

Dick Harrison.

UNNAMED COUNTRY:

THE STRUGGLE FOR A CANADIAN PRAIRIE FICTION.

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250 pp. \$12.50.

Prairie fiction is an exciting and often neglected part of our national literature. Too often critical works have dealt only with a specific period or author, neglecting the wide historical and cultural context in which the literature needs to be examined. A few studies have dealt with prairie fiction mainly in terms of the conflicts and/or bonds between man and the land, but Dick Harrison widens the scope, which makes his book both useful and interesting. It is a critical study of prairie fiction from its beginnings to the present. The book deals with the tension created by "the new land and the old culture," and with the way this is mirrored in the literature and to some extent in the painting produced on the Prairies.

The first European settlers experienced the Prairies through senses "coloured" by the cultures they had brought with them from their home countries. The link between culture and perception and its effect on literary output is the main concern of the book. By using the analogy of prairie painting, the author is able to establish the basis of his analysis quite forcefully. In an interesting analysis of early prairie landscape painting, Harrison shows how the artists' eyes had been trained to view the land in a different perspective that did not adequately encompass the new reality. For example, Paul Kane's "Red River Settlement" depicts the austere settlement in a luscious, highly romantic manner — a far cry from reality. Harrison then applies the same kind of analysis to works of fiction, showing how subsequent generations of prairie writers had to overcome this "culture shock" and slowly work their way through to a new consciousness suitable to the prairie where they were born and bred. This new "prairie consciousness" has been reached by writers such as Margaret Laurence and Rudy Wiebe.

Since the major focus of the book is the relationship between culture and literature, it is unfortunate that Harrison deals with English-language fiction only and with none of the French-Canadian or Ukrainian prairie fiction. However, such a limitation is understandable in view of the already large scope of the book.

The author treats the literature chronologically under such headings as "Excess Cultural Baggage: The Nineteenth Century" and "Alienation from the Land: Prairie Realism." Each chapter contains several detailed analyses of well-known works of the period. However, the analyses are uneven: some novels are treated in depth, and others which might well merit a weightier treatment are only mentioned in passing.

Unnamed Country is aimed at a college-level audience, but can also be useful in high schools as a general reference work. It contains a very valuable bibliography both of individual authors and of general topics. Harrison has done a genuine service to the study of Canadian prairie fiction; in the balance it is a worthwhile book.

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