During the last quarter century, the New Western Historians and a growing turn to regional studies have made the history of the American West a particularly vital part of the profession. Meanwhile, extraordinary strides in Canadian western women’s and, particularly, Aboriginal history have revised and revitalized the history of the Canadian West. During the same period, first the Free Trade Agreement and later NAFTA have focussed both Canadian and American attention on continental issues and the differences and similarities between the two enormous land masses that make up the bulk of North America. Comparative histories and monographs of the Canadian and American Wests are now beginning to flourish, including two volumes of essays edited by Carol Higham and Robert Thacker, One West, Two Myths (2004 and 2007), Beth Ladow’s Medicine Line (2001), Sheila McManus’s The Line Which Separates (2005), and Andrew Graybill’s Policing the Great Plains (2007).
On the one hand, there is no difference between the Canadian and American Wests. There is one unbroken geographical entity (though it may be called Prairies or Great Plains) that changes gradually from north to south and from east to west, and that includes a vast range of microclimates and microgeographies. The “United States of America” and the “Dominion of Canada” have divided this region between them for less than two centuries, but the impact of their citizens upon it has been great and largely similar. In both countries, the slaughter of the great bison herds led to land treaties with Aboriginal peoples. Domestic cattle replaced the bison, and railroads brought thousands of commercial agricultural settlers who ploughed the land and planted cereal crops. The newcomers used the federal government and the courts to separate even more land from Aboriginal peoples—for farmland, mineral development, urban growth, and hydroelectric and irrigation dams. Both north and south of the forty-ninth parallel, almost all of this region is now commercially cropped grasslands, producing grain or meat. In both countries, this agriculture is one of boom and bust, with fewer and fewer people on the land and more and more relocating outside the region or to cities that, except for those in Saskatchewan and Texas, are only on the fringe of the region. The extraction of energy resources, especially petroleum, also continues to transform the land.

On the other hand, the two Wests are so different in the context of their current political identities and intellectual histories that almost no comparison is possible. To find a true parallel, we would have to discover that Sitting Bull was George Washington’s primary antagonist, or that Americans still hotly debated whether Mexican general Santa Ana should be called a Founding Father or a vicious renegade. Canada needed its West to bring about Confederation; the eastern United States claimed its West as Manifest Destiny. Canada’s West is separated from its eastern population centres by a thousand miles of rugged Canadian Shield, while the United States deployed a continuous frontier of Amer-European settlement—despite historian Walter Webb’s contention that it toppled over for a moment at the hundredth meridian. Euro–North American traders traversed Canada for centuries via the empires of the St. Lawrence and Hudson Bay, working in a symbiotic relationship with Aboriginal trappers and fur preparers. Euro-American traders in the Mississippi basin gave
way to American trappers, mountain men, who wiped out the beaver as far as they could reach and supplanted the Aboriginal trappers with whom they were not unusually at war. The United States, it seemed, waged war against all in its path—the land, the animals, and the Aboriginal, Hispanic, and mixed-blood peoples. Canada prided itself on its avoidance of US-style violence and waited for disease and starvation to reduce its Indigenous westerners to acquiescence in treaties and dispossession.

