W.L. Morton and Margaret Laurence are giants in Canadian writing. Both are considered to be at the top of their respective disciplines of history and literature. While they espoused a sense of Canadian nationalism and identity, both were regional and provincial writers who wrote from their own place and told the story of that place. Together they fit into what Doug Francis calls "mythic regionalism"; they offered a vision of the Prairie West, and of Manitoba in particular. According to Clara Thomas, "they are writers who, more than any others, have given Manitoba a powerful historic and mythic identity." They forged what Peter Easingwood calls "a special interest in the relationship between fiction and history."

The lives of Morton and Laurence offer revealing parallels. Morton was born in 1908 and raised in Gladstone, while Laurence was born in 1926 and raised in Neepawa. These neighbouring small towns in Manitoba along the Yellowhead Trail are both distinctly "Ontario" in character. Gladstone and Neepawa were founded in 1882 and 1883, respectively. They were founded largely by Anglo-Celtic immigrants from Ontario prior to the Prairie immigration boom of 1896 to 1911 that ushered in large numbers of Eastern European newcomers,
as well as many other “foreign” groups. Their Ontario-style brick architecture is distinctly different than the false wooden storefronts and large main streets that dominate the small towns of western Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta.

After being a Rhodes scholar at Oxford, Morton taught at the University of Manitoba and later became the master of Champlain College at Trent University in Peterborough, Ontario. Laurence went to Winnipeg to attend university, then on to Africa, Vancouver, and England to work as a writer; when she returned to Canada, she settled in the small town of Lakefield, just outside Peterborough, succeeding Morton as chancellor at Trent. Growing up in smalltown “Ontarian Manitoba,” Morton and Laurence found a sense of familiarity in Peterborough that they could not find in larger cities such as Toronto. For Laurence, Lakefield was “an equally small town with many of the same characteristics” as Neepawa. The large brick house that Laurence purchased held an uncanny resemblance to her famous childhood house in Neepawa. "Whether or not I ever lived in the prairies again was really unimportant in a sense,” she once told Robert Kroetsch. "There is a kind of spiritual return. I don’t know whether it is a kind of totally Canadian experience. I know it is very western.” Their small-town identity and “Ontarian-Manitoba-ness” shaped their vision and meaning of the Prairie West.

W.L. Morton remains one of the greats in Canadian historiography, alongside Harold Innis, Arthur Lower, Frank Underhill, and Donald Creighton. But Morton, as Carl Berger indicates, stood out because he was a historian of region, "one of the first major historians of Canada who brought to his field of study a perspective molded by the cultural milieu of the prairie west." In fact, Morton led the second generation of Prairie historians. The first generation included Donald Gunn, Alexander Begg, George Bryce, and A.S. Morton, and was characterized by the struggle of man against nature—the triumph of the human spirit and condition. The second generation included Chester Martin, George Stanley, and W.L. Morton. Works dealing with the Riel Rebellion, the wheat economy, or the emergence of the farm protest movements were depicted within the patriarchal framework of nation building but ultimately as part of a national success story. The narrative focused on agricultural settlement and the political structure of an emerging region within the nation.

Morton, however, challenged the dominant centralist metanarratives by focusing attention on the Prairie West as a time and place in and of itself: "The history of western Canada possessed an individuality that transcended its tributary relationship to the national economic policies; it therefore constituted a decisive field for historical investigation on its own terms." He accepted the validity of Creighton’s Laurentian thesis that Central Canada formed a commercial, political, and cultural empire that exploited its subordinate hinterlands such
as the West, but he resisted the peripheral view of the region it implied. There was a metropolitan-hinterland relationship, but its influence worked both ways. Morton attempted to create a distinct image in the minds of Prairie dwellers through an appreciation of “their” history, an understanding of “their” myths. The history of Canada could be written from the perspective of the West.

With his 1950 publication, *The Progressives*, Morton offered “a retrospective engagement with his own heritage and the people among whom he had grown up.” This search for place, identity, and home continued in 1957 with *Manitoba: A History*, which Berger refers to as “by far his most finely crafted work” and “a work of great emotional involvement.” Morton sought to resolve “the discrepancies that had existed in his mind between the locality he knew and the ‘unreal’ world he had assimilated from a distant literary culture, between his commitments to a society that he believed possessed a character and authenticity of its own and a historiographical tradition that consigned it to the margin of national development.” The book was his answer to a problem of recognition that he first posed in 1946.

