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The Press of the Plebiscite:
Canadian Prairie Newspapers and the Conscription Debate of 1942

Print, Profit and Pedagogy: The School Aids and Textbook Publishing Company

Saskatchewan (1954): Alias Alberta

The Saskatchewan Archives Board

The Saskatchewan Archives Board was established by provincial statute in 1945 under the Archives Act (RSS 1978, Ch. A-26). The board is responsible for appraising, acquiring, preserving and making accessible documentary records in all media on all aspects of the history of Saskatchewan as well as facilitating the management of the records of government institutions. Two offices, affiliated with the University of Saskatchewan and the University of Regina, are maintained to provide public access to a rich collection of archival materials for research and reference.

In addition, the Saskatchewan Archives Board has produced several authoritative works on the province's history and a number of reference booklets and directories to assist historical research about the province. The journal, *Saskatchewan History*, first issued in 1948, has earned a reputation for excellence, receiving awards in 1962 from the American Association for State and Local History and in 1970 from the Canadian Historical Association.

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The editor of *Saskatchewan History* welcomes the submissions of articles relating to the history of the province. Manuscripts can be submitted via regular mail or email and must be double spaced and letter quality print. The endnotes, prepared according to *The Chicago Manual of Style*, should also be double spaced. Electronic submissions should be in Word format. Qualified readers will review manuscripts. The Saskatchewan Archives Board assumes no responsibility for statements made by contributors.

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Cover Photo: Commerical Printers Building, circa 1978. (City of Regina Archives, CORA-A-712)

News and Notes

New Database

After a year of customization and conversion activities the Saskatchewan Archives has launched Minisis software for staff use through its new descriptive database Threshold. This database contains archival descriptions for thousands of records in all media and will eventually provide researchers with extensive searchability of our permanent collection. A post-conversion review of the records is underway in the Records Processing Unit during the spring of 2008. The public interface component to the software is planned for development in 2008-2009.

Archives Week 08

From February 4 through 10, 2008, archival institutions all across Saskatchewan celebrated Archives Week, and Saskatchewan Archives Board was actively involved in a number of events aimed at bringing a greater awareness about the work of archives to the community. At similar events held in both Saskatoon and Regina, celebrity readers read from original archival documents found in collections from various provincial archival repositories. The celebrity readers who helped celebrate archives in this way included: His Honour, the Honourable Dr. Gordon L. Barnhart, Lieutenant Governor of Saskatchewan; writer and performer Brenda Baker; former Premier of Saskatchewan, Allan Blakeney; author and professor emeritus of English at the University of Saskatchewan, Don Kerr; Rob Macdonald, co-anchor of the CTV News in Saskatoon; Yann Martel, author and Man Booker Prize winner for *The Life of Pi*; the Honourable Christine Tell, Minister for Tourism, Parks, Culture and Sport; Fred Clipsham, Regina City Councillor; country and western musicians Tex Emery, Paul McCorriston and Brodie Moninger; Gursh Madhur, Manager of Community Programming at Access Communications; CBC radio host, Jennifer Gibson; and Ruth Smillie of the Globe Theatre.

Saskatchewan Archives Board staff also organized an archival film screening event and a genealogy open house in Regina, and participated in the annual Saskatoon Heritage Festival.

Keep your eyes peeled for advertising for more exciting Archives Week activities in late January and early February of 2009!

Letter From the Editor

One of the most fascinating aspects of history is the manner in which events often take directions or take on meanings that were unexpected or unintended by those who were involved with them. I was reminded of this when I received two letters responding to the editorial in the fall 2007 issue. The letters' authors were concerned that my call for a Saskatchewan Historical Association created the impression that Saskatchewan lacks provincial historical associations. This was an unintended consequence and I am very happy to report that it is also very far from the truth. In fact, Saskatchewan is blessed with a number of very active provincial historical associations; the Rural History and Cultural Association of Saskatchewan is one and the Saskatchewan History and Folklore Society is another and they are not the only ones. Both these societies and others are very actively involved in chronicling Saskatchewan's history, bringing people into contact with it and bringing people together who share a love of it. Furthermore, Saskatchewan also has a number of historical journals. In addition to *Saskatchewan History* the Saskatchewan History and Folklore Society also produces its own historical journal, *Folklore*, and if we include newsletters then the number of publications on Saskatchewan history increases even more! The study of history in this province is very much alive and well. What is lacking is an umbrella organization, something that can connect the various organizations and individuals together and, in some cases, make people aware of the various resources that are available to those who are interested in Saskatchewan history. Hopefully it is a direction that will be taken in the future.

Articles

The Press of the Plebiscite: Canadian Prairie Newspapers and the Conscription Debate of 1942

by Craig Greenham

Since the tragic events of September 11, 2001, the United States has paid particularly close attention to its immigration policies, and certain ethnic groups within American society have drawn criticism and suspicion as the war against terrorism continues to be fought. At the forefront of this dialogue is the American media. Terrorism, however, knows no borders. With alleged terrorist plots to bomb important Canadian buildings and organizations and assassinate Prime Minister Stephen Harper in 2006, Canadian media outlets began questioning the merits of ethnic diversity and multiculturalism in the post-9/11 world.

Historically in Canada, periods of heightened military activity have cast certain ethnic groups into suspicion. The Second World War was a time of cultural persecution, perpetrated largely by the English-speaking majority. This article examines the English language prairie press' coverage of the conscription crisis of 1942 and how it demanded conformity to the dominant Anglo-Saxon culture from its readership at the expense of multiculturalism. Ethnic differences were unacceptable to the print media of Western Canada during the conflict, and the English-speaking newspapers of the region assumed the duty of securing a vote that allowed for conscription.

In 1942, Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King asked Canadians to release him from a promise he had made two years earlier. In the 1940 federal election, King pledged to Canadian voters that conscription would not be invoked by the Liberal government in its effort to help the Allies win the war in Europe. He had seen the division such a measure created during the First World War when former Prime

Minister Robert Borden conscripted Canadians for military service. King was not about to follow Borden down that ill-advised path.

The situation in 1942, however, was different from that of 1940. When King made his no-conscription guarantee, the war was less than one year old and he underestimated the severity of the conflict. By 1942 the manpower shortage was a serious issue and many Canadians – including King's old nemesis, Arthur Meighen, who regained leadership of the Opposition to force King's hand – wanted the Liberal government to spare nothing for a full war effort.¹ A minority of Canadians disagreed. Quebec's less than enthusiastic participation in the war has been well-documented. Historian Richard Jones writes, "Even limited participation had very grave risks for French Canada. Several of them had known the experience of the First World War; now this new conflict threatened to be still more disastrous for the nation. ... conscription was unacceptable and the politicians thus represented a point of view which they probably also espoused personally."²

Opposition was not limited to Quebec. There were a number of other pockets scattered across the nation that shared the province's view – generally because of ethnic or religious reasons. In this matter, Western Canada was no exception. Though the majority of the

Craig Greenham is a PhD candidate in the University of Western Ontario's history department. A former student at the University of Regina, he is nearing completion of his dissertation titled "Outfields, Infields and Battlefields: Canadian Baseball and the Great War."

prairies' population was of British stock, there were a number of communities that did not fit this description. Whether they were French, German, Ukrainian, Russian, Mennonite, Hutterite or Doukhor, these communities did not want King to go back on the promise he made in 1940.

In typical King fashion, a compromise was crafted and the question of conscription would be settled by a national plebiscite. He would let Canadians decide if the government should be allowed a free hand in solving the soldier manpower shortage, thus absolving him of the responsibility of conscription and his promise. On Monday, April 27, 1942, Canadians twenty-one years of age and older voted on the question: "Are you in favour of releasing the government from any obligation arising out of any past commitments restricting the methods of raising men for military service?"³ The voter then marked either "yes" or "no."

As in most matters of public interest, newspapers threw their hats into the ring of opinion. By and large, the western press would accept nothing short of a resounding affirmative from its readership, as evidenced by its handling of the emotionally charged issue of the plebiscite. Through its editorials, inclusion of passionate letters to the editor from politicians and ordinary citizens, generally favourable "yes" campaign coverage, and editorial cartoons urging readers toward the "yes" vote, the prairie press led the charge for an affirmative vote. Even in areas with a high ethnic population where the general sentiment favoured voting "no," it can be seen that many of the region's newspapers saw it as their duty to coerce those who read their pages to release King from his 1940 promise.

It is also worth noting that the political partisanship of each prairie newspaper did not factor into its coverage and views on the plebiscite. Prime Minister King; R.B. Hanson, federal Conservative leader; and M.J. Coldwell, federal Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (C.C.F.) leader, all threw their influence behind the "yes" vote and were quoted in newspaper ads declaring as much.

Newspaper Sources

Before this article delves into its analysis, it is important to address the reasons why the dailies and weeklies of particular towns and cities were selected over those of other municipalities. This canvas of newspapers, much like any other canvas of newspapers, is without doubt a method of selection. Interpretation, after all, starts with the historian's inclusions and exclusions.

Because of the publication in which this article appears, there is an emphasis on Saskatchewan. This is not to suggest that Manitoba and Alberta are ignored, but Saskatchewan is the focus. Regina's newspaper, the *Leader-Post*, was selected because it served the readers of the provincial capital. Regina experienced a significant margin of victory for the "yes" side and the newspaper vigorously advocated releasing King from his promise. The *Moose Jaw Times-Herald* is included in the examination because of the region's large percentage "yes" vote and substantial affirmative supporters. Moose Jaw's newspaper was among the most active in rallying support for the "yes" vote. Prince Albert was the riding of Prime Minister King and thus an important region for this analysis. The pages of the *Daily Herald* demonstrate the newspaper's desire to back their politician's request to be released from his earlier pledge. Yorkton's newspaper, the *Enterprise*, is included because of the town's prominent Anglo-Saxon/ethnic mix. Yorkton had many Scottish residents but also a sizeable Ukrainian population and this mix led to a narrow "yes" victory in the riding. The *Humboldt Journal* covered the news for a town that had a large German population and though it was a small publication, its inclusion in this study is important. Similarly small in size, Rosthern, with its Mennonite population, was the only riding in the province to vote "no" on the plebiscite. *Saskatchewan Valley News* covered the Rosthern area and it is included in this analysis.

Outside Saskatchewan, two other newspapers received examination. The *Winnipeg Free Press* was an influential newspaper in the largest city on the prairies and was active in its reporting and editorializing on the plebiscite issue. The *Vegreville Observer* reported the news for the only district to vote "no" in Alberta. Its biased reporting and scathing editorials demonstrate the lack of cultural tolerance that some newspapers used when dealing with serious, wartime issues. As well, this article concentrates on English language newspapers. The reasons for this emphasis are twofold. While other cultures existed on the prairies, the dominant culture was British and spoke English. Accordingly, it is important to see the newspapers that reflect and shape the culture of the majority. As well, the author's inability to do justice to the German, Icelandic, Ukrainian and, to a lesser degree, French languages limits the scope to English publications.

Editorials

The first point of analysis is the editorials written on the plebiscite. While it is ideal for the media to be a neutral voice on all issues when reporting the news, it is acceptable for newspapers to express viewpoints in the editorial section. It is evident that prairie newspapers used their editorial voice to take an official affirmative stance and that they used a number of tactics and strategies to carry this out. It is worth noting that daily newspapers editorialized conscription far more often than their weekly counterparts, largely because they had more space to devote to the topic.

Few districts voted “yes” with the same resounding majority as Regina. Of the 27,501 non-spoiled ballots, 23,810 voted in favour of releasing King from his 1940 campaign promise – almost 87 per cent.⁴ The *Leader-Post* backed the affirmative side in its editorials, using Canadians’ national pride, fear of enemy attack and religious beliefs as tools of persuasion:

The stronger the affirmative vote which can be rolled up in all sections of the country the better for national unity. And national unity, as the prime minister said, is “more essential to the success of the war effort of any country than most other factors combined.” ... If the Japanese could rain down bombs on Pearl Harbor, they could rain them on our cities too ... Under these circumstances none but a Canadian Gandhi could deny the government a free hand. The No voter is a man who would crawl into his isolationist cave and trust his isolationist god no one will see him.⁵

This editorial was representative of the opinion pieces published by the *Leader-Post* in April 1942.

The *Leader-Post* gave one last push on voting day. It was common practice for editorials to advocate exercising the franchise and preach against apathy. Newspapers feared eligible voters would abstain from voting, confident the affirmative side would win without their ballot. The prairie press did not accept this attitude. These newspapers were not satisfied with just winning the plebiscite. They wanted to represent a readership that had a strong affirmative turnout. It appears they perceived an overwhelming “yes” vote as a

reflection on their effectiveness as a newspaper as well as their loyalty to Canada. The *Leader-Post’s* editor wrote:

This is plebiscite day and it is the bounden duty of every loyal citizen to go to the polls ... It has been said that Hitler would vote No and his creatures confirm it. That should be sufficient guidance for Canadians. Vote NOW, Vote YES. Vote against the fuehrer and his Gestapo. VOTE FOR CANADA ... Three provinces have a better showing. But this prairie country has yielded place to none in previous war tests and every man and woman should make it his personal concern to boost the affirmative figure so high that we should lead all Canada in the final count.⁶

The above excerpt also points to another commonality among the western daily press. It refers to German leader Adolf Hitler as the spokesperson for the “no” vote, which was an accepted practice of the prairie press. It brought about a “if you are not with us, you are against us” attitude. If a voter did not want to release King of his pledge, the newspapers asserted, that voter was a Nazi, or something close to it.

The *Leader-Post* had a unique feature to its editorial page. Not only did it state its own views on why Canadians should vote in the affirmative, it also reported how other daily newspapers across Canada echoed the sentiments. The *Ottawa Journal*, the *Montreal Gazette*, the *Toronto Star*, the *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix*, the *Windsor Star*, the *Calgary Herald*, the *Edmonton Journal*, the *Winnipeg Tribune*, the *Fort William Times-Journal* are just a handful of the newspapers that had excerpts of their pro-affirmative editorials published in the pages in the newspaper of Saskatchewan’s capital city. Perhaps the *Leader-Post* printed these editorials because they demonstrated the widespread support for releasing King from his pledge and justified its own stance.

Moose Jaw’s newspaper readers experienced similar editorials as those living in the provincial capital. The *Times-Herald* was a staunch supporter of the “yes” side and published editorials accordingly – especially in celebration of a landslide “yes” verdict (Moose Jaw’s affirmative vote was 83 per cent).⁷ The following

editorial excerpt is an example of the proud partisanship the *Times-Herald* displayed from the beginning to the end of the plebiscite. The newspaper showed relentless support for the affirmative side throughout the debate and assumed partial credit for the overwhelming “yes” vote in Moose Jaw.

The *Times-Herald* pays tribute to the individual voters of the city who responded to the appeal from all the Federal political party leaders to free them from all commitments, and also to the Moose Jaw Plebiscite committee and the ladies of the city who took over the work of recording the vote in the polling booths. At the same time the management of this newspaper finds considerable satisfaction in the result. The *Times-Herald* is read in over ninety per cent of the homes of this city. Some criticism was directed at the newspaper for devoting so great an amount of advertising and editorial and news column space to the “Yes” vote campaign in the ten days previous to the voting. The *Times-Herald*, not in a boastful attitude but in a thankful and satisfied manner, takes unto itself a small portion of the credit for Monday’s magnificent result.⁸

The editorial staff at the *Times-Herald* also kept a close watch on Quebec – the province in which the “no” support was strongest. Perhaps to encourage its readership or to feign national unity, the newspaper claimed the tide of public opinion in the largely French-speaking province had begun to shift.

The change that has clearly taken place in Quebec is due altogether to the able presentation of the “Yes” cause, and what was a sincere, very much alive and vocal “Yes” minority now looks forward to a result that will surprise the Dominion. In this campaign French-Canadians are working in hearty co-operation with their English-speaking fellow Canadians. The “No’s” are not being allowed to have everything their way.⁹

It is unclear what sources the *Times-Herald* relied upon when crafting the above column as the results of the plebiscite were unflattering to the “yes” side. More than 70 per cent of Quebec residents voted “no,” and any confidence the newspaper was trying to conjure in regard to Quebec’s support for the affirmative vote was purely a canard.

Joining the *Leader Post* and the *Times-Herald*, the *Prince Albert Daily Herald* took an active role in encouraging its readership to vote “yes.” Potentially, the Prince Albert riding had more invested in a successful affirmative plebiscite than other regions, as it was the riding of Prime Minister King. Seventy-six per cent of the Prince Albert constituency voted “yes” on April 27, 1942.¹⁰ The *Daily Herald* took a leading role in advocating support for an affirmative response from the electorate by using its editorials to sway the district’s voters – including the following editorial that endorsed fifteen ways for Canadians to support their country during the war and be a beacon for their neighbours.

Not so long ago a favourite Canadian sport was “keeping up with the Joneses”. The only rule required participants to drive as shiny an automobile, dress as snappily and in every way present as sharp as appearance as their neighbors. This was great for persons with things to sell, but a bit rough on pa’s pocketbook. Now is the time to revive the old game, but with quite different rules. This time you will be setting the pace, not attempting to catch up with the Joneses. Make them get up and hustle to catch you as you go all-out for victory. Here are some little things which, if done well and regularly, will put you in the home army front rank. ... 15. Vote “Yes for Victory” in the plebiscite two weeks from today, and urge your neighbors to vote “yes.”¹¹

The *Daily Herald* was steadfast in writing editorials to secure the affirmative vote in Prince Albert. Fully in support of their Member of Parliament (M.P.), the newspaper wrote in its editorial titled, “Are You Going to Heed King or Hitler:”

Prime Minister King is the last man in the world one could call a war-mongering

Official Plebiscite Returns Electoral District of Vegreville

-- THE SHAMEFUL FIGURES --

~~How our "NEW-CANADIANS" Rallied to the Support
of Hitler:~~

The final Official Count of Votes cast on April 27th in the Plebiscite as made public by E. E. Morton, Returning Officer, on May 11th, 1942, are as follows:

"YES" Votes, 5,471; "NO" Votes, 9,041.
Majority for Hitler3,570.

