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review essays

The Study of Region: A Canadian Example from The Prairies — Donald A. DeBats

Gerald Friesen, *The Canadian Prairies; A History*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

The rationale for regional history is that the whole, often the nation, is best understood as the sum of its parts, its regions, and their interrelationships. At its broadest and best, the regional approach demonstrates that regions are sufficiently distinct to require analysis in their own right and, more importantly, that regional analysis provides insight into the process of change not available in more conventional histories focusing on the national experience. The latter, the regionalist argument runs, is like the mean of a skewed distribution: it describes a statistical norm where no one lives. National accounts are, as a consequence, less vital and less true than are regional histories which take into account diverging and sometimes conflicting processes of change. Much better then, to concentrate on history at a level where the true forces of change can be more readily understood and illustrated.

Regional history is in this sense a plea for a disaggregated approach to the study of the past. That argument, once conceded, may prove dangerous in that it is capable of an infinite regress which ultimately could leave us with an ethnology based quite literally upon individual experience. The brakes on this threatening regression are the historian's discovery that there is a level of disaggregation of the national experience which imparts maximum insight and the demonstration that this insight is synonymous with a regional approach. The nation is too large and contradictory and the provinces/states (to say nothing of smaller aggregations such as cities or ultimately individual inhabitants) are too numerous and divergent. But region defines the level of aggregation which provides explanation - it is neither too large and thus discordant or too small and thus idiosyncratic.

In the practice of regional histories, these assumptions are seldom made explicit and the counterfactual virtually never demonstrated. The argument usually proceeds on an unstated faith in the virtue of regional analysis. But it is worth recounting the underlying assumptions in evaluating regional histories. At the minimum, a successful regional approach should demonstrate that the forces producing change are those indigenous to, or substantially modified by, the

specificity of region. A regional history should logically be built upon regionally specific variables. Unique features of region can serve the cause well; what is required in all cases is an assessment of the basis of region.

The key variable in many regional studies is, not surprisingly, physical geography. As a noted scholar once observed (when perhaps all were less conscious of gender specification):

[r]egionalism is a recognition of the intractable diversities among men, diversities partially shaped by nature but no less derived from the different reactions of men to nature (cited in Jensen, 1965, p.xvi).

From this base, the question soon becomes whether the changes imposed on nature by non-indigenous forces sustain or erode the underlying distinctiveness of place which physical geography has imparted. Ultimately the issue is whether regional distinctiveness, based at least initially on natural features and the concomitant aspects of economics and culture, can survive the homogenizing effects of modernity.

This in turn raises, or at least should raise, the question of how one measures regional 'survival'. Behavioural and attitudinal variations are often quite compelling evidence of the reality of region, particularly when they can be controlled for differences in social structure. Notions of regional culture have a role to play here as does regional literature for, in the end, region is a matter of identity and of consciousness of difference. Modernizing processes are not infrequently seen as the antithesis of region. Perhaps for all of these reasons, region, like community, sometimes seems a concept inclined toward disappearance just as the first historian appears on the horizon (Gibbins, 1980).

Canada, geographically divided, socially diverse, and politically federal, is, like the United States, one of the obvious candidates for sub-national analysis. As MacKenzie King once observed, some countries have 'too much history'; Canada has 'too much geography' (Gibbins, 1985, p.82). Australia, politically centralised and socially less pluralistic, possesses a lesser regional literature. The study of region in both Canada and the United States is often historical in nature and not infrequently linked. From Fredrick Jackson Turner onwards, to the study of the frontier. Recent studies of Canadian region include J. Lewis Robinson's geographically based study as well as a spate of western histories (Robinson, 1983). Region provides a strong organising theme for Canadian history (Palmer, 1977; Rasporich, 1984; Francis and Palmer, 1985).

Gerald Friesen's historical survey of the Canadian prairies (present day Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba) from pre-contact Indian civilisation to the 1980s is a generally successful addition to this body of scholarship. The book is most effective in the pre-1870 period when the land, the prairies themselves, were clearly the dominant force in the shaping of both people and events. Friesen is at home detailing in turn, the land, the Indian civilisations which flourished upon it, the arrival of the French fur traders and the internationalisation of the fur trade.