Morton described *Manitoba: A History* as emphasizing “the growth of a modern urban and agricultural community on the basis furnished by a primitive fur trade economy and society.” His central theme was “the development of a distinctive variant of Canadian society within the province.” But in creating a framework for the region’s history, Morton rejected the “frontierism” of the earlier generation of historians, according to whom the Prairies were “a virgin tabula rasa” until the community of Red River was formed. There was little room for the history of the First Nations, particularly prior to contact. Instead, Manitoba’s early history was dominated by the Métis and the fur trade of the St. Lawrence and Hudson’s Bay. After the trials of Selkirk’s transplanted settlement, “the primary characteristic of the colony was the balance that existed ethnically between the buffalo hunt, river farm lots, and the canoe brigades.” Red River had become a dual society based on a balance between French Catholic Métis and British Protestant settlers.

This principle of duality was threatened by the migration of Ontario settlers that followed the resistance of 1869–70: “Modern civilization came to the plains and parkland in the 1870s,” he wrote, “but in a specific form, that of Ontario settlement. The next generation was to be dominated by the introduction of the institutions and mores of Ontario into the prairies.” Ottawa’s National Policy failed, however, to fill the new region with settlers. Ontario had “occupied” the Prairies but “had not peopled them.” The western immigration boom that brought Central and Eastern Europeans, Americans, and British finished the process of settling the West and again reforged Prairie society. This reforging was characterized by utopianism and the search for radical political
alternatives, such as the Progressives. In Morton’s mind, there was no doubt that Manitoba was a British-Canadian province, but immigration patterns ensured ethnic diversity. By the early decades of the twentieth century, Manitoba was a culturally pluralistic society. In the province’s history—in the struggle of the Métis, the Scots, the Ontarians, and the immigrants—Morton perceived “the Canadian experiment in political bi-nationalism and cultural plurality” at “its most intense.” As Berger notes, “his sense of plurality of Canadian life informed and shaped everything he wrote.” But the West, Morton claimed, “was more than people.” The environment had its own role to play in creating this new society. In the first decades of the twentieth century, from the ferment of the agrarian revolt, a distinct Western identity was born:

In that tremendous generation, a generation of fierce action and hard decisions, the West with heavy strokes forged its own institutions, declared its own identity, and created its own sense of semi-political independence. It affirmed its own newly discovered and deeply felt sense of novelty. Its people had realized that the West was indeed a clean sheet on which a new story might be written. The West was no longer attempting to be Ontario on the prairies, it had declared its spiritual independence; it was persuaded of its own difference.

Morton’s conception of Manitoba’s history was changing by the time the second edition of Manitoba: A History appeared in 1967. There was cautious optimism, a sense that the traditional enemies that had long besieged the Prairie West—economic uncertainty, crop failure, and debt—were receding. The main objectives in building Manitoba had been achieved: “Everything, in short, that had been dreamed of and aspired to had been realized at least to a reasonable degree. The society the pioneer generation and its sons and daughters had sought to build had had been established.” But optimism, prosperity, and harmony were not part of Morton’s history. Achievements could be obtained but only through grim determination and hard work. The fact that “no major depression, and no serious drought, or crop failure, occurred in the twenty years after 1945” left Morton off-balance. “The hard-taught caution of two generations,” characterized by the Depression and two world wars, “was confounded.”

The future for Manitoba may have looked relatively bright in 1967, but much of what Morton witnessed he lamented. The rural population, “which had been the cornerstone of Manitoba rural society,” was declining faster than ever before. The decline of the small town and family farm weakened local institutions, leading ultimately to the collapse of “the foundations of Manitoba democracy.” The move from rural to urban also led to changes in “the values
people held.” Urban values replaced rural values, leading to “a more material and easier way of life.” It was not only that people were leaving the rural for the urban; “the countryside itself was being urbanized.” The growing size and power of Winnipeg was exerting its pull and influence throughout the rural province: “The country was now urban in outlook; the city was rural in scope.”

Another result of Manitoba’s transformation was “the re-appearance of the Indian.” After being pushed away, out of sight, onto the reserves of the shield and interlake regions for three generations to make the transition from a nomadic life to the sedentary life of a farmer, the natural resources were now failing to support the Native population, “and the public conscience and the federal government, critical of other peoples in other lands, suddenly realized that it too had a ‘native’ problem at least as reproachful and as difficult of solution as any in the world.” Morton wrote that the Natives and Métis “were simply added to the ranks of the dispossessed, the failures, the incarcerated, of Manitoban society.”

Morton wished for a history of the West written with such fidelity to the inner texture of local experience and so evocative of the sense of place that it would immediately trigger a recognition in those who had been molded by that history.” In his 1970 article, “Seeing an Unliterary Landscape,” Morton presents his view of a cultural landscape “formed by what the mind, not the seeing eye alone takes in.” He describes his career as a historian as a quest to reconcile these two modes of vision. Writing about a landscape such as Manitoba, whether in a historical or literary context, meant staking an imaginative claim to a territory that had not yet achieved proper recognition. Morton’s education in small-town Manitoba had left him disconnected from his local past. He learned little of his people or his place, and instead learned about Canada through the broad sweep and triumph of British imperial history: “The need to reconcile the actual and the mind’s landscape, I think from my own experience, underlies the need, felt at least by the sensitive, of a new country to create its own literature and write its own history.” With his provincial history, Morton had written what he called “a general history of Manitoba for Manitobans.”

