Vernacular Currents in Western Canadian Historiography: The Passion and Prose of Katherine Hughes, F.G. Roe, and Roy Ito

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“Only connect the prose and the passion, 
and both will be exalted.”

— E.M. Forster, Howard’s End (1910)

In a 1985 review article on Gerald Friesen’s The Canadian Prairies and Pierre Berton’s The Promised Land, David C. Jones argued for a new approach to Canadian historiography. Specifically, he called for a fusion of best practices of the genres of academic and popular history, and asked: “What is the scholar’s responsibility to the masses?” Jones thereby identified an issue of continuing relevance to our discipline—the relationship between practitioners of history and the people whose history is being represented. Jones was primarily concerned with promoting popular forms of writing, but I would like to focus attention on another important but neglected dimension of historical work over the last century: the vast and undervalued production of vernacular history.

Some clarification of terms is warranted. Over the last century, the term vernacular has held little currency in Canadian historical discourse, consigned
largely to such sub-fields as architectural history, classical or medieval disciplines, and folklore studies. However, the term *vernacular* has experienced a long genealogy, originating with the Latin *verna*, meaning "home-born slave," "indigenous," or "domestic." As an adjective, it refers to 1) a person "using a native language or dialect of a country or district"; 2) the language or dialect "spoken as the mother tongue by the people of a particular country or district;" 3) a composition "written or spoken in the native language of a country or people"; or 4) an artistic form or feature "native or peculiar to a particular country or locality."

In earlier eras, vernacular writing played important and sometimes even dominant roles in the historiography of European countries, especially in France and England in the late medieval period. More recently, various cultural theorists have embraced the vernacular in their assorted critiques of modernism, its hierarchies, and its exclusions.

My use of the phrase *vernacular history* refers generally to grassroots historical practice in North America in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as discussed in my 1991 article on the Seven Oaks incident of 1816 and John Bodnar’s application of *vernacular culture* in his 1992 book on commemoration in the United States. Bodnar and I drew similar distinctions between the unofficial or vernacular historical memory of local groups and the official histories sanctioned by the state or established elites. However, we might heed Bennet Schaber’s cautionary advice to avoid characterizing vernacular writing in terms of "traditions." Schaber prefers the term *situation* to describe the contexts within which vernacular performance is constituted or sanctioned, and *situation* seems to better approximate the contingent circumstances within which vernacular historical texts have been produced in Western Canada over the last century.

These circumstances echo the diverse contexts of vernacular architecture within which local builders in particular situations have confronted the challenge of fashioning usable forms from a limited repertoire of materials, through the application of accumulated experiential knowledge and the practitioners’ capacities for on-the-spot problem solving.

Yet vernacular historiography does not simply respond to the local but often also borrows from and comments upon the larger scene of historical writing. As the historian Robert Blair St. George has usefully argued, vernacular expressions, while rooted in local knowledge, generate texts derivative of “collisions of imperial interests and autoethnographic resistance.” Drawing inspiration from both macro- and micro-levels of history, vernacular forms are always mixtures, referencing “uneven and uneasy attempts to create artifacts or texts that address simultaneous but divergent social realities.” The mixing of forms and genres also characterizes the concept of hybridity as elaborated by the Russian philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin.
most interesting aspects of vernacular historical production have included its tendency toward formal promiscuity—the sometimes indiscriminate mixing of forms, both the high and the low. Because its practitioners were not schooled in traditions favouring unitary and internally cohesive forms, they were therefore obliged to develop new forms within which to express the diverse strains bearing on their writing. This very tendency toward hybridity is one of the features endowing vernacular production with its continuing resonance and relevance to lived experience and memory.11

Notwithstanding a diversity of practices, forms, and perspectives, practitioners of vernacular history share the common experience of operating outside dominant discourses of power and authority. It must also be acknowledged that vernacular writing does not always run against the grain of prevailing discourses and may incorporate concepts and ideological content derivative of hegemonic forms. In this regard, the sociologists Kent Ono and John Sloop usefully point out that vernacular discourse “is not, by definition, liberatory” and may indeed incorporate conservative or even reactionary elements. However, Ono and Sloop also acknowledge that vernacular discourses “emerge from discussions between members of smaller, self-identified communities within the larger civic community,” ..., and as Bakhtin observed, the dialogical character of such interactions ensures that the audience or addressee participates in the production of meaning alongside the nominal author or addressee.12 It is its strong connection to the local that helps ground vernacular writing within the experiential contexts within which it emerges. We might go farther in suggesting that, whether pursuing accommodationist or oppositionist strategies, the marginalized status of vernacular discourse makes it incapable of fully reproducing dominant power relationships. Unschooled to operate comfortably within discursive conventions established according to guild protocols, vernacular practitioners must necessarily draw on their own experience in fashioning their historical works. In this regard, sociologist Richard Harvey Brown usefully distinguishes “official” from “unofficial” history as they relate to two terms: cogency and coercion. In Brown’s formulation, official history has exhibited a high level of inner cogency or coherence, albeit shaped with coercion, while unofficial or folk history “characteristically is highly malleable precisely because its expression has not been rationalized and justified in terms of official canons of reasoning, whatever these may be.”13 By definition a subordinate genre, the vernacular stands outside of or on the margins of the official canon, sometimes merely co-existing in relative obscurity within vernacular domains but on other occasions critiquing and challenging the canon and its claims to dominance.14

Brown’s categorization was earlier anticipated by Bakhtin and members of his circle in several important works on the history of Western discursive
forms. In his famous essay “The Epic and the Novel,” Bakhtin identifies two opposing forces in cultural history—a centripetal tendency that he associated with official culture and the contrary centrifugal tendency of unofficial culture. As Bakhtin scholars have noted, official forces seek to impose order on an essentially heterogeneous and messy world, while unofficial forces continually disrupt that order. The Bakhtin circle also distinguishes between the “linear style” of authoritative discourse and the “pictorial style.” In this schema, authoritative discourse flows from efforts by a group to entrench approved forms of writing by discouraging any tampering or alterations to an approved canon. It seeks to standardize discursive forms to minimize individuality of expression, which might reveal the origins of a work in the specific, and therefore partial or incomplete, experience of the author. Therefore, official forces seek “stylistic homogeneity,” imbuing writing with the impression of authority or universality, and with minimal personalization. By contrast, the pictorial style seeks to maximize personalization by breaking down the boundaries between the reported speech and the speech of the author, calling attention to the relationship of style or form to social realities and attitudes, and enhancing dialogical interaction between speech and its contexts. These distinctions also closely correspond to Bakhtin’s important differentiation between monological and dialogical imperatives in writing. Monological, or single-voiced, discourse comprises the forms in which the author’s own voice takes precedence to the exclusion of other voices, while dialogical forms acknowledge a plurality of consciousnesses and perspectives in any given social situation. For Bakhtin, all writing can be placed on a continuum between the absolute monological closure of the traditional epic and the fully dialogized open-endedness of the modern novel, as exemplified in the work of Dostoevsky, in which each character is accorded her or his own authentic voice, unsubordinated by the voice or perspective of the author.

In the last century, in Western Canada, as throughout Western Europe and North America, vernacular practitioners and associated dialogical forms of writing were marginalized by the rise of the academic discipline, which introduced the new categories of “professional” and “amateur” history, and the associated privileging of professional production in opposition to its amateur counterparts. Academic history was constructed through the entrenchment of a series of hierarchies, including, among others, 1) the privileging of written documents over oral testimony, 2) the favouring of scholarly distance over direct experience, and 3) the development of a master narrative of progress to advance the new critical methods of academic historians in opposition to the putative biases of “promoters, patriots, and partisans” in nineteenth-century historiography. Other hierarchies flowed from the gender, ethnocultural, and...
class identifications of members of the historical profession throughout much of the twentieth century. Prior to the advent of social history in the 1970s, most practitioners of scholarly history were male, Euro-Canadian, middle class, and heteronormative in background, and these associations clearly influenced their perspectives on and practice of history. This is not to pursue an essentialist argument that identities rooted in these social categories necessarily predisposed practitioners to particular outlooks. However, current historiography suggests that few professional practitioners departed from the mainstream credo that suffused so much of the academic historical canon during the century following Confederation. Not until Gerald Friesen’s *The Canadian Prairies: A History* in 1984 and Jean Barman’s *The West Beyond the West* in 1991 was the social history of Aboriginal people, women, and working-class residents of the West significantly acknowledged in synthesis histories. For much of the twentieth century, non-mainstream issues in Western Canadian history were either addressed by vernacular or grassroots historians, or not at all.

