The 1920s marked not only the gradual tapering down of Indian exploitation in Oklahoma—and the exhaustion of anything left to exploit—but also the gradual depopulation of the Great Plains (absolutely in some areas and overall in relation to the rest of North America), which began in 1919. The extreme variability in moisture from year to year in a complex system of greater and lesser precipitation cycles had developed the Great Plains ecosystem of grasslands with enormous species variety to be able to withstand rain, drought, and prairie fire. Gophers and locusts harvested the grass to protect the roots when there was little rain. Buffalo, elk, and other ruminants followed predictable migration patterns but ones that varied greatly with rainfall and other climatic patterns. Prairie fires, bison ripping up grass—roots and all—and pawing and creating wallows, and even the excavations of prairie dogs and gophers exposed soil to blowing. At least during the days of dog transportation, it seems as if Indigenous peoples mostly lived on the verges and the riverine oases of the Plains. Travel by foot and dog travois was slow. People in the southern and middle Plains, such as the
Pawnees, Mandans, and Hidatsas, maintained corn villages, while people north of the Missouri for the most part confined agriculture to the ceremonial growth of tobacco and hunted buffalo, using pounds or jumps perhaps in co-operation with the wolves. Despite their utilization of such stationary features as gardens, pounds, and jumps, and the slowness of dog travel, the people such as the Blackfeet were able to be mobile, to anticipate the cycles of the buffalo, and to move away from drought.²

The rapid reintroduction of horses back onto the Plains from the south increased the mobility of the people. They could range nearly as far and as fast as the buffalo, and they could carry food and tools with them. Horticulture became less necessary (lessening the significance of women’s work and hence the prestige of women), and eastern peoples such as the Siouan confederacies and the Creeks came (or came back) onto the Plains. The Kiowas came from the northwest and the Apaches, among the Athapascan peoples who had migrated through the Plains around the 1300s, returned from the south.³ Although droughts, unusual bison movements, regional overhunting or overgathering, and, increasingly, deadly raids on small family groups menaced the people, theirs was a sustainable way of life. And a satisfying one. Historians and ecologists have not yet agreed on when and what the “climax” population of buffalo was or exactly when it began to decline, but sustainability was certainly hampered when the Great Plains became a hinterland to the fur and hide trades. The market for pemmican to feed the northern fur brigades certainly raised hunting pressures on buffalo in the Red River area, while a growing industrial demand for bison robes and bison-hide belts for steam machinery supported a hide industry largely carried out along the Missouri from St. Louis to Fort Benton. Not until the coming of the transcontinental railroads in the United States, however, did the buffalo vanish as a subsistence resource.⁴

The very mobility of the buffalo meant that their demise was necessary for the establishment of commercial agriculture on the Great Plains. Pronghorns gracefully feeding among cattle were no problem. A shaggy brown river flowing for days through fences and across ploughed fields was another matter. The demise of the great free-ranging buffalo herds, the agreements to the numbered treaties in Canada, and the abandonment of the treaty system and the retrocession of the Great Sioux Reservation
in the north and Indian Territory in the south of the US Great Plains all occurred during the 1870s and set the stage for large-scale Euro/Afro/North American settlement of the Plains. The 1870s also saw the first bust for settlers who had come into Kansas and Nebraska during the relatively wet 1850s and 1860s, only to discover drought, the economic impact of which was magnified by a recession in the 1870s. A similar economic depression and drought in 1893 hit all the Plains states and territories and saw disillusioned settlers leaving the Plains and heading either west or back east. The 1890s was the decade of the Populists. Despite a few itinerant rainmakers, the Populists could do little for drought, but they could attempt to loosen the grip of the railroads, elevators, bankers, and mortgage companies on the farmers. Returning rains and prosperity by 1907 introduced the age of parity (1910–14)—the rate of return, in purchasing power, per bushel of wheat or corn or hundredweight of cattle or hogs that would be the benchmark for farmers seeking support programs for decades to come. The end of the Depression of the 1890s and the beginning of another prairie wet cycle initiated the extraordinary wheat boom of the Canadian Prairies that lasted until the outbreak of World War I in 1914. As we have seen, the economic basis of both the wheat and beef booms of these years was speculation, investment, and, in the case of wheat, the subsistence work of women and children. What was happening in the Prairie Provinces was similar to what was happening in the western Dakotas and Nebraska, and on into Wyoming and Montana, helped on by the irrigation promoted by the 1902 Reclamation Act—though that had been directed more specifically at California, the Southwest, and the Great Basin—and the Enlarged Homestead Acts, such as the Kinkaid Act. Neither farmers nor speculators nor the general public, however, saw rate of return as being the result of excess investment rather than the inherent productiveness of the land and the “scientific” farming techniques that had been invented to tame it. The Great Plains was the Last Best West, the home of the bonanza farms, where golden wheat to feed the world would make everyone’s fortune.