As Francis points out, the “children of the West” were seeking a home. To Morton, Margaret Laurence was accomplishing just that. In the second edition of Manitoba: A History, he calls her “one of Manitoba’s best writers—and an expatriate.” Together the two shared a common challenge: the people of Manitoba needed to know and understand their history and their myths, their place and their identity. They needed to see both their internal and external landscapes. The historian and the novelist were instrumental in this process.

Morton held Laurence’s first Prairie novel, The Stone Angel (1964), in high regard. Even though women were not visible characters in Morton’s narrative, he recognized that Laurence’s main character, Hagar, characterized the pio-
neering generation and the “stubborn northern flowering” of Manitoba. For Laurence, Hagar represented her grandparents’ pioneering generation, represented by “a Scots-Irish background of stern values and hard work and Puritanism.” But both writers viewed their province’s history with a strong and even painful sense of irony. Hagar’s character “flowers” despite her grudging nature through the embracing of her past. Like Hagar, Manitoba “was a province so long braced to endure that it did not find it easy to rejoice in victory or to expect much of the future.”

The historical development of the fictional town of Manawaka and Laurence’s use of history gradually expanded through her next four books. Laurence was part of the third generation of Prairie writers that sought to demolish the myth of the “Golden West” as depicted by such novelists as Frederick Philip Grove. Like other Prairie novelists such as W.O. Mitchell, Wallace Stegner, Rudy Wiebe, and Robert Kroetsch, she sought to re-examine and rediscover the Prairie past because it had been misrepresented to her. But it was not so much a demolishing of myths as it was a reforging of myths. Like Morton, she recognized a distinction between history derived from reading and that derived from lived experience. The latter has “power over us.” It works “in unsuspected ways” through memories “that can recall a thousand images,” and it “can be related only to one’s first home.” Her emphasis on individual characterization, and in particular female characterization, merged with a longer time-perspective based on memory and the pursuit of historical context. In A Jest of God (1966), The Fire-Dwellers (1969), and A Bird in the House (1970), Laurence explores the need to reinterpret the past from memory and the interrelatedness of different sides of the Manawaka community with particular references to the Scots, Métis, and Ukrainians. Laurence may have been “newly seized by the thematic implications of the Manawaka novels as a series and by the idea of relating their development to a version of Canadian history,” but she was not yet prepared to write a historical novel. “I don’t know what the hell I’ll write next as a novel, if it ever comes,” she told Al Purdy, “but something seems to be going on and I hope someday it’ll crystallize. I sure as hell don’t want to write an historical novel, God forbid. Something in the area of legend, or half-legend, or legend even seen distortedly through contemporary eyes.”

But, according to Easingwood, “the full strength of Laurence’s achievement … emerges against the background that Morton’s treatment of Manitoba provides.” Laurence used the writing of her last novel, The Diviners, to work out “the question of where one belongs and why, and the meaning to oneself of the ancestors, both the long-ago ones and those in remembered history.” It represented her deep-felt need to understand her time and place. In this sense, both Morton and Laurence were grappling with the central issue of identity. But as
Northrop Frye points out, "Canadian sensibility has been profoundly disturbed not so much by our famous problem of identity, important as that is, as by a series of paradoxes in what confronts that identity. It is less perplexed by the question 'Who am I?' as by some such riddle as 'Where is here?'." Laurence’s biographer, Lyall Powers, argues that her life may be understood as a sustained attempt to find viable answers to these two questions. But Laurence was also focused on a third question: When is now? "My writing, then," she observed, "has been my own attempt to come to terms with the past."

Eli Mandel claims there is more to regional writers "coming home" than simply mourning a sense of place: "It isn't place that we have to talk about but something more complicated and more compelling: remembered place—or beyond that—remembered self, something lost and recovered, a kind of memory, a kind of myth."

The concept of "myth" was fundamental for both Morton and Laurence. As Doug Francis indicates, the image of the West in the post-World War II era shifted from that of an external, physical, or formal landscape to a mental, internal, or mythic landscape, a "region of the mind" shaped by its own mythology. But, according to Morton, "in this decadent analytical age" the historian was losing sight of its importance. Myths are essential to a people’s collective identity but they cannot be separated from its history. As early as 1943, he maintained that the historian and the writer resemble each other insofar as "each is a maker of myths, only the historian has neglected his job of making myths." If a society loses sight of its myths, it loses sight of its stories as well as its identity. The historian and novelist, therefore, face the same dilemma: the need to reconcile a landscape actually seen and realistically experienced with an internal landscape formed by reading. "How," Morton asks, "could these be brought into a single, authentic vision in which neither would deny, but rather clarify the other? ... I desired it to be seen not only as it could be seen, but as it might be seen."

