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Forest Prairie Edge: Place History in Saskatchewan by Merle Massie

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An Alternative View of Saskatchewan: Forest Prairie Edge

***Forest Prairie Edge: Place History in
Saskatchewan*** by **MERLE MASSIE**
U of Manitoba P, 2014 \$27.95

Reviewed by **MATTHEW ZANTINGH**

In *Forest Prairie Edge*, historian and farmer Merle Massie suggests that, for many, Saskatchewan is known as the “[h]ome of Tommy Douglas, medicare, the Roughriders, and endless fields of grain, [it] has become ‘the Land of Living Skies,’ where open space is the defining characteristic” (255). However, she sets out to upend, or at least complicate, this picture by exploring the local history of the Prince Albert region, situated at the interstice between the province’s northern boreal forests and southern prairie. In doing so, Massie presents a nuanced and layered portrait of a local place as it changes in various ways because of the arrival and colonization of the landscape by European settlers up until World War II.

In this textured place history, Massie works to reconfigure Saskatchewan’s iconography. And this is the book’s greatest contribution to historical understandings of the Canadian prairies. Being a newcomer to Saskatchewan myself, I found her detailed presentation of the transformations of the province’s boreal forest into refuge, resource, and resilient farming landscape intriguing and different from my own notion of the province as both a breadbasket for the world and a dust bowl during the Depression. Massie presents numerous examples of “occupational pluralism” where First Nations, Métis, and settlers all make “a living by more than one job on a seasonal, barter, or other basis” (9). This pluralism is rooted in the ecotone

landscape of the Prince Albert region and illustrates a more complex picture of how the province developed historically.

In order to present this alternative vision of the province, Massie sets out to “think laterally: what activities, businesses, pastimes, transportation routes, or trysts have occurred in the dance between humans and landscapes in this place?” (20). I find this interdisciplinary and lateral thinking a refreshing approach to history as it digs up different voices and presents history from multiple perspectives. She displays a remarkable ability to narrate a human history that is tied to the landscape without sinking into a reductive form of environmental determinism. Indeed, another strength of the book is the way that Massie draws on local and community histories alongside oral histories to build her narrative of the region’s growth. Rather than dismissing these as “too narrow in focus, narcissistic and limited,” she takes them up as legitimate archival documents, helping to establish a deeply informed sense of place (21).

What should be clear is that although Massie’s work is set within overall narratives of the Canadian West, it is primarily a local history. This fact may prove to limit the book’s impact as it does not aim at a larger national audience. At the same time, there is a kind of violence implicitly performed in telling a broadly national story by binding together selected events across a broad span of time and an even larger swath of land that is not present here. Massie’s book is rooted in regionalism, but it is also acutely aware of all that is going on in Canada and across the globe. This critical regionalism is a valuable tool even if it means that *Forest Prairie Edge* may not have as much to say to a Maritimer or British Columbian as it does to a

Saskatchewanian.

Her critical regionalism is particularly helpful in discussions of the Great Depression. The middle chapters of *Forest Prairie Edge* explain why more than 45,000 farmers and their families made the journey north during the worst years of drought in the 1930s. The Prince Albert region offered a temporary refuge with its forests, higher levels of rain and water, and shelter from the dust and drought of the southern parts of the province. For others, it also offered the chance to start a mixed-farm, using multiple crops and livestock to ensure long-term resilience even though short-term profits fell far short of the potential profits of a single good wheat harvest. Farmers could work in the lumber, fur, or freighting industries during the winter to inject cash into their farms while the early 20th century cordwood industry helped transform poplar and aspen into valuable farm commodities. Surprisingly, the Prince Albert region, and Paddockwood in particular, boomed while the southern parts of the Canadian prairies experienced mass exoduses of people and capital. The only drawback in this work is a lingering sense of nostalgia for the mixed farm that was replaced after World War II by the increasingly corporatized agribusiness.

What also stands out is Massie's commitment to including First Nations and Métis history into her place history. She includes a rich discussion of the indigenous presence in the area before the arrival of Europeans and subsequently returns to these inhabitants in each chapter that follows. However, in some ways, I found her attempt to draw connections between the occupational pluralism of the farmers and the traditional practices of the Métis, the Montreal Lake, and the Lac la Ronge bands a little uneasy. It is clear that Massie wants

to include indigenous history as part of her narrative, but the book itself is a narrative of agricultural progress, of families finding a resilient landscape and making a living from it. What seems clear from reading her book is that the population boom of European settler-invaders comes at a direct cost to First Nations livelihood in the area. Massie does not avoid this fact but, perhaps, does not spend enough time reflecting on the injustice of this.

Overall, though, this is an excellent piece of local history that complicates Saskatchewan's provincial history, provides an excellent resource for scholars interested in how to do local place history, and presents a much more nuanced picture of the settlement of the Canadian prairie. It is no surprise that *Forest Prairie Edge* was nominated for a Saskatchewan Book Award this year, and it will prove a vital resource in helping Saskatchewan's citizens rethink and reimagine their province in productive ways.

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