The second half of the book focuses much more on external agencies - British

monopolies, farmer settlement, immigration, and above all 'The National Policy' which defined Canadian governmental policy toward the prairies and their exploitation. The book is less successful here because Friesen tends to allow these external forces which dominated and ultimately assimilated the prairies to also determine his categories of analysis. By the end of the book, the unit of observation and organisation has become the individual province. Regional analysis has given way to provincial exposition.

In the modern period the regional perspective is undeniably more difficult. While the population remains small - an area the size of western Europe with a population even today of only four million - the forces which operate on the prairies are powerful indeed. The question is whether, in a regional history, one should focus on the forces undermining regional identity or those which operate to maintain a regional perspective. Ironically in this regional history, Friesen opts for the former course.

It should be acknowledged here that neither aspect of the story is easy. More than one commentator has noted that the 'Prairie Provinces' are more forest than prairie and share, now as in the past, as much political diversity as they do unity (Hare, 1988, p.49). Nevertheless, the first half of the story does not have to contend with provincial boundaries and it can focus more readily upon the influence of the land and geography, the traditional bases of regional history. The Indians and fur traders were content to live in and with the land; there were few powerful external agencies attempting to impose an alternative order upon the landscape.

In the first period the influence of the land was clearly paramount. Geography shaped the Canadian prairies no less than it did other North American regions such as the American South: geography does indeed underlie region. Friesen argues that the Canadian prairies constitute a geographic (and ultimately an economic) whole which is divided into three natural sub-parts - the prairies proper from the edge of the Laurentian Shield to the foothills of the Rockies and stretching well south of the US border, the crescent shaped rolling parkland along the northern most edge of the prairies, and the vast boreal forest covering the northern half of the region. The claim of unity across these three sub-units constitutes the extent of regional definition here.

The Indians understood and responded to this environment as did the early fur traders. For over 200 years, as long as whites accepted Indian domination of the prairies, contact was peaceful and the fur trade flourished, with the Indians clearly the central agency. Perhaps this period prior to 1870 was less of a golden age than Friesen would contend, but the relative peace and harmony are undeniable as is Friesen's success in portraying this part of the region's history.

The problems, both historical and methodological, emerge with the arrival of new actors and new ideas both dedicated to the exploitation of the land, the natural region, on a scale hitherto unimagined. The result was conflict and bloodshed but for the historian these events also present a fundamental challenge to the notion of region. With the arrival of a powerful Canadian central

government determined to take control of the prairies to ensure profit for Canada, three great changes were quickly imposed upon the regional landscape. First the Hudson's Bay Company, representing London interests, finally displaced the Northwest Company, based in Montreal, in the struggle for the control of the fur trade. 'The Bay' now worked actively to depose both the Indians and the Métis, the descendants of Indian women and French fur traders, from their central positions in the trade. The triumph of the Company also marked the submission of the prairies and their inhabitants to a new external force.

The second new element was good order, a matter of increasing importance in the 1850s as the political authority of the Hudson's Bay Company (exercised for nearly 200 years) declined and the legal status of the prairies became an increasingly complex issue. British Columbia became a Crown colony in 1858 and, with the creation of the Canadian Dominion over the four eastern provinces in 1867, the stage was set for the integration of the prairie districts. Using the legal authority which now existed, the Canadian Government under MacDonald was determined to annex the west lest United States ambitions remove the whole centre of the new nation. Predictably, significant regional opposition arose in the form of the Red River Rebellion of 1869. Led by Louis Riel, this Métis-dominated rebellion issued its own charter of complaints and assertions of autonomy in the Declaration of Métis Independence, a document modelled on the American document of 1776. Riel insisted that the land and the people could not be transferred from one authority ('The Bay') to another (Canada) without consultation.