Laurence shared the belief in the relationship between history and myth. "We have only just begun to recognize our legends," she writes, "and to give shape to our myths." Myth took the form of the ancestors. "These people are our myths," Laurence claims. "This is our history. And perhaps not consciously, but after a while consciously, this is what we are trying to set down." By the time she was writing The Diviners, Laurence viewed herself as "a kind of historian of her people or maker of myths." As she noted in an interview, "our writers can affect this whole struggle simply, by forging our myths and giving our voice to our history, to our legends, to our cultural being." In this process, myth and history became interchangeable. "In one way, fiction may be viewed as history," she writes, "just as recorded history may be viewed as fiction. They are twin disciplines ... for the perceptions, interpretation, and choices of material of particular writers give form to our past and relate it to our present and our future."
The influence of Morton on Laurence can be seen most particularly in *The Diviners*. “The action of the novel,” Easingwood notes, “turns entirely on the concept of myth as an answer to the need that is felt, individually and collectively, to go on reinterpreting the past.” Laurence read *Manitoba: A History* for the first time during the summer in which she began writing *The Diviners*. “When I first read Morton’s *Manitoba: A History*,” she notes, “it was with a tremendous sense of excitement, combined with an angry sense of having been deprived, when young, of my own heritage. I have since done a great deal of reading of prairie history, but it was Morton who first gave me the sense of my place’s long and dramatic past.” Laurence was moved by Morton’s vision of their shared past because she was already seeking this vision; she needed it for her own search. He provided, Laurence admitted,

a sense of the sweep of history, the overview which I think I share....
I subsequently had many conversations with him about the nature of writing history and fiction. I believe ... as I think he does, too ... that the two disciplines are very much related. The historian, like the novelist, must be selective and must necessarily write his own interpretation of the historical era with which he is dealing.

In the novel, Laurence seeks to connect the Manawaka world with Manitoba’s history and “goes considerably beyond her earlier fiction in the attempt to connect particular local experience with a wider view of Canadian history.” According to Clara Thomas,

until *The Diviners* it was possible to miss the uniquely Manitoban element in her work, for the town of Manawaka was not as relentlessly regionalized as was, for instance, Sinclair Ross’s Saskatchewan town of Horizon. With the background of the Sutherlanders and the Métis, however, Morag’s youth is unmistakably set in a Manitoba that has been given historical—and in Laurence’s hand mythological—depth. She is very close to the historian, W.L. Morton, in what she has tried to do for her native province.

The novel’s title represents divination and the discovery of “inner truths” that relate the past, present, and future: the river that flows both ways. When Christie Logan tells Morag the tales of Piper Gunn, one of Selkirk’s settlers, Laurence is experimenting with the transference of folklore into literature, history into myth. But through Morag, she questions that history and the relationship between the Scots and the Métis. According to Laurence, she shared with Mor-
ton especially those parts of Manitoba’s history “which deal with the Métis people.”52 The two ethnic groups came together in the founding of Manitoba. In order to achieve her inclusive sense of place, Laurence sought through the discovery of these myths to return them to a state of symbiosis, within Morton’s vision of duality. “The ancestors,” she writes, “are everyone’s ancestors—mine, in some ways, are not only the Scots but also the Métis; I was born in a land which they had inhabited, shaped and invested with their ghosts.”53 This relationship becomes manifest in the image of the hunting knife and the plaid pin, and ultimately in the persona of Pique, Morag’s mixed-blood child with Jules. “Those of us who are not Indian or Métis have not earned the right to call Gabriel Dumont ancestor,” she writes. “But I do all the same.”54 “There are more and deeper things between myself and Riel, myself and Dumont,” Laurence claims. “We are prairie.”55

Even though she never admitted it, Laurence went much further in incorporating the Métis into her history of Manitoba than Morton ever could. This was due in part to the decades in which they were writing and in part to their respective ideologies. Morton’s depiction of the Métis that so influenced Laurence was based on the works of George Stanley and Marcel Giraud.56 The Métis were a primitive people caught up amidst the inexorable march of progress and civilization. Morton did not, however, view Red River as a frontier settlement, nor did he view the Métis as Indians. Red River was “an island of civilization in the wilderness” and the Métis were civilized enough to fight to defend their rights and position in an emerging nation.57 But, sad as it was, their way of life was doomed:

Only concentrated settlement would allow the work of civilization to proceed. The practice of agriculture, the ministrations of the church, and the education of the young required that the roving life of the hunt, native to the Métis and forced on the immigrant by the harsh circumstances of the first years of the colony, should give way to close settlement by church and school along the rivers and to the steady routine of the ploughman and the herdsman…. For fifty years the Red River Settlement was to live in uneasy balance between civilization and barbarism, the river lot and the buffalo hunt.58

The Métis were victims deserving of sympathy. Their “savage” ways, while unfortunate obstacles to advancement, were romanticized. They were

the sons of French and Scottish fathers and Saulteaux, Cree, and Assiniboine mothers, they had adopted the hunting life, the wild freedom, and the ancient feud with the Sioux of the tribes of the park belt and
its bordering plains…. Their devotion to the buffalo hunt and their role as shield of the settlement served to perpetuate in the Métis their strong sense of identity, their belief that they were a "new nation." 59

For Morton, they were regional actors. They became “the archetypal westerners—misunderstood by an uncaring and ill-informed government in distant Ottawa and provoked into protest by policies that adversely affected their vital interests and about which they had not been consulted.” 60 They also represented the dual nature of Canadian society, the balancing act between French-speaking Catholics and English-speaking Protestants. The Manitoba Act was the successful embodiment of this dual character; the struggle for Manitoba was a microcosm of the struggle for Canada.

Laurence’s sympathetic depiction of the Métis goes further. They are a dispossessed and forgotten people. Their story is more than that of a small failed rebellion or resistance to Ontario and Canada; it is “the myth of a dying nation defending itself against impossible odds.” 61 She told George Woodcock that “it’s a period of history which has haunted me for a long time, and some of that haunting I tried to put into The Diviners.” When she was writing the novel, posters of Riel and Dumont looked down upon her from her office walls. 62 Despite the fact that there were very few Métis in Laurence’s Neepawa, their “mythic” insertion into Manawaka demonstrates her desire to deal with a more inclusive history of her province, as well as with issues of social injustice and post-colonialism.

The result is a romantic presentation of the Métis. Hagar’s views of the “French half-breeds” reflect those of the pioneering generation. They “lived in a swarm in a shack somewhere,” and Hagar “wouldn’t have trusted” them as far as she could “spit.” The Tonnerre family is physically as well as culturally segregated from the town. They live “below” Manawaka, “where the Wachakawa River ran brown and noisy over the pebbles, the scrub oak and grey-green willow and chokecherry bushes grew in a dense thicket.” Their name means “thunder,” a portent of their mixed-blood existence. 63 The family represents the place (or lack thereof) of the Métis in Canada. “They did not belong among the Cree of the Galloping Mountain reservation, further north, and they did not belong among the Scots-Irish and Ukrainians of Manawaka, either. They were, as my Grandmother MacLeod would have put it, neither flesh, fowl, nor good salt herring.” 64 This identity crisis becomes manifest in the daughter of Jules and Morag. “I don’t want to be split,”” Pique laments. “I want to be together. But I’m not. I don’t know where I belong.” 65 The Métis also represent what Angelika Maeser-Lemieux has termed the “shadow archetype,” a metaphor for the “alienated and repressed parts of the individual and collective psyche in patriarchal culture.” Jules, for example, becomes a consort figure for the feminine archetype, the black
Morag. The shadow side of the archetype is dark, mysterious, savage, and lustful. The Métis are that “lost factor” of the psyche that must be regained. As the “journey” continues throughout the Manawaka cycle, the place of the Métis therefore becomes increasingly important.

The loon is Laurence’s central metaphor for the Métis, and it appears in all the Manawaka works: “No one can ever describe that ululating sound, the crying of the loons, and no one who has heard it can ever forget it. Plaintive, and yet with a quality of chilling mockery, those voices belonged to a world separated by eons from our neat world of summer cottages and the lighted lamps of home.” In A Bird in the House, Vanessa attempts to befriend Piquette, a Métis girl at Galloping Mountain. “‘You know something, Piquette?’” Vanessa says, “‘There’s loons here, on this lake…. At night, you can hear them…. My dad says we should listen and try to remember how they sound, because in a few years when more cottages are built at Diamond Lake and more people come in, the loons will go away.’” When Vanessa returns to the lake as an adult, the loons have disappeared: “I did not know what happened to the birds. Perhaps they had gone away to some far place of belonging. Perhaps they had been unable to find such a place, and had simply died out, having ceased to care any longer whether they lived or not.”

In The Fire-Dwellers, Stacey comments on the disappearance of the loons: “She never discovered where they went, but she thought then, that eighteenth summer, of where they might be, somewhere so far north that people would never penetrate to drive them off again.”

The Métis are depicted in a state of stoic suffering that has been ongoing since Jules Tonnerre “came back from Batoche with a bullet in his thigh, the year that Riel was hung and the voices of the Métis entered their long silence.” According to Easingwood, Laurence’s portrayal of the Métis is romantic; “however, to speak of an element of ‘romance’ in her fiction is not to deny her true concern with the actual history of the Métis.”