These, at least, are the broad strokes that most contemporary western historians in either country would agree to. The historiography of the two Wests is also different. Neither Frederick Jackson Turner nor Harold A. Innis was, by any means, the first historian of his respective West, but each in some way encapsulated the work of those who had gone before him and laid out the major theoretical approaches that future historians, explicitly or implicitly, would follow—even those American historians who insisted that they were not following Turner and those Canadian historians who did not realize they were following Innis. J.M.S Careless’s 1954 article “Frontierism, Metropolitanism, and Canadian History” lays out two lines of interpretation, the Turnerian frontier thesis as opposed to the metropolitan theory that Innis included, almost as an afterthought, in The Fur Trade in Canada and that Donald Creighton expanded upon in The Commercial Empire of the St. Lawrence and other texts. While Turner, in 1893, was reacting to the “germ” theory of Herbert Baxter Adams and others, that American society was merely the development of European “germs” in American space, Innis was reacting to the ideas of Turner and his followers that American democracy was born out of the forest, the individualism of the frontier. Innis, however, stressed not “germs” but the continuing effect of the metropolis—whether it be London, Montreal, or other—on the economic, and hence social and political, nature of Canada. Rather than the remote medieval antecedents of democracy in Saxon forests, Innis looked at European fur markets and innovations in the manufacture of European goods for the fur trade to show how even this most far flung of markets developed in relationship to Europe and Montreal. “The importance of metropolitan centres in which luxury goods were in most demand was crucial to the development of colonial North America” because they manufactured trade goods and provided relatively high prices for raw materials such as fish and fur.
This relationship between metropolis and hinterland would continue to determine Canadian western development. The United States featured an interlocking network of large and small metropolises, stretching from New York and Albany west and north to Buffalo and Cincinnati, from New Orleans and St. Louis west and north to Des Moines and Council Bluffs, from Chicago, from Minneapolis, from San Francisco . . . and on and on. Even a major centre, as William Cronon has so magnificently shown in his study of Chicago, *Nature’s Metropolis*, is in the middle of a web. Canada’s fur trade and frontier development, however, was much more linear, given the nature of the country’s geography. Two great pathways arced west, the Kingdom of the St. Lawrence and the string of forts that eventually sprouted westward from Hudson Bay. Instead of fur trade forts that grew into cities surrounded by agrarian settlements, the slender Canadian network of fur posts and missionary churches and schools remained isolated from eastern Canada and its Euro–North American population centres and lifeways.²

As Turner would tell his audience at the World’s Columbian Exhibition in Chicago, “The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development.”³ Turner’s insight, which seemed to encapsulate perfectly what other European-descended Americans were thinking and saying in 1893, was that there was no longer a discrete line of settlement in the United States. The network had become so far flung that it overlay the entire continental span of the nation. If there was still public land (and more was available for homesteading after the disappearance of the frontier line than was taken up before), the days of a line of settlement and its “continuous recession” were gone. Turner, of course, did not consider the effect of this moving line on those who were either scraped along before it or marooned as it rolled past them. Innis, especially in his work on the fur trade, was continually aware of the Indian role in the fur trade fiefdoms he described and in the resulting nation. The formative value of the US frontier became obvious only in hindsight, when Turner claimed it. Innis, as an historian, obviously studied the past, but its pastness was more provisional. The Canadian fur trade was smaller, proportionately, to Canada’s economy in the 1920s when Innis was researching and writing his book than it had been before Confederation in 1867, but it still flourished throughout much
of the northern Shield country that, Innis claimed, had defined Canada as a nation. In fact, the fur trade continued until it came upon metropolitan limitations. Just as the collapse of the fashion of beaver felt hats in Europe had removed the market for the staple of the classic fur trade Innis and Turner (in his dissertation) had described, animal rights groups in the 1980s and 1990s in Europe and to a lesser extent in North America have reduced the fur market almost to nil (though, except in Alaska, it had largely declined to hobby status in the US before the frontier line disappeared). The role of the metropolis has reverted from the fur trade markets to Ottawa, which funnels payments through the Nunavut Tunngavik corporation to subsidize hunters and trappers willing to remain on the land. Innis is best known for his work on staples—fur, fish, and the others that characterize the Canadian economy. Not primarily a historian of the West, his work on the fur trade nonetheless laid out a basis for understanding the nation that other historians have developed (like Creighton) or debated (like W.J. Eccles). Turner is known for his Frontier Thesis—it might be a question on Who Wants to Be Millionaire?—but also for his discussion of the United States as a set of regions. Both Innis and Turner were American-trained economic historians who became, almost by accident, the writers who determined the formulas for their respective Wests.

One of the important distinctions between Innis and Turner for understanding the historiography of the two Wests is that Innis is very particular in talking about place—he was careful to travel to as many as possible of the places he discussed—while Turner is most concerned with talking about process—place is virtually irrelevant, something that the New Western Historians have noted. In some ways, all of Turner’s frontiers were simply his own Wisconsin pine lands dressed up in another environment. One of the most oft-cited passages from Turner’s celebrated “Significance of the Frontier” essay reads: “Stand at Cumberland Gap and watch the procession of civilization, marching single file—the buffalo following the trail to the salt springs, the Indian, the fur-trader and hunter, the cattle-raiser, the pioneer farmer—and the frontier has passed by. Stand at South Pass in the Rockies a century later and see the same procession with wider intervals between.”