Total Ballots cast, 14,634; Rejected, 122.
Total available votes, approximately 21,676.

"UP" with the Swastika; "DOWN" with British Liberty!
HEIL HITLER!

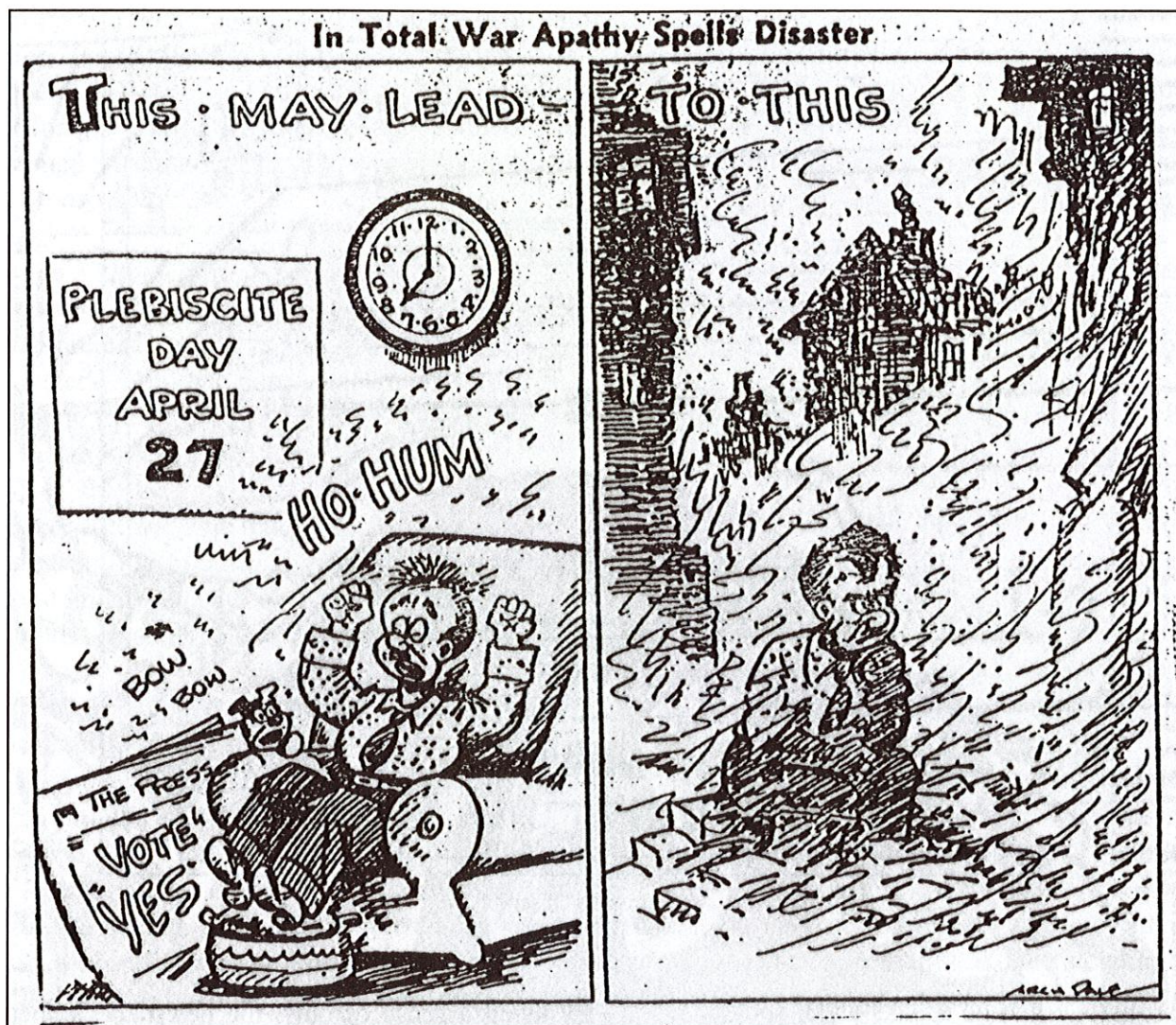
Editorial Bulletin from the Vegreville Observer, May 13, 1942, p. 1.
(Author's Collection)

alarmist. When he speaks as he spoke the other night in asking Canadians to vote "yes" in the forthcoming plebiscite, his words should be heeded by every adult Canadian in the country. [...] If you remain unconvinced and intend to write "no" in bold defiant letters on your plebiscite ballot, take another look into the mirror. Wonder what that face will look like five years hence? Perhaps a Jap or a Hun will be looking into that mirror before many months pass. Your defiant "no" is the way Hitler or Hirohito would wish you to vote. Your own Prime Minister has asked you to vote "yes."¹²

It is evident that the threat of foreign invasion was used as a tool by the affirmative camp to persuade the electorate to vote "yes." The threat of the war in Europe making its way to Canadian soil was utilized as a scare tactic by the western press to garner votes supporting the "yes" side. The *Daily Herald* then focused its attention on recruiting people to join the affirmative campaign.

By using a sense of duty, the newspaper appealed to the district's citizens to muster more volunteers for the city's affirmative campaign. Only 50 people in a district of 46,000 attended the inaugural "yes" campaign at the City Council Chambers – a number that did not please the *Daily Herald*. The newspaper said the meeting was productive and engaging but 50 people could not fill the job. It asked for at least 500 people to attend the following meeting and concluded the editorial, "so let's get on with these jobs to assure that when Prince Albert riding speaks on April 27 through the secret plebiscite ballot the 'no' votes will be overwhelmed under an avalanche of 'yes' ballots!"¹³

The *Yorkton Enterprise* found itself in a different position than most of its Saskatchewan counterparts. While newspaper columns in Regina, Moose Jaw and Prince Albert crowed about the high affirmative vote in their constituency, the *Enterprise* had to devote editorial space to explain why its local riding could not boast the same. In the Yorkton district, 8,246 voted "yes" while 6,668 marked their ballot "no."¹⁴ The affirmative side captured only 55 per cent of the unrejected votes. The newspaper blamed a high population of uneducated



Editorial Cartoon from the Winnipeg Free Press, April 25, 1942, p. 17.
(Author's Collection)

Ukrainians for the slim margin of victory of the plebiscite.¹⁵

The result for the plebiscite in Canada in general and in the Yorkton federal constituency in particular on Monday clearly demonstrates that an alarming condition maintains among many of our people. ... In the Yorkton constituency it was Canadians whose ancestors hail from the Ukraine who piled up the big "No" vote. Lack of proper information was doubtless responsible.¹⁶

The column went on to say that the newspaper was certain the Ukrainians living in towns voted affirmative. Their population, however, was largely based in remote areas, according to the editorial, and the affirmative campaigns did not make it to the peripheries of the

voting district to relay the affirmative message to the less informed.¹⁷ Ukrainians were not bad people, the *Enterprise* contended, just ignorant of the facts.

Two districts in Saskatchewan were even less enamoured with the prime minister's plebiscite than Yorkton. The German community of Humboldt's polls favoured the affirmative, but only 54 per cent marked their ballots "yes." The Rosthern constituency, which was largely Mennonite, rejected King's request, as almost 53 per cent of the district voters marked their ballots "no."¹⁸ With such a division among the citizens in their areas, it might be safe to assume that the *Humboldt Journal* and *Saskatchewan Valley News* (Rosthern) had ample fodder for many editorials concerning the plebiscite. This was not the case, however, as neither newspaper delved into the anomaly that set their districts apart from the rest in Saskatchewan. The lack of newspaper analysis or opinion was conspicuous by its absence on such an emotionally charged issue. The two newspapers shared syndicated editorial pieces that discussed the

war, but steered clear of the plebiscite. The reason for not editorializing the plebiscite might have been the publishers' wish to remain neutral on a controversial issue that divided these newspapers' readers. Silence was the only sound business option when no consensus existed. The *Journal* and the *Saskatchewan Valley News* were void of analysis in trying to describe the split vote in their constituencies when the plebiscite results were known. The muted voice of the two newspapers proved to be an aberration and curious factor in contrast to the other western newspapers and how they handled the plebiscite of 1942.

Winnipeg was the largest prairie centre during the Second World War, and the *Winnipeg Free Press* enjoyed a wide readership. The *Free Press* staunchly supported the "yes" vote. The city responded with 108,252 affirmative ballots and only 15,026 negative ballots (an 88 per cent affirmative majority).¹⁹ The *Free Press* was pleased with Winnipeg's showing at the polls, but was not enamoured with certain statistics the results provided.²⁰

On the face of it, Winnipeg did itself proud. Yet there are several sobering facts which we may well ponder. In the first place, one person in every four did not take the trouble to go to the polls. This is surely a melancholy commentary on the health of this democracy. People who refuse to exercise their franchise in this hour of crisis will have only themselves to blame if the day arrives when free elections are no longer allowed. ... The result in North Winnipeg was disappointing. There were almost as many negative votes cast there as in the rest of the city combined. If North Winnipeg had held up its end, Winnipeg might easily have led all Canada in the percentage majority it gave to the affirmative vote.²¹

When the expectations and analysis of the *Free Press* are contrasted with the newspapers in Rosthern and Humboldt – whose town publications pointed no such accusatory finger at its readers for a far less supportive affirmative vote than Winnipeg's – the difference in the editorial styles of the newspapers can be plainly seen. The *Free Press* chastized Winnipeg-North, even though the district voted 78 per cent in favour of releasing King

from his pledge. While in Humboldt, where only 53 per cent voted affirmative, and in Rosthern, where only 47 per cent voted "yes," no such reprimand was issued by the *Journal* or the *Saskatchewan Valley News*.²²

In Alberta, the only district to vote "no" was Vegreville. The *Vegreville Observer* did not devote much space to editorials, but the weekly newspaper saw it fit to run a lengthy one on the front page as the plebiscite neared. Despite the eventual "No" vote in the constituency, the *Observer* campaigned vigorously to persuade its readership to vote "yes."

If we don't vote YES on April 27th, we may wake up some morning to discover that the Plebiscite was the last popular vote in this county. We may find that the Japs and the Nazis – made bold because Canadians were not willing to vote for total war at a time when any other kind of war is mere temporizing – have moved in and taken us over. ... In voting no political considerations are involved. Every political party or its leaders have declared emphatically that it is our duty to vote "Yes."²³

Throughout the column, the *Observer* threatened its readership with a scenario of invasion by Canada's enemies and declared a "yes" vote was the only way to stop the war from being fought on Canadian soil. The newspaper also asked its readership to put its political partisanship aside as this was not a vote about politics as much as it was a vote on national security. The main priority on the *Observer's* agenda, however, appeared in the editorial's final segment:

The electoral district of Vegreville is somewhat unique in that at least 80 per cent of the qualified voters are of Ukrainian descent. Vegreville electoral district comes about the closest in all Canada to having a solid mass of non-Anglo-Saxon descent. ... Thus all eyes of Canada will be anxiously directed toward the result in Vegreville. The *Observer* has no fear of this result. The writer knows the real leaders of the Ukrainian people are all in support of the "Yes" vote. But there is always the danger that small-time demagogues will

make an effective appeal to our people to vote “No.” Vegreville must roll up the most emphatic “Yes” vote in Canada, and by Vegreville, we do not simply mean the small town of that name; but the 107 townships comprising the electoral district of Vegreville.²⁴

The *Observer* was obviously concerned with the Ukrainian vote – especially in the peripheries of the voting district. The editorial made a plea to the majority of the constituency’s population base to vote in the affirmative. Such an appeal by a newspaper was unique. Outside of Quebec, Anglo-Saxons generally comprised the vast majority of every district’s population base, so newspapers essentially did not have to persuade their readership to vote “yes” with such vigour, as the readership was generally sympathetic to the war effort because of their ties to Britain. Because of the immense Ukrainian majority in the Vegreville district, the *Observer* did not have this luxury. It had to grandstand and use every tactic and ploy at its disposal to convince its non-British readership that an affirmative vote was necessary.

As the result of the negative return on the plebiscite, the *Observer* lashed out at its readership for failing their country. In a brief editorial, titled “Vegreville Constituency Disgraces Alberta,” the newspaper stated, “Space limitations prevent the *Observer* from commenting at length on the result in general but we have space enough to say that in the Vegreville Electoral District, Herr Hitler must have plenty of friends for the result in this district was almost incredible.”²⁵ The official result of unspoiled votes saw the “No” side garner 62 per cent of the Vegreville voting district ballots (5,471 “yes” and 9,041 “no”).²⁶ The *Observer* was clearly not afraid of offending its readership.²⁷

The final editorial jab at its Ukrainian readership came in mid-May 1942 in an untraditional form. Instead of writing a wordy column berating the Ukrainians, the *Observer* crafted a sarcastic bulletin to do the same job. The bulletin used the descriptors of “Shameful Figures,” “How our ‘NEW CANADIANS’ Rallied to the Support of Hitler” and “‘UP’ with the Swastika; ‘DOWN’ with British Loyalty.”

Newspapers were not limited to their words when it came to editorializing on the plebiscite issue. The prairie press used political cartoons in April 1942, as they campaigned for an affirmative vote. These

cartoons conveyed similar messages to their editorials – demanding total victory for the “yes” side. The *Winnipeg Free Press* warned its readership against apathy with an editorial cartoon. The *Regina Leader-Post* made a voting day appeal to its readership with a cartoon depicting Hitler’s demise. The *Free Press* celebrated an affirmative vote victory with an editorial cartoon, depicting a solid fist smacking a proclamation of total war, signed with a “V” for victory.

Letters to the Editor

Letters to the editor provide feedback to the newspaper from its readership. Letters can praise a newspaper’s ideals or shame it for a biased perspective. An objective newspaper runs letters, both positive and negative, and is not afraid of free debate amongst its readership. With other newspapers, however, letters to the editor are somewhat akin to the newspaper’s editorials. Although a letter to the editor might not express the official viewpoint of the newspaper, sometimes the newspaper prints only those letters that agree with its editorial stance. The conscription debate inspired many letters to prairie newspapers and most of those that were printed supported an affirmative vote. Occasionally, but not nearly as frequently, letters sympathizing with the “no” vote were published.

The *Winnipeg Free Press* published many letters to the editor that addressed the conscription plebiscite during April 1942. A French-Canadian veteran of World War I with the surname Baptiste from St. Boniface, Manitoba, wrote the *Free Press* with reasons why other French-Canadians should vote “yes,” perhaps hoping to persuade other prairie francophones to follow his lead.

I am a French-Canadian and I am going to vote “Yes” on the 27th (unless I die by that time). ... I was never a less fervent Britisher than I am today, and that is 100 per cent. Why should not I? I am more interested in being British than any other Canadian of any other origin because I have more to lose if Britain lost out. The French language is as much official as the English language, according to the Canadian constitution and I am equal to my English-speaking compatriot in every respect, while remaining a French-Canadian. Should the Axis win, what would become of Canada and its constitutional duality?²⁸



Cartoon from the Regina Leader-Post, April 27, 1942, p. 9.
(Author's Collection)

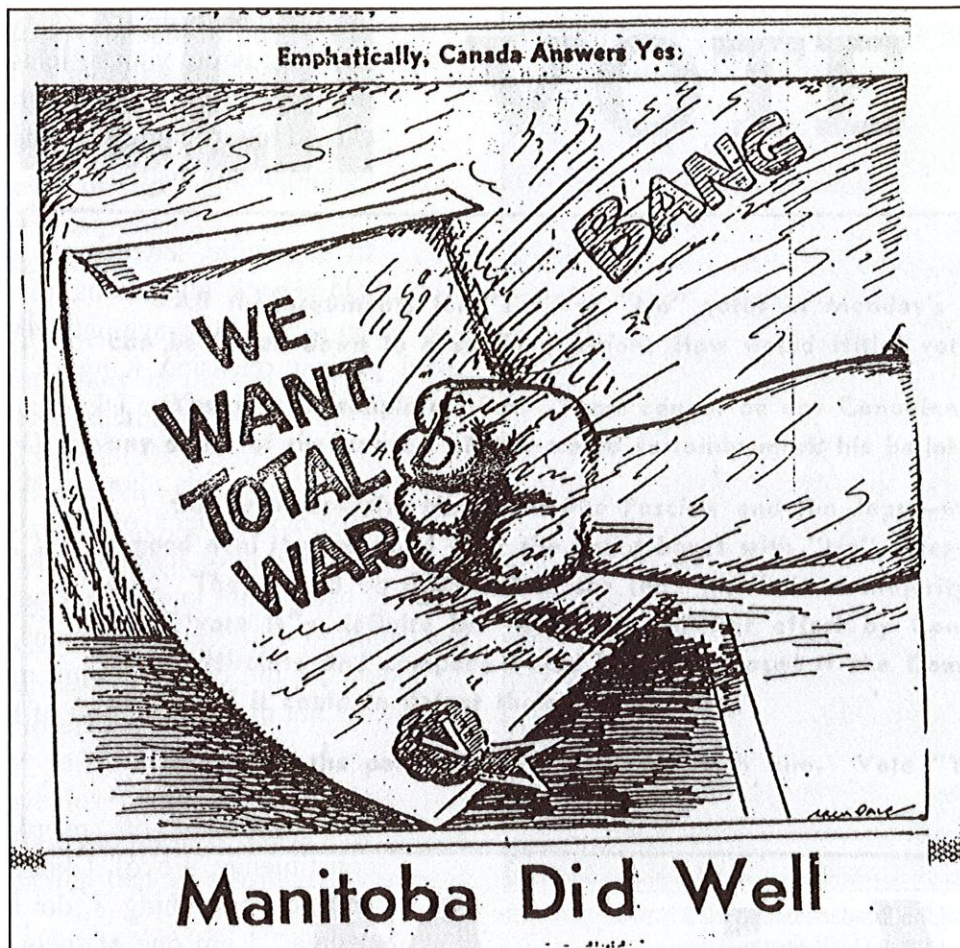
To the credit of the *Free Press*, it did publish a letter from a reader condemning the newspaper's stance that French-Canadians have not done their share for Canada. The letter was written by Reverend Leo Marchand of Fisher Branch, Manitoba, in reference to the *Free Press* column titled "A Call To Duty." The letter lashed out against the *Free Press* and its one-sided views on the plebiscite, part of which was that the French-Canadians not doing their part in the war effort.