It might be useful to try to isolate some of the characteristic features of these two major currents in Western Canadian historiography. Academic or scholarly history, which has been dominant since about 1900, has been predominantly deductive in approach to evidence and interpretation. Argument- or thesis-driven, it has usually been based on primary and secondary written sources. Over the last century, academic historians have preferred to write in the third person, expressing a position of detachment from the topic, and in the plain prose style pioneered in scientific writing by Francis Bacon. Academic discourse has thereby assumed the removed stance of Antonio Gramsci’s “traditional intellectual,” operating on the assumption that the realm of truth is separated from the world. Emphasizing the crafting of syntheses and generalizations from specific examples, these practitioners have preferred to subsume the voices of witnesses or other historical observers under the author’s synthesizing voice. Academic history has been presented in the synchronic (thematic) or diachronic (narrative) temporal modes, and less often in analytic modes. It has tended to be carried out by individual scholars although collaborative research is becoming more common.

By contrast, vernacular history, which was dominant up to about 1900, has historically been largely inductive in its authors’ approaches to evidence gathering and processing. Vernacular histories have also typically lacked a central argument. Like academic history, vernacular history has often been grounded in research in primary oral or written sources, or a combination of the two, but unlike academic history, it has been written in a variety of voices, including first, second, and third person. Vernacular authors have often not displayed scholarly detachment; their writing has tended to be informed by direct experience.
and animated by a passionate involvement with their subjects of study, more in keeping with Gramsci’s concept of the “organic intellectual.”25 Vernacular writers have resisted synthesis and generalization; rather than integrate other sources into their own arguments, they have often quoted sources at length and displayed the voices and perspectives of witnesses to history for readers to consider and evaluate for themselves. Vernacular history has been presented in narrative, thematic, or analytic modes but has also been cast in idiosyncratic forms. It has sometimes been prepared by individuals but in other cases collaboratively when it has served as a vehicle for the social memory of an ethnic-cultural community or other social group. Like scholarly history, vernacular history has included a wide range of practitioners and practices over the last hundred years. Vernacular historians have ranged from community historians to individual scholars to so-called history buffs, and their practice has assumed many forms, from informal pioneer reminiscences to highly crafted works of scholarship, exemplifying varying levels of talent, experience, and imagination.

Rather than approach these two categories as binary opposites, my preference is to treat both vernacular and academic histories as encompassing a range of strategies on a continuum extending from a close identification and engagement with one’s audience to a position of distanced removal. This continuum corresponds to the range of levels of interaction between performer and audience as mapped out by folklorist Roger D. Abrahams. In Abrahams’ schema, the spectrum of narrative expression extends from conversational genres, expressing full interpersonal engagement, to static genres of vicarious experience and removal from the audience, with various gradations between these poles. These categories also correspond to different narrative concerns—conversational genres tend to be more concerned with conflict and dramatic movement, while the static genres express a preoccupation with resolution, repose, and stability.26 Generally, academic writing has been weighted toward remoteness from the subject and vernacular history toward greater interpersonal connection, although it is important to reiterate that we are not talking about “traditions” so much as loosely defined genres, tendencies, and currents.27 My assumption is that even today vernacular currents persist in academic contexts, just as scholarly currents may be found within the vernacular, in keeping with the notion that vernacularity is more than a condition of “outsidedness” obtaining from local, class, or gender identity and difference, but also a position that writers may choose to inhabit through a close identification with and connectedness to vernacular communities and concerns.

This paper is concerned with three vernacular historians writing in three different periods in the twentieth century: Katherine Hughes, a female journalist, archivist, and social activist, whose most significant historical work predates the
First World War; F.G. Roe, an agricultural settler and railroad engineer, who produced major works from the interwar era to the period after the Second World War; and Roy Ito, a Japanese Canadian war veteran and teacher, whose historical research and books date from the 1980s and early 1990s. While informed by Gramsci’s concepts of organic and traditional intellectuals, this discussion shares a greater affinity with Grant Farred’s reformulation that places vernacularity as “operating outside organized political structures.” As Farred wrote, “the vernacular is a mobile and flexible experience, accommodating of different trajectories.”

The practice of the three historians discussed in this essay does not readily correspond to particular class membership or consciousness in the manner of Gramsci’s formulation. Of these three practitioners, only F.G. Roe clearly meets the definition of a member of the working class, while Hughes and Roy Ito might more accurately be placed in the professional white-collar, or “petit bourgeoisie” class, upwardly mobile but also occupying a recurrently insecure position owing to their gender or racial difference.

Regarding Roe, while clearly animated by populist sympathies, his work does not directly bear upon issues of class unless his deconstruction of academic authorities can be taken as an allegorical stand-in for resistance to class structures represented in mainstream historical discourse. Nevertheless, we might hazard an inference that Hughes’ experience as a woman writing in a patriarchal era (and as a Roman Catholic functioning within a developing Protestant dominance in the Prairies), Ito’s identity as a Japanese Canadian in an era of racial marginalization, and Roe’s proletarian origins in Sheffield at the height of the British class system influenced their formal approaches to history and prompted much of the passionate engagement that imbues their work with its resonance. As the African-American poet and philosopher Imamu Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) wrote in the 1960s: “The view from the top of the hill is not the same as that from the bottom of the hill.” In important ways, each of these practitioners was an outsider for whom gender, class, or racial barriers might have impeded their acceptance within mainstream historical discourse but whose very otherness was also what afforded them perspectives on history unlike those of other contemporary practitioners.

Katherine Hughes (1876–1925)

Thanks to the research of the Irish Studies specialist Padraig O Siadhail, a good outline of Katherine Hughes’ life is already available. She was born in Prince Edward Island in 1876, the second youngest of nine children in an Irish-Canadian Roman Catholic family and the niece of Cornelius O’Brien, archbishop of Halifax between 1883 and 1906. Hughes was educated in Charlottetown at Notre Dame Convent and Prince of Wales College, from which she graduated.
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with a first-class teacher’s licence in 1892. Soon afterwards she apparently moved with her family to Ottawa and became engaged in missionary work with First Nations in eastern Ontario and Quebec. In 1899 she worked as a teacher at the Mohawk reserve at Saint-Régis (Akwesasne) and in 1901 founded the Catholic Indian Association, which sought to find employment outside reserves for graduates of Indian schools. Like most missionary teachers of her era, she espoused an assimilationist ethos, albeit one informed by a deeply felt concern for Aboriginal people.

In the early 1900s, Hughes found work as a reporter with the Montreal Star, where she impressed William Cornelius Van Horne, president of the Canadian Pacific Railway Company. In June 1904 she became a founding member of the Canadian Women’s Press Club, established en route to the St. Louis World’s Fair. Perhaps also through Van Horne’s connections, she caught the eye of Frank Oliver, publisher of the Edmonton Bulletin, who offered her a job with his newspaper in 1906. Within two years, she had accepted the position of Alberta’s first provincial archivist; in this role, she actively sought textual and photographic collections for the archives while carrying out oral history research with old-timers in the region to preserve their stories. “I should like to get from them, if possible, portraits of the early settlers, buildings, fairs, banquets, or any striking incident connected with the old times,” she wrote in an advertisement. In 1909 Hughes was appointed private secretary to Premier A.C. Rutherford; she also served as secretary to his successor A.L.W. Sifton. In 1912, at the request of Bishop Legal, she organized the Catholic Women’s League of Edmonton (within the Diocese of St. Albert) to assist Roman Catholic immigrants to Alberta. In 1913 she transferred to London, England to become assistant and secretary in the office of the agent general for Alberta. By the time she returned to Canada in 1915, she had become a passionate advocate of Irish independence, which proved harmful to her standing with Anglo-Canadian elites.
Hughes was acquainted with Father Lacombe even before she moved west, and they evidently developed a warm friendship. Lacombe had long intended to write his own memoirs but complained that distractions had prevented him from pulling it together. According to historian Raymond Huel, Lacombe first approached Hughes in 1904 with the request to write his memoirs, and in 1907 she agreed to take on this assignment, apparently with the church’s blessing. Hughes’ published biography of Lacombe, entitled *Father Lacombe: The Black-Robe Voyageur*, was in some ways an extension of the archival project she had commenced as provincial archivist. Specifically, her book illustrates an archivist’s approach to collecting and displaying oral history. As she showed during her trip to northern Alberta in 1909, Hughes saw her role as one of collecting and preserving the reminiscences of old-timers, written biographies, and original documents for posterity. She prided herself on including extensive dialogue in the book and especially on the authenticity it represented. In the foreword to the 1920 edition of the biography, she writes: “Where I repeat conversations in Père Lacombe’s Life, I am not making magnificent guesses at what these people likely would have said. I am repeating from the lips of participants what actually was said—or what I myself heard…. This record is History—picturesque western History caught for posterity before it had passed out of memory—and while many of its makers still walked with us.”