While emphasizing the history of the Métis and Scots, other ethnic groups such as the Ukrainians and Chinese receive some attention from Laurence, thereby weaving Morton’s fabric of cultural diversity. They do not receive the same romantic treatment as the Scots and Métis, but they are described as suffering under hegemony. In A Jest of God, Nick cannot come to terms with his past and serves to represent the plight of his generation of Ukrainian Canadians on the Prairies. He represents the divided nature of the Ukrainian community. The split between the Ukrainian nationalist father and the politically leftist uncle…. In essence the inability of Nick as type to come to terms with his past is the inability of the Ukrainian community to come to terms with its
own history. And by virtue of this inability, the only path open for the ethnic community is a steady assimilation and the loss of its cultural heritage.

Lee Toy, the "Chinaman," is portrayed as the sojourner, fitting a stereotypical role in the Canadian West. The Chinese café, like the laundromat, became the abode of what was usually the lone Chinese family in the Prairie small town:

Behind the counter Lee Toy stands, his centuries-old face not showing at all what he may think of these kids. He has been here ever since I was a child, and he seemed old then. Now he is dried and brittle and brown like the shell of a lichee nut, and he has two younger men in partnership, nephews, perhaps. They could even be sons, and I wouldn’t know. He has spent most of his life here, but in a kind of secrecy, living alone in the rooms above the café. My father told me once that Lee Toy’s wife was still in China, still alive and living on the money he sent, but unable to come here, first because of our laws and then because of theirs. Maybe she is there yet, the woman he has not seen for more than forty years.

While Laurence expressed the emerging spirit of multiculturalism in the 1970s, like Morton she was not a complete convert. Even though she criticized the forces of assimilation, there is still a sense that Laurence believed they would ultimately prevail and even prove beneficial. History and geography, time and place, were ultimately more potent for Laurence than ethnicity: "Whatever ethnic and cultural background our prairie writers come from, they are very much prairie writers."

Morton and Laurence shared a similar small-town background and view of the relationship between their disciplines, and their vision of the Prairie West was characterized by a shared "Ontario-Manitoba-ness," but there were important differences. Morton was a conservative anglophile and staunch Anglican. He mourned the spiritual decline of his province: "The decline of the Church of England in rural Manitoba and the union of the Presbyterian, Methodist, and Congregational churches, consummated in 1925, were among other things, indications of the weakening of the religious spirit as the pioneering years gave way to the years of material accomplishment." The Protestant laity were "blinded by the false doctrine of the ‘social gospel.’" Morton’s lament for all things British placed him in the same ideological tradition as George Grant and Donald Creighton. "Though Morton was a third-generation Manitoban," Berger writes, "he has recalled that in his home all points of reference and all
standards were English, tempered only by a local variant of an intense imperial patriotism.” Morton lamented Canada’s path to becoming a North American nation. With the revival of conservatism in 1957, this sentiment became evident in his later works, *The Canadian Identity* (1961), *The Kingdom of Canada* (1963), and *The Critical Years: The Union of British North America, 1857–1873* (1964). In *Manitoba: A History*, even though he is critical of Ontario’s role in dominating the West, Morton emphasizes what he calls “the solid rural conservatism” of the province, fused by the “great Ontario immigration of the 1870’s and 1880’s” and creating “a land of steady ways” where the “simple, sturdy virtues of hard work, thrift, and neighbourliness have been cherished and transmitted.”

Laurence was influenced by the social gospel tradition on the Prairies. “I want to proclaim and affirm my personal belief in the social gospel,” she indicates on several occasions.” She was a social democrat of Presbyterian upbringing who claimed affiliation to the “Winnipeg Old Left.” She claimed “the kind of social conscience closely associated, in the prairies, with the Methodist and Presbyterian churches and, ultimately, with the United Church of Canada, in which I myself was brought up. From such a tradition had come many of the early reformers in the prairies, founders of the Social Democratic Party, the CCF, people such as J.S. Woodsworth, Stanley Knowles, Tommy Douglas, and many others.”

Most of her characters share a struggle between the stultifying and punishing, and the liberating and redeeming, a “pilgrimage from bondage to grace, often expressed in a transition from Old Testament to New Testament imagery.” Laurence’s lament for all things Scottish pervades her writing and shaped her sense of history, from the role of the Selkirk Settlers of Manitoba to her own search for home that took her back to Scotland and her ancestors. But even these ideological differences between the two writers served to create a certain balance, a certain whole. Together they reflected the spectrum of Manitoba and Prairie politics, left and right, social democratic and conservative.