Settlers poured in. Canadian cattlemen lost their leased and public domain grazing lands to homesteaders. Indigenous people disappeared from the public consciousness—except for spectacles like the Calgary Stampede—but the survivors of the starving years of the 1880s and 1890s
found ways to combine subsistence, grazing, teamstering, and the sale of crafts and traditional foods such as berries to survive. They even began to reverse the population decline that had continued since 1492. Railway completion to the north, however, brought Euro/Afro/Canadian settlers to Peace and Athabasca River country, further marginalizing Indigenous hunting and trapping, subsistence activities, and even agriculture. The Canadian government’s “barbarism” theories and the extreme niggardliness of both federal governments in providing seed, draft animals, and implements had the ironic effect of protecting Indigenous peoples from the excesses of the wheat boom—though government expropriation of northern Plains land and herds during World War I, supposedly to produce more food to help make the world safe for democracy, saddled reserve and reservation communities with the ecological if not the economic results of the bust and substantially reduced land retained by the reserves.7

The development of Marquis wheat in 1911 did make the wheat bonanza plausible, but it took World War I to make it real. The virtual destruction of European agriculture and the insatiable demand of the allied armies for bread, beef, horses, and men raised the prices of all these Prairie products. Even with Canadian government price controls on wheat, Prairie farmers could pay off all their debts with a single harvest—which encouraged them to mortgage everything and buy more land at any price. The weather was not exceptionally good for most of the war, but it was good enough to make a crop. As a farmer says, cynically, in Edward McCourt’s novel Music at the Close, “Matt, if them Huns can just hang on for two more years, we’ll all be able to retire.”8

By 1919, there were no more armies to feed, European agriculture was producing again, and the men that Prairie farmers had learned to do without returned home, looking for jobs and homesteads. And so the bottom fell out of wheat and land prices. The roaring of the 1920s on the Great Plains was the sound of banks failing and farmers losing their land. David C. Jones’s Empire of Dust focusses on the dry belt of southeastern Alberta and especially the town of Carlstadt—which became Alderson during the anti-German days of World War I—but this area is simply an exaggerated version of most of the High Plains from New Mexico up. Alderson is in the western base of the Palliser Triangle, that area that the first expansionists
had deemed part of the Great American Desert but that the optimists from Clifford Sifton and Frank Oliver down through the moneylenders and dry farming experts to the boomers and would-be town fathers had declared open for agriculture. People poured into the country. If many expected to get something for nothing, some did make speculative fortunes. The ones who believed in hard work and the decent life of farm and small town, however, mostly got nothing for years of trying to make a living. “Experts” were sure the region was destined for glory, as if willing it into agricultural land could make it agricultural land. “Hard times will never affect Southern Alberta’ [mortgage company co-treasurer Kingman Nott] Robins quoted Canadian paladin of the soil, Professor James W. Robertson [in 1910]. ‘The interests of this district are now so diversified that there is no possibility of a pronounced depression.” But diversification is no guarantee against drought. Nineteen fourteen brought crop failure; 1915 and 1916 brought bumper crops to coincide with the war demand. By the agricultural census of 1916, 45 percent of all farms and 75 percent of all wheat farms in Alberta were in the dry belt. Between 1918 and 1922, wheat prices dropped by more than half, though the prices of manufactured goods, inflated during the war, did not drop as quickly or as far. Meanwhile taxes leaped—in the Nobleford area from $2 per quarter section before the war to $36 by 1922. Land values dropped with wheat prices—from an average of $12.89 per acre in 1914–19 to $9.58 in 1920–21 to $7.51 from 1925 to 1929. The 1920s also saw record or near record low precipitation. After 1916, the grasshoppers, gophers, rabbits, and mosquitoes turned out in vast numbers. The pale western cutworm was largely responsible for crop failures from 1917 to 1920. And many farmers were paying off land purchased at high prices with high interest rates during the war years.9