Relying on both oral and written sources, including her extensive correspondence with Lacombe, Hughes brought out some nuanced dimensions to her subject that were not well known at the time and have not been extensively treated in the subsequent historiography. For example, she was not averse to pointing out differences between Lacombe’s written records and his oral recollections. One such example was his condemnatory comments on railroad construction workers, whose language and conduct he often found blasphemous. Hughes concludes that Lacombe’s oral reminiscences were sugar-coated in relation to the more frank—and truer—expression of his sentiments as recorded in his diary. She also does not always paint a flattering picture of her subject. Lacombe emerges from her account as a subject with a unique personality; certainly hers is not a generic official biography of a missionary. For example, she relates Lacombe’s reported indignation on encountering intolerance directed toward his priestly robes while visiting Winnipeg in 1874. Recounting Lacombe’s words, she conveys his defiance: “More than once insulting jeering remarks were thrown slyly at him as he passed through the streets; and usually then a very unpriestly desire came to thrash the man or boy who flung the jeer at the crucifix or robe. There never was anything of the turn-the-other-cheek Christianity about Father Lacombe.” Hughes’ anecdotal approach, incorporating both extensive direct quotation of Lacombe’s own words and indirect
reported speech in the pictorial style, grounds her biography in everyday experience and dialogical interaction with her subject. In her version, according to Padraig O Siadhail, “Lacombe emerges in all his contradictions as missionary and colonizer ... simple churchman and wily old politician.”

Like Lacombe, Hughes was unsympathetic to the armed resistance led by Louis Riel in 1885 although she took pains to document Lacombe’s sympathy for prairie Aboriginal peoples in the West during the Northwest Resistance/Rebellion. In that era, criticism of Prime Minister John A. Macdonald’s government was rare in the English-language historiography, but Hughes quoted Bishop Grandin’s correspondence with Macdonald, in which Grandin reproached the prime minister for failing to respond with “anything but fine words.” In her notes, Hughes also records a conversation with Lacombe in which he revealed he had considered the possibility of most Prairie First Nations taking up arms in 1885, which he thought might buy them three or four more years of freedom. Ultimately, however, he believed it would bring about the destruction of First Nations on the Prairies. It was this realization, she implies, that impelled Lacombe to exhort the Blackfoot not to join Riel’s resistance, followed by his famous telegraph to Sir John A. Macdonald assuring him that the Blackfoot intended to remain loyal to Canada. Notwithstanding Lacombe’s role in encouraging the Blackfoot not to take up arms, Hughes suggests that he was dismayed by the aggressive character of Canadian settlement and what he viewed as the newcomers’ lack of regard for the well-being of the Aboriginal populations of the Prairies, a concern she shared. In her notes on Lacombe, she writes: “15,000 people in west at time of transfer—objected to themselves and possessions being signed away without one word of their consent or approval.” Her position contrasts sharply with contemporary assertions of George Bryce, the father of academic historiography in Western Canada, who celebrated Canada’s victory in 1885 as an imagined triumph of civilization over barbarism.

Beyond highlighting aspects of Lacombe’s character, Hughes allowed her biography to be a conduit for the missionary’s major thoughts, including his dismay at developing racism and marginalization of difference within Euro-Canadian communities in the West. Hughes faithfully recorded Lacombe’s words: “Out of these many years of communication with the Indians, I bring this thought, that with all the power left to me, I want to impress upon the white man that the Indians are truly in flesh, feelings, and aims, our brothers. Do not judge the race by one or a score of the worst as you do not judge some of the bad white people—Look upon these poor uneducated populations, scattered in our Northwest with sympathy, charity, and Christian philanthropy. I think that you occupy now the land and ground where they were born and which was once their property.”
Hughes’s approach to form was to present history not retrospectively as a process completed in the past but rather as a dynamic succession of present-day occurrences, as animated by direct quotation of the participants’ own words. With a journalist’s eye for both a compelling anecdote and first-person dialogue, she imbued her biography with immediacy and contingency. Hughes does not present us with a past that is sealed off and done with. Every episode in Lacombe’s life is presented as he might have viewed it, part of an open-ended present, resonant with future possibilities. Her approach to history derived from her own life experience. As she writes in her unpublished notes, “Experience is knowledge, obtained by one’s own person in senses, spirit, etc.” She divided this experiential knowledge into three categories—physical, mental, and spiritual, all of which she saw as interconnected. In this regard, Hughes could not separate her religious beliefs from her writing, and her biography of Lacombe might properly be viewed as an extension of her work as a Roman Catholic missionary and teacher. Rather than assume a position of objectivity and neutrality, she became passionately committed to documenting what she regarded as Lacombe’s selfless devotion to the Prairie First Nations, mirroring her own concerns as a missionary.

Notwithstanding Lacombe’s celebrity, Hughes’ choice of subject departed from the mainstream focus of Anglo-Canadian historiography of the early twentieth century. In that era, the nation-building preoccupations of Anglo-Canadian historians led them to privilege historical figures associated with Confederation or its historical antecedents. These included mostly anglophone and a few francophone political and military leaders, as in the twenty original books of The Makers of Canada series. This series comprises biographies of three colonial governors; three prominent fur traders; three francophone political leaders; three Maritime politicians; war hero Isaac Brock; educator Egerton Ryerson, founder of the Ontario school system; and five Ontario politicians. All the historical figures represented in the series were drawn from Canada’s privileged classes. As historian Daniel Francis observes, these individuals comprise a pantheon of heroes “whose efforts had contributed to the development of the self-governing nation.”

In contrast, Hughes’ biographical subject was a francophone priest who, while closely connected to pivotal events and prominent personalities involved in Canadian expansion, followed a career path diverging from the nation-building narratives of the canon in that era. Nation building was in any case a tenuous rubric for this particular author, whose nascent Irish nationalism inclined her to take a critical attitude toward Anglo-Saxon pan-Canadianism. Beyond her own authorial voice and Lacombe’s, she quoted the words of the Cree leader Sweet Grass, the Blackfoot chief Crowfoot, Métis and other observers.
alongside quotations from prominent businessmen and church leaders of the period. She wrote in a period in which the developing discipline of history was increasingly subsuming the diverse voices of history under the professionals’ overriding syntheses, such as the Rev. Dr. George Bryce’s refashioning Western Canadian historiography as a narrative of the ascendancy of his own Anglo-Canadian ethnocultural group. While certainly no oppositionist, Hughes brought vernacular voices into Western Canadian historical discourse, a practice that waned as the professionalization project took hold. For Lacombe’s biography, Hughes pioneered in oral history and careful scholarship, and in employing forms of representation enabling the people she was studying to speak for themselves. Hughes’ biography of Father Lacombe was a popular success and is still regarded as a reliable source.

Nevertheless, Hughes’ biography of Lacombe fell short of a fully dialogized treatment of his life and career. While including quotations from First Nations witnesses, she incorporated their voices within her own narrative framework rather than as fully autonomous individuals with the freedom to challenge or contradict her assertions. Lacombe’s close connections to Canadian Pacific Railway executives Lord Strathcona and Sir William Cornelius Van Horne also raise questions in terms of his apparently divided loyalties, and the missionary experience itself has been considered highly problematic. I do not intend here to make light of these issues although Lacombe’s role as elaborated by Hughes does appear to share affinities with other Euro-Canadian witnesses to colonization who sought to mitigate the negative consequences of Canadian expansion in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Hughes’ biography is not an objective, detached account of Lacombe’s life. Rather, it is a text animated by both her admiration for Lacombe and her compassion for Aboriginal people who had been displaced by advancing European settlement in the West. The book’s merit resides in its status as a faithful representation of Lacombe’s own perspectives on his long career as a missionary, as mediated through Hughes’ sympathetic eyes. By quoting Lacombe and other witnesses at length, she contributed their authentic voices to the historiography of his career and to an important period of Western Canadian history.