Turner’s process is also hierarchical. Buffalo are the first and lowest element in the procession, closely followed by “the Indian,” the only figure in
the whole procession who is defined by essence and not by profession. Even the buffalo is doing something (looking for salt), and “the Indian” as a real person was also as likely as not to be a “fur-trader and hunter.” The final element, the apotheosis for Turner, is the “pioneer farmer”—imagined, of course, as white and male, unlike the unmentioned Indian women who had tended crops, at least in the vicinity of the Cumberland Gap, literally from time immemorial. Innis’s scene is by no means as orderly and hierarchical. (And nor is that of contemporary fur trade historians.) Euro–North American fur traders feuded endlessly against one another. Different Aboriginal groups struggled with each other, changed roles, and played Euro–North American companies and nationalities against each other. This process, however, was not telocentric in Innis’s telling—it was not “going somewhere,” not evolving into some “higher” form of land use, such as farming. It was sufficient in itself. While in the United States, even the fur trade worked toward the displacement of Native people—with Anglos themselves taking over trapping, as is evident from Turner’s conflation of “fur-trader” and “hunter”—in Canada, during any phase of the fur trade, as Innis said, it was never the case that the only good Indian was a dead Indian. Native people in the Canadian fur trade, as in the eastern United States, fulfilled vital economic roles as trappers, fur preparers, canoe builders and paddlers, hunters and provisioners. Even Plains peoples performed a vital role in the Canadian fur trade—as buffalo hunters and pemmican makers, feeding the fur brigades as they stretched out to the mountains and the great northern rivers.

For Turner, “the wilderness” and “the Indian” were versions of one another with no positive values except to strip Europeaness from the settler and set “him” on the way to becoming an American.

The wilderness masters the colonist. . . . It puts him in the log cabin of the Cherokee and Iroquois and runs an Indian palisade around him. Before long he has gone to planting Indian corn and plowing with a sharp stick; he shouts the war cry and takes the scalp in orthodox Indian fashion. In short, at the frontier the environment is at first too strong for the man.6

In addition to various inaccuracies about Indians, what is arresting about this oft-quoted statement is that the Indians have vanished, leaving their
role to the frontiersman, who Turner believed would soon leave Indian deficiencies behind. Upon the former European, now reduced to a blank slate, a new and improved American would be drawn. While Innis, no less than Turner, subscribed to the idea that European contact doomed the Aboriginal way of life, his account recognized the indispensability of Native people to the fur trade and pointed out the continuing Aboriginal influence in Canada. “We have not yet realized that the Indian and his culture were fundamental to the growth of Canadian institutions,” he wrote.7

In fact, Innis, by 1930, clearly recognized three founding peoples of Canada. “The Northwest Company was the forerunner of confederation and it was built on the work of the French voyageur, the contributions of the Indians, especially the canoe, Indian corn, and pemmican, and the organizing ability of Anglo-American merchants”—labour, land knowledge, and management. As Doug Owram points out, western Canadians of European descent have before and after Innis shown decided preferences for either the Nor’westers or the Selkirk settlers as the founders of western Canada, and I will discuss the various arguments below.8 The big difference, for Americans, is that the United States never had a choice. Daniel Boone and Kit Carson are both, as Henry Nash Smith pointed out, Sons of Leatherstocking. The mainstream of American culture, academic or popular, has not really come up with alternatives to these Sons of Leatherstocking as founders of the West. Mixed-bloods like James Bordeaux are certainly available as colourful characters, Tatanka Iyotaka and Ta Sunka Witko (Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse) are anti-heroes, and Santa Ana is the bad guy, but there is no question about who the hero of the settlement saga is.

