Out of necessity, Saskatchewan developed a mixed economy that managed to buffer both agriculture and industry against the disadvantages of great distances and sparse populations. It lost it when a global way of thinking found momentary support—and proved again that the unbuffered market will not work on the Great Plains, especially not in the purest part of the Great Plains, where there is what W.O. Mitchell has called “the least common denominator of nature, the skeleton requirements simply, of land and sky—Saskatchewan prairie.” If the eighteenth and the first part of the nineteenth centuries began the transition of the Great Plains to hinterland through the fur trade, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries cemented that relationship through the railroads and homestead settlement. But, as we have seen, that expansive wheat economy reached its apex in World War I and never really recovered its strength or its importance in the national economies of the United States or Canada after the disaster of the 1920s. Yet keeping up the boosterism, the belief in progress and growth, continued largely unabated through the twentieth century and into
the twenty-first. While growth in most of the rest of North America was first industrial and then service and knowledge oriented, the Great Plains for the most part missed out on the economic development promoted by the wartime munitions and aerospace industry—continued in the United States by the Cold War. Although the American Great Plains did get wartime investment, most states were unable to parlay that into a permanent industrial complex because the West Coast and Southwest were home to the giant contractors who were able to capitalize on and to keep the armament nuclei of industrial production. Canadian Prairie cities did not even have any plants to lose. Efforts to proclaim the University of Nebraska the “Harvard of the Plains” or to make the University of Saskatchewan the information technology centre of Canada have mostly lost out to the two old problems—distance and sparse population. Except for petroleum centres like Tulsa and Calgary, economic development on the Great Plains has stayed focused on agriculture and its sine qua non of land and water. Land and water cannot be created and cannot even, for the most part, be transported. But water can be saved up in reservoirs behind dams, and arid lands can become commercially productive with the application of water. So economic development on the Great Plains in the last half of the twentieth century has continued to focus on getting more land from the Indians and putting more land under irrigation, processes that, as we shall see, are often interlinked.

As shown earlier, the Amer-European settlement on the Great Plains started as a planned economy, denominated especially by the square survey. For the most part, classical development theory explains how the ploughed grasslands merged with a global market economy, though it does not deal with issues such as the loss of fertility and the growing dependence on hybrid seed, chemical fertilizers, and pesticides that mark monocrop agriculture, especially on the Great Plains. Planning for Native peoples on the Great Plains, however, had never been as neutral and beneficent. In fact, it looked a good deal like the disastrous farm schemes in the Soviet Union, Tanzania, and Ethiopia that Scott describes, though without the promise of equality and material abundance. From the point of view of the Great White Father or even the friendlier Grandmother England, reservations and reserves were temporary refuges, not unlike Buffalo Bill’s Wild West.
(through which Black Elk would actually meet “Grandmother England”), where people could play at being Indian until they got the real message and gave up their heathen ways to become brown white men and women. Since the reservations were temporary, they did not need to be economically viable and indeed were founded with the promise of annuities and rations in lieu of the subsistence hitherto provided by the land that was, according to the written parts of the treaties, to be relinquished to the Amer-Europeans. Thus, it is not surprising that the modern states of both Canada and the United States, with their firm belief in better living through technology, would “improve” reservation and reserve lands by flooding them and moving the inhabitants from their chosen plots. Although the rhetoric of these moves stressed the benefits of dam and lake building, the benefits were almost all off-reservation and the unacknowledged losses almost all on-reservation.