Frank Gilbert Roe (1878–1973)

Roe was born into a working-class family in Sheffield, England in 1878 and moved with his family to the Blackfalds district north of Red Deer in 1894, where they made entry for a homestead, built and established residence in a sod house, and then moved into a log dwelling a year later. After the early death of their father, Roe and his brother, both teenagers, attempted to con-
continue farming with their mother. The 1906 Census of the Prairie Provinces enumerated Roe, still single at twenty-seven, as the sole head of the household consisting of himself and his mother. Two and a half years later, following the third in a succession of crop failures, they were forced to abandon their farm. Obliged to start again from scratch at the age of thirty, Roe found a job with the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway and worked his way up to an engineer’s position by 1919. He also assumed a leadership role in the railroad workers’ union. After 1923 he continued his career with the Canadian National Railway (CNR) until his retirement in 1944. Obligated by his family’s straitened circumstances to work at an early age, Roe had no formal education beyond the age of twelve.

Roe’s limited formal education would seem to be a poor preparation for intellectual labour, but Roe was no ordinary school dropout. Early in life he developed a passion for reading and reflection that belied his lack of schooling. Roe’s grassroots experiences also imbued him with a down-to-earth quality that apparently never left him. In his published autobiography, he recalls several direct encounters with First Nations people at his family’s homestead in Alberta, including his purchase of two pairs of moccasins for fifty cents from the Aboriginal visitors. A theme running throughout his published and unpublished writings is his persistent sense of injustice regarding indignities that had been visited on Aboriginal people. He was particularly critical of the residential school system imposed on First Nations, which he regarded as paternalistic and authoritarian.

Roe came to his great subject virtually by happenstance. Aware that certain nineteenth-century British scholars had sought to determine whether or not English roads had begun as animal paths, he developed a similar curiosity with regard to North America. When, as an engineer, he travelled over trestle bridges or high above mountain valleys, his imagination was piqued by the ap-
pearance of trails visible from the engine cab; these sightings spurred him to investigate the hypothesis that prairie First Nations trails followed old buffalo routes.55

He began by assembling a large corpus of references to the Prairies, which he had planned to publish before learning that the English Place Names Society was then undertaking to publish much of the same primary material he had already collected. Discouraged at first, it then occurred to him that his assembled materials offered the potential for developing a much larger study on the buffalo as a wild species in its former domain across the Canadian Prairies, Northern Great Plains, and other regions of the continent. Roe continued to collect materials and wrote the manuscript of his book *The North American Buffalo: A Critical Study of the Species in Its Wild State* between ca. 1925 and 1940, while still employed by the CNR as a train engineer.

What is striking even today is the immense scope of Roe’s subject, encompassing the study of the entire natural range of the North American buffalo across the continent of North America. Inspired by the panoramic prospects afforded a train engineer travelling through the Rockies, Roe applied his expansive perspective to wide-ranging research on this species while other contemporary historians of Western Canada—including A.S. Morton, Marcel Giraud, and W.L. Morton—largely confined their archival research on the buffalo to the documents of missionaries and Hudson’s Bay Company officers bearing primarily on the areas north of the forty-ninth parallel.56

On one level, Roe’s book constituted a monumental historical reconstruction of arguably the most significant event in Western Canada in the nineteenth century—the virtual extirpation of the buffalo from its natural habitat on the North American prairies and plains. His work was enabled by a unique research context in the first half of the century. In the early decades, the small number of serious students of Western Canadian history militated against rigid hierarchies and sometimes contributed to collegiality between the classes. Alexander Rutherford, a former premier of Alberta and chancellor of the University of Alberta, granted Roe wide access to his library near the University of Alberta in Strathcona (Edmonton).57 University librarian Donald Ewing Cameron was another senior person at the University of Alberta who also gave Roe unimpeded access to its developing collections of materials.58 Roe consulted Cameron when considering the preparation of a much larger work than originally intended on the history of the buffalo, and the university librarian’s encouragement was apparently decisive in his decision to proceed.59

On another level, Roe’s book constitutes a detailed critical analysis and deconstruction of questionable or erroneous generalizations and specific assertions by both period witnesses and scholarly authorities on the buffalo in the
Roe was aware that his research constituted a revisionist challenge to Western North American historiography, and he deliberately set out to challenge what he regarded as uncritical orthodoxies that had come to dominate the subfield. Discovering in the course of his research on the buffalo that early eyewitness evidence “was almost damning in its complete refutation of most positive pronouncements by later scholars,” Roe’s practice evinced a particular aversion to reifications that he discovered were widely represented in the literature. In his monumental challenge to received wisdom, he followed “a series of principles I had laid down for my own guidance.” These include “the vital distinction between observation and opinion, the insertion as far as possible of any witnesses’ testimony in his own words, the inclusion of as many witnesses as possible on any topic of dubious or disputed authority, and the precise and accurate documentation of any citations whatever, whether of factual matter or opinion. Only thus, could a fair and authentic account of the buffalo be presented.”

Among the nineteenth-century observers he examined critically are Alexander Ross, Reverend John McDougall, and Henry Youle Hind, each of whom asserted that the plains Aboriginal cultures overhunted the buffalo on which they had relied for numerous generations, as if impelled by a suicidal death wish. To Roe, these assertions were misguided if not ridiculous. Piece by piece, he picked apart both the texts of period observers and the scholarly authorities who accepted their assertions uncritically. In treating the narratives of Rev. John McDougall, Roe zealously critiqued what he regarded as McDougall’s sanctimonious hypocrisy. Regarding Hind’s report on the putative migration patterns of buffalo, Roe comments, ironically: “The foregoing is an admirable specimen of a type of general description which might be considered highly informative or even convincing, if we had no other source of information.” Of Alexander Ross, Roe comments on this observer’s tendency to have “recorded an incident and made it a law.”

Roe reserved his most detailed criticism for three American specialists, including William T. Hornaday, an acknowledged leading authority whose work entrenched and perpetuated notions of Aboriginal profligacy, waste, and re-
responsibility for the destruction of the buffalo. Hornaday, formerly a zoologist at the Smithsonian Institution, was then director of the New York Zoological Society and a close associate of leading eugenicists in the United States. For decades following the publication of his *The Extermination of the American Bison*, it served as the standard text on the topic, and it continues to be cited even today. It was this book’s questionable scientific status “as the unchallenged authority on a subject for over half-a-century,” combined with its racialist sentiments, that prompted Roe to devote particular attention to Hornaday in his own book, and his analysis of this work occupies a significant proportion of the text of *The North American Buffalo*. Roe writes: “Those portions of Hornaday’s essay dealing with the Indian are the most unsatisfactory of the entire work. The exaggerations, the contradictions, the unsupported assertions, and the slovenly argumentation, which are only too frequently evident in his pages, are brought to bear in an exaggerated form against the Indian.”

Meanwhile, Roe encountered Ernest Thompson Seton in Edmonton. In the 1930s, Roe’s friend Donald Cameron introduced him to the University of Alberta zoologist William Rowan, who, after reading several chapters of his buffalo manuscript, also became one of his champions. Rowan in turn introduced him to Seton, who happened to be visiting with him in Edmonton. Roe proceeded to interrogate Seton as to why he had relied on Hornaday in his work on the buffalo; he later recalled Seton’s reply that “he was then a young man and rather diffident in the face of Hornaday’s authority.” Roe states: “I told Seton that if my manuscript ever got itself printed Hornaday himself would be in the dock, and not for that alone.” However, Roe was also willing to acknowledge that Seton, “in his old age if not before,” had revised previously unsympathetic attitudes toward Aboriginal people and “had thrown his great weight behind the ‘new look’ at the Indian question.”