We are sorry to note your attitude toward the French Canadians who made great sacrifices, not only during the World War, but even the present day war. ... The French Canadians are doing their share in this war; are giving many of their sons for overseas service and much of their money in supporting the war, by aiding the Red Cross and buying war saving certificates. ... In the matter of the plebiscite, you should know that Quebec is not in the same geographic position as this province and may have particular reasons to vote No. After all,

are we free to do it? ... I don't know why you wrote your articles. Is it only propaganda? ... Your articles have caused bitter feelings among the French people in this district.²⁹

In Vegreville, letters were written in response to the *Observer's* allegations that the constituency was laden with Hitler sympathizers after the district voted against releasing King of his 1940 promise. The *Observer* blamed the Ukrainians and other "New Canadians" for the defeat. John Decore, of Ukrainian descent, expressed his shock and disapproval at the community newspaper's outlook on the district and added he would have admonished the newspaper more severely had he not known and befriended the editor, the one who criticized Ukrainians. Decore wrote in his letter that the overwhelming majority of negative votes were not made in support of Hitler, but for other reasons.

The majority of people in this constituency are of Ukrainian origin, and for one thing I do know these people. I am one of them, have lived among them and know their outlook and their way of thinking. I can assure you, Mr. Editor, that one of the unkindest cuts you could ever make is to even suggest that these people are disloyal to Canada. Surely the numbers of volunteers that have enlisted for active service ... is conclusive proof beyond reasonable doubt that they love their newly adopted land and are doing all they can to bring this war to a successful conclusion. ... I personally know a man who has made a very heavy purchase of Victory Bonds and yet I am positive that this same man together with his family voted no. I could give numbers of instances where parents whose sons have volunteered for active service and who are now serving overseas; these very same parents voted no. ... Can anyone conscientiously say that the average Polish speaking Canadian is a Hitlerite, simply because this plebiscite has shown that the Poles have given a majority of negative votes in their district?³⁰



Editorial Cartoon from the Winnipeg Free Press, April 28, 1942, p. 8.
(Author's Collection)

This letter prompted an editor's note. The editor said his judgement and reference were harsh and stemmed from his inability to understand the results among Ukrainian voters. He added that he knew many Ukrainians and was on friendly terms with them, "but that the Ukrainians would be so far out of step with other Canadians just did not seem possible."³¹

Daphne Garrison taught high school in Vegreville and wrote a letter to the editor of the *Observer*, asking people in the constituency to not let the plebiscite vote cause ethnic disharmony. Garrison wrote of how proud she was that many of her ex-pupils – Ukrainians and those of other origins alike – went on to enlist in the military.

Friends, let's not carp at each other. Let's each do his own duty and if we have to draw away from those who refuse to share, let us stand closer to our neighbours who are carrying the same load. Indeed, we are already doing this and it is the one good thing about war, that it brings this intensified sense

of human comradeship. Because of Metro and Zanan and Victor, I salute the Ukrainian portion of my neighbors; because of Ian and Bill and Eugene, I congratulate my own people. And there are so many, many other names. Bless them all!³²

Despite a close vote in Yorkton, few readers seemed disgruntled with the Ukrainian population or biased newspaper coverage, if the newspaper's letter to the editor section was any indication. The *Enterprise* published a letter by M. Stetchishin. Stetchishin wrote that it was not disloyalty to their adopted nation that prompted Ukrainians, Germans and Poles to vote "no;" instead, he placed the blame on political ties. Included in the letter to the editor was a table comparing how the Yorkton constituency voted in the 1940 general election and how it voted on the conscription plebiscite in 1942 on a poll-by-poll basis. There was some correlation between the two statistics. In many polls where the Liberals did not do well in 1940, the vote on the plebiscite was overwhelmingly "no" in 1942.³³

Still, one has to question the reason behind comparing 1940 general election votes with those of the 1942's conscription plebiscite because all three major political parties in Saskatchewan (Liberals, Conservatives, C.C.F.) fully backed the notion of freeing King from his promise.

P.G. Woloschuk of Wroxton, Saskatchewan, wrote the *Enterprise* on behalf of the Ukrainian community to thank the newspaper for its coverage and editorials regarding the Ukrainian vote in the Yorkton constituency. Woloschuk wrote that he wished all newspapers were as understanding as the *Enterprise* and said the local newspaper had a good grasp on the ethnic population – certainly a different reaction than the readership of the *Vegreville Observer*. He wrote:

I was quite impressed by your explanation of the outcome of the recent plebiscite results, especially of the vote at the rural polls. It is a true fact that many of the rural voters did not even understand what the question was about and were of the opinion that as soon as the majority came in as "Yes" the government would step in and commence mobilization for overseas service. ... I am writing this letter in personal gratitude and appreciation of the understanding attitude of the *Enterprise* on all questions affecting Canadian citizens of other than Anglo-Saxon origin. It would be a good thing if your presentation of the matter could be brought to the knowledge of the rest of the people of Canada.³⁴

Certainly not all of the letters to the editor came from Ukrainians. Many Westerners wrote their local newspaper to give their reasons for why they voted "yes" on the plebiscite and left race and religion aside.

It was common for provincial politicians to write letters to their local newspaper to appeal to their constituents for an affirmative vote. S. Sigfusson, an M.L.A. from St. George, Manitoba, wanted readers to know the situation in 1942 was much more serious than in 1940. At the end of the letter, Sigfusson also mentioned ethnicity:

The war has tragically changed since then. Democracy and human liberty is today menaced as it has never been

before in the history of the world. ... The Manitoba legislature passed a resolution unanimously in favor of a strong affirmative vote. I voted for that resolution and I now appeal to my fellow citizens of this province to do likewise. ... I desire to make a special appeal to my fellow Canadians of Icelandic origin to accept the responsibility of citizenship in the great country and vote on April 27, and vote "Yes."³⁵

Federal politicians also drafted letters for their local newspapers to rally citizens behind the affirmative vote. The *Prince Albert Daily Herald* received one of these letters from the prime minister himself, who held the local federal seat. King's letter appeared on the front page of the newspaper, urging people to join affirmative vote organizations and support the "yes" vote whenever possible. King wrote:

I feel that it is very desirable for the citizens of every constituency to form an organization for the purpose of seeing that every possible affirmative vote is cast. I wish it were possible for me to be present, personally, in Prince Albert Constituency, to share in the work of such an organization. But I know that the people of the Constituency will understand the reasons which render this impossible. I am pleased to learn that many citizens of the Constituency have already taken the initiative in this matter and are now engaged in setting up the necessary organization. I would appreciate it very much indeed if as many as can possibly do so would support the organization which is being established. ... In advance, I would like to thank the people of the Constituency for the support which I know will be forthcoming in response to this appeal.³⁶

H.R. Fleming, M.P. for the Humboldt district, asked for his constituents to vote affirmative in a letter that appeared in the *Humboldt Journal*. Fleming wrote about how the country would be looking at the constituency to see how German-Canadians voted.

Do not say, "My vote makes no difference." Every one counts. The eyes of many people will be on Humboldt constituency on account of the fact that many of the electors are of German racial origin. ... Do not be afraid to ask questions. Listen in on the radio. Hear the various speakers from all the political parties. ... All our newspapers will carry full explanations. [...] Vote "YES" on the Plebiscite. Keep Canada a united nation and maintain an all-out war effort.³⁷

On the surface, it appears Fleming gave voters a number of resources from which to form an independent opinion and make an informed vote. In his letter of advice, however, Fleming directed his constituents to only one side of the plebiscite debate. Radio media and radio addresses supported conscription, all political parties supported conscription and the same can be said for newspapers. Fleming followed his initial letter with a note of appreciation which appeared in the *Journal* on April 30, 1942, shortly after the district's narrow affirmative victory. He wrote: "The electors of this district have given their verdict without any pressure having been brought to bear. It was a democratic expression of opinion."³⁸ Fleming's claim might have been misleading. His first letter to the editor warned his constituents the rest of the nation would be watching them because of their German descent. That cautioning might have constituted "pressure."

In an editorial, the *Vegreville Observer* drew attention to the M.P. of its constituency, for his silence and lack of direction. The *Observer* demanded Anthony Hlynka tell the district where he stood on the plebiscite. Hlynka responded in a letter to the editor that confirmed his support of an affirmative vote.

I welcome the *Observer's* invitation to make my views known to those of my constituents who may share your editorial views on my duty in the forthcoming plebiscite. My stand is perfectly straightforward and it occasions me no embarrassment to declare it without equivocation. [...] While I am most anxious to observe scrupulously my democratic obligations to my constituents by not suggesting to them

how to vote, I do not hesitate to state my own personal view as a citizen. I am in favour of the Government being relieved on any limitation, real or imaginary, to its most effective prosecution of the war, but under existing circumstances, I am not satisfied to let the matter rest there.³⁹

Organizations also took the opportunity to express their views with letters. The Canadian Legion was a big proponent of the "yes" vote in Western Canada. The Legion was responsible for organizing many affirmative vote campaigns and was relentless in its letter writing efforts to local newspapers. This institution of war veterans gave their interpretation of how necessary an affirmative vote was and how potentially detrimental a negative vote would be. The Regina branch wrote: "Now it's no use pussy-footing with this Total War idea. Our enemies aren't pussy footing. They've been devastatingly ruthless about it. They're out to win this war by fair means or foul and that's why you must not treat this plebiscite lightly. It's a way of telling the enemy that we mean to win this war."⁴⁰ The Legion spoke with an authority and a sincerity on the topic of war that no other group could. Unlike politicians and clergy, these men had served their country in battle and the veterans knew what it took to win in Europe. Even in Rosthern, where King's wish was ultimately rejected, the local Legion made an attempt to secure an affirmative vote for the district. F.V. Rielly, president of the Rosthern branch of the Canadian Legion, penned a letter of behalf of his Legion brethren.

The legion has gone on record as unanimously favouring total war mobilization of all of our resources including manpower. We have opposed the holding of a plebiscite because we can see no reason why, in such a critical situation, Mr King should single out from the many "solemn pledges" made by him during the last election campaign, the pledge made by him regarding the conscription of man-power as the only one from which he must be released by a plebiscite. Vote "Yes," and you are favoring a policy of offensive action – one defeating the enemy wherever he may be found instead of waiting until

he lands in Canada: Vote “No” if you want Hitler to win this war. Vote “Yes” if you want him beaten. ... Remember, too, that the right to vote freely is the only guarantee that you will remain free. The free ballot is the greatest charter of human liberty. Do not neglect the first duty of every citizen of Canada. When you vote, forget your private affairs, your political likes and dislikes and vote for Canada.⁴¹

One-sided Coverage

The prairie press provided one-sided coverage of the local events surrounding the plebiscite. “Yes” vote information and updates were frequent and were reported on positively, while material on the “no” vote was seldom seen – in part due to the fact that “No” organizations were rare. The “Vote Yes For Victory” campaign’s mandate was outlined in the *Prince Albert Daily Herald*. The article announced that the group’s plans included a force of 25 speakers that were to be “marshalled” from the city to address meetings on the constituency’s peripheries. Daily radio addresses and spot announcements were also part of the agenda, according to the front-page article.⁴² Two days later in another front-page story titled, “‘Vote Yes’ Committees Hard at Work,” the *Daily Herald* gave an update on how the committee was progressing. The newspaper announced coming affirmative vote meetings as well as the new headquarters for the committee.⁴³

As the plebiscite neared, the *Winnipeg Free Press* published an article that told its readership to expect a high-volume of voters – higher than the 1940 federal election. Though appearing as a news story and not an editorial, the *Free Press* did include editorialized content in the article. “Voters lists have been completed and the decks cleared ... in the national plebiscite in which Canadians will have an opportunity to tell the sailors, soldiers and airmen who have gone overseas to halt the enemy that the people on the home front are not going to let them down.”⁴⁴ The suggestion that Canadians will not let overseas military personnel down implied that Canadians will and must vote “yes.”

Western women were also targeted in the stories of the prairie press. After all, their votes were of equal importance to those of men. The *Moose Jaw Times-Herald* devoted one page per edition to women and their interests. In a story titled, “‘Yes’ Vote Favored by Prov. Council of Women,” the newspaper stated

that the provincial council of women went on record as endorsing a “yes” vote in the plebiscite.⁴⁵ The article was lengthy and the plebiscite portion of the story was small. Still, the *Times-Herald* saw it fit to run a large headline over the story regarding the council’s decision to support an affirmative vote. The *Times-Herald* was a staunch advocate of releasing King from his promise. The *Regina Leader-Post* also dedicated space in their newspaper to women’s issues. The newspaper reported on a meeting for women in which they were informed of the importance of voting “yes” on the plebiscite. D.A. McNiven, M.P., urged women to give an unparalleled vote of confidence for the government in their effort to win the war. McNiven told women that because all political parties supported an affirmative vote, it should be an unprecedented landslide “yes” victory. As well, women were encouraged to sign up to canvass Regina in support of a “yes” vote.⁴⁶

Conclusion

Western English language newspapers were not impartial during the spring of 1942. By and large, many openly supported the affirmative vote with their editorials, one-sided “yes” vote local coverage, and political cartoons. Using a number of persuasion tactics, these members of the prairie press took an active role in campaigning for the “yes” vote. They seemed to believe strongly that a “yes” vote majority reflected well on their newspapers. The *Moose Jaw Times-Herald* even wrote in one of its editorials that it could take at least partial credit for the substantial affirmative triumph in the Moose Jaw constituency. Conversely, when the vote was not an overwhelming majority, newspapers sometimes lashed out at their readerships for letting their county down when it needed them most. The *Vegreville Observer* was so dismayed with the result in its district that it referred to its Ukrainian-Canadian readership as Hitler enthusiasts. The newspaper blamed the ethnicity of the region on its “shameful” affirmative turnout. Pockets of Winnipeg’s voting district, a city that largely came out in droves to support the affirmative vote, even drew the ire of the *Winnipeg Free Press* despite an 88 per cent affirmative vote. The city was criticized because the North Winnipeg district kept the city from achieving the highest “yes” majority in Canada.

In Humboldt and Rosthern, two constituencies with a concentration of persons from ethnic minority groups, the vote was split. Humboldt had a narrow “yes” majority while Rosthern had a slim “no” majority. The *Humboldt Journal* and *Saskatchewan Valley News*

(Rosthern) steered clear of any controversy by largely avoiding the subject of the plebiscite and its results in their pages. Very little coverage was given to the topic that had consumed the rest of Canada. Perhaps the publishers did not wish to alienate their respective readerships in the same fashion as was done in Vegreville and, thus, did not lash out or even comment on such a sensitive issue – one that maybe divided their communities. Perhaps the newspapers in Rosthern and Humboldt were controlled by those who did not support the “yes” side and their silence on this issue was their only way of protesting the plebiscite without reprisal from those who supported the conscription cause.

It was an emotional period for the country, as the passionate letters to the editor can attest. Times of military conflict have the ability to rally a nation together by uniting citizens in an effort to achieve common goals. The Second World War was also a divisive period because it alienated ethnic minorities whose beliefs set them apart from the rest of the Canadian population. Newspapers played a large role in the estrangement. Their approach was one that wanted conformity to the dominant Anglo-Saxon culture and was intolerant of multiculturalism. Anyone who did not support the affirmative vote in the plebiscite was considered subversive by the prairie press. A role of the newspaper is to provide balanced coverage and objectivity. In the spring of 1942, most Western Canadian newspapers failed this mandate and left their readership with only one side of the plebiscite issue.

