix of geography, business practice, and public policy, summarized here in straightforward fashion, is instructive. The railway companies (the CPR among others) brought the industry to birth, but bled it through infamy and strangled it at maturity. The corporate bottom line demanded access to cheap, undervalued locomotive fuel. The

railways' plans did not include the fostering of coal-based industrial diversification in the mining regions (while early efforts were made by independent capitalists in the Crow's Nest Pass and southern Alberta, all of them came to naught). Nor, on a terrain more familiar to western historians, did the railways do anything to facilitate a fair exchange of industrial goods for industrial raw materials between Alberta and central Canada. It was not "the East" that discriminated against the coal producers; the ill-fated National Fuel Policy argued for by the Alberta coal lobby had no more ardent supporters than the Ontario Tories. It simply suited the omnipotent railroads to keep the mines and miners chained to their monopolies: an object lesson in the failure of the National Policy.

Five remaining essays in *CPR West* are what the miners of Alberta called "bone:" interesting but not very useful bits of petrified material worthy of the coffee table. E.J. Hart, Sam Kula, and George F.G. Stanley examine the CPR's relentless self-promotion in the realms of tourism, film, and art. Does Professor Stanley's "John Hammond: Painter for the CPR," a study of a minor landscape artist who found a patron in Sir William Van Horne, mean to leave us with an impression of the latter gentleman's "profound" contribution to Canadian culture? If Van Horne was such a patron of the arts, why didn't he bequeath his notable art collection to the nation rather than letting it be auctioned off by his offspring? John Marsh's discussion of the Connaught and Spiral Tunnels begs another question about Van Horne: why did Van Horne put the original main line on such impossible grades in the first place? Robert Stamp's anecdotal "Royal Tours and the CPR" rounds out the book with a topic that brings to mind that old definition of social history as the study of the everyday lives of dead kings and courtiers.

If not quite a *festshcrift* to the robber barons, *CPR West* does suggest that west-

ern railway history has taken the proverbial one step forward but two steps back since Harold Innis and Matthew Josephson. "Knockers" and econometricians — clear the track!

II

JUST AS THE CPR remains a fixture in the national ethos, so too does Canada's "political economy tradition," which has continued to make lively contributions to public and historical debate. But the inherent contradictions among a school that avows Marx as its "theoretical foundation," while also claiming lineal descent "from the liberal writings of Harold Innis, Donald Creighton, W.A. Mackintosh and Vernon Fowke," have perhaps never been successfully resolved.¹ This central paradox of the political economists' nationalist "paradigm" may explain why work in this genre has often been marred by a dogmatic and anachronistic blending of the economic categories of the Rowell-Sirois Report, and the political idiom of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union's (CPSU) *Short Course*.²

The virtues of the political economy approach lie less with its practitioners' interpretations of the supposed "peculiarities" of Canadian capitalism, than in the potential for a genuinely interdisciplinary project that would learn "to combine scholarship with relevancy."³ On each count, *Essays in the Political Economy of Alberta*, edited by David Leadbeater, falls a little short of the mark.

¹ Daniel Drache and Wallace Clement, eds., *The New Practical Guide to Canadian Political Economy* (Toronto 1985), ix, xviii.

² See, as an unfortunate example, Daniel Drache, "The Formation and Fragmentation of the Canadian Working Class: 1820-1920," *Studies in Political Economy*, 15 (1984), 43-90.

³ Drache and Clement, *The New Practical Guide*, xxiii.

While there is much poaching by social scientists on the historians' turf, no professional historian is included among its contributors. This lacuna, ironically, does little to make the volume more "relevant" to contemporary issues. The volume has, to be sure, one foot on the ground, but the other is fixed somewhere out in the nether regions of social theory, beginning with a bald assertion in the introduction of the "generally lower level and subordinate character of . . . cultural development in Alberta," which *Essays in the Political Economy of Alberta* is obviously meant to redress. The Leadbeater volume does achieve one thing. It effectively answers a long-standing criticism from the right that the radical nationalism of the political economy school is Toronto-centric and indifferent towards the regions.

Rumours of a powerful resurgence of the dismal science in Alberta, however, are misleading. Three of the six essays are recycled versions of research published during the 1970s. Warren Caragata's survey of Alberta labour history was originally written — and properly so — as a chronicle of trade union achievements for an audience of trade unionists; it is not couched in the idiom of social science or political economy and, now recast in article-length form, will be useful to labour historians. Larry Pratt's analysis of province-building in Alberta in the 1970s has already been widely used by political scientists, although like anything else in that discipline, its conclusions are now dated. The ten-year provincialist binge came to an abrupt end with the constitutional and energy deals of 1981; analysis of more recent events awaits another commentary. Less well-known is the republished article by Jim Anderson on the municipal government reform movement, 1900-30, combining Marxian notions of the class struggle with theories of Progressive reform as an agency of the hegemonic "middle class" — as they were developed in the 1960 and 1970s by such non-

Marxists as Sam Hays, John Weaver, Alan Artibise, and the early Michael Katz. Anderson's discussion of an extremely wide literature regrettably obscures the focus on actual communities and events in early twentieth-century Alberta. Moreover, there is a real problem with his periodization. Useful in collapsing the Alberta experience into the critique of Progressivism, the choice of these three decades misses the highlights of labour, communist, and social democratic involvement in local government in Alberta. It also insures that the piece will be next to useless for those interested in contemporary urban issues.