Both Doug Owram’s Promise of Eden and Henry Nash Smith’s Virgin Land are histories of the ideas of the respective Wests, and they provide useful contexts for examining the ideas of Turner and Innis in the contexts of the intellectual history of each country.9 In seeing the North West Company as the precursor of Confederation, Innis, an Ontarian himself and teaching at the University of Toronto, was definitely following in the footsteps of the Ontario expansionists of the 1840s to 1860s, who had determined the particular manner in which the great territories to the northwest of the Canadas in the 1840s would be enfolded into the Confederation of the 1860s. According to Owram, until the 1850s, the North West appeared to
Canada West to be a fur trade hinterland, connected, after the 1821 merger of the North West Company and the Hudson’s Bay Company, not to Canada but to England through the Bay, thereby seeming both distant and arctic. By the 1850s, however, as the Canadas ran out of agricultural land and it became clear that their internal improvements would never win them much of a share of the commerce of the American Midwest, Ontario expansionists began to look to the West not only as a solution to the problems of land and commerce but also as a kind of ballast to the struggles between East and West, Catholic and Protestant, French and English in the Canadas and the Maritimes. In the United States, most Euro-Americans had always seen the West as their destiny (something that called forth the 1763 proclamation and separated Canada from America in what would turn out to be a decisive way). The only question had been how far West. The annexation of Texas, the Mexican-American War, and the *Kansas-Nebraska Act* were all ways in which the United States tried to use its West to balance out pro- and anti-slavery tensions in the East—as the Canadas used their West to balance French and English tensions. The Ontario expansionists rediscovered the North West and claimed it for the United Canadas, as the heirs of the North West Company. This claim, of course, required “liberating” Rupert’s Land from the Hudson’s Bay Company, whom the expansionists portrayed as despotic, much as the American expansionists portrayed the Mexicans. The Selkirk settlers were the object of the Ontario expansionists’ concerns in much the same way that the Austin settlers were the concern of the American expansionists. Ontario expansionists also accused the Hudson’s Bay Company of blocking the Protestantization—and hence the “civilization”—of the Aboriginal peoples of the North West. Because of their monolingualism, unconscious racism, conscious anti-Catholicism, and barriers of distance, the expansionists did not consult Métis or Indian residents of Red River but simply assumed that those who, for whatever reason, opposed the Hudson’s Bay Company spoke for all. In the same way, proponents of the Lone Star Republic never asked the opinion of the actual Mexicans in Texas, and still less the Indians. As for Kansas, as Paul Gates noted, it was all Indian Territory when the *Kansas-Nebraska Act* was passed. There was no squatter sovereignty or right to consultation provided for the Indians, many of whom were hustled out of Kansas before they had
even been paid for the eastern lands they had surrendered to the government when they were moved to Kansas. For the Anglo expansionists in both Canada and the United States, any title other than their own was so deficient as to be incomprehensible. Both American and Ontarian expansionists were perfectly aware that the claims of the Hudson’s Bay Company had counted for very little (and the claims of the Indians to nothing at all) when it came to Oregon country. American settlers, intending farmers, had held the land for the United States up to the forty-ninth parallel. The Ontarians were right in assuming that unless white Canadian farmers settled in the Red River valley, the hungry expansionists of St. Paul would gobble up that country, too.

Americans expected Mexican resistance to US expansion into Texas and the Southwest, and most were content to deal with it through warfare. Ontarian expansionists, on the other hand, genuinely did not expect Métis resistance to Canadian control of Red River and were puzzled and offended when the Métis resisted the immediate (and illegal) annexation of their land without their consent or even notification. The expansionists did not know what to make of Louis Riel’s Provisional Government. They theorized that the Métis must be pawns of the Americans, the Catholic church, or Quebec foes of Confederation. But future historians, especially those who were either in blood or in sentiment the descendants of the Ontario settlers of Manitoba, dealt with the confusion in another way. If the Selkirk settlers, the Scots crofters whom Lord Selkirk had transported to and granted land in Red River starting in 1811, rather than the Nor’westers, were posited as the true founders of Manitoba, then the English-speaking Protestant Ontarians could claim to be their natural heirs. If the Nor’westers were the true founders of the West, then the Métis were, if not their only heirs, certainly their senior heirs. Anglo Texans had never hesitated in claiming to be the heirs of the Austins, of Sam Houston and Sam Maverick and Jim Bowie and, of course, of Davey Crockett. No other choice was even visible.