The particular hybrid form of Roe’s idiosyncratic work might paradoxically be characterized as a deconstructivist epic. Written long before the rise of postmodernism, deconstruction, and the associated critique of reification, Roe’s work shares certain affinities with these currents from more recent critical theory, as his open-ended style runs against the grain of the reifying tendencies of the sanctioned historical discourse of his own era. His parodic style—with its extended quotation of the most egregious passages from Hornaday and other biased authorities, relentless dissections, innumerable digressions, and caustic asides—constitutes a dialogical form of writing that was utterly opposed to the hierarchical closure of conventional historical discourse. Unlike historical synthesis that seeks to override the vernacular, Roe insists on preserving local difference, and rather than the familiar declarative voice of scholarly writing, he favours the interrogative. He continually poses questions
to readers, and, as one might expect of an inquiring mind, is often dissatisfied with the answers—his own or those of others. For example, having discredited the buffalo authorities’ notion of regular buffalo migrations, Roe also freely acknowledges his own inability to replace the conventional wisdom with a new hypothesis, as he refers to “those numerous instances in which the origin of some recognized and powerful impulse is the despair of the inquirer.”

Yet Roe’s *The North American Buffalo* is far more than a deconstruction or dismantling of faulty authorities. He devotes at least as much attention to historical reconstructions through the painstaking analysis of the entire corpus of primary published material on the buffalo, including documentation of its movements and whether hypothesized migrations could be verified. He also seeks to reconstruct the sequence of actions in both the United States and Canada leading to the near extirpation of the species in the wild. Roe’s book provides encyclopedic data on environmental history, including the climate and topography of buffalo habitat in regions across the continent.

Notwithstanding the support of key scholars and university officials in Edmonton, Roe encountered resistance when seeking to publish his manuscript. In his unpublished autobiography, he relates a succession of rejections by university presses, whose editors asserted that they could entertain the work of only accredited scholars. He writes: “Meanwhile several years passed by and publication seemed no nearer than ever. I grew very much discouraged; and more than once, but for my wife’s remonstrances, I think the MS. would have gone into the furnace.” He submitted several chapters of the manuscript to the *Canadian Historical Review*, which accepted them for publication as articles. As well, Roe’s academic colleagues, apparently from the University of Alberta, read Roe’s papers on his behalf at annual meetings of the Royal Society of Canada, and two of his essays on the buffalo were published in the Society’s *Transactions*. Then, according to Roe, “a lucky accident happened.” In 1949 Roe learned that George Brown, professor of history at the University of Toronto and long-term editor of the *Canadian Historical Review*, who had published some of Roe’s work in that journal, was coming to Vancouver to lecture at the University of British Columbia. Learning of his impending sojourn, Roe invited Brown to visit him in Victoria, and when Brown arrived, he presented him with his 1,637-page manuscript. Roe writes: “I think the size of it almost took his breath away. After looking through it quite briefly he evidently caught the general ‘motif.’ ‘This thing ought to be printed, Mr. Roe.’” At Brown’s request, Roe mailed him the manuscript after his return to Toronto, and it was published within two years by the University of Toronto Press.

Almost coincidentally, the University of Alberta awarded Roe a Doctorate of Laws, *honoris causa*, on 20 October 1951 and invited him to deliver the con-
vocation address. Roe’s achievements were further recognized by leading academic historians of his day. In the late 1950s, George Stanley and F.E.L. Priestley, themselves eminent scholars in History and English, nominated Roe to the Royal Society of Canada. After some debate focusing on his advanced age, Roe was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada in 1960 at the age of eighty-two.

In the early 1980s, historian Lewis G. Thomas wrote an appreciation of Roe in the foreword to a posthumous autobiographical compilation extracted from Roe’s unpublished papers, entitled *Getting the Know-How: Homesteading and Railroading in Early Alberta*. Numerous laudatory reviews greeted the publication of Roe’s *The North American Buffalo* across North America and Britain, including a review in the journal *Ecology* by F. Fraser Darling, who characterized it as “one of those great books which will adorn the culture of a continent.” In an obituary and tribute published in the Proceedings of the Royal Society of Canada, historian George Stanley describes Roe’s book as “truly a magnificent work, which received acclaim from scholars in Great Britain, France, Germany and Poland, as well as in Canada and the United States.” The book’s enduring resonance resides in its author’s critical spirit and unceasing quest for the truth.

**Roy Ito (1922–2000)**

Born in Vancouver in 1922, Roy Ito was a member of the Nisei or second-generation Japanese Canadians in British Columbia. While growing up in Vancouver, he became acutely aware of the linguistic barriers that had cropped up between the generations, even within his own family, in which his parents spoke Japanese and he was far more fluent in English. Against these differences, he related the importance of the Asahi baseball team in providing a venue at which the entire community could come together. A shared sense of belonging to a community, one united not by linguistic bonds so much as its members’ shared sense of marginalization from mainstream society, impressed on Ito and other members of his generation the need to support one another in the face of systemic racism in British Columbia.

Following Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 and the implementation of compulsory registration and removal of all Japanese Canadians in Canada’s west coastal zone, Ito moved with his family to southern Alberta, where they worked on a sugar beet farm. A year later, he moved back to Kaslo in B.C.’s interior, where he assumed the position of assistant English editor for *The New Canadian* newspaper under the editorship of Thomas Shoyama. The core group of young writers to which he belonged—including Marje Umezuki, Muriel Kitigawa, and Harry Kondo—saw their role as one of reinforcing the faith and confidence of members of the Japanese-Canadian community in their identity as Canadians.
through this difficult period of displacement and marginalization. Shoyama writes: “We had a sense of mission in the sense that it was very important to do everything we could to sustain morale. We had to tell people: Look, in spite of all these terrible things that have happened to you, stand on your own feet. Look within yourself to your own strength and self-respect and your own sense of dignity.”

After commencing studies at McMaster University in 1943, Ito enlisted with the S-20 Unit of Japanese Canadian recruits for service with Canadian forces in the Second World War and served as a sergeant with the Canadian Intelligence Corps in India and Southeast Asia. After the Second World War, he completed his university studies, became a teacher, and for the last twenty-five years of his career, served as a school principal, retiring in 1984. Even before his retirement, Ito had already embarked on a major project to research the history of Japanese Canadians’ role in the First and Second World Wars. As a veteran of the Second World War, he felt a responsibility to his comrades to tell their story of fighting for Canada and in particular of the First World War veterans’ application of their wartime service to secure the franchise for Japanese Canadian veterans, a prelude to the general extension of the franchise to Asian Canadians after the Second World War. In 1984, the year of his retirement as a school principal, Ito published his first book, We Went to War: The Story of the Japanese Canadians Who Served during the First and Second World Wars. In focusing on the wartime service of both Issei and Nisei generations, Ito stresses the role of their military service in demonstrating for Japanese Canadians a sense of belonging to Canada, of participating in the country’s struggles and sharing in its sacrifices. He writes: "For Japanese Canadian veterans, the struggle was not merely to wear the King’s uniform, not to gain the franchise, but to be able to say without any fear of contradiction: ‘I am a part of my country. I have suffered in her struggles and gloried in her victories, I was ready when I was needed. I am a Canadian.’"
Ito’s research for this book included extensive reliance on Japanese language sources, including period newspapers and published diaries and letters from soldiers, from which the author selected and translated passages for inclusion in the book, supplemented by oral histories. These quoted passages afford a vividness and immediacy to his account, which goes far to illuminate the soldiers’ experience in the theatre of war, including their aspirations, achievements, and suffering. Ito also carried out considerable archival research, but that is not the principal strength of the book. Its merit largely resides in incorporating Japanese-Canadian voices into the story and in enabling the assorted participants to speak for themselves as witnesses to history. While he left an extensive set of papers elaborating research on many chapters in Japanese-Canadian history, Ito’s reluctance to focus on himself is evident in the dearth of material in his papers dealing with his practice as a historian. Nevertheless, an entry from his wartime diary affords a partial glimpse into his philosophy of history. Referring to the agency of his Nisei comrades in enlisting in the Canadian armed forces in 1945 and the significance of their taking this step for the Japanese-Canadian community, he writes: “[We] felt a big significant step forward was made for our people. Motto ‘Action From Knowledge.’” A further, concise statement of his concrete, experiential approach to history can be drawn from a passage in his second book, *Stories of My People*, in which he writes: “[History] should be told from the inside, a history as seen and remembered by the people who have shared the experience.”

