This essay deals with the development of a professional historians’ canon, one associated with publishing about, and university teaching in, Western Canada, and it relates this story to changing cultural perspectives. Its focus is the historical writing that, as Carl Berger defined it, broke the “traditional patterns of interpretation.” It suggests that, on the prairies, the traditional patterns have been challenged and supplemented five times in the course of one hundred years and that a comprehensive regional cultural history would have to take these five shifts in perspective into account.

A list of the founders of critical history as a discipline in Western Canadian universities must include Chester Martin (who joined the University of Manitoba in 1909), Arthur Silver Morton (Saskatchewan, 1914), A.L. Burt (Alberta, 1913), and Walter Sage (British Columbia, 1918). Though a case can be made for the historians of the nineteenth century as founders of the discipline in the region, including George Bryce of Manitoba and Judge F.W. Howay of British Columbia, they were closer to nineteenth-century amateur than twentieth-century professional in terms of research effort, scholarly documentation, and attention to broader schools of interpretation. Martin, Morton, Burt, and
Sage were pioneers. Each commenced his training before the First World War, each contributed important books that discussed the Western past, and each stood out in his respective province for his institutional contributions, including teaching in the schools, the development of archival collections, and the founding of provincial historical societies and university history clubs.2

A second step in Western historical writing connects the twenties, the thirties, and the Second World War. The important histories published by this interwar generation concerned forests, mines, grain, and immigration, and were written by such famous academics as Frank Underhill, Harold Innis, Arthur Lower, J.B. Brebner, and S.D. Clark. The era also encompassed the planning (not the execution, in which the many volumes varied enormously in approach and interpretation) of four important publishing projects: the Frontiers of Settlement series, the Carnegie series on Canadian–American relations, the studies commissioned by the Royal Commission on Dominion-Provincial Relations, and the Social Credit in Alberta series. In this period, Underhill was interested in protest movements, Innis addressed the export of staples, and Clark, a father of Canadian sociology, linked those two stories (political protest and staple economies) by suggesting that “new forms of economic enterprise” imposed stresses, social and political, upon frontier regions.3 These various scholarly enterprises undertaken between the end of the First World War and the end of the Second World War continued the political themes set out in the preceding generation, but, not surprisingly given the events of this quarter-century, they emphasized that the physical environment and economic forces shaped human action. For example, Carl Dawson’s important volume on immigrant groups implies that those groups could be placed on a gradient running from isolation to assimilation and suggested that ethnic bloc settlements, such as the Mennonite and Doukhobor, would move quickly from the former to the latter as the economy, the state, and communication technology consolidated a Prairie Canadian way of life.4

This era’s historiography has sometimes been associated with the frontier theory, but as Jeremy Mouat and Elizabeth Jameson have argued, F.J. Turner was not central to professional writing about the Canadian Prairie past. (Walter Sage in British Columbia and Burt in Alberta had a different view.)5 W.A. Mackintosh’s historical writings, Innis’s emphasis on staples, and the Canadian interest in the metropolitan side of the story were more important in Western academics’ thought. And George Stanley’s frontier in The Birth of Western Canada was “not so much a Turnerian frame of reference,” Carl Berger cautioned, “as an imperial one that compared the destruction of Métis society with the fate of other peoples who unsuccessfully resisted the march of white civilization in Africa and Australia.”6
The Second World War, like the first, constituted a profound challenge to Canadian scholars. That crisis drove the historiographical reorientation that occurred in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. Innis, Underhill, Lower, and Clark addressed new topics, none directly related to the West. And in history, new institutional leaders in each of the Western provinces—W.L. Morton in Manitoba, L.H. Thomas in Saskatchewan, L.G. Thomas in Alberta, and Margaret Ormsby in British Columbia—directed their discipline along a new path. Morton has received the lion’s share of attention, due in part to Berger’s decision to devote a chapter to Morton’s work in *The Writing of Canadian History.* The Manitoba historian would have been quick to reply that this was an achievement of many, not one. Among the scholars in related disciplines who contributed to local historical study in the post-war decades were Vernon C. Fowke, a distinguished member of the so-called Saskatchewan school of economics; geographers in each university (Tom Weir, J.H. Richards, William C. Wonders, J. Lewis Robinson); political scientists (Murray Donnelly, Evelyn Eager, J.R. Mallory, C.B. MacPherson); sociologists (S.M. Lipset, Forrest LaViolette, Stuart Jamieson); anthropologists (W.J. Mayer-Oakes, Wilson Duff); and even psychologists (John Irving) and students of literature (E.A. McCourt, George Woodcock, Chester Duncan). The regional history movement also included students of local societies located in other parts of Canada, ranging from J.M. Beck and Stewart MacNutt in the Maritimes to Maurice Careless in Ontario.