Endnotes

- 1 J.L. and J.M. Hitsman Granatstein, *Broken Promises: A History of Conscription in Canada* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1977), 162-163.
- 2 Richard Jones, “Politics and Culture: The French Canadians and the Second World War,” in *The Second World War as a National Experience* ed. Sidney Aster (Ottawa: Department of National Defence, The Canadian Committee for the History of the Second World War, 1981), 87.
- 3 Brian Nolan, *King’s War: Mackenzie King and the Politics of War, 1939-1945* (Toronto: Random House, 1988), 85.
- 4 *Canada Gazette*, June 27, 1942, p.5456-61
- 5 *Regina Leader-Post*, April 9, 1942, p.9
- 6 *Ibid.*, April 27, 1942, p.9
- 7 *Canada Gazette*, June 27, 1942, p.5456-61
- 8 *Moose Jaw Times-Herald*, April 30, 1942, p.6
- 9 *Ibid.*, April 24, 1942, p.6
- 10 *Canada Gazette*, June 27, 1942, pg.5456-61
- 11 *Prince Albert Daily Herald*, April 13, 1942, p.2
- 12 *Ibid.*, April 9, 1942, p.2
- 13 *Ibid.*, April 11, 1942, p.2
- 14 *Canada Gazette*, June 27, 1942, pg. 5456-61

- 15 As Bohdan Kordan and Lubomyr Luciuk point out in *On Guard For Thee: War, Ethnicity, and the Canadian State, 1939-1945* (p.85-87), Ukrainian Canadians constituted the second largest non-British, non-French ethnic group in Canada during the Second World War, and the presence of such a large “foreign born” population within Canada during this tense time was seen by Canadian officials as an internal security problem. There were concerns at the most senior levels of the government involving the loyalty of Ukrainian-Canadians, igniting debate about the threat that this ethnic group might pose to the state and how best it might be contained. Secretary of state for External Affairs, O.D. Skelton, was sure that any German favouritism toward Ukrainians in Europe would excite Ukrainian-Canadian nationalists about the prospects of a future independent state and weaken their loyalty to Canada and the Allied cause.
- 16 *Yorkton Enterprise*, April 30, 1942, p.2
- 17 *Ibid.*
- 18 *Canada Gazette*, June 27, 1942, pg-5456-61
- 19 *Canada Gazette*, June 27, 1942, pg.5456-61
- 20 The only Manitoba district that voted “no” on the plebiscite was Provencher, south of Winnipeg with a considerable Mennonite population. The Icelandic settlements north of Winnipeg largely voted in favour of releasing King from his earlier promise.
- 21 *Winnipeg Free Press*, April 28, 1942, p.13
- 22 *Canada Gazette*, June 27, 1942, pg.5456-61
- 23 *Vegreville Observer*, April 15, 1942, p.1
- 24 *Ibid.*
- 25 *Ibid.*, April 20, 1942, p.1
- 26 *Canada Gazette*, June 27, 1942, pg. 5456-61
- 27 The owner of the *Observer* during the Second World War was Mr. A.L. Horton. Little is known about his background and politics.
- 28 *Winnipeg Free Press*, April 25, 1942, p.10
- 29 *Ibid.*
- 30 *Vegreville Observer*, May 20, 1942, p.1
- 31 *Ibid.*
- 32 *Ibid.*
- 33 *Yorkton Enterprise*, May 7, 1942, p.6
- 34 *Ibid.*
- 35 *Ibid.*
- 36 *Prince Albert Daily Herald*, April 14, 1942, p.1
- 37 *Humboldt Journal*, April 9, 1942, p.4
- 38 *Ibid.*, April 30, 1942, p.4
- 39 *Vegreville Observer*, April 22, 1942, p.1
- 40 *Regina Leader-Post*, April 4, 1942, p.11
- 41 *Saskatchewan Valley News*, April 8, 1942, p.1.
- 42 *Prince Albert Daily Herald*, April 13, 1942, p.1
- 43 *Ibid.* April 15, 1942, p.1
- 44 *Winnipeg Free Press*, April 24, 1942, p.1
- 45 *Moose Jaw Times-Herald*, April 25, 1942, p.2
- 46 *Regina Leader-Post*, April 9, 1942, p.6

Print, Profit and Pedagogy: The School Aids and Text Book Publishing Company

by MaryLynn Gagné

Abstract

The School Aids and Text Book Publishing Company operated in Saskatchewan from the early 1930s through to 1978. The company specialized in textbooks for the K-12 market, but also published several trade titles of Western Canadiana. This small prairie publishing firm was able to thrive through the Depression years and beyond by profiting from its association with a successful job printing plant, by employing local educators, artists, and amateur historians as writers, by marketing directly to teachers and to the provincial Department of Education, and by exploiting the crucial role that the authorized textbook played in classroom instruction during this time.

Distinctive features of School Aids publications include a strong interest in and focus on the history of Aboriginal peoples on the prairies, incorporation of considerable local content, translation of homegrown textbooks into French, and suggestions of socialist influences. Winnipeg bookseller Jim Anderson referred to the School Aids and Text Book Publishing Company as “the most energetic and prolific of prairie school-book publishing firms.”¹ The story of this little known company represents a noteworthy chapter in the history of education and publishing in our province.

Commercial Printers Ltd.

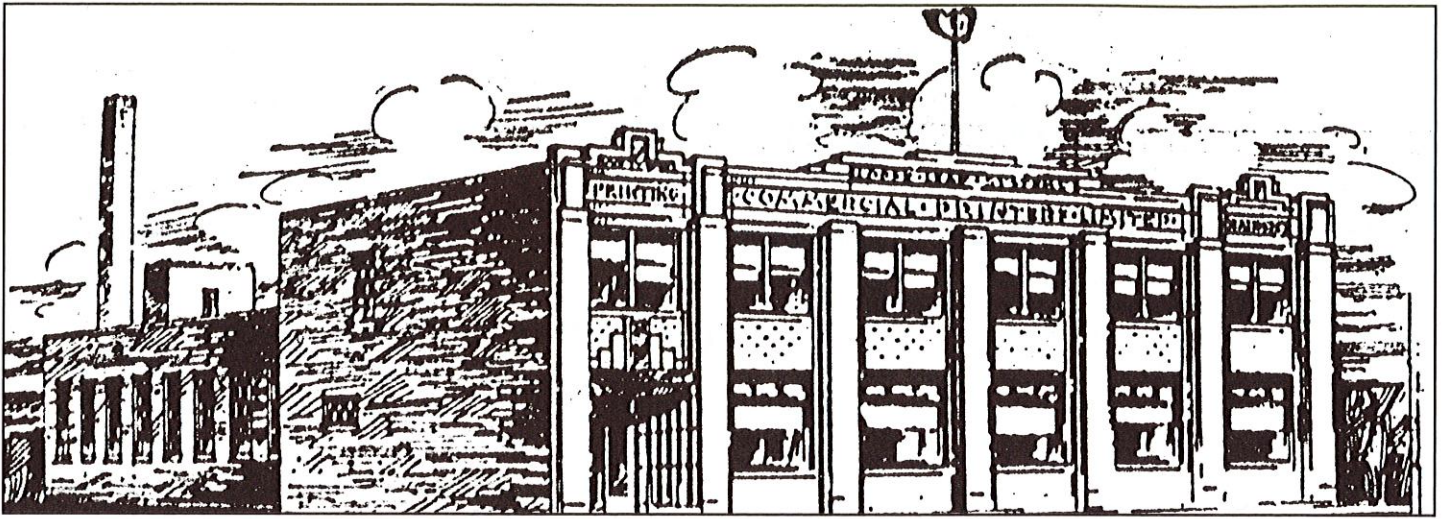
Commercial Printers was established in Regina in 1929 when “a group of gentlemen that were employed with the Leader Publishing Company...formed Commercial Printers Ltd. and built the building on 1935 Albert Street.”² Commercial Printers assumed control of the printing and stationery branches of Leader Publishing, while the latter company became Leader-Post Publishing, responsible for Regina’s daily newspaper.³ Under the leadership of President and Sales Manager John L. Anderson, Vice-president Harry Perry, and Secretary Robert Usher, Commercial Printers grew to be

an immensely successful company with representatives throughout the province and an agent and branch office in Toronto.⁴ Using the traditional “hot type” method of printing, Commercial Printers produced great quantities of standard forms for municipalities, agricultural fairs, law offices and hospitals.⁵ The company also sold office machines and equipment, all manner of stationery and classroom supplies, and “everything from birthday candles to Christmas cards.”⁶ The “dean of Saskatchewan antiquarian book-dealers, Richard Spafford”⁷ recalls that, “Commercial Printers was a very wealthy organization. At its peak it made huge amounts of money, which allowed Anderson to pretty much do what he wanted to do.”⁸ One of the things that J. L. Anderson and the other officers of the company wanted to do, “a bold venture for those days,”⁹ was to enter into the world of educational publishing.

The Rise of the School Aids and Text Book Publishing Company

The School Aids and Text Book Publishing Company appears to have flown somewhat under the radar in the documented history of Western Canadian publishing. Whether this is because the company operated as a subsidiary of Commercial Printers Ltd. or because of the generally low status of school textbook publishing is unknown. The firm’s publishing output of well over 200 titles would arguably place it in the same category as other small prairie presses such as Western Producer Prairie Books.¹⁰ Despite this productivity, the School

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Drawing of the Commercial Printers Building. It housed the Schools Aid and Textbook Publishing Company from 1935 to 1978 (The Regina Leader-Post, August 18, 1930, 8.)

Aids firm is not included in the Canadian Publishers' Records database,¹¹ an archival listing of records relating to Canadian English-language book publishers, nor does it appear in the Canadian Book Trade Bibliography covering the years from 1935 to 1985.¹²

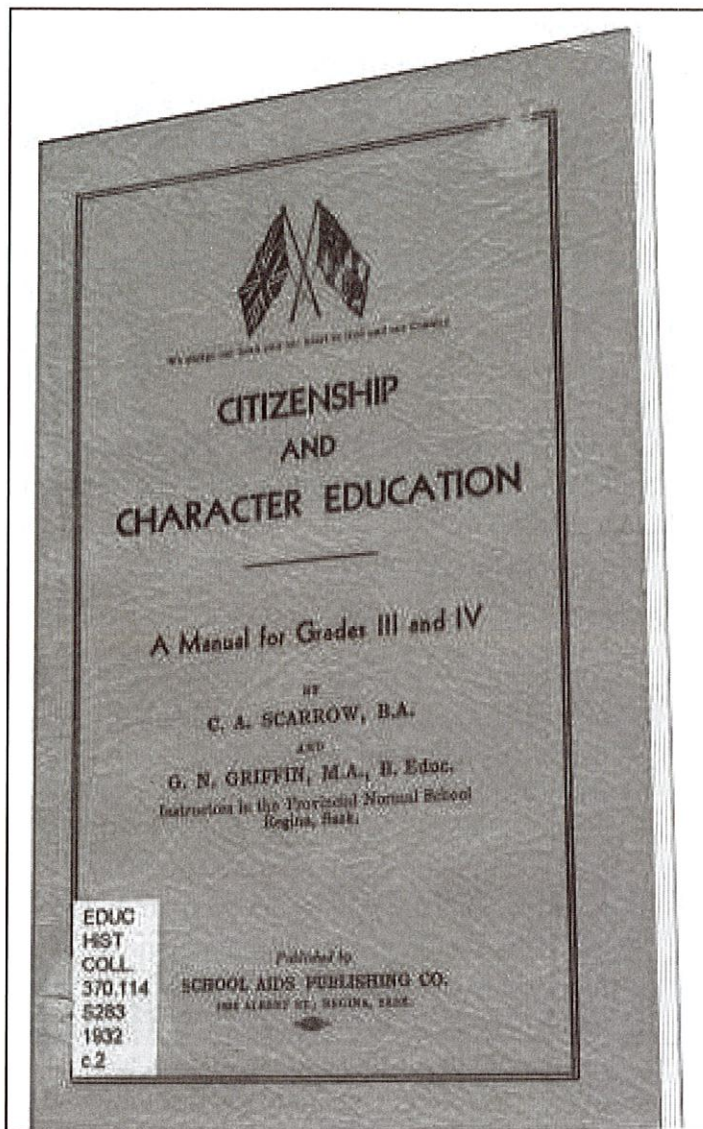
The Government of Saskatchewan's Corporations Branch's records are similarly sketchy, indicating that the School Aids and Text Book Publishing Company was incorporated in 1941 (after operating for 9 years as an unincorporated company) with a mandate to "acquire, print, bind, publish, buy, sell, circulate or otherwise deal with manuscripts, books, periodicals etc."¹³ Corporations Branch documents list John Levine Anderson as president of the company, and Robert Usher as secretary. J. L. Anderson was a bookbinder by trade. He was born in Minneapolis, Minn., came to Regina in 1906, and supervised the bindery department of Leader Publishing until the formation of Commercial Printers in 1929.¹⁴ Robert Usher was born in Liverpool, England and came to Regina in 1913. He began his career with Leader Publishing in 1921, joined Commercial Printers in 1929, and was active in the School Aids and Text Book Publishing Company from its inception. Robert Usher was actively involved with the education community in the province and served for many years on the Board of Directors for the Regina Collegiate Board.¹⁵ Anderson and Usher remained on the list of directors of the School Aids and Text Book Company until 1965.¹⁶

A retrospective profile on the School Aids Company published in the *Leader-Post* in 1950 provides a wealth of additional details. This article notes that the company's first publishing effort was in response to the Saskatchewan Department of Education's newly minted course on citizenship and character education:

School Aids and Text Book Publishing Co. was formed in 1932 and its first product was a little book to assist teachers and students in a new course. Since then, under the guiding hand of J. L. Anderson, president, the business has published books and booklets to cover everything from Vitalized English for pupils to Teacher's Daily Plan Book for instructors. About 25 of the 42-odd authors who compile and write the books live in Saskatchewan. They turn out not only straight helpful books for pupils and teachers but easy-to-read stories of Canadian folklore, adventure tales and fairy stories.¹⁷

The article goes on to note that the School Aids Company published about 100 titles annually including a monthly magazine for teachers, that the authors are paid royalties based on a percentage of sales revenue, and that the School Aids books were used in every province in Canada, including Newfoundland:

Since that first volume for Saskatchewan schools, business began to grow and spread. The Regina firm became known for its helpful books in city and little one-room country schools from one end of Canada to the other. Thousands of copies of books a year now go out to established buyers of school aids.¹⁸



Cover of *Citizenship and Character Education: A Manual for Grades III and IV*
(Author's Collection)

School Aids and the Department of Education

The School Aids firm commenced operations in 1932 under the Conservative government of J.T.M. Anderson, who also assumed the portfolio of Saskatchewan's Minister of Education from his election in 1929 until 1932.¹⁹ Archival files from the Department of Education included several letters on School Aids letterhead²⁰ promoting new publications and offering complimentary copies for the consideration of Department of Education officials:

Far-Away People is a book of very complete and very interestingly written geography stories for Grade IV. You will notice in the Preface that Dr. J. D. Denny, Superintendent of Schools in Regina, assisted Miss McVeety in the

preparation of her book. The features of *Far-Away People* to which we would particularly direct your attention are its completeness, its interesting style, its very helpful suggestions to teachers, and its excellent illustrations.²¹

The 1930s also saw the launch of the company's highly successful teachers' monthly *The Modern Instructor*. This periodical, billed as "the magazine for progressive teachers," was published by School Aids from 1932 to 1968. Each issue included articles on the latest teaching methods, short literature selections, units of study based on the Saskatchewan curriculum, and a popular *hctograph* section of reproducible seatwork, practice exercises and tests. Articles were authored by practicing teachers as well as educators from the Normal School and the University of Saskatchewan. Teachers were in short supply during the war years, and many began their careers after an accelerated six week Normal School course. One teacher interviewed by Saskatchewan students for a *SchoolNet* project noted that she would have been lost without a subscription to *The Modern Instructor*.²² A group of retired teachers I spoke with in southern Saskatchewan echoed this sentiment, with one teacher going so far as to refer to this publication as "her Bible."²³ *The Modern Instructor* also served as a convenient vehicle for marketing other School Aids publications directly to teachers in one-room schools throughout the province. The firm took full advantage of the popularity of this magazine, using it to promote other School Aids publications, as well as to advertise the school supplies, wall maps, duplicators, examination foolscap and ruled scribblers distributed by the parent company, Commercial Printers. Advertisements for textbooks and teacher aids published by School Aids figured prominently in each issue of *The Modern Instructor*; rural sales representatives deployed by Commercial Printers were more than happy to relay order forms back to the Regina office.

Following its successful beginnings in the thirties, the School Aids and Text Book Company was both well-established and well-positioned to respond, in 1944, to the newly elected CCF government's desire for innovative, "made in Saskatchewan" curriculum materials. School Aids' publishing heyday coincided neatly with the period in office of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation, with Woodrow S. Lloyd's tenure as Minister of Education and with Henry Janzen's term as Saskatchewan's Director of Curricula.

John Lyons, in a recently published history of education in Saskatchewan, describes Janzen's "collaborative and cooperative" approach to curriculum development as a "unique blend of central co-ordination, consultation, professional involvement, in-service education, and shrewd economics" which was in direct opposition to the traditional top-down model of curriculum development which left textbook selection in the hands of "hired experts from the university or normal school."²⁴ Janzen's interest in locally developed curriculum materials dovetailed nicely with the availability of a Regina firm with a proven track record in educational publishing.

Bookseller Jim Anderson described the relationship between the School Aids firm and the Saskatchewan Department of Education thus:

I got the impression from this Mr. Anderson, the retired printer [referring to Thomas Anderson, not J.L. Anderson, founder of School Aids] that the publishing effort was print and profit driven – in other words, his firm profited from the printing of text books prescribed by the Department of Education. I believe the publishing company was thus an arm or offshoot of the printing exercise – and they would employ leading school teachers and other educators to write their books, geared to curriculum needs or in some cases to the whims of the authors...²⁵

Penney Clark, in her paper "The Rise and Fall of Canadian textbook publishing", notes that educational publishing, until the early 1970s, benefited greatly from the critical role that the authorized textbook played in classroom instruction during that time period.²⁶ The School Aids and Text Books Publishing Company was no exception. Most School Aids publications were either adopted as textbooks or listed as recommended reference books for Saskatchewan schools; several titles appeared in the province's textbook circulars for periods of time up to and exceeding 20 years. The endorsement by the Department of Education translated into sizable print runs and guaranteed yearly profits for the School Aids and Text Book Publishing Company.