Ito’s largest work, researched and written over an eight- to ten-year period following his retirement, is the book *Stories of My People: A Japanese Canadian Journal*, a wide-ranging series of vignettes of both well-known and obscure people and events in Japanese-Canadian history. Loosely organized chronologically into five eras of Japanese-Canadian experience in Canada (1877–1907, 1908–18, 1918–41, 1941–45, and 1945–88), it also includes a section on Canadian Nisei recruits in wartime Japan, in which the author relates his own experiences as a Canadian soldier during the Second World War through a series of stories. The balance of his narrative traces this history through the life stories of other individuals, from the arrival of the first Japanese Canadian immigrant in 1877 to the attainment of the redress settlement and the formal apology of the federal government to Japanese Canadians in 1988. Ito was one of the first scholars to address this history through extensive reliance on Japanese language newspapers and oral history, in contrast with the archivally based research of other historians. As Marilyn Iwama points out in a 1995 review of the book, Ito’s approach to research influenced the interpretive orientation of his book. Rather than rely on government documents that presented to historians an image of Japanese Canadians as submissive victims, Ito’s direct experience of the
Second World War, as well as his research in Japanese-Canadian newspapers, revealed to him that his own community had reacted to injustices with dignity and active resistance. His work contrasts significantly with academic work of the same era, which is based largely on government sources and tends toward interpretations aligned with official justifications of the internment of Japanese Canadians on the basis of wartime contexts of 1942.

In terms of form, *Stories of My People* does not represent Japanese-Canadian history as a seamless narrative. Rather, Ito broke up the continuous flow of text with photographs, cartoons, anecdotes, lists of people whose history was being represented, a plan of the Japanese neighbourhood of Powell Street, and even poetry, such as “Powell Street Knows” by Mark Toyama, a voice of the Nisei generation. Periodically punctuating the generally reserved narrative with occasional expressions of emotion—including anger, nostalgia, joy, grief, and devotion—Ito did not feign objectivity and distance from his subject. These periodic ruptures in Ito’s narrative echo the disjunctures in Japanese-Canadian history, a history that resists the smooth continuities of conventional narrative history. Even so, Ito found agency in the midst of injustice. For example, notwithstanding the racist character of many of the displayed cartoons, Ito managed to find one that showed spirited resistance within his community to the violent attacks during the 1907 anti-Asian riots in Vancouver. Overlaying and connecting the individual stories is Ito’s literary device of treating the stories as his own personal journal, although he resisted the temptation to shape them into an integrated whole. Ito’s evident objective was to enable each story to speak for itself and retain its own integrity as a stand-alone episode without being subordinated to an overriding narrative synthesis.

Ito’s emotion shows through in the penultimate chapter of *Stories of My People*, a chapter dealing with the friendship and collaboration of George Tanaka of the National Japanese Canadian Citizens Association and Ken Adachi, a journalist chosen by the association to write the history of Japanese Canadians during the Second World War. The publication of Adachi’s book in 1976 was a milestone in the revival of Japanese-Canadian post-internment identity, and it examines an important chapter in Canadian history neglected in mainstream historiography. Ito’s chapter consists largely of extended letters between Tanaka and Adachi, affording a revealing glimpse into the struggles of writers within marginalized communities. In their correspondence, Adachi writes of various setbacks and a lack of support for his writing, while Tanaka repeatedly urges him to continue. Adachi was finally able to publish *The Enemy That Never Was* in 1976, thirteen years before his suicide in Toronto. Of this tragic event, Ito comments tersely: “Silence isn’t always golden.”
Ito concludes *Stories of My People* with a chapter on the redress settlement of 1988, followed by his concluding reflections entitled “The End of My Journal.” Here, he expresses ambivalence regarding the history of the Japanese Canadians in the twentieth century. While expressing no bitterness toward Canada, he could not forget his experiences of growing up in British Columbia: “We were called names … dirty Japs! The word still makes us bristle. There were hakujin who seem to have an unreasonable loathing for all things Japanese…. We were sitting ducks. ‘Boycott their stores. Close their schools. The Japs are treacherous. Send them back to Japan.’” Ito also reflects on the prospect of community fragmentation: “The ties that once bound us from west to east as one community will be no more. We are moving as a small invisible minority living in fragmented communities.” Alongside his expressed ambivalence toward British Columbia, Ito simultaneously expresses a deep attachment to Canada, a country that he served overseas in the Second World War.

The author’s concluding words were drawn from a poem by Motoori Norinaga, an eighteenth-century Japanese scholar and poet. Ito writes: “It is a poem no Japanese can read without being moved but it has to be read and understood in Japanese. It reveals the essence of the spirit of the Japanese people, a part of our heritage”:

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Shikishima no
Yamato gokoro o hito towaba
Asahi ni ni-o-u
Yamazakura kana.
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Notwithstanding his admonition that the poem needs to be understood in Japanese, as a teacher Ito could not refrain from offering a translation for readers he knew would not be able to read it in its original language: “The morning fragrance of the mountain cherry blossom is the Yamato spirit of Japan.” With understated grace, Ito thereby expresses his pride in his own people.

**Conclusions**

For much of the last century, vernacular history has been a vital, if often discounted, force in Western Canadian historiography. In both Western Canada and other regions of the country, it occupied a critical place in the practice of history even as advancing concepts of professional history after 1900 generated the new category of “amateur” as its binary opposite and as a prelude to its marginalization. Within successive generations of the twentieth century, the vernacular impulse persisted in the oral traditions of Aboriginal cultures, as well
as within successive waves of immigrant communities. It survived in both towns and rural districts, where often one or more dedicated individuals typically assumed the role of documenting the community’s history. Unlike its professional counterparts, vernacular history was characteristically un-nationalistic. While oral traditions continued within Aboriginal and other communities, over time vernacular writing was extensively displaced by written histories of Euro-Canadian groups that became dominant in the post-Confederation economic, social, political, and cultural life of the four Western provinces. Thereafter, orality was accorded little credibility in the emerging text-based cultures of the Prairies, although in the first half of the twentieth century, the distinction between professionals and amateurs could not be rigidly maintained. Even after the great expansion of academic and public history between the 1950s and 1970s, when the professional historical canon became well entrenched, vernacular currents could still be discerned. Today they hold the potential to connect us to people who either directly participated in important events or who left us grassroots knowledge bearing upon the interpretation of these events.

The history of vernacular historical production reminds us of what was lost alongside what was gained in the course of professionalization. Beyond issues of inclusion or exclusion of content, a casualty of professionalization was a loss of multivocality, as diverse grassroots voices bearing on historical experience were appropriated and subsumed under the monological syntheses of scholars as authorities. Here we might refer to the French philosopher Jacques Rancière, whose book *The Names of History* offers a rather trenchant critique of Annales-style social history. Rancière asserts that in the course of dissecting and analyzing human groups from the past, the Annales scholars inflicted a second death on the people they were studying, robbing them of their vitality as historical agents by smothering them with what he terms “the excess of words.” I would certainly not endorse Rancière’s sweeping critique of the great Annales tradition, but he may have a point. What has often been missing in Western Canadian historiography is the voices of historical participants or individuals with grassroots experience of their communities’ histories, as well as direct dialogical engagement with these voices by practitioners seeking to represent their experience.

Excepting several unique characteristics owing to their different personalities and life trajectories, the work of the three vernacular historians highlighted here illuminates three different eras of Western Canadian historiography over the last century. The work of Katherine Hughes belongs to the earliest phase of post-Confederation historical writing in the new provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan. Operating outside the nascent male- and Anglo-Canadian-dominated historical profession of Western Canada in that era, her choice of Albert
Lacombe as biographical subject contrasts with the nation-building preoccupations of her contemporaries. In terms of form, she pioneered in oral history and wrote history as a succession of open-ended contingencies in the present, as opposed to a retrospective, sealed-off process. Hughes’ idealization of Lacombe prevented her from fully representing the diversity of perspectives and voices bearing on his career although her extensive use of quoted material expressed a partially realized dialogism surpassing the monological narratives of other historians of that period. A generation later, F.G. Roe’s *The North American Buffalo* represented a more fully dialogized engagement with history, manifested in the author’s extended debates with his sources and in his candour regarding his own thought process, displaying a critical spirit and method throughout. Roe’s widely acknowledged achievements owed much to a fairly open scholarly environment in Edmonton in the first half of the twentieth century, when academic historians reached beyond the university to encourage a prodigiously talented vernacular historian who they recognized was making a significant contribution to the field. By contrast, Roy Ito was writing in the late twentieth century in British Columbia, when Japanese Canadians still felt isolated from mainstream society and academic historians were either writing about their history from a position of distanced removal or ignoring it altogether. Acutely aware of his community’s marginalization in historical discourse, Ito researched and highlighted important episodes omitted in the prevailing historiography. In the process, he experimented with form and produced multivocal works disrupting the organicist flow of conventional narrative, enabling vernacular voices to be heard and challenging readers to reconsider their assumptions regarding the boundaries of legitimate historical discourse. Each of these writers drew on their own direct experiences as witnesses to history to add to our understanding of the people and events about which they were writing. As outsiders freed from the constraints of conventional form, they followed history wherever the evidence and their imaginations took them, exemplifying a fusion of vernacular experimentation and grassroots commitment. Their works attest to the dynamism of the vernacular impulse and the importance of recovering and nurturing this strain to the revitalization of the practice of history in Western Canada.