Except for the municipalities, who were aware of the disaster facing their citizens and were generous with aid—resulting in debt and higher taxes—governments did not help the floundering farmers. Mrs. Reinhard Frerichs was one of many who wrote to Herbert Greenfield, the first premier in the United Farmers of Alberta government, asking for relief: “It eats all them years the dear seed and never gives it back.” But the premier and the others in positions of power regarded Mrs. Frerichs and anyone else who complained as “anticapitalistic scaremongers of the worst order.”
Euro–North American settlers were meeting the same ideology that had denied the suffering of the Blackfoot and Crees, Lakotas and Cheyennes, and others in the 1880s. The dry farming experts propounded their “ten commandments” of dry farming and insisted that no farmer who followed the rules could fail. They believed, on the grounds of their own high opinion of themselves, that since the land was occupied by farmer-settlers, it could be occupied, and Nature would have to obey the experts and nurture the farmers. Finally, even the experts acknowledged that in some years, no crops were possible. In 1926, the Lyman school board voted to paint the schoolhouse yellow so it wouldn’t show if anyone relieved himself against the wall, and to paint a white elephant on the front. But it could have been no more than a gesture of defiance. Everything was kaput, and there was no money for paint. The out-migration that followed World War I in southern Alberta was as dramatic as the in-migration that had preceded the war, although most settlers stayed, at least during the 1921 census period. The whole southeastern Alberta area lost 21 percent of its population, but 48 southeastern townships lost 75 to 100 percent of their population. Southwestern Saskatchewan also lost population, but not as drastically. The situation was similar in Montana and, to some extent, all over the Great Plains.

Why did the “Empire of Dust” see such a spectacular build-up and decline? As in the Vulcan area, just to the west, much of the original settlement was speculative, spurred by government hype, easily available mortgages and other money, and the desire to make a fortune while living a Wild West adventure. As with Vulcan, the people who suffered the most were those who really intended to make a living farming in the region and reaped few of the speculative benefits but had to pay for them in higher taxes and depreciating land prices. The wishful thinking of government, experts, moneylenders, and intending farmers is important. All concerned seem to have felt entitled to have rain follow the plough, to have technology vanquish the desert. Part of the problem was with the social construction of “desert.” Just as Indians who did not wish to divide land into private property were deemed deficient and needed to be changed—even if the change primarily demeaned, demoralized, and impoverished them—land that would not produce dependable crops of European grains was also deemed
deficient and in need of reform through conversion to private property and “breaking” to the plough. But if we remember that no ecosystem is deficient, that all ecosystems are sufficient for the organisms that have co-evolved with them, blaming the land is clearly paradoxical.