Writing in the first decade of the twentieth century, George Bryce, who had moved to Red River in 1870 and had become a booster, proclaimed *The Romantic Settlement of Lord Selkirk’s Colonists*, who, he claimed, were the true first settlers of the area, the ones who had toiled and suffered, had survived hardships that eclipsed those of the Acadians, and had
made the West Canadian—and Canada possible. Since most of the settlers’ tribulations had come at the hands of the North West Company and their Métis allies, Bryce, then, had to complete the rearrangement of good guys and bad guys. The Selkirk settlers were no longer the dupes and pawns of the Hudson’s Bay Company, as the expansionists had cast them, and the North West Company was not, as Innis would have it, the pre-figuration of Confederation. Instead the North West Company became the half-civilized predators on the noble agricultural settlers of Red River. John Thompson uses the dramatic C.W. Jefferys painting “The Massacre at Seven Oaks” to demonstrate how the Anglo-Canadian tradition had developed into a sort of “Remember the Alamo” rendition of the conflict between the Selkirk settlers and the Métis in 1816. Interestingly enough, Governor Robert Semple, who commanded the settlers and was killed at Seven Oaks, was an American by birth. According to Hartwell Bowsfield’s entry on Semple in the Dictionary of Canadian Biography, Semple at first misjudged Métis intent—and then sent for cannon, a little too late. According to Bryce, more men of European descent were killed at Seven Oaks than in the whole preceding two centuries of fur trade rivalry in Canada.  

It has never occurred to Anglo Americans, either in the academy or in popular culture, to make Santa Ana a hero of regional resistance to federal domination nor to cast him as an Indigenous leader valiantly resisting imperial domination. Although many American academics, such as Richard Slotkin, have criticized the American obsession with “regeneration through violence,” and although the New Western Historians and most of their immediate academic predecessors have shown that America’s frontier epic was neither as predestined nor as admirable as Turner had portrayed it, Americans have never had the choice of heroes and founding fathers that Canadians have had. While popular writers like Bryce and academics like W.L. Morton have chosen to be the sons of the Selkirk settlers rather than of the Nor’westers, in Innis the possibility exists to claim a very different descent. Despite the flaws in Canada’s claims to be the mosaic, not the melting pot—to be the first multicultural society—this is not merely a self-serving rhetoric dreamed up sometime around the Trudeau years, but a potential that has been in the idea of western Canada since long before Confederation and is inescapably part of Canada’s historiography.
While there have certainly been large, synthetic histories of the Wests since Innis and Turner—most importantly Walter Prescott Webb’s *The Great Plains* (1931), Ray Allen Billington’s many times revised *America’s Frontier Heritage* (1966), and Arthur S. Morton’s *A History of the Canadian West to 1870–71* (1939) as well as various accounts, such as George Stanley’s, centred on Riel—the historiography of the mid-twentieth-century Wests belongs mainly to monographs and articles.12 The rise of the New Western Historians in the 1980s, however, has required a new framework for understanding western history and hence the publication of several ambitious overview histories. I would like to conclude this chapter by looking at four of the most influential, two Canadian and two American, in the context of the Innis-Turner dichotomy I have sketched above and in terms of their incorporation, or lack of incorporation, of monographic texts that have substantially stretched these interpretations.