Notes

1 I would like to acknowledge the critical comments of Ron Frohwerk and Walter Hildebrandt, which have helped me improve this text. Jean Barman’s early advice on structuring the thematic material was also much appreciated. The notable assistance of the following archivists is gratefully acknowledged: Diane Lamoureux,
Archivist, Missionary Oblates, Grandin Archives; Jonathan Davidson and Robin Wallace, reference archivists at the Provincial Archives of Alberta; Nadica Lora, Assistant Archivist at the University of Victoria Archives; and the archival staff at Library and Archives Canada in Ottawa. I also appreciate the invitation of session chair Jeremy Mouat and the organizing committee of The West and Beyond conference, Edmonton, 19-21 June 2008, to present this paper in the concluding panel devoted to Western Canadian historiography.


8 Elsewhere I have argued that the practice of vernacular architecture has affinities to the concept of bricolage, as elaborated by anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, who distinguished between two types of science—the abstract Western science, analogous to the approach of an engineer, and the concrete or applied science of a bricoleur, or handyman. Where the engineer designs specific tools and conceptual frameworks for each new problem, the bricoleur pragmatically reworks materials within pre-existing mental frameworks to arrive at a suitable solution. A good example of the vernacular result of the “untamed thinking” characterizing bricolage is the complex of wintering shelters erected by the North Polar explorer Robert Peary and his expedition party in an emergency situation in the High Arctic in 1900. See Lyle Dick, “The Fort Conger Shelters and Vernacular Adaptation to the High Arctic,” SSAC Bulletin (Society for the Study of Architecture in Canada) 16, no. 1 (March 1991): 13–23; and Claude Lévi-Strauss, The Savage Mind (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966). See also Henry Glassie, Vernacular Architecture (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).


17 Valentin N. Voloshinov, Marxism and the Philosophy of Knowledge, trans. Ladislaz Matejka and I.R. Titunik (New York: Seminar, 1973), 120–22; and Morson and Emerson, Mikhail Bakhtin, 165. Bakhtin scholars Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist have argued that this work was actually authored by Bakhtin and published under the name of Voloshinov, a member of his scholarly circle. Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, Mikhail Bakhtin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap/ Harvard University Press, 1984), 146–70. For counter-arguments on the issue of this book’s authorship, see Morson and Emerson, 102–19. In any case, the issue of whether or not Bakhtin authored this text is of little consequence for this discussion, as the arguments of Voloshinov are consistent with the tenor of Bakhtin’s other writings and his philosophy of dialogism.

19 To refer to some current definitions, the word *professional* has alternately been defined as 1) following an occupation as a means of livelihood or for gain, and 2) engaged in one of the learned professions. *Random House Unabridged Dictionary* (Random House, 2006), http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/professional. Alternatively, the word *amateur* has been defined as 1) a person who engages in a study, sport, or other activity for pleasure rather than for financial benefit or professional reasons, and 2) a person inexperienced or unskilled in a particular activity. Ibid., http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/amateur. It was the latter definition of *amateur* that was to prevail in the consciousness of professional historians in the twentieth century.


21 In the first edition of Carl Berger’s *The Writing of Canadian History*, for example, only three women were listed in the index—Hilda Neatby, Judith Robinson, and Jean Burnet. Burnet, a sociologist from the University of Toronto, was included because she authored one of the volumes of the Social Credit series discussed in Berger’s book while Robinson, a journalist, was apparently included for sharing some of historian Donald Creighton’s political concerns. Neatby was the only female professional historian in the country considered to merit inclusion. See also Donald Wright, *The Professionalization of History in English Canada to the 1950s* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 52–81.


26 Roger D. Abrahams, *Everyday Life: A Poetics of Vernacular Practices*, 45 (fig. 1), 62 (fig. 2).

27 Northrop Frye wrote that the purpose of genre criticism is “not so much to classify as to clarify ... traditions and affinities, thereby bringing out a large number of literary relationships that would not be noticed as long as there were
no context established for them.” Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957), 247–48. It should be stressed that while this essay seeks to draw attention to vernacular history as a legitimate and important genre within Western Canadian historiography, it is not being claimed that it necessarily comes closer than academic counterparts to the truth of history, however that might be defined. As literary scholar James Fairhall has pointed out, neither academic nor vernacular historians of the 1882 Phoenix Park murders in Dublin were able to provide a definitive account of this incident. In contrast, he suggests that the dialogical forms of novelist James Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake* and *Ulysses* come closer to accurately representing the complexity and diversity of voices bearing on this event than is evident in works cast in either vernacular or academic genres of historical writing. See James Fairhall, *James Joyce and the Question of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), especially 11–39, 59–60, and passim. I would like to thank Walter Hildebrandt for drawing my attention to Fairhall’s insightful account. This is not to suggest that historical treatments (whether academic or vernacular) more oriented to dialogical interactions between writers, texts, and readers might not more successfully engage the complicated scene of history than the monologically oriented texts referenced by Fairhall.


33 Provincial Archives of Alberta (Edmonton), Katherine Hughes Papers 74–340/81, Katherine Hughes, 21 September 1908, quoted in Siadhail, “Katherine Hughes, Irish Political Activist,” 87.

In their correspondence, Lacombe addressed Hughes as “Omimi,” an Ojibwa term meaning “turtle dove,” and she addressed him, alternately, as “Father Lacombe,” “Big Chief of the Rockies,” “Father and Chief,” and “Aahsosskitsipapiwa,” a name given to him by the Blackfoot, meaning “the good heart.” Provincial Archives of Alberta, OMI Grandin Province Archives, acc. 71.220, box 156, file 6548. I would like to thank Ms. Diane Lamoureux, Archivist with the OMI Grandin Province Archives, for kindly locating and sharing with me the correspondence between Katherine Hughes and Father Lacombe in this collection.

Raymond Huel, “Lacombe, Albert,” in Dictionary of Canadian Biography, ed. Ramsay Cook (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 14:576. In the early twentieth century, the engagement of a layperson to write a priest’s biography was unusual, especially if that layperson was female. According to Huel, the approval of Bishop Émile-Joseph Legal was undoubtedly required, but Hughes clearly impressed Lacombe with her career as a Roman Catholic missionary, and her religious credentials were impeccable. As well, in 1906 she published a biography of her uncle, Archbishop Cornelius O’Brien of the Diocese of Halifax, which may have impressed her Catholic clients in Alberta. See Katherine Hughes, Archbishop O’Brien: Man and Churchman (Ottawa: Rolla L. Crain, 1906).

Ken Kaiser and Merrily Aubrey, eds., In the Promised Land of Alberta’s North: The Northern Journal of Katherine Hughes (Summer 1909) (Edmonton: Historical Society of Alberta, 2006). In presenting her first report as provincial archivist to Premier Rutherford in 1909, Hughes elaborated on her collecting priorities. Stating that the archives had communicated with more than five hundred towns, cities, and settlements, she indicated that in each of these communities, several persons were “asked for information.” She added: “In passing, it may be remarked that the collecting of Archives does not now consist, as in the past, mainly in securing documents bearing upon outstanding events of interest, affairs of political interest and matters of great moment generally. This work has taken on a broader aspect, and now embraces all records bearing on the social conditions of a country as well, for these have come to be regarded as essential to the study of writing of history.” Beyond major collections such as the Hudson’s Bay Company Archives, the Masson Collection, missionary reports, and “the copying of any important reports referring to Alberta in the Canadian Archives in Ottawa,” Hughes stressed the need to collect “reminiscences and narratives of pioneers, traders, prospectors, missionaries, ranchers, and other settlers together with maps, charts, documents, diaries or private letters relating to historic incidents in the family or public life.” Provincial Archives of Alberta (Edmonton), Legislative Library Records, GR 74.350, file 82, correspondence, 1908–10, Katherine Hughes to the Honourable Alexander C. Rutherford, 15 February 1909; and Hughes’ “Preliminary Report in Connection with the Recently Established Archives for the Province of Alberta,” 1, 2, and 5. It might be noted that Hughes’ archival collecting priorities anticipated a number of the concerns of Canadian social historians that emerged sixty to seventy years later.