At the same time that the various Homestead Acts and the immigration propaganda was creating the belief in an entitlement to farm (and also an entitlement to make profits in land speculation) on the Great Plains, the railroads and the federal governments were creating contrasting economic uses for the mountains and the American Southwest as tourist attractions. Mining and irrigated agriculture would also play their parts in these arid lands, and the intensive irrigation around Cardston, Lethbridge, and the other parts of southern Alberta owes much to the Mormon experience of creating irrigated agriculture in Utah. It is instructive, however, to compare the propaganda for the corridor of national parks just to the west of the Great Plains to that for the Plains. The Y2Y (Yellowstone to Yukon) Conservation Initiative, currently supported by environmentalists, operates in the tradition of constructing the mountains as beautiful, fragile, and full of environmental diversity and splendour. While grasslands conservationists are now trying to apply similar imagery to the Great Plains, a century ago, the region was constructed as utilitarian, its diversity much better sacrificed to monocultures of corn and wheat, something we have already noted in Pleasant Porter’s comments. It is also instructive to compare the CPR’s tourist posters, for which they quite deliberately recruited artists, showing the mountain splendour of Banff, with their settlement recruitment posters of cornucopias and sheaves of wheat and a land transformed. The railroads had received land as part of their payment for construction of the actual railways, and they had chosen prairie land, not mountains or the Canadian Shield. It was part of their economic role to construct the prairies in the picturesque tradition of homes and herds, while the mountains were the sublime of untamed peaks. The Santa Fe did the same for the desert Southwest.

The cowboy aesthetic, expressed by the Calgary Stampede, painters like Frederic Remington and Charlie Russell, and writers like Owen Wister and Will James, also created and bridged a dichotomy. The rodeo and Indian Village aspects of the Stampede to some extent mask(ed) and to
some extent enhance(d) its utility as an agricultural exhibition, showing off wheat, barley, and tame forages like brome, timothy, and alfalfa. The relentless square survey also reinforced the idea that the Plains was a monotonous monoculture and the mountains—wild, varied, and unsquared—were sublime rather than deficient. Yet the one aspect of prairie restoration that has proven most difficult is the extraordinary complexity of prairie flora and fauna. Any given acre of tallgrass prairie regularly supports about two hundred different kinds of plants, and every slight slope, exposure, or soil variant supports a different mixture of plants, which shift again in response to drought or wetness or different kinds of grazing pressure. From termites and gophers, to voles, to buffalo and elk and grizzly bears, the prairies are infinitely varied and variable. There is a good deal of irony that the great ruminants and predators of the Great Plains found refuge in the mountain parks of Banff and Yellowstone, Glacier and Waterton Lakes.

The settlement of the Plains and the preservation of the mountains was not inevitable—as one can see by the cattle and petroleum exploitation in the Kananaskis area just outside Banff, or the pressure for mines and wells outside the mountain parks, or even the reservoirs constructed within the parks themselves. The huge lake in Rocky Mountain National Park in Colorado is a reservoir for a trans-basin project bringing Colorado River water through a tunnel to irrigate wheat on the plains to the east, while Barrier Lake, at the north end of Kananaskis Country, was constructed to provide hydro power to the city. The flowery mountain meadows of July are no more beautiful than the flowery prairie meadows of May and June, except that the prairie flowers have almost all been ploughed under. The desert of southeastern Alberta is not the Great American Desert that Palliser believed he saw. Instead, it is a desert of wheat, created by a particular economic system. That does not negate the suffering of the intending farmers who came, but it does suggest that it was not the land that was at fault but the socially constructed belief in entitlement to farm European crops.

The continuing disaster of the 1930s on the Great Plains resulted from the same conditions that had plagued the 1920s, complicated by a more widespread drought and an international economic disaster that, like the collapse of wheat prices after 1919, was a result of the Great War and, in the case of the Depression, the shattering reparations imposed on Germany.
afterward. Donald Worster has called the Dust Bowl the greatest ecological disaster ever to hit the United States—possibly the worst in the entire world—and he blames both it and its coincidence with the Depression on the nature of capitalism.13 He does, however, also acknowledge that even the Soviet Union followed a similar predatory policy in ploughing up land, if not in policies leading to the ecological disasters around Lake Baikal and the Caspian Sea. Yet the frenetic ploughing of the Great Plains did not happen in other parts of the capitalist world. The North American East Coast and Maritimes simply does not have the expanse of level land and deep soil that the Great Plains has. The tallgrass prairie of the American Midwest, sloping briefly into Canada, suffered ploughing even more intense than the Great Plains because it was less arid.