In the 1950s, the United States came up with the twin policies ominously named Relocation and Termination. After the war, Native people, especially veterans who had seen the world and were determined to succeed in whitestream society, began, like other rural North Americans, to come to the cities. Relocation was ostensibly a plan to help them move, adjust to new conditions, and train for and secure new jobs. For the most part, it failed, marginalizing people in urban ghettos instead of merging them into the economic mainstream. Termination was the federal withdrawal of recognition from tribes, thus “freeing” their land and other assets for the good of the society as a whole or, in some cases, forcing them to relinquish valuable timberlands to private companies. In Canada, the reformulation of the *Indian Act* in 1951 also focussed on whitestreaming Aboriginal peoples. Despite clear testimony to the contrary from Aboriginal speakers, the new act still assumed that it was the united purpose of everyone for Native people to assimilate as quickly and fully as possible. The resource boom of the 1950s also pushed Euro-Canadian resource exploration further north, into what had hitherto been considered inhospitable and marginal land, deficient for economic use. Other federal programs in the 1950s and 1960s resettled whole communities, particularly in the North, for the ease of providing mandatory schooling and other “services.” Since early contact, Native people had valued technological training in the European arts and
crafts, including reading, writing, and arithmetic, which they had actually embedded in some of the treaties. They never, however, asked for or wanted training that was coercive or primarily assimilative. In some cases, at least partially for the sake of defending Canada’s claims to the North from other countries, villages were relocated far from any resources that they were trained and equipped to hunt or gather, forcing them into welfare dependency. In both countries, the relocations were socially and culturally damaging to the people who were relocated, and the resultant social and health pathologies became excuses for the rapidly increasing practice of taking Aboriginal children from their families of origin and placing them, sometimes illegally, in non-Aboriginal foster or adoptive homes. All of these processes were ostensibly aimed at assimilating Native people into whi
estream society but also had the added benefit—from a non-Native point of view—of decreasing reserve and reservation populations so that there would be more “surplus” land. The self-serving and duplicitous nature of this sort of transaction was no more apparent to most non-Aboriginal people of the mid-twentieth century than it had been at any other period of North American history, especially as it was usually couched in terms of individual equality of opportunity.

Although reserve and reservation lands had originally been placed in areas that Euro–North Americans did not expect to want, lands that were seen as completely deficient for “civilized” uses, uses began to develop early in the twentieth century, especially for road corridors or for areas to be flooded behind dams. Indigenous people had frequently chosen land that included rivers, breaks, and riverine forests, the Great Plains habitats most conducive to subsistence lifestyles because they featured wood, water, and game. Euro–North American farmers commonly favoured level uplands instead. But these lands that Euro–North Americans had customarily defined as “unused” and “uninhabited” became prime sites for dams and reservoirs. A relatively early and small-scale project was Calgary’s Glenmore Dam and reservoir, built during the 1930s, largely as a relief project, on land abutting the city and purchased from the Sarcees (Tsuu T’ina), who had preferred that area to the dryer regions further south where they had first been settled under Treaty 7. Land for the Ghost Dam and reservoir was leased from the Stoney people at Morley in 1929.
The most egregious and most studied case of “dammed Indians,” however, is the saga of the Pick-Sloan projects, built on the mainstem of the Missouri through the Dakotas. Michael Lawson’s study, *Damned Indians,* dramatizes the institutional imperialism of the Army Corps of Engineers and the Bureau of Reclamation, both of whom needed to build dams in order to justify their own existence. As we have seen, George Norris had envisioned such a project along with his TVA, and he and the actual planners shared an automatic acceptance that dams were an unmitigated good, providing flood control, irrigation, and hydro generation with no side effects. Rivers without dams, which flooded or simply ran away to the sea, were deficient rivers. All the government bodies concerned also automatically accepted the premise that reservation lands were expendable. Although some of the power of the Corps and of Reclamation was related to the sheer inertia of bureaucracy, their real power was bound up with ideas. The Corps had been involved in exploring, mapping, and “taming” the West. They were the bridge builders and road builders who brought civilization to the hinterland. Dam building, especially for flood control, was another aspect of “taming,” one for which there was a good deal of public support, especially in downstream communities that had been built on flood plains and were frequently inundated during spring runoff. The very name of the Bureau of Reclamation stated its ideology. The arid and semi-arid West was implicitly not only in a deficit state but a deficit that represented a fall from some happier, Edenic time when, presumably, it had been a well-watered garden. It was not being “claimed,” but “reclaimed.” The Bureau of Reclamation, then, redeemed and restored what God or Thomas Jefferson or some other such venerated father had intended to be the homeplace of Crevecoeur’s American Farmer. Once again, the land could no longer be declared sufficient to its own flora and fauna.