Eric Hobsbawm suggests that the events of the late 1960s, notably in 1968, marked a turning point in world history, not because of their immediate political impact but because of the cultural changes that the popular uprisings in Europe and North America helped to consolidate. His statement deserves attention in Canada because the “new” history—social history, mainly—which reached the peak of its influence in the next twenty years, began for Canadians in the late 1960s. It encompassed what Berger described as a “vast expansion” in the number of Canadian academic historians, an “explosion of research and publications,” and “new fashions” in historical writing. It was accompanied by an initial boom in university hiring and enrolment, another boom in book publishing, yet another in the founding and expansion of university presses, and still another in spending on libraries, museums, and archives. New subfields emerged—led in the 1970s by urban history, labour history, ethnic history, and most of all, Aboriginal history—with their own journals, conferences, and, it seemed, infinite futures.

Historians’ worlds changed again around the beginning of the 1990s. The collapse of the communist bloc, the birth of the Web, and the rise of North American academic interest in the postmodern were markers of a cultural shift between the late 1980s and the end of the millennium. In Canada, the ab-
The sense of new university and public history appointments constituted a crisis of a different kind. Graduate students continued to enrol, theses and articles were written, but the conferences and the social connections gradually declined in number and creativity. Historians had to regroup under the pressure of the new ways. They were fewer in number and they were being recruited for legal work by Aboriginal, environmental and city planning interests while simultaneously dealing with their colleagues’ insistence that they decentre their interpretive language, abandon metanarratives and essentialist categories, acknowledge the instability of boundaries by moving beyond the national to the global, and re-think such basic terms as gender, race, space, the state, the body, and identity.

What does a cultural history of these five generations look like? The founders such as Burt and Martin were outsiders who moved west to take jobs and develop a discipline. The vantage point from which they surveyed the Canadian West was London, Oxford, or Edinburgh, where their understanding of the discipline was established. Their conceptual tools were empirical, their questions political. The flaw they perceived in the writings of the previous generation, an error that the Great War group aimed to correct, was amateurism. They resolved to undertake more extensive research in primary sources and to look more rigorously at the documentary record. In terms of cultural outlook, Burt, Martin, Sage, and A.S. Morton belonged to Careless’ Britannic School and, in the case of Burt and Martin, to Berger’s category of historians preoccupied by Canada’s achievement of self-government.

The interwar histories were written by Canadians whose vantage point was Toronto and whose conceptual tools were rooted in economics. The flaw they perceived in the work of their predecessors was an excessive preoccupation with Britain and with the British system of government. These interwar historians sought to establish the material foundations of a national society. The key to understanding their cultural location was that they treated the West as a hinterland, a receiving vessel for outside influences, rather than as a pattern-maker that would create its own history.

Many of the post-1945 generation were born in the West and spent their careers there. Their vantage point was located within the territory, often in rural communities. They knew the local leadership and respected local people. The excess or flaw they saw in the work of their predecessors was its Central Canadian, centralizing bias. Their conceptual tools were increasingly drawn from a range of social science disciplines. Their achievement, as Berger asserted about Morton (but the judgment applies to many), was to see the West and the nation as equally prominent in their lives and to find a means of expressing this dual loyalty.