In general, the attitude of North American agriculture and public imagery focussed heavily on the idea that all grassland was deficient and had to be reclaimed—as if it had declined from some earlier, better use. While the clearing settlements in the eastern parts of North America and around the Great Lakes had the same attitude toward trees that Prairie pioneers had toward grass, timber was at least acknowledged as having value. The grasses were not. Even in the twenty-first century, I have had Greenpeace recruiters and other environmental activists argue against the validity of a grass/grazing utility for the land, opposing all meat production, even the range production of grass-fed beef, a far less ecologically damaging alternative to ploughing the grasslands and planting soybeans, most of which are now genetically modified. Grasslands can best produce protein for human use by serving as pastures for large ruminants—whether bison and elk or domestic cattle—as the Lakotas, Blackfoot, and other Indigenous Plains peoples have always recognized. Because the extermination of the buffalo herds was essential to the dispossession of Indigenous peoples and because the Indian Wars have been valorized in American popular culture and Walsh and his Mounties peacefully subduing Sitting Bull in Canadian popular culture, the very grasslands themselves seem to have become abhorrent to whitestream cultures on the Plains—just as Germany had become abhorrent to the victorious World War I allies, who imposed impossibly strict reparations upon Germany in the Treaty of Versailles. Although, as Worster says, we should have learned from the Dust Bowl
that something was fundamentally wrong with the way capitalism used the Great Plains, even some conservationists have made only minor adjustments, not ones that would lead to a totally different and more appropriate relationship with the land.

The Depression was both a worldwide phenomenon and a sequence of experiences that varied by place, time, economic class, gender, Aboriginal status, and so forth. Both of my parents lived through the Depression in the small city of Calgary, now a major metropolis that is still distinguished by domestic architecture that was almost all built either before 1914 or after 1947. The Glenmore Reservoir, still the source of domestic water for downtown and the south side of the city, was, however, excavated and its dam built as a municipal relief project during the Depression. My maternal grandfather, a lawyer, held onto a middle-class existence during that grim decade. My father’s family was less prosperous, especially during the last illness and after the death of my grandfather. Family legend has it that they escaped starvation and relief (a worse fate) during the winter my grandfather lay dying only because my uncle, teaching school at Morley on the Stoney Reserve, went hunting with his students and brought home a moose that fed the family through the winter. Yet Calgary was better off than the southeastern part of the province, where those settlers who had survived the 1920s slowly succumbed to the 1930s.

In the United States, the true “Dust Bowl” area of northeastern New Mexico, southeastern Colorado, western Kansas, and the panhandles of Oklahoma and Texas suffered from the tenure of “suitcase farmers” who had entered a particularly dry and windy part of the Great Plains, mined it for wheat for a few years, and left when the land began to blow away. The dust storms further east, from Texas through Saskatchewan, hit communities that had been settled with Euro–North American farmers for three generations and had survived earlier droughts of the 1870s and 1890s. Some thought it was the end of the world. Yet climatologists tell us that, in terms of millennia, the drought of the 1930s was not a particularly harsh one. It was only that the people could not pick up and move with the dirt that made it a human disaster. In fact, the 1930s was the least mobile decade on the Great Plains since the Euro-Americans had come, and the one in which the Euro-Americans most resembled the Indigenous people in their
subsistence methods. My uncle’s hunting experience was not unique. Nor was the return to the “home place” and the support of the extended family. With the collapse of the market economy—despite the efforts of the Farm Holiday and other farmers’ associations, the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA) and Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration (PFRA), and other federal programs in both countries—women’s subsistence activities and the ingenuity of both women and men had to replace the market until rain and war came again. Rain and war were always the twins that seemed to make the Plains most commercially attractive.

The 1930s redefined politics in North America, as unemployment mounted to levels never seen before or since, except on reserves and reservations, and, more recently, in inner cities. Nowhere was the response more dramatic than on the Great Plains. The Populists had attained prominence in the 1890s, the Non-partisan League during the teens, and the Progressives during the 1920s. The thirties brought many new theories and leaders.