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Settler Education by Laurie D. Graham

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**“Sunk Deeper than the Road”: a review of
Laurie D. Graham’s *Settler Education***

***Settler Education* by LAURIE D. GRAHAM**
McClelland & Stewart, 2016 \$18.95

Reviewed by **KELLY SHEPHERD**

Illustrated with black and white photographs and maps, with dates and place-names on practically every page, and with a table of contents full of titles like “The Yellowhead,” “RCMP Barracks Regina Saskatchewan,” and “Fort Edmonton Park,” at first glance Laurie D. Graham’s *Settler Education* might look like required reading for a first year history class. But this is history none of us learned in school.

We should have, though. In sparse, evocative, often prose-poem stanzas, and utilizing numerous perspectives and voices, Graham’s book shows what a real education in Canada’s history might look like. It points out the myriad gaps in the dominant culture’s knowledge, including familiarity with Indigenous languages, and the land, and an awareness of what happened here before. These poems are the roadside interpretive signs that were never installed on the Prairies. They are absences, negative spaces, impossibilities. These poems are voices long forgotten, and the ghosts of voices. “Once place is lost, the voice becomes an apparition” (“The Surveyors” line 22).

Settler Education is a travelogue, a pilgrimage, a railroad trip across the land and in and out of memory. The poems are juxtapositions: historical documents, journals, and letters from the late 1800s are places side by side with the sights and sounds of a present-day ride across the Prairies. They make stops all across the country, but circle around the community of

Frog Lake, Alberta in particular. This was the site of the Plains Cree uprising and the violence that brought the 1885 North West Rebellion (or the North West Resistance) to an end, and led to Cree chief Big Bear’s wrongful imprisonment for treason. One of the deep ironies inherent in these poems is the frame of the cross-country train ride—the book begins and ends with railroad travel—because the train itself was so instrumental in the Canadian government’s suppression of the North-West Resistance. How can we visit these places, to investigate our own suppressed colonial past, without making use of the railroads (or the highways) that are themselves such integral parts of the same colonial project?

“And how hard it is for me to write / what came before” (“Number One Canadian” lines 33-34). This book is a cartography of forgottenness, burdened with the “weight of the grave in the bushes” at Louis Riel’s graveyard (“Aerial” line 10), and many other burial sites. The graves of the white men killed at Frog Lake in 1885 are now overgrown, with “[g]oldenrod lapping at the tin crosses,” and in this fecundity lie “the unnamed unmarked, / who knows how many” (“Frog Lake” lines 12-14). Without markers, however neglected or overgrown, we settlers have no idea how to approach these places, or even how to think about them. In “Battleford Gravesite” the narrator advises the visitor (and the reader) to “[s]how some respect and keep your distance”—but the truth of the matter is, “with no paved route, / no federal plaque, you don’t know what respect is” (lines 16-17). There is a barrier, an amnesia, that began with the opening of the West (if not much earlier than that) and continues to this day with bulldozers, grid-system agriculture, golf courses, suburbs. An ongoing disconnectedness.

From the soldiers “watching other soldiers trying to drag a Gatling gun over grassland they don’t know and will never see again” (“North West Rebellion Memorial” lines 44-46), to the participants in the ongoing urban sprawl of present-day Alberta (“The Train Back” p. 104), the Prairies Graham evokes are populated with people who never truly belong.

How to be here? The poet Tim Lilburn’s poignant question lingers in these pages. Although Graham never mentions him in *Settler Education*, readers familiar with Lilburn’s work—from his 1999 essay “Summoning the Land” to his 2012 book *Assiniboia*—might sense it hovering in the background. Can settlers in Canada ever truly be here, and truly know this place? Will we ever feel that we authentically belong on the Prairies? Graham doesn’t answer these questions, which are perhaps ultimately not possible to answer, but she wrestles with them. She walks the path to the site of Poundmaker’s burial “untrained and unsure how to walk rightly” (“Visiting Pîhtokahanapiwiyin’s / Poundmaker’s Grave” line 27). “Inauthentic is me reading it out of books,” she admits,

but it’s where I start, it’s where I sit,
looking, walking around
alone, saying, to you, here,
in writing, that it existed. It
existed. It exists. (“The Train
Back” lines 56-58)

Laurie D. Graham, an instructor at Humber College and an editor, lives in London, Ontario. *Settler Education* is her second book.

KELLY SHEPHERD’s poetry collection *Shift* was published by Thistledown Press in spring 2016. Originally from Smithers,

British Columbia, he currently lives and teaches in Edmonton.