Both of the American texts, Patricia Limerick’s *Legacy of Conquest* (1987) and Richard White’s “It’s Your Misfortune and None of My Own” (1991), cover the entire trans-Missouri US West, which means that the Great Plains region tends to drop out of consideration for long periods and there is no attempt to look at Canada, either comparatively or as part of a larger region. Both Canadian texts, Gerald Friesen’s *Canadian Prairies* (1984) and John Herd Thompson’s *Forging the Prairie West* (1998), on the other hand, are focussed on the Prairies and do, particularly in *Forging the Prairie West*, offer comparisons to the US West.13 Both of the American books present themselves with metaphoric titles that suggest, as the texts reveal, what Limerick calls the “injured innocence” that the westerner addresses to the East and particularly to the federal government. The Canadian texts use more straightforward titles that simply announce their subject. *Canadian Prairies* and *Your Misfortune* are texts designed to be used in western-history classes. *Forging the Prairie West* is part of a series of regional Canadian histories published by Oxford University Press for the general reader but also for use as university texts. *Legacy of Conquest* is more personal and idiosyncratic, less designed on the coverage model. It is more concerned with establishing a vantage point on the West that, in contrast to Turner, is present-centred, concentrates on the West as place rather than process, and eschews the triumphalism inherent not only in

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Turner but in the whole Manifest Destiny, Indian-fighter popular culture of the American West.

Instead of discussing a linear process moving from east to west, Limerick instead provides a drama with many players coming from many different directions or originating in the West: “Everyone became an actor in everyone else’s play; understanding any part of the play now requires us to take account of the whole. It is perfectly possible to watch a play and keep track of, even identify with, several characters at once, even when these characters are in direct conflict with each other and within themselves.”

Limerick’s directions do not include the North, however, because she never looks at Canada, nor does the book become quite the multivocal text that she promises, as her own voice remains quite determinant. Although White does look at the urban twentieth-century Plains West, as in his discussion of World War II and the subsequent aircraft industry in Wichita, he, like Limerick, tends to discuss the Great Plains primarily as the nineteenth century of Indians and homesteaders and the 1930s’ disaster of the Dust Bowl. Both authors address the bulk of their coverage of the twentieth-century West to the Southwest and the Pacific Coast.

Since the Prairies region has been occupied by human societies for millennia, contemporary historians, working in English and using written sources, face a substantial problem in dealing with all but the most recent four centuries—what to say about all those preceding centuries? White announces at the beginning of Your Misfortune that his definition of region relies on political geography and delineates the West only in terms of its Euro-American occupation. Although this is in many ways a sensible decision that keeps the book from either becoming impossibly long or shrinking Indigenous occupation to a relatively few pages that trivializes Indigenous longevity and impact on the land, it also seems to presage the loss of focus on Native peoples after the end of the Indian Wars. Both Limerick and White discuss John Collier and the “Indian New Deal” as well as AIM and the Red Power movement, but both largely skip over the continued and insidious dispossession of Indians during the twentieth century. Given the controversy over Angie Debo’s And Still the Waters Run (1940) and its enduring fame, as well as the publication of Michael Lawson’s tellingly titled Dammed Indians (1982), it is unfortunate that this
chapter in history rates so much less ink than the Indian Wars. Custer and his less vivid peers, though advancing what they saw as a well-deserved Anglo-Saxon empire in America by means that were cruel and vicious, at least displayed a physical courage and panache that were completely lacking in the lawyers and “guardians” who made an industry out of cheating mixed-blood orphans out of their land and even dispossessing whole communities of successful small farmers in Oklahoma in the twentieth century. Bureaucrats who consistently flooded reservation land along the Missouri and other western and northern rivers with unneeded dam projects and relocated successful villages from riverine forests to unprotected grasslands devoid of game are similarly bland and faceless. Sincere child welfare advocates who, through various programs, ensured that more than half of Native American children would not be raised in their own families during the 1950s and 1960s also deserve more scrutiny, especially as their policies are still continuing, with Aboriginal children severely overrepresented in foster care and other types of state guardianship in both countries. To show the nineteenth-century military defeats of the Cherokees, Lakotas, and others without showing the economic and social destruction of their descendants who had successfully made the transition to reservation life trivializes both the suffering and the resentment that fueled Red Power in the latter part of the twentieth century. Serious discussion of Native American sovereignty and other contemporary issues in Native American society and culture is underground in the United States, but it is becoming increasingly audible and effective in Canada, largely enabled by Supreme Court decisions that affirm Indigenous rights. Fiction writers have probably done a better job than synthetic historians with these tales, as witness Linda Hogan’s *Mean Spirit* and especially Thomas King’s border-crossing *Green Grass, Running Water*, with its reference to Debo’s and Lawson’s issues. Similarly, Beatrice Culleton (Moisionier) with *In Search of April Raintree* (1983) and filmmaker Alanis Obomsawin with *Richard Cardinal: Cry from a Diary of a Métis Child* (1986) showed some of the tragedies of foster care before the historians did.