The post-1968 social histories were also written by academics who had grown up in the West. These scholars sought to write history “from the bot-
tom up.” Like their predecessors, their vantage point was located within the region, but they chose to situate themselves outside privileged circles. The flaw they saw in the work of the post-1945 group was its elitism and its England-centred social outlook. Their goal was to develop the points of view of the less powerful in society, including ethnic groups, Aboriginal people, or the working class and, by the 1980s, women. Their models included a wide variety of social histories that drew upon Marxist, literary, and anthropological traditions. They believed that writing the history of the region and its less-privileged peoples would, in and of itself, contribute to a richer nation-state. Their intellectual mooring was the concept of “limited identities,” a term developed by Ramsay Cook and Maurice Careless to encapsulate the belief that Canada’s identity lay in the absence of a uniform national identity—what Joe Clark later described as a “community of communities.” These post-1968 social historians recognized that the Western Canadian economy remained small, open, resource-based, and export-oriented. And many among them believed that, because the West was still subject to sharp fluctuations in the production of and demand for its primary products, the periodic outbursts of regional protest—now renamed “Western alienation”—were justifiable responses to Sir John A. Macdonald’s National Policy and its offspring. These views spawned debates that continued through the 1980s on the role of the market in the allocation of resources and the fate of communities.

The writers of the post-1989 publications belonged to yet another cultural age. Their ideal vantage point was perhaps a satellite looking down on the earth that enabled them to see all human activity and environmental change as one. Their predecessors’ flaw, they might say, was to observe the world from within the confines of the region and the nation-state, and thus to slight the international dimensions of their society. When post-1989ers looked at language, social relations, and individual identity, they saw instability, contingency, and deception. They sought to identify what was similar in imperial and state-driven and identity-forming experience among the peoples of the world. Their goal, like their predecessors, was to talk on the same plane and in the same terms as colleagues around the world. But their emphasis on such approaches as the post-colonial and the feminist, and on such themes as race and gender and borderlands, seemed to threaten the very “regions” that had been developed in the four previous generations of critical history.

Though the post-1989 approaches reduce the importance of Western Canadian or Prairie regional history, they do not make it irrelevant. Rather, the new themes place greater emphasis upon the scale of our analysis, as Richard White has suggested, and multiply the range of scales—local, regional, national, global—that must be considered as we define our topics. One example of
region's continued relevance lies in the history of immigration to the Prairies. In the mid-twentieth century, newcomers from Europe settled in Prairie cities where they encountered two regionally distinctive groups of Canadians: migrants fleeing rural areas whose families had been in Canada for several generations and "established Canadians," British in ethnicity, who had been accustomed to setting the cultural tone of the community. The negotiations undertaken by these three population fractions in the burgeoning Prairie cities constituted an important chapter in the story of a Prairie regional culture and resulted in the creation of a "Nordic prairie" cultural synthesis. The following two or three decades encompassed another immigration wave, this time from the global South, and another rural-to-urban migration, this time of Aboriginal people. These two groups encountered a third social type in Prairie cities, a quite different host than the one that had met their mid-century counterparts: the "Nordic prairie" host society, having coalesced in the previous generation, now greeted newcomers with more inclusive institutions and more ambitious multicultural ideals. The three groups' adaptations after 1968 did not eliminate racism, did not end gender issues, did not transcend global communication developments, but they did suggest why such themes—race, gender, culture—drawn from "world history" found resonance in a Prairie Canadian "regional" historical writing.

The foregoing is structured in terms of generations of historians for purposes of clarity, but the image is misleading. Really these are five distinct conceptual languages, each of which, once introduced, survived in a wide range of historical works published in later decades. Most are still in use, sometimes to great effect, sometimes only to elaborate on conventional wisdom. Recognizing this continuity, Lyle Dick has suggested that professional history operates in sedimentary layers and that eventually its interpretations compress even outright error and prejudice into bedrock. And he is right to say that a deeply rooted and implicitly racist narrative such as the so-called Seven Oaks massacre, as it was recounted between 1900 and the 1950s, is difficult to dislodge from its position as a historical "truth." But the emergence of five distinct analytical patterns during the course of the twentieth century suggests that new conceptual frameworks do challenge the old and may, given time, even replace or at the least recast some of the inherited stories.