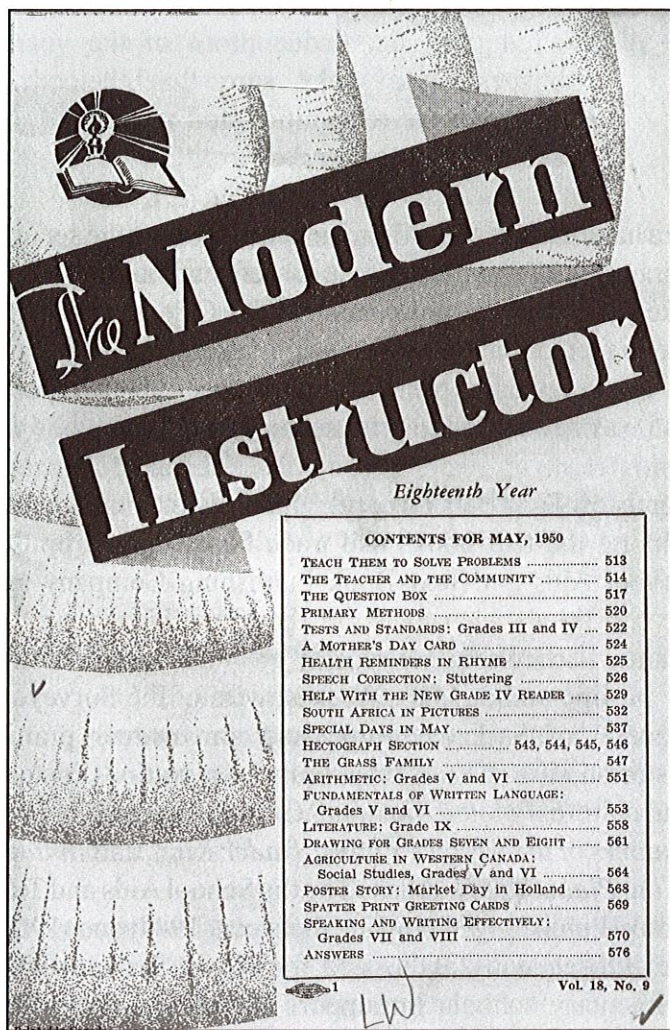
The individuals who submitted manuscripts to School Aids were not, for the most part, professional writers. Some were amateur historians and

archaeologists, but many were educators—classroom teachers, normal school instructors, school principals and superintendents. The list of authors who researched and wrote material for this publishing firm reads like a veritable who's who of Education in Saskatchewan – Frederick Gathercole, Marion McVeety, R. J. Staples, Elsie Dorsey, W. J. Oliver, and Morley Toombs, to name but a few. Both the authors and Robert Usher, co-director of the School Aids and Text Book Publishing Company, had very close connections with Saskatchewan's Department of Education. Gerald Langley, whose 1944 thesis²⁷ still serves as an authoritative guide to historical textbooks in Saskatchewan, described the textbook publishing scene in the province in the 1930s and 40s as a very close-knit community:

I was quite satisfied that there were connections between authors and publishers and government officials—that the Department of Education people knew the different authors and they knew which authors would produce good books. And the authors were anxious to work with the publishers who could get a book authorized...because unless the book was authorized, there wasn't much money in it for anyone! And so, the people in all those areas knew each other...It wouldn't be fair to say that they got it [referring to a contract to write or publish a textbook] because of political affiliations, no, but because they were known.²⁸

Under Henry Janzen, the Department of Education continued to play an active and significant role in vetting and even editing textbooks published by School Aids. It was not uncommon for authors to receive assurance from the Department of Education that their books would find a place on the authorized and recommended text books lists before approaching the publisher. In a letter to Mary Weekes dated December 3, 1948, Janzen assumes an editorial role:

I have read with great interest the manuscript on "The Indians of the Plains." For only one chapter do I have some comments to make. In the section on Trading Posts could you not include



Cover and last page of the *The Modern Instructor*, Volume 18 no. 9 (May 1950)
(Author's Collection)

a number of the ones which played a prominent part in the opening up of the West. A little story of their location and their importance in the early days would be of great interest to all students [...] If we can get this story out in an inexpensive binding you can be assured that the Department will be interested in listing it as a reference and in buying a considerable quantity.²⁹

Janzen's hands-on approach is further demonstrated in a 1946 letter in which he notes that he has received a revised edition of one of Weekes' books and writes that:

Mr. Anderson of Commercial Printers brought me a manuscript copy of the revision of *Round The Council Fires*. I think it is a tremendous improvement, for our province at least, of the whole

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book. There are still a few words here and there which I am suggesting changing because of the difficulty of vocabulary for grades seven, eight, and nine students...I am particularly pleased with the sections on the beadwork of the Prairie Indians and also the story about the painted tipis.³⁰

In another letter he writes:

Regarding the matter of having the School Aids people in Regina undertake the publishing of *Trader Welsh* and *Trader King*, I can only repeat what I have told you before, that I shall not hesitate at all in placing these books on the list of supplementary reading for the boys and girls in grades VII, VIII, and IX. This is far as I can go. I certainly

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*Inside cover of the Catalogue of School Books 1943-1944
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(Author's Collection)

believe that the books would have a good circulation. The number of copies that we would buy would naturally depend upon the demand from the schools. We would put every effort into advertising them as useful and interesting reading for the students.³¹

He goes on to state that listing the books as supplementary readers would mean that the department would order around 500 books “to start with” and continues, “If you and Mr. Anderson feel that with this encouragement you wish to take the risk of getting this book published I would say that you should go ahead.” Despite a close working relationship with the School Aids publishing firm, Janzen demonstrated that he has no great regard for commercial publishing houses when he wrote:

When we get our own printing

establishment under way we can avoid the red tape, the undue profit of the publishers, and make sure that the authors get the recognition and reward which they richly deserve.³²

In a handwritten addendum Janzen adds that “the second paragraph of this letter is quite personal, and I should like you to keep it confidential.”³³ The CCF government, did in fact, purchase its own printing plant in 1945,³⁴ but to my knowledge printed chiefly government reports and was never used to print school textbooks.

Focus on First Nations and Métis history

Among the text books and trade books issued by the School Aids and Text Book Publishing Company are several titles which focus on aboriginal history on the plains. Particularly noteworthy are four books written by prolific author Mary Weekes, wife of the Surveyor-General of Saskatchewan,³⁵ and an amateur prairie historian with a keen interest in First Nations history and culture. *Painted Arrows*,³⁶ *Great Chiefs and Mighty Hunters of the Western Plains*, *Trader King*, and *Indians of the Plains* were published by the School Aids and Text Book Publishing Company between 1947 and 1950, and subsequently authorized for use in Saskatchewan elementary schools in support of the Social Studies curriculum.³⁷ *Indians of the Plains*, a small seventy-five page booklet was notable in many respects. At a time when Aboriginal peoples were often portrayed generically and homogenously, Weekes emphasized the complexity of the various nations of Plains Indians. In a period when Canadian history textbooks often jumped from Iroquois tomahawks in eastern Canada to totem poles in British Columbia with only a passing nod to Western Canada, Weekes' little book provided school children with information on the Cree, Sioux and Blackfoot nations in the West:

Our concern in this book is to learn about the tribes who live in Western Canada—that is in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia. We wish chiefly to learn, however, about those who live on the prairies. The British Columbia tribes have their own culture, customs and legends, and they differ vastly from those of the prairie people.³⁸

Richard Spafford recalls selling numerous copies of *Indians of the Plains* from his Regina bookshop many years after this book was first published by the School Aids company. According to Spafford:

It was the only description of the Indians of Saskatchewan—the various tribes and the languages that they spoke, their customs and what they wore and so on...It was the only thing of its kind for a long time and still is.³⁹

While other history textbooks glossed over the impact of Canada's settlement policies on the original inhabitants of the land, *Indians of the Plains* was bluntly critical:

The Crees have from the earliest times been generally friendly with the French and English who invaded their country, first to trade goods of little value for their priceless furs, and later when the Canadian government took over their vast lands.⁴⁰

Great Chiefs and Mighty Hunters of the Western Plains, also written by Mary Weekes and published by School Aids, was a recommended reference book for Saskatchewan schools from 1947 to 1977. The Publisher's foreword in the 1947 edition notes:

The early settling of the West comes alive again in these stories about the Indian statesmen who tried to keep the peace with their neighbors, the white settlers. The writer's clarity and justice enlightens the development of these Indian personalities, which are supplemented with an account of the Western Indian treaties, prairie handicrafts, and legends.⁴¹

In a letter to Weekes dated September 7, 1946 and written on Department of Education letterhead, Henry Janzen writes:

I have read with great interest the material you sent to me on the Indian Peace Treaties. It is information which all our western school children should know. We understand far too little of the

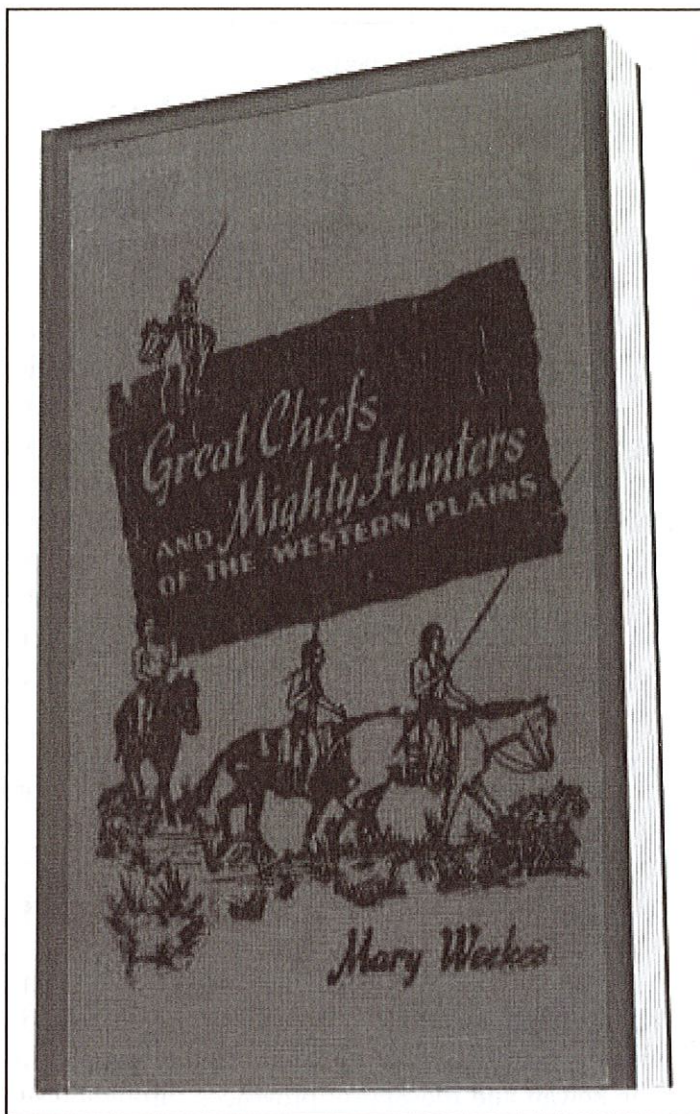
manner in which the territory west of the Great Lakes was taken over by the white man. Your explanations are direct and interesting and are stated simply enough for a boy or girl in grade IX to absorb without difficulty.⁴²

While the Weekes' books published by School Aids and recommended for use in Saskatchewan schools arguably present a sympathetic and for the most part, well-researched view of aboriginal history largely absent in schoolbooks of this era, other School Aids publications do not fare as well—many present a biased and patronizing view of First Nations and Métis history and life. *Friends far and near*⁴³ published by School Aids in 1953 and recommended for use in the Grades 3-4 Social Studies classroom was given an "objectionable" rating for its portrayal of pre-colonial native culture in a study of prejudice in social studies textbooks authored by the Saskatchewan Human Rights Commission.⁴⁴ As evidence, the authors of the report cite such passages as "people are not native to America, but horses and other animals are,"⁴⁵ and "the Eskimos enjoy being out in the cold, even when the temperatures slip far below zero."⁴⁶

The School Aids and Text Book Publishing Company continued to evidence a strong interest in publishing materials relating to aboriginal peoples of Saskatchewan and the prairie provinces throughout its existence in the Albert Street location. Other School Aids publications with significant aboriginal content include *Indians of Canada and Prairie Pioneers*,⁴⁷ *These are the Prairies*⁴⁸, *Stone Age on the Prairies*,⁴⁹ and *Hunters of the Buried Years*.⁵⁰ In 1963, in the waning years of the School Aids and Text Book Publishing Company, the firm published a set of Language Arts Wall Charts⁵¹ for use in northern Saskatchewan. The paintings were done by Lois Dalby, an artist and educator who has lived in the La Ronge area of Northern Saskatchewan since 1955. A 1966 article from the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation Bulletin congratulated the School Aids company on this publishing milestone, noting that "for the first time in the history of the province, special instructional materials have been published for use with pupils of Indian Ancestry."⁵²

Local Content

"A Saskatchewan citizen buys good valued at \$2.80, all subject to education tax. Find the tax."



Cover of *Great Chiefs and Mighty Hunters of the Western Plains: Stories of Daring and Resourceful Leadership of the Indian Chiefs and Scouts During the Early Settlement of the Western Prairies*
(Author's Collection)

“A farmer ships 1,800 bushels of wheat. The dockage is 1.5%. Freight charges are 12 cents a bushel, and elevator charges are 2.5 cents per bushel. The wheat was sold at Fort William for \$1.08 per bushel. What proceeds did the farmers receive?”

These mathematics word problems, from *Socialized Mathematics*,⁵³ illustrate another distinctive characteristic of many School Aids textbooks – a focus on local and regional content. Local flavour is present in many of the Social Studies, Science, English, Art, and Mathematics resources published by School Aids in the 30s, 40s and 50s. Examples abound—a series of science books for the elementary school includes numerous references to prairie flora and fauna;⁵⁴ a composition and grammar textbook incorporates writing samples of letters from imaginary children with addresses

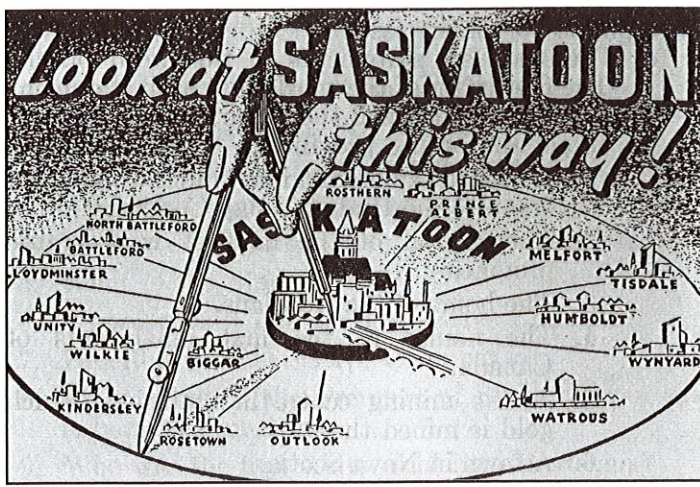
in Regina, Leader, and Weyburn, Saskatchewan;⁵⁵ a teachers' reference book for Art includes photographs of children from various Saskatchewan schools as well as examples of artwork by students from schools in the Moose Jaw area;⁵⁶ a Social Studies textbook on Canadian geography and history includes a chapter on pioneer settlements in Western Canada.⁵⁷ *The Lure of the West*,⁵⁸ a School Aids publication authorized as a Social Studies reference book from 1947 to 1962, includes chapters on the development of new varieties of wheat in Saskatchewan, as well as brief histories of the “Queen City” and the “University City.” In an era where most Canadian textbooks were published in Eastern Canada or the United States,⁵⁹ School Aids publications afforded Saskatchewan children the rare opportunity to find themselves, their history and their physical surroundings reflected in the curriculum.

The French Connection

The School Aids and Text Book Company undertook the initiative, unusual for such a small company, of publishing French language translations of a few of their popular Social Studies and Science titles. A translation of *Far Away People* by Marion McVeety was the work of Louis Charbonneau, a prominent Ontario translator of school text books in the 40s.⁶⁰ *Peuples Lointains* was recommended by the Saskatchewan Department of Education as a supplementary source for Social Studies in French schools and as supplementary reading for French classes in collegiates, high schools and colleges.⁶¹ This School Aids publication also became the first French language Social Studies textbook to be used in the 40s in francophone elementary schools in Ontario.⁶²

Socialist intimations

The School Aids and Text Book Company came into its own during the early years of the CCF government in Saskatchewan. Thus it is not surprising that signs of the prevailing zeitgeist appear in many School Aids publications. The most intriguing hint, brought to my attention by Richard Spafford,⁶³ comes in the form of the dedication page of a children's picture book, “we are teaching our children to listen to the voices that call for peace.” The quotation from V.M. Molotov, Soviet leader and People's Commissar for Foreign affairs from 1939 to 1949, appears at the beginning of *The tremendous adventure of the Peace Fairy*,⁶⁴ published by School Aids in 1945, the same year Molotov addressed delegates at the San Francisco Peace conference. The



A picture from the textbook *The Lure of the West*
(Author's Collection)

book itself is fairly benign – a colorfully illustrated tale told in Dr. Seuss style rhyme in which the Peace Fairy, after witnessing much strife and conflict, convinces the animals of the forest to live together in friendship and harmony. *The Peace Fairy* was an authorized literature selection for the Junior Grades English classroom in Saskatchewan from 1946-1950.