Friesen’s *Canadian Prairies* and White’s *Your Misfortune* are probably the most comparable of the four books, as both are textbooks for university classes. Friesen begins with Indigenous societies on the Canadian
Prairies, a somewhat more manageable topic than Indigenous population on the less-glaciated Plains, since much of the area emerged from glaciaction only four thousand or so years ago. Nonetheless, his use of oral sources is limited, and archaeological and ethnohistorical sources are not particularly clear or definitive, and all are focussed most intensely on the last four hundred years. (The explosion of monographs since Friesen was writing, more than twenty years ago, will make things much easier for future historians.) While both Limerick and White explicitly repudiate Turner, Friesen mentions Innis, as he does many previous historians, only in passing, as “the economic historian who first perceived the pattern in the Canadian staple trade.” Friesen does, however, use Innis’s framework for his extensive discussion of the fur trade era. While White and Limerick shift their twentieth-century interest away from the Plains, Friesen, tasked with the Prairies, simply limits his coverage of the more recent past. Like Limerick and White, he does not discuss the post-treaty dispossession of Native peoples, but unlike the two Americans, he had no sources such as Debo’s from the 1930s and was writing before the important monographs on the subject, such as Sarah Carter’s *Lost Harvests* (1990), were available. Canadian Indian policy gained immeasurably—from the point of view of the federal government and non-Native intending settlers—from lagging behind American Indian policy in the nineteenth century. In the twentieth century, Canadian Indian historiography lagged far behind that of the United States, in part because of the protective myth of Canadian benevolence but even more because of the lack of a European-educated Native or mixed-blood intellectual corps that still identified as Indigenous, such as the La Flesche family, John Joseph Mathews, D’Arcy McNickle, Gertrude Bonnin (Zitkala Sa), and others who wrote and published in the United States. Pauline Johnson stood alone until Olive Dickason began publishing Aboriginal history in the 1970s. The field now supports many talented Native scholars, including Taiaiake Alfred, James (Sakej) Henderson, John Borrows, Leroy Little Bear, Antoine Lussier, and Blair Stonechild, some of whom are discussed below. The lack of an Angie Debo in Canada, however, is perhaps less inexplicable than her existence in the United States.

Of the four books, *Forging the Prairie West* is perhaps the most successful. For one thing, it is the latest and has access to the most monographic
materials. For another, it is the shortest, and although Thompson does not oversimplify, he has room only for broad strokes, leaving less room for quibbles. Thompson gives the most emphasis to the twentieth-century Prairies, and although his US/Canada comparisons are relatively few, he uses them effectively to frame Canadian controversies, such as those over Macdonald’s National Policy, in ways that make strategies possible for using comparative data to generate new answers to old questions. Like the other authors, he does not look at the systematic white-collar aspects of fleecing Native peoples during the twentieth century.

History is inescapably presentist, if only because no one would write, or would bother to read, a study that had absolutely nothing to do with the lives they are living and the thoughts they are thinking. History is also presentist because it is cumulative. Even purely archival research rests not only on what has been kept into the present but on the kinds of questions raised by past historians. Similarly, we can only read past historians from our vantage point in our own particular moment. Historiography, however, is a kind of cross-focussing device that allows us to look at the kinds of ideas that have framed our understanding of the past and to refine the questions we will ask in the future. The Wests of Friesen and Thompson are as different from the Wests of Limerick and White as are the Wests of Innis and Turner. But all the cross-border comparisons remind us that we write not about the past but about our ideas of the past. Ideas, as Henry Nash Smith showed us more than half a century ago, determine the actions of historical players, but they also determine the actions of historians. Cross-border comparisons force us to examine our whole frame of reference, and when we do that, we may decide that the play we have been watching is even more complex and amazing than we had thought.