Ibid., 250–51, 231–32.
40 Siadhail, “Katherine Hughes, Irish Political Activist,” 82.

41 Katherine Hughes, Father Lacombe: The Black-Robe Voyageur, 295–96.

42 According to Hughes’ notes, in Lacombe’s speech to the Blackfoot at Hobbema, Alberta, he said: “Suppose we kill or drive away all who are here—the Govt. will send an army of 1000s of soldiers, for the world is full of white people. Then, they will exterminate us. Let us submit. Many countries in [the] world where people of land had to give it up after struggles to the whites. Submit.” Library and Archives Canada (Ottawa), Katherine Hughes fonds, MG 30, D 71, vol. 1, file 6, Memoranda: Notes on Father Lacombe and Northwest Missions [handwritten notes entitled “A Passing Thought”].

43 Ibid.


45 Library and Archives Canada (Ottawa), Katherine Hughes fonds, MG 30, D 71, vol. 1, file 6, Memoranda: Notes on Father Lacombe and Northwest Missions, “To La Tourterelle [Katherine Hughes] Omimi, from The Old Chief [Father Lacombe],” n.d.

46 Ibid., vol. 4, file 21, Memoranda – Personal and Family, “My Belief” [handwritten notes].


48 George Bryce, A History of Manitoba, Its Resources and People (Toronto, 1906), 306. See also the discussion in Dick, “Seven Oaks Incident.”

49 Historian Raymond Huel observes: ‘Although Hughes may have thrown humility to the winds in her depiction of Lacombe’s character, Father Lacombe, the Black-Robe Voyageur is an accurate factual account of his activities and career.” Raymond Huel, “Lacombe, Albert,” in Dictionary of Canadian Biography, ed. Ramsay Cook, 14:576. In his own biography of Lacombe, popular historian James G. MacGregor also pays tribute to Hughes’ book. He writes: “Prior to his death some sixty years ago Katherine Hughes wrote her excellent Father Lacombe: The Black-Robe Voyageur. In the present work there is little about the man himself to add to her account.” James G. MacGregor, Father Lacombe (Edmonton: Hurtig, 1975), 11.

50 See the thoughtful discussion of these issues in the introduction and essays in Celia Haig-Brown and David A. Nock, eds., With Good Intentions: Euro-Canadian and Aboriginal Relations in Colonial Canada (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2006).


52 Library and Archives Canada, (Ottawa), RG 31, Statistics Canada Records, 1906 Census of the Prairie Provinces, Alberta, Strathcona District No. 21, Sub-district 28 (Townships 39, 40, 41 in ranges 23, 24, 25 west of the 4th M), family no. 326, microfilm reel no. T-18363.
Roe later recalled: “I suppose I read at first for the pure pleasure: history, biography, and their kind, mingled with such sane, down-to-earth criticism as one gets—and from such masters!—in the English Men of Letters.” He particularly “gloried in the nineteenth-century historians” and owned his own copies of works by Gibbon, Hallam, Carlyle, Froude, Macaulay, Mommsen, Motley, Prescott, Schiller, and John Richard Green. He also studied “many of the great critics in English history especially: Stubbs, Maitland, Bishop Creighton and Thorold Rogers, and the massive intelligence of John Fiske.” From these luminaries “I learned much of the stylistic and logical approach to the critical revisionist’s problems; and incidentally I also mastered the ‘mechanics’ of the apparatus criticus.” University of Victoria Archives (Victoria), Frank Gilbert Roe fonds, F.G. Roe, “That’s How It Seemed to Be,” unpublished autobiographical manuscript, chap. 32, “New Ambitions.”

Roe, Getting the Know-How, 111, 113.


In the preface to The North American Buffalo, Roe later writes: “Without the aid of the late Hon. A.C. Rutherford, Chancellor of the University (and first Premier of the Province of Alberta), it probably never could have been written.” He writes that Rutherford granted him free access to “his magnificent library of early Canadiana and Americana, which included many very valuable original editions. From this rich collection I was allowed to take away anything I chose to select.” F.G. Roe, The North American Buffalo: A Critical Study of the Species in Its Wild State, 2nd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970), v.

Roe writes that, having exhausted the available research materials at the province’s legislative library and the Edmonton municipal library, he approached Cameron “not without some inner fear and trembling, and stated my needs. I may say that I was at once taken to his heart; and we became fast friends until his death twenty-five years later.” Roe, “Unpublished Memoirs,” chap. 32, “New Ambitions.”

Ibid.

In his unpublished memoirs, Roe writes: “I had long felt that there was need for a drastic change of front in the approach to Western history. This had in my opinion been abandoned far too long to the treatment of men who in their simplicity reminded me of the mediaeval monkish chronicler; and like him needed their rhapsodies to be checked from the Public Records Office…. There was a complete absence of the critical attitude which, in such fields as ancient Rome or mediaeval England, was felt to be the very beginning of wisdom.” Roe, “Unpublished Memoirs,” chap. 33, “Widening Horizons.”
Roe’s aversion to stereotypes appears to have been a lifelong tendency. While still a teenager, he bristled at the notion that all British immigrants belonged to a type, drawing distinctions between British farmers or land workers, artisan townsmen, and what he termed the “middle-class’ quasi-aristocrat” of southern Alberta. He regarded any such lumping of social groups “preposterous.” It is this long-standing aversion to stereotypes that animates so much of the argument in Roe’s *The North American Buffalo*.


For example, after reproaching First Nations people for excessive reliance on the buffalo, McDougall also wrote that “so long as we can get buffalo within three hundred miles we would prefer buffalo steaks to barley-meal.” Roe observes: “After this, from a scion of a meal-eating ancestry, who had then spent only two years among the buffalo, who shall blame the Indian or his kin!” Roe, *North American Buffalo*, 400.


Ibid., 143.


In his convocation address in 1951, Roe paid extended tribute to the late university librarian D.E. Cameron, who had encouraged him. Noting the contrast in their social stations, he writes: “I was in railroad service, and in the ‘black squad,’ the caste characterized with some contempt by Shakespeare as ‘lean unwashed artificers,’” and even more contumaciously by Rudyard Kipling. “As against this, Mr. Cameron was member of four universities, and a most distinguished member of a faculty of a fifth. It was no small thing to be treated as an equal by such a man. I am proud to know that we remained fast friends as long as he lived.” University of Victoria Archives (Victoria, B.C.), Frank Gilbert Roe fonds, box 49, ser. H, “Newspaper Cuttings,” Frank Gilbert Roe, “Address to the Graduating Class,” 20 October 1951, p. 167.
L.G. Thomas, “Foreword,” in Roe, Getting the Know-How, xi. Thomas observes: “Roe’s ironic view of the world about him emerges in his memoir even more frequently than in the scholarly publications of his long lifetime. His sharply critical mind made him suspicious of received popular wisdom. He was as impatient with the propagandist who represented the prairie soils as inexhaustible as he was with what he saw as A.S. Morton’s unduly charitable judgment of the Hudson’s Bay Company.”


Roy Ito, We Went to War: The Story of the Japanese Canadians Who Served during the First and Second World Wars (Stittsville, ON: Canada’s Wings, 1984), 284.

Ibid. See especially “Heroic Volunteer Soldiers,” 5–76.

Japanese Canadian National Museum (Burnaby, B.C.), Roy Ito Collection, ser. 1: Material related to Roy Ito’s Second World War Experience: 2001/04.01.001, Roy Ito War Diary, 22 March–1 December 1945, entry for 7 April 1945.


Roy Ito, Stories of My People, 61.

Ibid., 432–41.


Ibid., 459–60.
89 In his survey of Anglo-Canadian historiography of the first three quarters of the twentieth century, Carl Berger observes that “Canada’s historians have all been nationalists of various hues.” Berger, Writing of Canadian History, 259.


91 On the importance of vernacularity and the dialogical principle in the public sphere, see Gerald Hauser, Vernacular Voices: The Rhetoric of Publics and Public Spheres (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1999).