Other suggestions of socialist influences can be seen in passages from several School Aids' textbooks extolling the benefits to society of cooperative organizations. In *The Lure of the West*, W. Lewis presents a practical case for cooperation:

Our provincial government likes to see farmers organize co-operatives and does everything that it can to encourage a healthy growth of these organizations. Saskatchewan is the leading co-operative province in the Dominion. I wonder why this should be? We are a long way from markets here and our farmers must do everything that they can to keep the cost of farming as low as possible. The farmer has learned, too, that many people working together are much stronger and can do much more than the person who goes his own way alone.⁶⁵

The Decline of the School Aids and Text Book Publishing Company

The vast majority of School Aids books were published between 1932 and 1950, although the company continued to print and distribute its textbooks and trade

books for the next two decades. Several factors may have contributed to the demise of this once vigorous and successful company. These include a change in government in 1964, Henry Janzen's retirement in 1967 as Director of Curricula, Robert Usher's departure from Commercial Printers, and the adoption by the Department of Education of new textbooks published by established educational publishers from eastern Canada such as Gage, Thomas Nelson, Prentice-Hall, McGraw-Hill, and Macmillan. The School Aids and Text Book Publishing Company was struck from the register of corporations in Saskatchewan on September 29, 1978.⁶⁶ Commercial Printers continued to operate as a job printing plant in the province, finally closing its doors in 1994.⁶⁷ The building was unoccupied from the mid-nineties onward and was eventually sold in August of 2003. The structure was demolished in the spring of 2005.⁶⁸

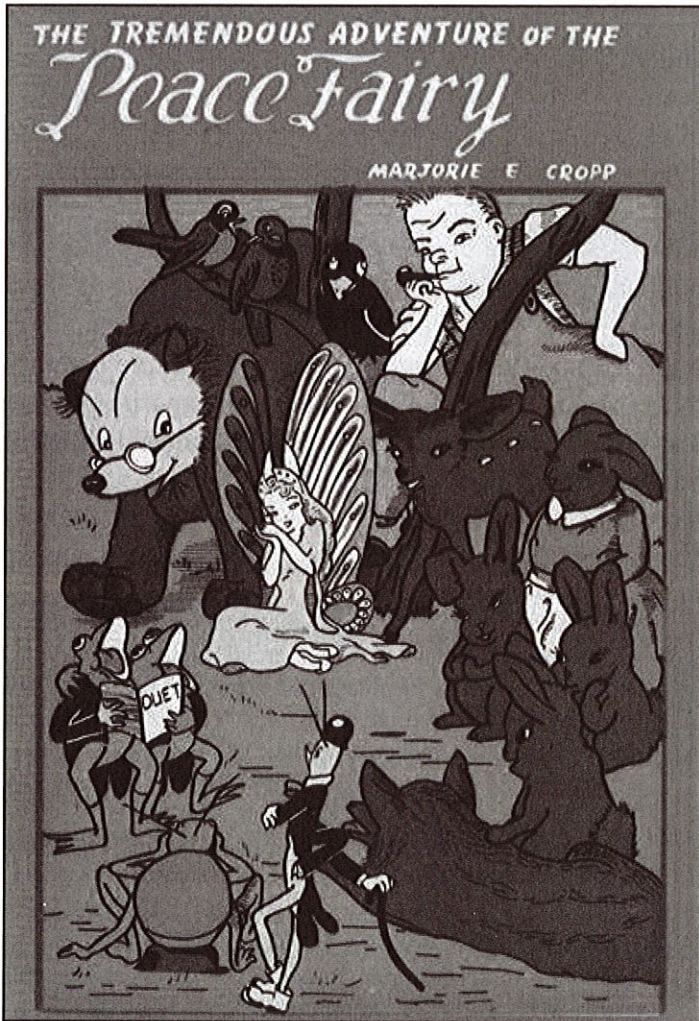
Conclusion

The School Aids and Text Book Company was an astute and enterprising firm which profited in the Depression years from its rural connections and from the success of its parent company, Commercial Printers, and in the 1940s and later from its close ties with the Saskatchewan Department of Education, and from the movement in Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba towards textbooks published in Western Canada. The School Aids story chronicles a particular confluence of economic, political, and pedagogical factors which came together to create an environment and an era of experimentation and innovation in grassroots educational publishing in Saskatchewan.

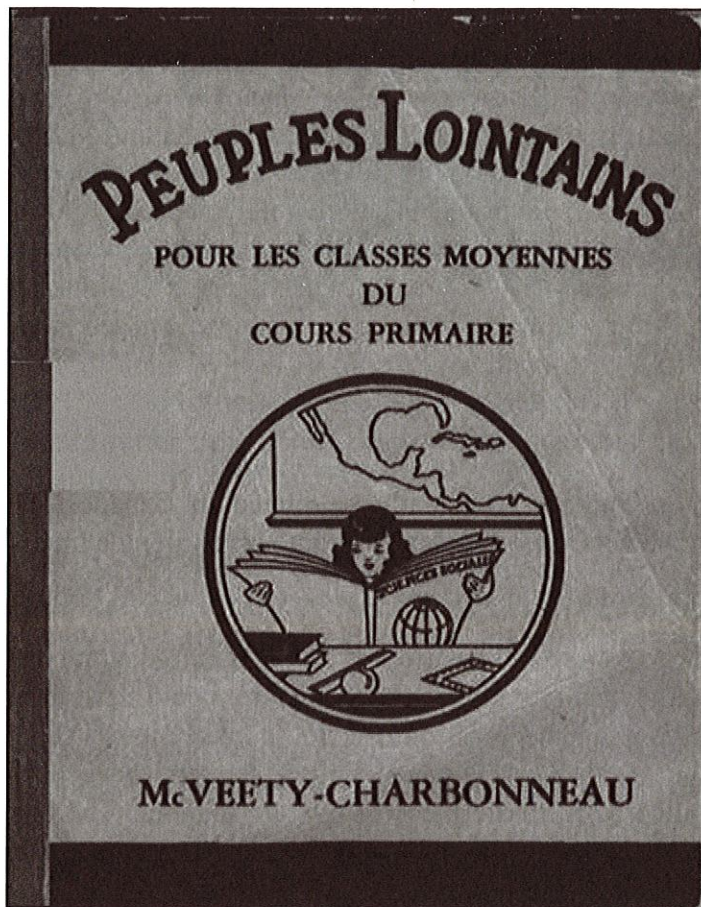
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Cover of *The Tremendous Adventure of the Peace Fairy*
(Author's Collection)



Cover of *Peuples lointains* : livre de lecture pour le Cours de sciences sociales des classes moyennes du cours primaire
(Author's Collection)

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People and Places

Saskatchewan (1954): Alias Alberta

by Ron Smith

Saskatchewan, Alberta and Manitoba comprise the three prairie provinces of Western Canada. Alberta, the western-most province of the three, is bordered on the west by the majestic Rocky Mountains, and to the east by the sweeping grasslands of Saskatchewan. Manitoba, to the east of Saskatchewan, is a mixture of prairie, lakes and woodlands. These three provinces not only have a varied geographical landscape, they also have evolved political and social cultures distinct from each other. Saskatchewan's political formation is rooted in the collectivism of the "Social Gospelites" of the early 1940s, an ideology that would become the foundation of Canada's left-leaning New Democratic Party. Alberta travelled a much different political path, brought about, in part, by the American migration to the region at the turn of the 20th century. A strong dose of American Republicanism and individualism has pervaded the Alberta political experience, influenced by transplanted American populists such as Henry Wisewood. Most Canadians would have little difficulty distinguishing between these two provinces based on their geography and politics.

Americans, particularly Hollywood filmmakers, have not been so discriminating in this area. Part of the reason seems to be that they have been loath to incorporate any careful historical and geographical research into their stories about the region. Raoul Walsh and Aaron Rosenberg collaborated on the Mountie fantasy, *Saskatchewan*, made in 1954, which according to Pierre Berton became a national geographical and historical joke.¹ Here was a film called *Saskatchewan*, set and filmed in Alberta with the rugged Rocky Mountains as a backdrop. In the space of two years North-West Mounted Police sagas had moved from the rock monuments of Arizona (*Pony Soldier* was filmed there in early 1952) to the rock formations of Alberta, a production decision that was to enable a story about

the Mounties to actually be filmed in Canada. The producers, unfortunately, forgot to bring along a map!

Mistaken Images in Serge

Saskatchewan, because of the blatant geographical gaffes that were made in the picture, could have been used as a benchmark on how not to make movies about the North-West Mounted Police. It could have been billed as a "masterpiece of misinformation." The out-of-place locale, the questionable police uniforms, and a stereotypical portrayal of the Sioux as blood curdling redskins rather than as Native Americans seeking refuge and protection in Canada, make Walsh's film easy prey for cultural historians. American filmmakers rarely understood fully the cultural and historical contexts surrounding these films. Film historians such as Mark Carnes (1995), Robert Rosenstone (1995), and Jill Lepore (2000) have pointed out that a film's careful replication of the material culture of a particular era (including its characters being dressed for the occasion) does not guarantee that the story conforms even vaguely to the historical period. Cecil B. DeMille, for example, reproduced the material history of the Mounties in his epic costume drama *Northwest Mounted Police* (1940) but left audiences with little cultural and political knowledge about the Northwest Rebellion.

Saskatchewan fared even worse. The material culture is out of place—Mountie stetsons instead of pillbox hats, American style covered wagons, and the inclusion of the proverbial American cowboy or sheriff to Americanize the story. The fact that the picture was

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shot in Alberta did not faze the producer either. Aaron Rosenberg was smitten with the name Saskatchewan and believed it would make a catchy title for a picture about the Mounties.² Such intuitive notions, however, could not compensate for the lack of historical information about Canada. Although Walsh was in the twilight of a respected filmmaking career, *Saskatchewan* would serve to diminish some of that reputation. Walsh's association with the movies began as an actor when he played the role of John Wilkes Booth in *The Birth of a Nation* (1915).³ Both films, as cultural historians have noted, would suffer from a rather questionable representation of history.

Real versus Reel History

Robert Rosenstone has suggested that "to be considered 'historical' rather than simply a costume drama that uses the past as an exotic setting for romance and adventure, a film must engage, directly or obliquely, the issues, ideas, data and arguments of the ongoing discourse of history."⁴ Rosenstone adds to this notion by stating that "any 'historical film', like any work of written, graphic, or oral history, enters a body of pre-existing knowledge and debate."⁵ Most classical Hollywood films about the NWMP failed this test. They were costume dramas through and through. The Mounties wear red tunics, the trappers wear plaid and speak with French-Canadian accents, and the Natives look like your standard "cigar store Indians." *Saskatchewan* passes the "costume drama test" extremely well, but as an historical film, one that was passed off to the cinema-going public with a "true story claim," it fails to address Robert Rosenstone's concerns. Rosenstone adds that, "Like the book, the historical film cannot exist in a state of historical innocence [...] Like any work in history, a film must be judged in terms of the knowledge of the past that we already possess."⁶ Walsh and Rosenberg tend to ignore completely, for example, the issues, events and dates concerning the Sioux's flight into Canada in order to escape U.S. Army General William Sherman's policy of purging "Native American hostiles." Agents of the United States government's Indian Bureau had accused Sherman of embarking on a war of extermination against the Indians.⁷

Rosenberg's tendency to develop a "good guys versus the Indians" mentality in the story leads to a much more important question, what type of historical research, if any, was used to construct the story for the film? Documenting history, whether in film or in print form, can be extremely hard work,

with countless hours spent in the field or in dim archives, the results served up as footnote-encrusted books.⁸ It is questionable whether researchers for this Mountie story ventured anywhere near a Canadian historical archive or library. Not only was it difficult for them to understand the culture of the Canadian West, they failed to grasp the reasons why the Sioux had ventured North into Canada. The *Saskatchewan* producers seemed to be more enthralled with the visual epic they were making than with a recounting of an important period of Western Canadian history.

Hollywood Mounties

Saskatchewan began to take shape in 1952 at Universal Studios. Credit for the story would go to professional screenwriter Gil Doud. A Universal Story Department Treatment report dated April 4 provided background on the proposed film. It would be classified as a Western, and the locale and period would be Canada in 1879. What is interesting about the *Saskatchewan* story, however, is that Alan Ladd, the film's star, was responsible for putting together the first rough draft of the picture. According to Universal publicist Harry Niemeyer, "it was a two-page synopsis of a story concerning the early days of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. Like many another script it had lain dormant in a desk drawer in Ladd's home for the past seven years."⁹

A review of the Producers Picture Assignment Meetings¹⁰ that began in April 1952 provides a framework for the film's evolution. Meeting notes for April 30 indicated that 66 pages of script had been completed and that producer Aaron Rosenberg would be leaving on a scouting trip in Canada within the next two months to select location sites and contact RCMP officials. On May 21 it was reported that a first draft continuity would be completed within a week, and Rosenberg estimated that a 112-page script would be submitted to Gregory Peck for his consideration. The film, it was noted, was planned to be shot entirely out of the United States in Canada. June 16 meeting notes confirmed that Peck was still being considered, but by July 16 Burt Lancaster and Shelley Winters had been added to the probable casting mix. The film title being suggested was "Sas-katch-uan." On September 8, Rosenberg announced that the film would be shot in August of 1953. It was also noted at the meeting that Tyrone Power had expressed an interest in the role (perhaps wanting to redeem his reputation after *Pony Soldier*). He would be thankful that the role would eventually go to Alan Ladd. At the September 30 meeting, casting for the film was again discussed with

THE SAGA OF THE SASKATCHEWA



Universal-International presents

ALAN LADD · SHELLEY WINTER

IN

COLOR BY
Technicolor "SASKATCHEWA"

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CONQUEST OF THE CHEWAN TERRITORY!

...where the Royal Northwest Mounted Police stood alone against the fury of the Custer-massacring Sioux and the savage Cree Nation!

ACTUALLY FILMED IN ITS ENTIRETY IN THE MAJESTIC GRANDEUR OF CANADIAN ROCKIES!



RS
AN"

with **ROBERT DOUGLAS · J. CARROL NAISH · HUGH O'BRIAN · RICHARD LONG**
Directed by **RAOUL WALSH** · Story and Screenplay by **GIL DOUD** · Produced by **AARON ROSENBERG** **A**



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5A/142

Promotional Poster for Saskatchewan
(Saskatchewan Showman's Manual, Box 533/18363. University of Southern California Television Library)

Robert Mitchum's name being considered for the male lead. Rosenberg reported at the October 27 meeting that he had met with Inspector O'Neil of the RCMP and that O'Neil's minor objections in the present script could easily be corrected and complied with. O'Neil's concerns were not specified in the meeting notes, but if RCMP objections to issues relating to the Mounted Police's cinematic reputation were to be consistent, one of the requirements could have been "no singing!" If *Saskatchewan* needed any symbolic connection to earlier stories about the Mounted Police, Rosenberg and Walsh got it at the October 27 meeting when it was noted that Gary Cooper was to be considered for the starring role (shades of *Northwest Mounted Police*—except this time Cooper had Canadian citizenship!). Casting suggestions for the film had picked up more steam by the November 10 meeting when Glenn Ford (he would have been a good choice as he was born in Canada), John Wayne, and Burt Lancaster were added to the list of stars being considered for the role of Sergeant O'Rourke. By December 15, Ladd's name had moved to the front of the list. The mid-August 1953 production start had also been decided. Finally, in early 1953, the film appeared ready to go forward. By January 21, Ladd had been confirmed for the lead role, and on February 17 it was noted that Ladd would arrive in Banff, Alberta, on August 6 with shooting to commence on August 15. On March 4 it was confirmed that the first draft screenplay had been submitted to director Raoul Walsh for reading. Canadian geography would never be the same!

Geography, however, was an important factor in the making of *Saskatchewan*, not that the Alberta shooting locale resembled in any way the sweeping grasslands of Saskatchewan. The film was shot in Banff National Park, and if the publicity for the film magazines was any indication, the film production crew and actors were enjoying a holiday as much as they were working on a movie. Much of the film's promotion materials would be devoted to publicity stills showing the cast posing in front of mountains and waterfalls. The film's shooting locations included the Banff Springs Hotel golf course and Bow Lake, both set against the spectacular backdrop of the Rocky Mountains. Perhaps the soundtrack for the film could have included "On A Clear Day You Can See Forever" because it would have taken forever for anyone to see Saskatchewan from Banff, a distance of about 300 miles from the Saskatchewan border. But that did not deter the producers of *Saskatchewan*, who sensed that in shooting the film in Alberta's mountains they had

uncovered a new cinematic "El Dorado." In a Universal File Copy dated September 25, 1953, Harry Niemeyer observed, "The accent is on Canada, and it sounds like a very strong Hollywood accent. The land of dream merchants has awoken and made a startling discovery. It has found the scenic beauty of Canada."¹¹ The film's producer, Aaron Rosenberg, noted that "This is virgin territory and also the most suitable for the wide-screen processes. In the United States we have literally used up every choice background location and people are tired of seeing the same terrain and mountains in each outdoor picture. Canada offers us a new territory and new dimensions in outdoor pictures."¹² Raoul Walsh echoed Rosenberg when pointing to the snow-capped peaks in the West, stated "that's why."¹³ Walsh noted that "We need new location scenery that stretches...I think Canada will be the last frontier for the wide-screen backgrounds; but it is my guess that it will take a whopping long time to use it all up."¹⁴ Had they spent more time studying Canadian history and less time admiring the scenery, they might have presented a more historically accurate picture.

The premise for *Saskatchewan* was connected to the Sioux presence in Canada following the defeat of General George Armstrong Custer. The Sioux were anything but war-like during their stay in Canada, yet in *Saskatchewan* Raoul Walsh must have felt he was making a northern version of *They Died With Their Boots On* (1942). The Press Book (not dated) for *Saskatchewan* mentions "the story ... is built around the exploits of the Royal Canadian Northwest Mounted Police and their fight to keep the Sioux Indians, who crossed into Canada after the Custer massacre, from joining the Canadian Crees and overrunning the Dominion."¹⁵ Of course, this is just pure historical whimsy. Coupled with this notion was the romanticised perception by the America producers that a small detachment of Mounted Police were keeping thousands of rampaging Sioux at bay. This "based on a true story" maxim was being fuelled by NWMP Major James Walsh's relationship with Sitting Bull and the Sioux. In *The Canadians* (1961) and *Pony Soldier*, the James Walsh connection can be traced to the single handedness by which Tyrone Power and Robert Ryan deal respectively with the Cree and the Sioux (a single constable in the case of *Pony Soldier* and the three-man party in *The Canadians*). In *Saskatchewan* the Walsh composite is not quite so clear. Alan Ladd has a close relationship with a Cree tribesman played by Jay Silverheels, but it is as blood brother and sidekick, rather than one characterized by the

deferential and respect for authority relationship that are witnessed in the other films. Ladd's O'Rourke character, while exhibiting traits of courage, understanding and tolerance, qualities that personified the Force, displayed one questionable flaw: disrespect for authority. At a key point in the story he disobeys his commanding officer. In stories about the Mounted Police, it is "respect for authority" that symbolizes the relationship between Mounted Policeman and Indian.