The main argument for dams made by the Corps was to govern the flow of the Missouri and to keep it navigable for barge traffic. The main function of barges was to haul wheat. Water transportation was a huge part of the hinterlanding of the Great Plains during fur trade times, and shipment of wheat through the St. Lawrence system or down the Mississippi was vital to the market economy of the Prairie Provinces and of the Cornbelt States, respectively. Moving cargo on the Missouri, however,
especially above Sioux City, Iowa, was a different kind of proposition. From Nebraska to Montana, the Plains had been settled primarily by rail, not water, transportation, though steamers sailing as far as Fort Benton had been an important part of the trade in buffalo hides. By the 1940s, when Pick-Sloan was devised, a navigable Missouri was not a significant part of the transportation puzzle, and in the ensuing years, the cost of maintaining locks and a navigation channel has often outrun the economic benefits of barge traffic. Flood control and electric generation were obviously more popular and sensible arguments.

Perhaps the most salient effect of the Pick-Sloan projects was the siting of dams so that most of the flooding took place on Indian lands. This was not the case on the Great Plains alone. We have already looked at the TVA’s flooding of Cherokee lands. The most ambitious dam-building projects in North America in the second half of the twentieth century were proposed or built on Cree lands in northern Quebec. Hydro projects throughout the North flooded or otherwise impinged on Native peoples’ lands. Even in New York and Pennsylvania, the story was the same—dams, lakes, and expressways were somehow sited on the little bit of land that had been left to Indigenous people. This was more than coincidence. The old imperial ideas were certainly important—Manifest Destiny involved pushing out the Indians in favour of Euro–North Americans—but economic ideas were even more important. Although dams and their lakes were not private property, the downstream structures to be protected from floods, the upstream crops to be shipped to market, and the homes, farms, and businesses to be served by electricity were. And recreational facilities, such as lakes for fishing and waterskiing, and parks for camping, unlike income-producing properties, seemed to be entitled to public ownership because they could be used for the private enjoyment of all—including Indians, even if they mostly did not like sport fishing and mostly could not afford speedboats.

Conversely, the things that made the riverine forests so valuable to the Dakota and Lakota people of the upper Missouri seemed to be of little or no value to the Euro–North Americans. Even those who might value the habitat in general did not value the particular land bounded by the reservations. Recreational hunting of whitetail deer is an important sport in areas
like Ontario and New York—important enough that any big box electronics or sporting goods store in North America will feature a videogame or two on whitetail hunting—and perhaps bass-fishing and pheasant-hunting games, too. But whitetails have become very common on the Plains, so conservation of particular riverine habitats has little value even for whitestream hunters. Ducks Unlimited and Pheasants Forever are popular charities in the Great Plains, where they do extremely important habitat protection and restoration work. Pheasant and other upland game hunting is popular in the eastern Dakotas, while in the West River part of these states, hunters turn to antelope and mule deer and elk. Again, most of this does not depend on reservation land, though the Santee Sioux, for instance, do cater to hunters and fishers who like the open, unspoiled nature of the river where the reservation was relocated after the old town was flooded out by the dam. Rabbit hunting or snaring is of very little recreational value to Euro-Dakotans, except for those who practice some subsistence hunting themselves.

The whitetails and cottontails of the Missouri Breaks are an important part of subsistence living, and were particularly significant in the 1940s, but the value of Indian lands to be flooded was determined exclusively in terms of “fair market value.” Wild fruits, herbs, and beans were of even less value than game to Euro–North Americans. Mouse beans are perhaps the best case in point. These wild seeds are gathered and stored by harvest mice. In Sioux tradition, one took the beans from the mouse nests, replacing them, handful for handful, with dried corn or an equivalent, and then cooked the beans in a soup or stew.