Another major difference between the two writers is their approach to gender. Even though Morton’s Manitoba was overwhelmingly male—a province of Settlers, Métis, Politicians, and Capitalists, intent on building a nation and home—Laurence saw it as her place as well. Women were present, lurking in the background, but they did not take centre stage. They were assumed. Laurence knew these assumptions well. While she resisted them, they were part of her world:

My sense of social awareness, my feelings of anti-imperialism, anti-colonialism, anti-authoritarianism, had begun, probably, in embryo form in my own childhood; they had been nurtured during my college years and immediately afterwards, in the North Winnipeg of the
Old Left; they had developed considerably through my African experience…. But these developing feelings also related very importantly to my growing awareness of the dilemma and powerlessness of women, the tendency of women to accept male definition of ourselves, to be self-depreciating and uncertain, and to rage inwardly.80

Laurence did not criticize Morton for ignoring and excluding women. There was no reason to expect any different from the aging historian. Whereas the conservative Morton never focused on gender, Laurence was influenced by the new trends in social history, including the emergence of women's history. In many ways, Laurence saw herself as a natural balance to Morton. She sought through her own writing to bring a distinctly female perspective and voice to her history and her place.

In writing their place, Morton and Laurence inevitably had to deal with the relationship between region and nation. This relationship in Canada is usually assumed to be hierarchical: the local, the provincial, and the regional, while remaining significant expressions of identity, ultimately give way to the national. As Clara Thomas notes, nation “transcends” region and province.81 While historians have fallen prey to the wiles of nationalism to a larger extent than those in literature, both disciplines feel a responsibility to express a sense of “Canadianism.”

But Morton and Laurence shared a sense of regional alienation. For Morton, the agrarian revolt was a legitimate protest against the injustices of Confederation, the National Policy, and the two-party system. The economic and political grievances of the West were real. These injustices were repeated throughout Prairie history and then incorporated into the dominant schools of Canadian historiography. “Laurence’s whole approach to narrative fiction,” Easingwood notes, “may appear the inevitable extension of her strong sense of regional identity.” She had experienced “the insidious dominance of a Central Canadian mentality which, from the nineteenth century well into the present one, saw the West as a means of advancing the interests of the older metropolitan centres.”82

The 1960s and 1970s, however, were an age of nationalism. Canadian writers felt a common bond as they struggled for recognition, both internationally and nationally. They sought “to convey in literature, art, and history the distinctive features of Canadian life so that a people who had previously perceived their country only through borrowed concepts could finally recognize it through the rich allusiveness of their own art.”83 While seeking to identify and express a distinctly Prairie identity, Morton and Laurence sought to incorporate it into a larger Canadian cultural nationalism. “It is important to know,” Laurence notes, “that we all come from different sources, originally, but that in
this diversity lies our true strength as a people.” Morton ultimately sought to “reconcile the regional identity with the national community.” While he wished to portray Manitoba as a unique historical combination of cultural pluralism and bi-nationality, “in a mysterious, even enigmatic way, the fundamental determinants of Manitoba’s history, while operating in a specific locale, were also those that had worked upon all of Canada.” The history and the image of the West that he created “was one which saw the region as attempting to be like, not different from the rest of Canada. He argued in fact that the West had been germane to the Canadian experience and that its history could be seen as a miniature replica of the nation itself.”

In the end, however, the struggle between region and nation did not leave Morton and Laurence in the same “place.” Novelists and poets express the private, the imagined, and the internal; historians are expected to focus on the public, the real, and the external. Morton commenced his career as a “Prairie” historian but he ended up a “Canadian” historian, as his later works testify. Even while trying to be sensitive to region, Berger demonstrates the national biases of Canadian historiography when he writes that Morton’s “imperial orientation” and the strength of his nationalism prevented his sense of regional alienation and separateness “from degenerating into a mere parochialism.” Morton managed to avoid becoming “a regional scholar with narrow segregated preoccupations.” He began as a “mere” historian of region but he elevated his “narrow” approach and graduated to nation.

Morton’s odyssey was linear while Laurence’s was circular. She began writing about Africa but ended up writing about small-town Manitoba. She found it inevitable that she wrote about her locale “because that settlement and that land were my first and for many years my only real knowledge of this planet, in some profound way they remain my world, my way of viewing. My eyes were formed there.” Laurence did not perceive the same need to express national Canadian themes. “Canadian writing now is still very local,” she asserts, “and local writing does not require that you depict or construct some homogenous national identity. I am not aiming at a specifically Canadian identity in the Manawaka novels.” She viewed The Diviners as dealing with broad Canadian historical themes, but ultimately, it was based on the history of Manitoba. “I have no desire,” she once told Adele Wiseman, “to write a ‘Canadian’ novel in that horrible nationalistic, stilted sense.”