The fact that this was an American Western gone north could be measured by the type of correspondence and publicity promoting the film. Sam Israel's understanding of Canadian history can be gauged by a March 4, 1953, publicity memo that mentions that the story is about "Mounties who defeat an attempted invasion of Canada by the Sioux Indians after their victory over Gen. Custer."¹⁶ The Mounted Police might have negotiated with or instructed the Sioux, but there was never any confrontation that resulted in their defeat. Universal's publicity sheets also seemed to be promoting the film in a rather stereotypical and classical Western context. Niemeyer, in a September 24 publicity release, states "Universal-International filmed the entire picture in the Banff region of Alberta, and hired local redskins not so much for the euphony of their names as for their refreshing attitude towards movie work."¹⁷ Niemeyer, it seems, would have made an excellent press agent for Custer and Sheridan.

True Story Claims

The "based on a true story" litany that was an integral component of the Mounted Police films became a sort of mythical glue that held the story of these pictures together. The historical images of two or three red-coated constables talking peace to troubled Natives seemed to be the historical reference point that the producers and directors needed for inspiration. These producers and writers were not making just another Western, they were retelling real history, and *Saskatchewan* would be a refreshingly honest approach. In fact, the makers of *Saskatchewan* felt they were on the verge of making what constituted an historical epic about the Mounted Police—and they would use *Rose Marie* as a questionable contrast to their efforts. David Weiss, a Universal researcher noted:

If you want to be arrested in Canada, the quickest way would be to tell a member of the Mounted Police that you were the one who dreamed up that popular

Hollywood conception of the Canadian Mountie—you know, a handsome guy in a scarlet coat who has nothing better to do than go galloping through the Rockies bellowing songs a la Nelson Eddy.¹⁸

Weiss then added, "Until now—that is. Because opening...at the...theatre is the one motion picture that does justice to The Royal Canadian Mounted Police."¹⁹ *Saskatchewan* would be that exception, a perspective that is clearly pointed out in a January 11, 1954, memo from Phillip Gerard to Sam Israel concerning publicity for the film. Gerard (who worked out of Universal's New York Publicity Office) mentioned: "As part of our advance publicity and promotional planning on *Saskatchewan*, we had our researcher for the film, David Weiss, do a column on The Royal Canadian Mounted Police."²⁰ It might be that Weiss's brief research piece is the closest thing to creditable research that was done on the film, and it is, for the most part, anecdotal. Weiss goes on to spin an interesting review of the Mounties that is a blend of fact, fiction, and exaggeration. He began by saying "Universal-International's new Technicolor production...is a true epic of the great Canadian Northwest, accurately drawn and dramatically painted."²¹ The belief that this is a true story is reinforced by Weiss's observation that the story depicts "a thin band of valiant red-coated men who policed the vast and turbulent frontier and won the Northwest for Canada."²²

Canada's westward movement was certainly not a tale of "How the West Was Won." Except for the whiskey trade at Fort Whoop-Up and the Cypress Hills massacre, the settlement of Western Canada was relatively peaceful, with whites being generally more troublesome than the indigenous tribes. Yet Weiss appears to be using the image of the more violent American frontier experience as the historical benchmark for Canada. *Saskatchewan* appeared to lack the type of preliminary historical research that DeMille conducted for *Northwest Mounted Police* (not that DeMille followed it to any great degree). But it is the image of a few red-coated policemen on the so-called frontier that had captured the attention of Universal's research and publicity people. Weiss recounts a story about a U.S. Army Colonel who is surprised at what the Mounties could accomplish with so few. The U.S. Cavalry was to turn over 450 Canadian Indians who had ventured south of the boundary line during the Cree rebellion days of the 1880s. According to Weiss: "Arriving at



From left to right, Alan Ladd, J. Carrol Naish and Shelley Winters in a scene from *Saskatchewan*
(Author's Collection)

the international boundary...a whole U.S. column of Cavalry as an escort—the colonel was amazed to find on the other side only three Mounties.”²³ Weiss also included an implied historical reference to Major James Walsh stating: “The only non-Indian to spend a night in the camp of Sitting Bull was a Canadian Mountie. The Sioux Chief distrusted all other white men.”²⁴ According to Weiss, when you added the red tunics, the image was complete: “When the Mounties...don their full-dress uniform...they put a value on them as no other military organization with the possible exception of the U.S. Marines.”²⁵

These symbolic and historical anecdotes of the Mounted Police came to represent, from a Hollywood perspective, accurate accounts of Canadian history, enough in the eyes of filmmakers and publicists, to legitimize the “based on a true story” notions associated

with the Mountie films. Coupled with these seemingly threadbare vignettes of Canada and the Mounties was the American romance with westward expansion. *The Showman's Manual*²⁶ for *Saskatchewan* illustrated a sort of split personality that was associated with these Mountie Westerns—a wild untamed frontier that needed taming versus a small troop of mounted officers who would provide peace and stability in Canada's West. Posters from *The Showman's Manual* promoting the film declared: “The reckless war was on! [What war?] The hostile nations of Cree and Sioux mass for attack! Against them—outweighed in all but courage—rides a thin line of redcoats, the Mounties...Guardians of Canada's savage empire.”²⁷ Revisionist accounts of the westward movement in America by historians such as Patricia Limerick and Richard White were still decades away, and Hollywood's notions of the frontier were still rooted within a “conquest and forged a nation” mode. It is not surprising, therefore, that Universal promotions for the film featured such classic advertising previews as “where the Royal Northwest Mounted Police stood alone against the fury of the Custer-massacring Sioux and the savage Cree Nation.”²⁸ What passed for historical research for *Saskatchewan*, it appeared, was watching old Westerns. Lucretia Grindle in *Pride and Prejudice* (1999), contrasts Universal's depiction of the Sioux menace, stating:

Sitting Bull told Walsh that they had been driven from their country and were tied of war. [...] All his life Sitting Bull had watched while his people were lied to, cheated and killed by white men, and his trust was deep-seated. Now he meet a man who seemed to sympathize with him. [...] The two men began spending more time together. While Walsh manned a police post at Wood Mountain, he was often seen in the Sioux villages, where the population now reached almost 3,000. The Major and Sitting Bull often rode out across what is now Grasslands National Park.²⁹

Historians such as Robert Utley in *The Lance*

and the Shield: The Life and Times of Sitting Bull (1993) and Ian Anderson in *Sitting Bull's Boss: Above the Medicine Line with James Morrow Walsh* (2000) have also commented on the respectful and peaceful demeanour of the American Sioux during their stay in Canada. *Saskatchewan*, however, provided more glimpses of shooting, killing and scalping than all of the other Mountie films combined. In the end it is a joint band of Mounties and Cree that save the day for Canada, driving the war-like Sioux back to the United States. Quite likely, the only element of historical truth uttered in this film was by J. Carroll Naish (the Mountie guide), who mentions to Hugh O'Brien (the American Sheriff): "We treat our Indians with respect." It is not surprising that *Saskatchewan* developed such a questionable cinematic reputation. When Mounted Police officials got wind of another Mountie film, they probably feared a remake of *Saskatchewan*.

Promoting the Film

Saskatchewan was one of Universal's top grossing films of 1954 according to many of the film magazines. Magazines such as *Screen Stories* and *MovieLand* promoted the film as a great outdoor adventure shot in Canada's pristine wilderness. The film's location might have been a magazine writer's dream comes true, but from an historian's perspective, *Saskatchewan* was on shaky ground. A 1954 publicity review of the film kept spilling out the same historical twaddle: "The historic campaign by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police to prevent the American Sioux and the Canadian Cree Indian Nations from over-running the Dominion"³⁰ was a gross misrepresentation of Canadian history. Universal's "based on a true story" maxim finally bottomed out with this historical smear: "Two of the most colourful names in American Indian warfare, Chiefs Crazy Horse [he had been arrested in the United States and never made it to Canada] and Sitting Bull figure in one of the most dramatic incidents in the history of the Canadian Northwest...*Saskatchewan* tells the story of the invasion of Canada by the Sioux under Crazy Horse and Sitting Bull, following their massacre of Custer at Little Big Horn."³¹ The historical truth is simply that the Sioux were seeking refuge in Canada from the American Government. Robert Utley, (1993) in his book *The Lance and Shield*, tells of the respect and honesty shown toward the Sioux by Walsh at a time when the Sioux were a harried and almost starving nation—not quite the savages depicted in the movie posters.

This episode in Canadian and American history might have been better served by a film or stage play showing the arguments put forth by the Sioux to remain in Canada rather than as a sweeping shoot 'em-up' (perhaps more in the mould of the psychological tension shown in the Australian film *Breaker Morant*, 1979). In fact, contemporary Canadian playwright Sharon Pollack's play, *Walsh*, has received critical acclaim for its depiction of the Walsh-Sitting Bull meeting with American representatives seeking the Sioux chief's return to the United States to stand trial. Rosenberg and Raoul Walsh might have fallen in love with the Canadian outdoors, but Universal's research people had given them very little historical support to go with it. The film's Teaser Trailer script dated November 19, 1953, was a testament to Orwellian history:

Out of the West they poured by the thousands...tribes of American Sioux and Canadian Cree Indians...to peril Canada's newly won empire...and only a handful of the famed Northwest Mounted Police took the fury of the savage onslaught...brought to you with all the wild excitement of ruthless and relentless Indian warfare.³²

Universal got the "lay of the land" incorrectly as well. Geographically, the Sioux would have been coming from the southeast. South Dakota and Eastern Montana would have most likely witnessed their trek north into Canada. But that type of historical and geographical detail did not seem to matter in this questionable portrayal of the Canadian West. When one adds the fraudulent film poster headline: "Even to this day they tell the story of Inspector O'Rourke, his "mutineer" Mounted Police and the savage war against the blood-lusting Sioux and Cree Nations!"³³ The "based on a true story" claim lost any thread of credibility that any footage in this film would be historically true. Add to this the many references to the Saskatchewan territory (The Northwest Territories was the correct term), and *Saskatchewan's* suspect historical legacy, at least from a Canadian perspective, was sealed forever. Had staff at the Universal Research Department been given a Canadian history test, they would have most likely failed. But Universal did come up with one historical link to the province of Saskatchewan in the film. They had called J. Carroll Naish's French-Canadian character in the film "Batoche." It would be one of the few honest

references to Saskatchewan in the entire film!

It is clear from the publicity correspondence, fact sheets, promotion manuals, and production notes associated with the film that Universal was treating this foray into Canada as a production novelty. The studio was embarking on an opportunity to test the filmmaking environment in Canada. As Walsh and Rosenberg had suggested, filming outside the United States gave filmgoers new vistas to explore. It is not surprising, therefore, that much of Universal's promotional efforts were devoted to a theme that could best be described as "Hollywood visits Mountie Land" (with lots of stills and stories about the filming that was taking place in Banff National Park). The exploitation of this film would have little to do with an accurate representation of Canada.

The American westward movement had for the most part been defined, prior to the revisionist era, in terms of the legacy of conquest. The notion of manifest destiny had taken root in the acquisition of foreign territories and the gradual displacement of Native Americans onto government reservations. Frontier values were associated with the phrase "no duty to retreat," and the culture of the region was closely associated with the law of the gun. Law enforcement in America came after the trek west. In Canada it was the other way round, yet the Mountie movies, particularly *Saskatchewan*, could not divorce themselves from the culture of the American West. The film was marketed as if it were an extension of the American frontier, with good guys and bad ones—and of course, the ubiquitous "wild Indians" which the studio promoted to the public as "you'll stalk the trail of the murdering Sioux who massacred Custer, then swarmed north to exterminate the white man."³⁴ Universal could surely have made better use of historical research, but as the film's story clearly showed, *Saskatchewan* failed to provide any semblance of historical fact. Canadian historian Ramsay Cook's observations about the Canadian frontier experience make the *Saskatchewan* promotional blurbs appear almost slanderous: "First of all, the West was legally established, taken, made part of Canada. Arrangements were made; treaties were signed with the native peoples who lived there. And law and order, so to speak or peace and order, as we call it in Canada preceded settlement, in the form of the Northwest Mounted Police."³⁵ Serious historical research never seemed to be an important ingredient in the making of *Saskatchewan*.

Rosenberg and Raoul Walsh had provided Universal publicists with a variety of "it's great to film in Canada" comments, but Universal production

records show little concrete evidence that Walsh had contributed any historical direction to the story. Walsh appeared to be comfortable with the "Western" formula that had worked so well in the traditional Hollywood "dusters." When Walsh was questioned on aspects of material history (e.g., Mountie pill box hats) by the force's technical advisor, Walsh, as DeMille had done earlier, changed them to give the Mounties a more dashing appearance. A Universal production notes document (not dated) indicated that a retired RCMP inspector, Robert Mercer, a conscientious historian of Mountie history, wanted to make sure that everything associated with the red-coated police was on the up-and-up.³⁶ Mountie headgear had been a subject of controversy in a number of mounted police epics, and *Saskatchewan* was no exception:

Walsh, for instance, won a point from Mercer when the inspector expressed more than mild surprise to find that Walsh's Mounties were wearing 1900-style hats with their 1870-style uniforms. "Those hats look like pill-boxes," said Walsh. "No action to 'em. They'd slow down the chase scenes a good two minutes a reel!" So Inspector Mercer gave in and reluctantly admitted that the 1900-period Mountie campaign hats did have a certain flair in the way of action. That's why they were worn in the picture.³⁷

The Western formula that had worked so well in Walsh's earlier films certainly influenced the Indian stereotypes in the film. In fact, there is a disturbing level of ethnocentrism describing the use of Natives in the film. Production notes and publicity sheets used constant references to Indians as "redskins." One set of production notes (not dated) made a reference to George Pocater, Native technical advisor for the film. An excerpt from the notes mentioned: "On the final day of shooting, Pocater and his redskins got together and made Walsh an honorary chief of their tribe."³⁸ Walsh's sensitivity to history and to "political correctness" certainly left much to be desired, as well. Niemeyer had observed that Walsh was a veteran of handling Indians. But Walsh's view of Native Canadians smacked of condescension and superiority. Walsh noted: "The average American Indian, used to appearing in dozens of Western thrillers a year, has become lethargic to

the whole thing. [...] These Canadian newcomers to the trade wanted to do everything from love scenes to pratfalls.”³⁹ The legacy of *They Died With Their Boots On* might have been too strong for Walsh to overcome, and he continued to believe that First Nation’s people were the “bad guys.” According to Niemeyer, “Director Raoul Walsh, a veteran of handling movie Indians, says that it was a refreshing new experience to join up with some enthusiastic redskins” (hard to believe that this was 1953!)⁴⁰ Walsh added:

The Canadian bucks are new enough to the game that they outdo themselves to be useful... We had so many of them falling off their horses in trick riding scenes that we had to shoot ‘em over again. Nobody—not even Alan Ladd—could have killed that many pesky redskins with a six shooter.⁴¹

Walsh sounded like a contemporary of Custer and Sheridan. He had bought into Doud’s historical script without question. While DeMille, for example, had made a concerted effort to compile and use historical research for *Northwest Mounted Police* (his personal papers clearly showed that he wanted his film to have some historical resonance), *Saskatchewan*, on the other hand, never provided any historical sense of the period or the region. This was an American Western through and through. In Universal’s promotion of the film, history was an afterthought. Weiss had noted in his research column on the Mounties that this film would be “a true epic of the great Canadian Northwest.” It was not an epic, it was not historically accurate, and it appeared to lack any substantial research about the Canadian West. But that would not stop Universal from promoting the film’s questionable story on a much lighter note in film magazines and newspapers.

Magazine writers tended to ignore the film’s so-called historical story, opting for a more “tabloid” approach to the film, filing production stories from Banff under such by-lines as “Canadian Capers,” which appeared in the December 1953 issue of *Movie Life* and “Filmland in Canada” featured in the February 1954 issue of *Filmland*, where the author of the piece, Alyce Canfield, mentions: “I present a few mementoes of the occasion. My only regret is that I didn’t catch public relations man Harry Niemeyer. [...] Anyway, I award a medal to everyone at UI, with a special bouquet to producer Aaron Rosenberg.”⁴² The patronizing tone

of the stories suggested that these writers might have been on Universal’s unofficial payroll. These types of stories would help ensure that *Saskatchewan* would get all the exposure that it needed to be successful at the box office.

The publicity stories and special editions associated with the film would also continue to perpetuate and advertise historical distortions associated with the film. The December, 1953, issue of the magazine *Movieland* featured an article called “Canada Goes Hollywood.” The story chronicles how “tinsel town” had discovered the “Great White North,” mentioning that Aaron Rosenberg headed to Canada in order to find the proper locations to fit the *Saskatchewan* story.⁴³ Alyce Canfield gushed: “You can’t go anywhere without an idea. The idea was the result... of three men: William Goetz, head of production for U-I; Aaron Rosenberg, the producer to whom Goetz had entrusted the production; and the script itself, written by Gil Doud, famous for his precision-like blueprint scripts.”⁴⁴ According to the magazine story, Rosenberg would be looking for a magnificent lake, bounded on all sides by towering mountains, capped with a glacier in the background⁴⁵—the typical type of terrain that one would find in the province of Saskatchewan! Some critics of the movie could have argued that the film was about the Saskatchewan River country (the Saskatchewan River tumbled eastward out of the Rockies). Canadians, however, would rarely have used that phrase to describe the source of the Saskatchewan River. The fact that Fort Walsh was also stuck in the middle of the Alberta foothills added to the geographical deceit in the picture.