When Lower Brulé representatives asked $6.00 per bushel for the value of their mouse beans, Richard LaRoche, Jr., recalled that the Congressmen “laughed like hell and said we never heard of such a damn thing.” Thus the Indians were required to gather samples of this food source and submit them to a University of Maryland botany professor, who finally verified their worth to Congress.6

Although the Lower Brulé did get paid for their loss of existing mouse beans, the loss of the ongoing connection between beans, mice, and people

Mouse Beans and Drowned Rivers 271
had no economic function for Euro–North Americans. It is unlikely that Congress would have overlooked the economic potential of a commercial grain farm or proposed compensation for only the crop in the field and not the loss of future earnings.

The laughter of the congressmen at mouse beans is a parable of exactly what Scott terms “seeing like a state.” In her novel Waterlily, Ella Deloria records the complex relationship of mice and humans, beans and corn. It is local knowledge that can be gained only by doing and that provides diversity in the diets of both mice and men. The exchange required women to remember the sites of harvest mouse hoards and to recognize the signs of new hoards as they were developed. Unused beans and corn in the hoards preserved seed stocks through times of drought. Ploughing or flooding out mouse habitat destroyed the value of local knowledge as well as the actual resource, and impoverished both the people and the land, not to mention the harvest mice. Because the mice did not abide by the square survey and could not be owned or farmed, they were of no use to a modern state concerned with orderly fields and deficient rivers that had to be reconstructed so as not to flood valuable commercial buildings. Along with the mice, the people were flooded out, with the Lower Brulé (whose representatives had spoken for the mice) and their cross-river cousin Crow Creek (where my claimed family hails from) flooded and moved twice. Crow Creek still uses the “temporary” school buildings built after the original townsites were flooded and still has difficulty supplying potable water to the Fort Thompson school. As in Tanzania, the local knowledge that allows a rich, sustainable way of life in a complex semi-arid place like Buffalo County, South Dakota (the poorest county in the United States in the 2010 census), was laughed out of court in favour of a technological fix that is not working.

Perhaps the last major dam project that will be built in the Great Plains is the Oldman Dam in southern Alberta. It was planned almost completely for irrigation, a final answer to the entitlement mentality that marked the boomers of the region just west of the one Jones discusses in Empire of Dust. In this case, the lake was designed to cover the lands of several Euro-Canadian farmers, but the main opponents to the project were the environmentalists and the Lone Fighters group of the Peigans,
who pointed out that the dam would inundate some off-reserve ceremonial sites as well as diminish downstream flow and threaten the regeneration of the cottonwoods needed for Sun Dance ceremonies. Although the environmentalists won several important court battles, the dam was built, despite the rulings and the determined civil disobedience of the Lone Fighters and their leader, Milton Born-With-A-Tooth. Flooding sacred sites on Great Plains rivers was not a new phenomenon. A relatively early dam on the Republican River in Kansas drowned a spring that was accounted particularly holy by the Pawnees and many other central Plains peoples. Given how little land remained to Aboriginal people after the numbered treaties, the Dawes Act, Termination, and Relocation, it is depressing how routinely Great Plains dams after the 1940s continued the frontier pattern of taking Indian land in the name of the market, technology, private property, or newly discovered communal Euro–North American rights to recreation or, in other parts of the Dakotas and Alberta, for conservation and parks. Badlands National Monument was taken from Pine Ridge Reservation, while the Siksika Nation in 1960 filed a claim to the Castle Mountain area of Banff National Park, which had been promised to them as a timber reserve and then removed from their possession with no compensation. The Tsuu T’ina Nation near Calgary received back parts of their land that had been taken for use as a bombing range, but they had to clear the unexploded ordnance themselves. At the same time, the needs of drought-stricken farmers are real, and as global climate change makes the Great Plains climate even more extreme, with periods of drought and periods of flooding, people want still more dams and transfers of water. As tourism replaces farming as a major revenue stream, parks and lakes for recreation will continue to be economically important as well as being amenities for the people who live in the region. While producing food is a noble calling and making two blades of grass grow where only one grew before is a kind of miracle, there is a reason miracles are few and far between. The assumption that monoculture is better than the diversity of the Plains and that an artificial lake surrounded by fields of wheat or corn or canola is better than a break alive with deer and harvest mice has been central to the idea of the Great Plains as hinterland, as we saw with Oklahoma. “As long as the waters flow” has many meanings.