The hostility that sometimes erupts between professional and popular historians has its roots in the contrast between old and new conceptual languages. Thus, when Peter C. Newman used crude terms to describe Aboriginal women in the fur trade, he was roundly criticized by scholars who viewed his descriptions as unacceptable. Yet it is well known that scholarly books languish in academic libraries while their apparent competitors—Newman, Bruce Hutchison,
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James Gray, Pierre Berton, J.G. McGregor, Grant MacEwan, and George Bowering, among others—sweep the prizes and reap the rewards accompanying higher sales figures. The academics’ seeming marginalization might prompt them to doubt the relevance of scholarly research, but the preceding history of the canon suggests one additional observation. Scholars have learned to write more effectively, to assess the present and to anticipate the future more convincingly, through contact with international historical and social science publications and increasingly global conceptual languages. And the finest works in their field, such as A.J. Ray’s contributions to our understanding of Aboriginal history, have demonstrated the worth of truly innovative scholarship.24

This conclusion would not be complete without a word of caution. We might recall Carl Berger’s closing shot at the new social historians in the 1986 edition of his landmark history of English-Canadian historical writing: “Of only one thing we may be certain: in time the new history will experience the same fate as the old history, for Clio is still an inspiring muse but she has the alarming habit of devouring those who respond to her charms.”25 Berger’s comment offers a dash of cold water while underlining that historians should approach their predecessors with humility. Understanding of the human condition changes continuously and so does the language in which it is expressed. The relatively long-lasting issues addressed by today’s historians—modes and relations of production, sexual difference and sexuality, colonialism, the nation-state, the environment, the body—endure for a good reason: citizens have not finished debating their meaning and their proper place. Contemporary historians may make lasting contributions to public understanding through their original research and through their understanding of the changing language of scholarship. Nevertheless, they have to accept that their works, in turn, will at best become part of the historical canon.

Notes

1 Carl Berger, The Writing of Canadian History: Aspects of English-Canadian Historical Writing Since 1900, 2nd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986), ix. When addressing historians’ “search for fresh perspectives” in the 1940s and 1950s, Berger wrote: “It was typical of the sublety of the reorientation of the forties and early fifties that [J.M.S.] Careless could, in 1954, restate in language appropriate to his generation one of the central arguments of the historians of the twenties: that the pragmatic temper of the Canadian character and the national habit of compromise and maintaining opposites in balance implied certain qualifications for a fruitful participation in international affairs” (177–78). Berger’s The Writing of Canadian History is a superb study: deeply researched, judicious, and perceptive. It serves as the guide and foundation for all that follows.
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Berger, Writing of Canadian History, 164. In Clark’s view, the local version of Social Credit was a typical protest movement of the North American frontier—“intensely localist, separatist, ... [seeking] autonomy and withdrawal from the infringements of outside authority.” Ibid., 167.


Berger, Writing of Canadian History, 164, 167, 175. Some popular historians used a simple frontier approach, but the single most important book in that vein was written by Wallace Stegner. His much-acclaimed Wolf Willow relies on the frontier to construct a romantic past but is cruel in its assessment of the frontier’s successor, the small Saskatchewan town. Wallace Stegner, Wolf Willow: A History, a Story, and a Memory of the Last Plains Frontier (New York: Viking, 1966). See also J.F.C. Wright, Saskatchewan: The History of a Province (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1955), ix–xi. George Stanley’s reflections on the theme, including his definition of A.L. Burt as a Turnerian, are recorded in George Stanley, “The Last Word on Louis Riel—The Man of Several Faces,” in 1885 and After: Native Society in Transition, eds. F. Laurie Barron and James B. Waldram (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Centre, 1986), 3–22.
7 Berger’s memorable conclusion: Morton’s “major intellectual achievement was ... the successful effort to construct a framework and find a vocabulary to convey his attachments to both Canada and the West.” Berger, Writing of Canadian History, 256; W. L. Morton, “Clio in Canada: The Interpretation of Canadian History,” in Contexts of Canada’s Past: Selected Essays of W.L. Morton, ed. A.B. McKillop (Toronto: Macmillan, 1980), 105; originally published in University of Toronto Quarterly 15 (April 1946): 227–34.


15 Berger, Writing of Canadian History, 256.

17 Careless, “Limited Identities in Canada.”


25 Berger, Writing of Canadian History, 320.