Universal might have been having second thoughts about the title of the film when it opened in the United Kingdom. The picture was released in the British Isles as *O’Rourke of the Mounted*. The film got a good spread in the March 4-8, 1954, *Weekend Mail*. The paper provides a story-in-pictures segment about the film as well as a feature story on the Western genre. The story sequence is full of the same inane historical distortions suggesting the Sioux were on the warpath. One pictorial segment mentions: “O’Rourke and his Crees take the Sioux by surprise and save the Mounties from being massacred.” The final pictorial clip closes with a reference to the defeated Sioux.⁴⁶ In the United States, the April, 1954, issue of *Screen Stories* began with, “somewhere out there in the darkness were hundreds of war-painted Sioux who had drifted up from the States. The Sioux were on the warpath, blood thirsty



Poster for *O'Rourke of the Royal Mounted Police*. *It is suspected that the film was renamed in anticipation of British audiences have a better grasp of Canadian geography than American ones!*
(Author's Collection)

from the taste of victory.”⁴⁷ Whether on-screen or in print, the Sioux were the “usual suspects.”

Critical Reviews

Criticism of the film has, quite correctly, focused on the historical and geographical distortions associated with the film. These critical observations have primarily been from a retrospective point of view, with Pierre Berton's review of the Mounties in *Hollywood's Canada* being the most searing critique of the genre. But how sensitive were the film's contemporary critics to the distortions depicted in the film, and how did film audiences of the period respond to this Mountie epic? The February 25, 1954, edition of *Film Daily* mentioned: “A cracking good Indian adventure story with the fine touch and expert hand in evidence every foot of the way would adequately sum up this first rate production contribution from Aaron Rosenberg.”⁴⁸ While this might have been the type of complimentary feedback that Universal wanted to hear, other reviews would place the film's reputation on more questionable grounds.

Philip Gerard, in a March 4, 1954, letter to Sam Israel suggested that the film was getting better reviews on the east coast than out in California. Gerard noted that “in their reviews, the Eastern trade boys point up the plus values of the picture...I think you will agree with me that the boys back here have a better understanding and appreciation of the box office values on our pictures for theatres around the country.”⁴⁹ What type of reviews had prompted such a letter? Gerard was referring to

a review of *Saskatchewan* in the February 27, 1954, issue of *Boxoffice* by Ivan Spear. The review was on the mark when compared to others that were being written following the film's March release. Spear noted:

What might have been an outdoor drama of epic proportions emerges as a disappointingly ordinary galloper because of a cliché-ridden story that stemmed unmitigatedly from the rubber stamp, dull and dated direction and scenery-masticating performances.⁵⁰

It is not surprising that Universal's publicity people were somewhat unnerved by Spear's review, but he appeared to know a questionable Western when he saw one. Other reviews came to Gerard's attention, and he passed a number of the New York papers critiques (dated March 11)⁵¹ to Israel in a memo dated the same day. They included the following comments: *Daily Mirror*: “*Saskatchewan* is a stirring film...a good tale of Indian warfare.” *New York Times*: “Alan Ladd saunters nonchalantly through the dangers of *Saskatchewan*.” The usually conservative *Herald Tribune* appeared to have the sharpest criticism of the film: “Directed by Raoul Walsh, but the doings do not match his usual high standards of outdoor action. A lot of action takes place on the trail.”

The film magazines continued to have a cosy publicity relationship with Universal. Their reviews of *Saskatchewan* were mostly an endorsement of a well-written story and great action. *Screen Story*, in its September, 1954, issue, stated that “this is an excellent Western with some of the most beautiful scenery ever filmed.”⁵² *Photoplay's* May, 1954, edition parroted the “this is a true story” theme with “based on a tense incident in American-Canadian history, this satisfying Western gives Alan Ladd a role that fits him neatly.”⁵³ *Screenland's* June, 1954, issue gave probably the most banal review of the film stating “...American Sioux have crossed into Canada and are trying to persuade the peace-loving Sioux from annihilating the white man.”⁵⁴

Time and *Newsweek*, however, were a little more discriminating in their review of the picture. *Newsweek's* March 15, 1954, review of the film noted the geographical gaffes associated with the film:

The time is coming, if it hasn't already arrived, when Hollywood is going to have trouble trumping up new tricks to

enliven the classic warfare between white man and Indian. The only compensation that Gil Doud's screenplay can offer in lieu of possible mayhem is the fact that his film (incidentally, photographed not in Saskatchewan but Alberta) shows the Canadian Rockies, around Banff and Bow Lakes areas, in glorious technicolor. [...] The story itself is from the foothills.⁵⁵

Time's March 22 edition suggested that the film was strictly a postcard Western." The reviewer observed: "The only difference between this and any other Western—a few degrees of latitude... The escapes and chases are reeled out against some of the world's most emphatic scenery... The story, however, is just a plain tourist. [...] Ladd plays a Mountie... and as he stares around the circle of hostile Indians, only a very young moviegoer will believe he is really in any danger from all those pleasant Irish faces."⁵⁶ The reviews not associated with the film trade industry appeared to have labelled the film for what it was—a mediocre Western. But they too, could have been more critical of the distorted history.

Most Hollywood Westerns during this period had been constructed around the theme of the winning of the West. Film audiences, therefore, were quite familiar with the notion of conquest—Native Americans were seen as obstacles to settlement and expansion. There had been films such as *Broken Arrow* (1951) that had started to place a more revisionist spin on westward expansion, but *Saskatchewan* wouldn't be part of that revisionist genre. Film audiences would generally come to view *Saskatchewan* as just another Western in spite of Universal's attempts to elevate the film story. A Bob Faber note (not dated) that accompanied the November 19, 1953, Teaser Trailer script noted, "By using film of Alan Ladd in his buckskin outfit for the opening of this teaser trailer, I hope to recall the memory of 'Shane' without mentioning the title of the picture."⁵⁷ Comments about the film from a preview audience, however, would alert the studio to the film's mediocrity. *Saskatchewan* would not be in the same cinematic league as *Shane*.

Responses to questions about the film at a November, 1953, preview in Riverside, California, were generally enthusiastic. A November 24, 1953, Universal memo from Richard Cahoon to *Saskatchewan* production staff provided a generally favourable report

on the film.⁵⁸ In the category "How did you like the film?" 32 of the 192 polled rated the film outstanding. Sixty-five rated the film as very good.⁵⁹ Additional comments about the film, however, suggested that some of the preview audience had expected a great deal more. Sprinkled among the "I loved the scenery" and "Alan Ladd looked grand" were a number of more seasoned observations. One patron commented, "Indians made to appear stupid,"⁶⁰ while another noted "Raoul Walsh had done much better than this."⁶¹ One comment, in particular, provided an interesting historical perspective: "The public is tired of these extravagant Westerns—and this from a movie-goer from the time of the 'Birth of a Nation.' I regret being so rough, but this was a disappointment."⁶² Raoul Walsh had gotten his start in Griffith's questionable cinematic interpretation of post Civil War history. *Saskatchewan*, too, would suffer from a questionable representation of history—but this time it was in Canada.

If *Saskatchewan's* historical and geographical research was weak, the exploitation material (included in the *Showman's Manual*) for the film was predictably shop-worn. Canada and the Mounties would again be promoted in theatre lobbies and on radio commercials as part of the great northern wilderness. Universal's exploitation ideas for the film included the Indian Sign Language Contest and Canada Night.⁶³ When one added the *Saskatchewan* fur promotion and recommended library visit to the list, *Saskatchewan's* advertising exposure was complete. The fur promotion suggested that "a large number of pelts retailed by local merchants may have come from Saskatchewan."⁶⁴ The copy read "Saskatchewan...from whose wilds Blank Brothers Bring You Canada's Finest Pelts...See *Saskatchewan*, starring Alan Ladd and Shelly Winters."⁶⁵ A somewhat risky promotional effort was the library tie-in. This idea recommended going to book stores and libraries for displays of books and other materials dealing with Canada, and, in particular, with the Royal Northwest Mounted Police.⁶⁶ Universal might have been walking a thin line with this exercise. Had potential film audiences been exposed to reliable historical sources on Canadian history, Universal might have had a lot of explaining to do about the distorted history in the film.

Cecil B. DeMille had conducted extensive historical research for his film on the NWMP. In particular, his use of material history (Fort Carlton was an exact replica of the original) was sound. DeMille's interpretation of the political and social history, of

course, was another matter. *Saskatchewan*, on the other hand, seemed to lack any sort of historical verification. The geographical and historical errors associated with the film had made it a Canadian national joke. Saskatchewan, Canada's flattest geographical region had been described as "Canada's Savage Mountain Empire," and the Mounted Police as a Force that had tasted blood: "Scarlet were the coats they wore and blood they shed in battle."⁶⁷ The "Blood Lusting Sioux," in actual fact, were a starving nation seeking government protection when they crossed into Canada. An observation made in the *Saskatchewan* production notes (not dated) confirmed the less-than-historical approach to the film: "when you have a director like Raoul Walsh who knows what he wants in the way of action, regardless of history, there is enough on the job to make life interesting."⁶⁸ *Saskatchewan* used the "based on a true story" notion throughout its publicity campaigns, yet the film posters displayed in theatres, magazines, and newspapers advertised the Canadian West as an extension of the frontier violence that had characterized the American westward experience. Revisionist history of the American westward movement would have to wait for another decade or so. It would arrive too late for Universal and Raoul Walsh. Their slurs against Native Americans and First Nation's people, although apparently light-hearted, suggested a film culture not overly sensitive to the representation of history. The making of *Saskatchewan* would be a testimony to such insensitivity.

Conclusion

Rosenberg and Walsh ended up making a film that made the true story claim an out-and-out lie. The other Mountie films set on the Canadian plains had some elements of historical truths associated with their stories, the thinly veiled comparisons to the exploits of James Morrow Walsh being their most reliable historical connection. *Northwest Mounted Police*, of course, had its questionable story tied to the Riel Rebellion. But *Saskatchewan* was in a league of its own. Fort Walsh was stuck right in the middle of the Canadian Rockies, the Saskatchewan River country was actually along the Bow River, and those Mountie hats, well, they were from another century! With such a suspect historical legacy, could another Mounted Police story be on the horizon? Six years would pass before the next riders in scarlet would cross the screen—and surprisingly enough, they would actually find their way to Saskatchewan.

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Book Reviews

B.N. Arnason, *It Was A Great Privilege: The Co-operative Memoirs of B.N. Arnason*, foreword by Ian MacPherson. Vancouver: British Columbia Institute for Co-operative Studies, 2004.

Barney Arnason (1901-2001) was an uncommon public servant whose interest in co-operatives quietly helped build partnerships between government and community, in the process reshaping Saskatchewan in possibly profound ways. His career as a government employee spanned the years 1929-67, covering most of the building phase of the province's co-operative movement. He served under Liberal, Conservative, and C.C.F. governments alike, providing stability. His career also neatly illustrates the point that every Saskatchewan government supported co-operatives.

Arnason's distinctive contributions included instigating the introduction of credit unions into Saskatchewan, co-founding Canadian Co-operative Implements Ltd. (a farm-machinery manufacturing company), setting up the publication of an independent co-operative newspaper, representing the co-operative movement on a federal royal commission on income taxation, and generally serving as secretary or facilitator for almost every significant new development among Saskatchewan co-operatives for decades. Arnason was a civil servant who was discretely but directly engaged in the co-operative movement. Such individuals may be rare in government bureaucracies, but Arnason's career shows that they can have remarkable and lasting impact.

Arnason's memoirs, ably introduced by co-operative historian Ian MacPherson of the University of Victoria and published by MacPherson's research institute, are a chronological account of major events in Arnason's life. Arnason lived through interesting times. Coming from a Manitoba-Icelandic background, Arnason observed the Winnipeg General Strike and the Regina Riot, says he was personally affected by the oratory of J.S. Woodsworth and Aaron Sapiro, and seems at some point to have met or heard every significant individual in Saskatchewan public life. He also provides an interesting civil servant's view of the impact of the Great Depression.

But while the book includes details of Arnason's life, and a little bit about Saskatchewan politics, the emphasis is on Arnason's overriding concern: co-operatives. What he provides is for the most part a plain retelling of key events from his insider's perspective, punctuated by thumbnail sketches of farm and political leaders. In places the book proceeds more in vignettes than continuous narrative. In many cases, the author's own role in the events he describes is understated.

Perhaps three themes rise to the top out of Arnason's many stories. The first is that the development of co-operatives in Saskatchewan depended, at critical early junctures, on small meetings of influential individuals. Arnason shows how the Conference of Co-operative Trading Organizations, whose first meeting he called in 1934, became a nexus for the wider development of co-operatives; and how a small group of men decided that credit unions should be introduced into Saskatchewan in the mid-1930s.

But a second theme is that the success of these ventures depended critically on the organizational environment within which they took place. Existing organizations helped create new ones, or blocked them. One of the most interesting details I learned from Arnason's book is that he and others attempted to organize a co-operative health centre as early as 1939, but that it was met by a stone wall of opposition from the medical community. So while creative and even entrepreneurial individuals were key, their success also depended on the ways in which they could mesh with the organizational environment of the province.

Finally, Arnason's account shows that while co-operatives are driven by a philosophy of mutual self-help, external agents – notably Arnason himself, but also outsiders like Sapiro and other American speakers and co-operative leaders – sometimes play critical roles in facilitating their success. Arnason does not really reflect explicitly on the proper role of a public servant or what would constitute crossing the line to meddle in the affairs of co-operatives. But overall his account shows the care and respect with which he treated the co-operative movement. He clearly exercised a role as a visionary and leader among others, and yet this role was within voluntary networks and was not imposed

on anyone. He considered it his career “to assist the co-operative cause” (p. 273): none of the governments under which he served had any difficulty with that, nor did the co-ops themselves.

Missing from Arnason’s memoirs is almost any reference to controversy or disagreement within or surrounding the co-operative movement. Readers will find scant evidence of the tensions between producer and consumer co-operatives, the serious debates over a “100% Pool,” the ejection of the United Grain Growers from the co-operative movement, or the creation of community clinics during the medicare crisis and doctors’ strike of 1962. These omissions are undoubtedly reflections of Arnason’s perspective and role: he was a consensus builder, and his memoirs stand as much as a tribute to his philosophy as to the empirical history of co-operatives. Also missing is a frank assessment of the numerically limited success of the Douglas government’s efforts to develop new kinds of co-ops such as production co-ops, co-operative farms, or Aboriginal-led co-operatives in the North. In reality, Arnason’s memoirs run out of steam by the 1960s. The heart of his account, corresponding to a critical building phase of the co-operative movement, is the 1930s-40s.

A kind of postscript to Arnason’s career is provided by a chapter on his five years as an adviser to the Zambian government from 1968-73. This story illustrates simultaneously the ways in which co-operatives were a global movement, how Saskatchewan citizens were globally engaged, and why “official” development policy in that era – characterized by competing foreign advisors, working within government-dominated frameworks – had such limited success.

It is fitting that Arnason ends with a chapter on “The Philosophy of the Co-operative Movement,” summing up in his way the ideals for which he worked.

Reviewed by: Dr. Brett Fairbairn

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Randy William Widdis, *Voices from Next Year Country: An Oral History of Rural Saskatchewan* Regina: Canadian Plains Research Center, 2006.

Voices from Next Year Country is an odd little book, a unique by-product of a much larger study that focused on how humans adapt to ‘environmental, social, and economic change in rural southern Saskatchewan’ and was particularly interested in the concept of ‘social cohesion’. Although Widdis admits ‘social cohesion [is not easy to] define or identify’ (page 6), he does suggest that what this study was most interested in was the dynamism of rural life, in particular, various forms of collective action, perception, processes, and circumstances that intertwine to produce a community, how it functions and how it defines itself. In the process of this larger, multi-disciplinary goal, Widdis and his researchers interviewed long-term residents of six rural southern Saskatchewan communities – Carlyle, Eastend, Naicam, Balcarres, Craik, and Willow Bunch – asking questions about general changes in each community over the past sixty years, and focusing on how people have responded to those changes. These oral histories were left out of the larger study, so Widdis decided to glean a representative sample of these valuable oral stories for publication in this corollary book.

The oral stories, as told by anonymous correspondents, are the centerpiece of the book. In many cases, it sounds like the conversations heard in rural coffeeshops and hockey arenas, either celebrating achievements or lamenting community problems. The voices give a snapshot of life at the turn of the millennium, before Saskatchewan’s recent economic push and its new role as *the* place to go home to. But the voices nonetheless present a surprising picture of life in rural Saskatchewan, under the radar of many. Agricultural issues, grain transportation and government programs, rural school closures, roads and infrastructure woes, depopulation and neglect are brought vividly to life through the eyes of those who have watched it happen, and continue to watch it today. But thankfully, it is not all doom and gloom. Some communities are growing, perhaps as a result of nearby village deterioration. Amalgamation is the theme, with some towns emerging as winners, pushing new growth and adaptations.

Where the book has problems is in its conception: who, exactly, is the audience? The introduction and much of the commentary is overly academic (words like ‘lacuna’ and ‘obfuscate’ just are not used in most people’s everyday language) and despite Widdis’ hope

that his old-timers hockey team will enjoy the book, chances are they will not make it past the first chapter. As well, the interviews do not reflect the current rush to rural Saskatchewan – I live in Biggar, where housing prices have doubled and new residents from Alberta, BC, and even Scotland are flocking to town – so the voices feel a bit out-of-touch already, which is odd. This is partly due to the selection process: the researchers wanted interviewees who had ‘lived in the community for ...a considerable length of time.’ By sampling only the oldest segment of the population, the interviews reflected too much nostalgia, and not enough hope or planning for the future – after all, many of the interviewees will not be alive to see the future. Perhaps ‘Voices from Last Year Country’ would have been a more appropriate title. Nonetheless, the voices are strong, valid, and offer a beautiful view of change over time, and a mature reflection of what it means to live in, and be a part of a community in rural Saskatchewan.

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