The new material in this anthology includes contributions on native rights and the oil industry. A.D. Fisher's "Indian Land Policy and the Settler State" is a forgivably angry account of what was done to the native population between 1870 and 1920. He concludes, however, not with practical suggestions for strategies for redress, or even a comment on native resurgence, but with a tortured discussion of how "the general battle in [nineteenth-century] Canada between merchant and industrial capital" allegedly determined the Plains Indian outcome in Alberta — an outcome that was not different in, say, Montana, we need to add. (95-6)

Ed Shaffer's "Political Economy of Oil in Alberta" is, by contrast, anchored in an international perspective on multinational capital, and in the Leninist tradition of analysis of finance capitalist imperialism. Classic Leninist theory seemed to be on the ropes in the context of the oil industry during the 1970s, with both the OPEC "revolution" in the Third World and, closer to home, the apparently successful effort by provincial governments in western Canada to capture the economic "rents" of resource development. But with the bursting of the oil bubble in the 1980s, leaving in its wake the monumental debts owed by most oil producers to finance capital, the theory

assumes new relevance. Shaffer's conclusion for Alberta is surprisingly moderate — he doubts that oil will be developed in such a way as to "maximize benefits to the people of Alberta," (190) reflecting perhaps the lingering influence of the earlier, more optimistic revisionism, or the particular contours of the Alberta case. With its near-Kuwaitian ratio of petrodollars to population, Edmonton, unlike Lagos, Mexico City, or, for that matter, Ottawa, clearly did not have to borrow against its theoretical resource assets during the boom years. Despite recent reverses, Alberta emerged in the 1980s as a banker to the nation. Its financial power is felt at every federal-provincial conclave, including the fruitless talks on native self-government it helped to sabotage. The potential consequences of a progressive government in Edmonton are now almost too frightful to contemplate.

Unfortunately, in neither his introduction, nor his lengthy "Outline of Capitalist Development in Alberta," which steers a steady course through essentially uncharted terrain and stands apposite to the otherwise unfulfilled ambitions of *Essays in the Political Economy of Alberta*, does economist David Leadbeater lay out a political agenda for Albertans. The analysis of Alberta's bourgeoisie and political élite, buttressed by numerous data, from humble frontier origins to their place today near the commanding heights of Canadian capitalism, cannot be faulted in broad outline. Leadbeater could, however, have evoked the language of Charles O'Brien, William Irvine, Carl Axelson, or even "Bible Bill" Aberhart, to inspire Albertan undergraduates to throw off the yoke of class-bound provincial nationalism, storm the Tory bastions, and drive the money changers out of the temple. Instead, Leadbeater doffs his professional cap mainly to brood over "the weight of a colonial past" which, he believes, lies like a particularly vivid nightmare on the brains of the living in Alberta. Leadbeater prefers Shakespeare, that fatalist interpreter of early

capitalism and imperialism, to the voices of authentic modern radicalism in the province. He makes much ado about nothing in doting on such a relic of the past as the British-aristocratic origin of the word "Alberta" (compared with the native words "Manitoba" and "Saskatchewan" in an arcane analogy with Rhodesia/Zimbabwe). The multicultural dimensions of Alberta society, including the modern élite, are entirely overlooked by this emphasis on the "WASP" character of the "settler" culture. In attempting to conjure up the ghost of "national democratic" revolt from the ashes of 1885 he flogs other dead horses, and not even Albertan ones. If the "new" political economy, prairie-style, can do little more than shed tears over Riel, Poundmaker, and Big Bear, it is not to this century, or the next, that it belongs.

III

IN CONTRAST TO the anthologies discussed above, Gerald Friesen's *The Canadian Prairies: A History* is an old-fashioned book, a painstaking piece of individual scholarship around a grand narrative theme: the development of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta as "distinctive neighbourhoods in the North Atlantic cultural metropolis." (466) Building on his doctoral thesis, which examined manifestations of western regionalism in major national institutions — Protestantism, Progressivism, and the labour movement — Friesen has produced an impressively comprehensive survey.