This was the context within which Prime Minister MacDonald sought a new police force and, more accurately, a new arm of government to reach into the prairies. Once again the change was imposed from outside, in the form of what soon became the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. Representing nothing so much as the virtues of British civilisation, the RMCP achieved success by sheer intimidation, cultural as much as physical. This, Friesen argues, was in considerable contrast to the more individualistic (and bloody) imposition of order on the U.S. frontier to the south.

The third stage in the conquest of the prairies was the extinction of the Indian claims to the lands. Between 1871 and 1877, seven prairie treaties were negotiated and the whole of the prairies transferred to the control of the Canadian government in Ottawa. Now it was possible for MacDonald's notion of a 'National Policy' to move into high gear. The Prairies would serve the interests of the east. It was this policy which explained the pattern of initial Canadian settlement, later European immigration and the development of the prairies as a prime wheat producing region. In turn the construction of the Canadian Pacific transcontinental railway ensured the transportation network which commercial agriculture, and MacDonald's mercantilist policy, demanded.

All of this might have given rise to a sustained explanation of the emergence of prairie politics as a struggle against external domination and the colonial relationship of west to east. The question inevitably becomes what, if anything,

would sustain regionalism in the face of MacDonald's specific policies and modernity generally. Surprisingly, Friesen does not directly attack this question. The second half of the book is far too concerned, as a regional history, with the triumph of external forces. There is less here than there should be on the nature, basis and mode of survival of regional voices.

The Canadian Prairies becomes increasingly a political history and, predictably enough, a captive of the concerns of government policy. No doubt, these government policies are, in nationalist terms, an important focus; as one recent writer has commented, '[a] less active policy would have resulted in the absorption of the entire prairie region by the United States' (Leslie and Brownsey, 1988, p.170). But the consequence of MacDonald's policy for the survival of prairie regionalism is not sufficiently explored and the focus of the study shifts, unremarked, to the process of change undermining the survival of regional identity (Gluck, 1965).

This seeming displacement of regional sensitivity in the second half of the book is evident in a variety of forms. There is less effort expended here than there should be in capturing the western Canadians' sense of continuing victimisation implicit in the National Policy and perfectly captured in the insistence of the minister of railways in 1883 that the Canadian Pacific succeed at any cost: 'Are the interests of Manitoba and the North-West to be sacrificed to the interests of Canada? I say, if necessary, yes' (Swainson, 1985, p.134). Nor is there much sympathy for the voices of prairie difference. Louis Riel is rather quickly dismissed with little sense of him as representative of an alternative culture or the rebellions he lead as presenting a different vision of the future. No folk hero here. Toward other struggling groups, whether they be Jews or immigrants, Friesen is equally remote. Of the Jews he says 'there were quotas... a tacit covenant excluded them... but they made their way and found their salvation despite the slights' (p.264). Immigrants are expected to assimilate; the language is far from flattering, depending on the metaphor of 'a stew'. The opportunity of building a notion of regional survival on the basis of the unique ethnic and cultural diversity of the prairies is not pursued.

Second, in trying to make sense of the modern period, Friesen uses 'class' as a dominant variable. The conclusion is not surprising - that class is cross cut by other variables - although the argument that class was somehow a British import seems strained. More fundamental, however, is the likelihood that class analysis, as a systemic identity affecting all people regardless of place, will lead away from the identification of processes sustaining regional identity. This is not to say that class analysis is antithetical to regional perspectives but clearly a focus on class within a region, rather than in the universalistic framework adopted here, would be much more likely to sustain the analytic purpose of the work.

Third, there is surprisingly little attention here to the efforts to maintain a regional culture, whether in literature, art or life style. The material on the changing perception of the prairie - a fascinating business of self discovery and self definition - is slighted, both in the historical and contemporary periods. There

are opportunities for similar considerations in the determination of so many of the immigrant cultures which took root and flourished on the prairies to maintain their independence. Even the political development - the emergence of the Co-Operative Commonwealth Federation - might be seen much more clearly than is the case in this book as a powerful statement of regional identity and opposition to external domination.