In 1981, following the death of Morton, Laurence published a personal tribute to the historian. Since moving to Peterborough, the two writers had become friends and had enjoyed many discussions regarding their Manitoba small-town background. “Morton’s history gave me,” Laurence claimed, “… a great many facts that I needed,” but she focused on their shared “overview.”
“What I share, most of all, with Morton is the sense of my place, the prairies, and of my people (meaning all prairie peoples), within the context of their many and varied histories.” The two writers also discussed the relationship between history and fiction:

We agreed that the two disciplines were closely related. The fiction writer seeks to create a world that has been experienced both as an external “real” world and as an internal one. The historian selects the facts and landscapes of the real world and brings to them his own perceptions and interpretations. Both try to arrive at some kind of truth which can never be complete but which will possess its own integrity.

According to Easingwood, “Laurence considered herself more deeply engaged with the history of her own province than with any theory of fiction.”

W. L. Morton and Margaret Laurence, the best-known Prairie historian and novelist, presented a common vision of Manitoba and to an extent the Prairie West. Morton’s brand of “mythic regionalism” inspired and spoke to Laurence and she responded to his call for an articulation of the developing relationship between the sensitive observer and the landscape of Manitoba, of time and place, of history and myth. Both held an almost urgent sense of the need of their society to take possession of its past by creating its own literature and writing its own history, of the “great need to possess our own land, to know our own heritage”, both “recognized and valued what the other was trying to do,” and both felt a heavy sense of obligation to the past, like a debt still to be paid.

Notes
1 Francis argues that there are four dominant approaches to Prairie history: formal, functional, mythic, and postmodern. He argues that while Morton represented all four, it was his vision of a mythic Prairie and Manitoba that influenced Laurence. R. Douglas Francis, “Regionalism, W. L. Morton and the Writing of Western Canadian History, 1870–1885,” American Review of Canadian Studies 31, no. 4 (Winter 2001): 569–88.


that she found it difficult in her fiction “to create the feeling of living in a city, because I hate cities.” As quoted in Fiona Sparrow, Into Africa with Margaret Laurence (Toronto: ECW Press, 1992), 23.


6 “That House in Manawaka is the one which, more than any other, I carry with me,” Vanessa observes in the opening line to A Bird in the House. As James King points out, ”8 Regent Street and John Simpson’s house bear an incredibly strong resemblance to each other…. In many ways, the move to Lakefield was a return home.” James King, The Life of Margaret Laurence (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 320–21.


9 The third generation consists of such Prairie historians as Gerald Friesen, John Thompson, Doug Francis, Howard Palmer, Paul Voisey, Bill Waiser, Sarah Carter, Alvin Finkel, Roy Loewen, Bill Brennan, Greg Marchildon, and Doug Owram.


12 Berger, Writing of Canadian History, 244–46.


15 Morton, Manitoba, ix.

16 Berger, Writing of Canadian History, 238.


18 Morton, Manitoba, 474–76.

19 Ibid., 476–78.

20 Ibid., 492–94.

21 Berger, Writing of Canadian History, 56.


23 Ibid., 9.

24 Morton, Manitoba, vii.


31 Francis, *Images of the West*, 194.


37 Laurence, *Heart of a Stranger*, 17.


40 As quoted in Berger, *Writing of Canadian History*, 252.


46 Easingwood, "Margaret Laurence," 23.


48 York University Archives, Margaret Laurence Papers, "Books that Mattered to Me—Talk for Friends of the Bata Library," delivered at Trent University, February 1981.

Easingwood, “Margaret Laurence,” 23.


Ibid., 62–63.

Berger, *Writing of Canadian History*, 246–47.

In her eyes, the history of imperialism included her own people. Laurence, “Ivory Tower or Grassroots,” 23. Her response while in Africa to the plight of the Somalis was echoed in her portrayal of “the Highland clans and the prairie Métis.” Laurence, *Heart of a Stranger*, 37.

Queen’s University Archives, George Woodcock Papers, Margaret Laurence to George Woodcock, 12 August 1975.


Laurence, *Diviners*, 287.


Michel Fabre, “From The Stone Angel to The Diviners: An Interview with Margaret Laurence,” in Woodcock, *A Place to Stand On*, 196.


Berger, *Writing of Canadian History*, 238.


Thomas, “Chariot of Ossian,” 63.


Berger, *Writing of Canadian History*, 246.

As quoted in Thomas, “Chariot of Ossian,” 55.

Berger, *Writing of Canadian History*, 245, 249.


Berger, *Writing of Canadian History*, 239, 250.

Laurence, *Heart of a Stranger*, 213.

Fabre, “From The Stone Angel to The Diviners,” 196.


Easingwood, “Realism of Laurence’s Semi-Autobiographical Fiction,” 119, 129.

As quoted in Thomas, “Chariot of Ossian,” 55.