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*History, Literature, and the Writing of the Canadian
Prairies* (review)

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Alison Calder and Robert Wardhaugh, eds.
History, Literature, and the Writing of the Canadian Prairies.
Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2005.
310 pp. \$24.95.

In *History, Literature, and the Writing of the Canadian Prairies*, Alison Calder and Robert Wardhaugh bring together ten essays by Canadian and American scholars whose common concern, broadly speaking, is to find new ways of conceptualizing the prairies. The point of the collection, according to its editors, is to interrogate and reconfigure conventional understandings of the prairies which posit or reinforce the notion that this region is timeless and frozen, at once “unchanging and unchangeable” (4). In their Introduction, aptly titled “When Is the Prairie?,” Calder and Wardhaugh provide an overview of literary and historical scholarship related to prairies, clearly illustrating the extent to which the “where” of the prairies has dominated both disciplines. In and through their readings of prairie writing, literary scholars (most notably Henry Kreisel, Laurie Ricou, and Dick Harrison) have constructed a “generalized prairie reality” (6) in which “landscape dominates culture and geography effaces history” (8). The same can be said of those historians (including Donald Gunn, Alexander Begg, and George Bruce) who, in the late nineteenth century, drew the prairies into nationalist projects, linking the conquest of the region to nation building. While some historians writing during the 1970s and 1980s (Gerald Friesen, Douglas Francis, and Howard Palmer) began to question “centralist metanarratives” (12), focusing instead on the regional specificities and/or ethnic multiplicities of the prairies, Calder and Wardhaugh bemoan the fact that, even as “old definitions of region were challenged ... new ones were not offered” (13).

This book, then, seeks to challenge deeply-entrenched assumptions about “how the land speaks the people” and “how it shapes human history and culture” with questions that ask how “people speak to the land,” how we “write ourselves onto the prairie space,” and how in doing so we transform the prairies into a place radically unfixed and unstable (4). To be sure, some of the essays in this book fulfill its editors promises: Claire Omhòvère’s “The Melting of Time in Thomas Wharton’s *Icefields*” re-imagines the prairies as a “living landscape” (43); Dennis Cooley, in “Documents in the Postmodern Long Prairie Poem,” reflects at length on the notion that poets engage with the prairies by “erasing old inscriptions, retaining versions of old subscriptions, and authoring new inscriptions” (184); and in “Time’s Grip Along the Athabasca, 1920s and 1930s,” Cam McEachern

argues for the ways in which the Peace River district of Alberta was once, but is no longer, implicated in the promotion of early twentieth-century liberal ideology. Cooley's essay stands out for its comprehensive history of the prairie long poem and its thoughtful reconsideration of how historical documents figure in the work of such poets as Robert Kroetsch, Monty Reid, and Birk Sproxtton. Equally compelling is Russell Morton Brown's "Robert Kroetsch, Marshall McLuhan, and Canadian's Prairie Postmodernism: The Aberhart Effect," which draws convincing links between William Aberhart's politics, Kroetsch's poetry, and McLuhan's theory.

Readers, however, should be attentive to the discrepancies between some of the editors' claims about the nature of this collection and what the essayists actually deliver—claims, for example, that this book focuses on the *Canadian* prairies and that interdisciplinarity characterizes its contributors' overall approach to rethinking the region. Although most of the essays in this collection grapple with the meaning of the Canadian prairies, two (Frances W. Kaye's "The Tantalizing Possibility of Living on the Plains" and Sarah Payne's "Reconstructions of Literary Settings in North America's Prairie Regions: A Cross-Cultural Comparison of Red Cloud, Nebraska, and Neepawa, Manitoba") present cross-cultural work that compares Canadian prairie culture to that of the American Great Plains. And while these same two essays utilize interdisciplinary methodologies, the other essays in this collection (including Claire Omhovère's reading of *Icefields*, Nina van Gessel's discussion of Carol Shields's *The Stone Diaries*, Heidi Slettedahl MacPherson's examination of Gail Anderson-Dargatz's *The Cure for Death by Lightning*, S. Leigh Matthews's work on women's prairie memoirs, Debra Dudek's revisiting of Margaret Laurence's Manawaka fiction) are primarily grounded in literary discourses and scholarly practices.

More troubling is Calder and Wardhaugh's misleading suggestion that, unlike previous studies of Canadian prairie history and literature, *History, Literature, and the Writing of the Canadian Prairies* does not privilege European settler/invasor culture (3). The book's glaring lack of essays on First Nations prairie literature, coupled with its overt emphasis on canonical prairie writers (Robert Kroetsch, Margaret Laurence, and Carol Shields), undermines the editors' attempts to reconceptualize the dynamic between prairie history, culture, and literature. Culture, in this collection, is for the most part conceived as European settler/invasor culture. In addition to overlooking Aboriginal writing, moreover, the ten essays largely fail to reflect the ethnic/"racialized" heterogeneity of the

prairies (prairie writers of East Asian, South Asian, and Central/Eastern European descent are ignored entirely).

I am not suggesting that the book should be summarily dismissed for its shortcomings—on the contrary, it offers several provocative and eloquent (re)readings of prairie literature. And because essay collections are selective by nature, they are bound to displease some readers while delighting others. Indeed, in anticipation of criticism from some of the displeased, Calder and Wardhaugh explain that “[o]f all the proposals [they] received in [their] call for papers on prairie topics, not one was on a text by an Aboriginal author” (10). But such a disclaimer, given the number of scholars in Canada with expertise on Aboriginal literature and culture, neither excuses the omission nor addresses the other problematic oversights of this collection. Ultimately, despite its ambitious objectives, *History, Literature, and the Writing of the Canadian Prairies* reinforces more than it challenges conventional ideas about prairie literature and as such should be approached with caution.

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Rachel Connor. *H.D. and the Image*.

Manchester: Manchester UP, 2004. 152 pp. \$79.95.

Rachel Connor’s new study, *H.D. and the Image*, provides a new and exciting examination of H.D.’s interest in the visual. Moving beyond the conception of H.D. as Imagiste, Connor explores H.D.’s involvement with avant-garde filmmaking, psychoanalysis, and spiritualism to analyze the interconnections of gender, sexuality, and subjectivity in her *oeuvre*. Drawing on work by film scholars, feminist philosophers, and gender and cultural studies theorists, *H.D. and the Image* offers readings of H.D.’s lesser known poetry and prose as well as contextualizes her interdisciplinary interests in film and spiritualism.

Most fascinating about Connor’s study is the attention it gives to H.D.’s preoccupation with European avant-garde cinema. H.D. worked as a film critic, actor, editor, and writer while she was involved with POOL Productions, an independent film company that Bryher founded in 1927 in collaboration with H.D. and Kenneth Macpherson (Bryher’s husband and H.D.’s lover at the time). H.D. also wrote reviews, theoretical essays,