Roughly one-third of the 467 pages of prose are given over to pre-Confederation topics, including one of five chapters almost exclusively devoted to native history entitled "Prairie Indians 1840-1900: The End of Autonomy." The discussion of native history and prehistory ranges as far south as Meso-America and as far east as mediaeval France, and will no doubt help to push survey lecturers beyond the usual once-over-lightly survey of tribal territories and culture areas with a dash of

breast-beating à la A.D. Fisher thrown in for good measure. The story ends with a chapter "The New West since 1940" which brings us right up to date with such current events as Manitoba's language debate, which saw linguistic moderates trapped by generations of anti-federal rhetoric in 1983, and the swift collapse of the NDP dynasty in Saskatchewan in 1982. Friesen, who seems to be sympathetic to the regionalist and statist dimensions of the Prairies' social democratic tradition, does not choose, however, to discuss the roots of the contemporary crisis of social democracy in the midwest.

Typical of the economical use of words in *The Canadian Prairies* is Friesen's discussion of the origins of the Canadian Pacific Railway, (171-81) which accomplishes in ten pages that which eluded the compilers of *CPR West*. His conclusion that the railroad's profits "benefitted only a few, not the nation" is also typically measured and straightforward. *Canadian Prairies* stands about dead centre between the politics of *CPR West* on the one hand and *Essays in the Political Economy of Alberta* on the other, and from the strategic vantage point, has achieved a great deal. The author's regional sympathies do not result in the sort of grossly oversimplified model of "the West" as an exploited colony of central Canada to which we have become familiar (and which the marriage between Marxism and the staples school has helped perpetuate). Friesen is acutely aware of the differences in political culture and economic structure among the three provinces, and of the ethnic, regional (in the more precise, local sense of the word), and class antagonisms that have historically divided them as well.

Despite gratuitous endorsement of the book by the vulgar Trudeauphobes,⁴ I have no hesitation recommending *The*

⁴ See Andrew Nikiforuk, "Understanding Western History," *The Globe and Mail*, 5 January 1985.

Canadian Prairies as a text; the conscientious student will benefit from Friesen's wide-ranging footnotes and bibliographical essay (and the index — a tool which our political economists have eschewed), and by his example in dealing respectfully but firmly with historiographical debates. The study is also recommended to Canadian labour historians for whom the Prairies are a distant country. The working class receives as fair a shake as can be expected in a general account. The body of knowledge that exists on the social history of the prairie working class is successfully integrated into a chapter on "Capital and Labour 1900-1940: Cities, Resource Towns and Frontier Camps." Friesen steers a little too close to conventional wisdoms, however, in arguing that although class differentiation was intrinsic to the make-up of the prairie city and town in this period, it was only on the resource frontier that class consciousness reached a "mature" phase. (298-300) Elsewhere he confronts "the remarkable outburst of the working people in 1918-19," during which the urban worker, together with the miner, who is not so easily structured into the "frontier" milieu, rose to the vanguard. (355-64)

Perhaps the regional framework is simply inadequate to the task of appreciating this moment, which saw the workers' movement, in Trotsky's uncited phrase, "roused and alarmed by the greatest historical upheaval" throughout a war torn world.

IV

THE APPEARANCE OF all these works, from the right, left, and centre of western academe and the regional historical community, is apt at this time. For we have reached a *fin de siècle* as well as the hundredth anniversary of industrial capitalism in the prairie West. It is the bourgeois revolution that has run its course, particularly in pivotal Alberta, which now contains well over half the population of the region. It was a rank-and-file labour movement called the "Dandelions" (hard hats who sprang up to heckle Tory orators wherever they took the stump in 1984-5) that helped to shame a veritable sultan of sectionalism, Peter Lougheed, into timely retirement. That was an excellent cue — western workers, over to you.



'Given a Government with a big surplus and a big majority and a weak Opposition, you could debauch a committee of archangels'

The Honourable, Sir John A. Macdonald
First Prime Minister of Canada

Since 1920, *The Canadian Historical Review* has been setting forth, with clarity and elegance, the chronicle of our history and the varied texture of our society.

Maintaining a sense of the urgency and relevance of historical studies, *CHR* appeals alike to scholar and layman, and serves as an invaluable resource for instructors in search of curriculum-related topics that will excite interest and provoke discussion in the classroom.

Each issue of *CHR* features the most extensive bibliography available of recent writings in Canadian history, and with more than 150 texts, popular works, and scholarly publications reviewed each year, *The Canadian Historical Review* keeps interested readers informed about outstanding research developments in the field.

Consistently outspoken on issues of controversy, *CHR* invites a lively exchange of opinions among editor, author, and reader, providing in its wake a nation-wide spectrum on how Canadians view their past and interpret their present.

Timely, provocative, authoritative, and lively, The Canadian Historical Review remains the major source for comprehensive analyses of every facet of the shaping of Canada's history.

Subscription Rates:

Institutional: \$39.00 Individual: \$20.00 Student: \$15.00

Please add \$4.00 for shipping and handling
on orders outside of Canada

Inquiries and orders:

University of Toronto Press, Journals Department
5201 Dufferin Street, Downsview, Ontario M3H 5T8 Canada