Part of the difficulty here is that the notion of Canadian region is inevitably connected to regions in the United States. Friesen finds little that is applicable to his Canadian case from the study of American regionalism. Like MacDonald, Friesen appears to find the culture south of the border slightly distasteful. MacDonald, however, was attempting to submerge regional differences; Friesen is attempting to explore their survival. One suspects that a more judicious trans-border excursion would have yielded a richer legacy of regional findings than is suggested here.

The only direct testing of regional theory revolves around the demonstration that a Turnerian frontier of transformation and equality did not exist on the Canadian prairies. Turner, however, no longer provides the only or even the principal context within which today's western historiography is explored. The more modern literature looks to manifestations of enduring differences, whether they be geographic or social mobility, architectural style, birth rates, literature, women's suffrage and women's property rights, or violence. All remain part of an enduring frontier culture. Systematic and informed comparison would do more than is suggested here to sustain the notion of regional survival on the Canadian prairies.

There is a need to look more fully to comparative social structural and attitudinal work both across borders and within Canada. Regional literature from the earliest perceptions to the modern novel deserve some treatment as well. To be truly effective, a regional history requires an inventory of difference. In the case of the prairies that can only be accomplished by devoting more attention to the particular and special nature of society which grew up on the broad expanses of Canada's west.

Unhappily, much of that detailed study of prairie society, both historical and contemporary, remains to be done despite the outpouring of prairie scholarship in the last decade. When it is, when there are more detailed studies of migration patterns, political beliefs, marriage patterns, birth rates and cultural practices, then a more rigorous test of the survival of the Canadian prairies will be possible.

Friesen concludes with a plea for the continuation of western regionalism. Certainly there is evidence of just that - in prairie co-operatives, in the regionally specific successes of the New Democratic Party, in the variety of ethnic cultures and native identities which flourishes in the west. If land itself is less important in defining region, geography remains at the very core of prairie society as surely as does landscape influence prairie art and literature (Harrison, 1977).

Indeed the history of Canadian federalism and the metamorphosis of its centralised authority structure to one of peripheral autonomy is a measure of the

success of centrifugal forces in Canadian history. The history of the prairies, north and south of the border, reflect a profound struggle to remain in control of a separate destiny and to resist the external forces of domination, whether economic, political or cultural.

There is, of course, a political agenda at play here. Harold Innis' argument, long favoured by many Canadian nationalists, locates the origin of the political conflict between centre and periphery in the gradual replacement of Europe (certainly the British Empire) by the United States in Canada's economic development. The powerful central government apparatus necessary to gain access to European markets now frustrates what many see as the more 'natural' north-south trade pattern. It is this penetration of the Canadian economy which gives rise to regional conflict and the pressure to transfer power from the centre to the periphery. Yet in an ironic way, this is also the force which helps sustain Canadian regionalism. Regardless of one's view of this thesis, it is, in the end, the regional forces which have triumphed, not those of the core. Emphasis on systemic forces avoids the emotive argument about the future of Canada but it does so at the price of not directly confronting the forces at work on the prairies.

Friesen's synthesis appeared in the midst of that avalanche of political changes (the repatriated Constitution, the Charter of Rights, the Free Trade Act, and the Meech Lake Accord) which so enhanced regional identities. Yet there is little consideration here of the smouldering hostility of the prairies against central government domination which would inform observers of recent economic and political changes in Canada. Friesen slights both the historiography of the American west and the economic impact of the land south of the border of the evolution of the prairie provinces. The former would have provided a more valuable context for the appreciation of prairie divergences and the latter a more fully articulated appreciation of the region's political opposition to Ottawa. It is a tangential regionalism which Friesen leaves on the prairies; events at almost the moment of publication dramatically revealed a stronger and more articulate subnational voice. With the ascendancy of decentralist forces, the question of the place of region, as opposed to province, in the continuing evolution of Canada moves once again to centre stage.

In the end, however, Friesen has provided a useful background for an appreciation of this process. Perhaps more importantly, he has provided the encouragement for others to explore in greater, and perhaps more confident, ways the survival of that Canadian region defined by boreal forest, parkland, and above all those prairies of shimmering wheat (Francis, 1985).

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