James Gray called them the “Winter Years.” They were “Ten Lost Years” for Barry Broadfoot. For the Canadians who lived through them, they were the Dirty Thirties, the Dustbowl Decade, the Depression. It was a time when hundreds of thousands of ordinary Canadians were “up against it” and depended in large measure on government relief for their survival. It was also a time when cities and towns across Canada struggled under the yoke of local responsibility, that centuries-old convention that held local authorities accountable for providing relief to the poor.

For the first few years of the 1930s, responsibility for administering all aspects of urban unemployment relief fell primarily to city governments. As of 1933, however, senior levels of government began to assume a larger role in the development, administration, and oversight of relief
The Wages of Relief

The shift was signalled early that year by the federal government’s effective assumption of responsibility for the single unemployed. In addition, the federal government refused to continue funding urban public works projects as unemployment relief measures. Such changes in federal policy relieved municipalities of considerable burdens. At the same time, they undermined the degree of control that city governments were able to exercise over relief policy, thereby depriving them of a means to survive the Depression on their own terms.

This book examines how three Prairie cities—Edmonton, Saskatoon, and Winnipeg—met the challenges associated with administering and delivering relief to their unemployed residents before they were eventually obliged to give way to federal and provincial relief policies that increasingly marginalized their activities. While in many ways the concept of local responsibility imposed an onerous burden on city governments, it simultaneously afforded municipal officials, at least through the first few years of the 1930s, considerable latitude, enabling them to pursue relief policies designed to lessen what they believed were the Depression’s more dangerous effects as well as to cope with the economic crisis more broadly. At the same time, their scope of operation was constrained by federal and provincial agencies, on the one hand, and, on the other, by local business and community interests and the unemployed themselves. Local responsibility, in other words, forced municipal governments to mediate between forces both inside and outside their borders. These forces served at once to hinder and help municipal relief administrators in their efforts to carry out their responsibilities to the urban unemployed, while at the same time safeguarding their primarily middle-class conceptions of social order and the capitalist status quo.

This delicate balance between inside and outside forces began to break down in 1933, in the face of a newly evolving national approach to unemployment relief. Imperceptibly at first, municipal administrations were caught up in larger policy trends that ushered them into the modern federal system of social welfare. In the process, city officials who had initially wielded considerable influence over the nature and character of their local relief systems saw that influence diminish. No single change in policy at the federal level produced this shift in the locus of
responsibility. Instead, it was a series of legislative acts and program initiatives that took relief policy out of local hands and brought it under federal control. More than anything, the shift was prompted by the federal government’s recognition that the Depression was no short-term emergency—that, more so than anyone had imagined at its outset, the financial crisis was the product of much deeper, structural problems in the economy. Inevitably, then, the severity of the Depression, together with its longevity and seeming imperviousness to local solutions, culminated in greater federal control over welfare policy.

Despite the centrality of municipal unemployment relief to the Depression experience, however, historians writing on the 1930s in Canada have paid it relatively scant attention. As earlier studies demonstrate, given its dependence on international investment and a healthy export market, the Canadian economy was especially vulnerable to the severe global economic crisis. When, after 1929, investment dried up and export markets dwindled rapidly, the Canadian economy came crashing down. Exacerbating this bleak situation was the Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act, passed by the American government in 1930, which further diminished Canada’s access to crucial export markets in the United States. Later examinations of the Depression in Canada focus on the experience of ordinary Canadians, describing the hard times they endured in both urban and rural settings. While these studies provide a wide sweep of the Depression experience, none of them deal in any detail with important trends at the provincial level—where, according to historian James Struthers, relief was “more intimately connected with the lives of the poor than national social security policies aimed at the general population”—much less the municipal one. Finally, historical explorations of the Prairie West have tended to focus primarily either on the dustbowl, crop rust, and grasshopper disasters facing western farmers or on the emergence of new and important political entities, especially the Social Credit Party in Alberta and the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF).

In what follows, I build on previous studies, but I place the city at the centre rather than on the periphery of my analysis. This study is the first concentrated effort to explore the Depression experience principally from the perspective of municipal governments rather than that of the
business community, the unemployed, or religious charitable organizations. This perspective is important, not only because cities were on the front lines of administering and delivering unemployment relief but also because the role of city governments in the Depression experience is largely absent in the literature, beyond the recognition that they were saddled with a responsibility that they struggled to meet.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF WELFARE POLICY: THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Over the past half century, historians and other social scientists have viewed the development of welfare policies through a variety of theoretical lenses. Ultimately, their investigations have centred on one basic question: What forces drive welfare policy? Scholars have used at least six theoretical frameworks to answer this question. The first, which we might call the functionalist approach, argues that welfare policies emerged as inevitable products of industrialization, urbanization, and the rise of the wage earner. Industrialization and urbanization, in this view, isolated wage earners from kin networks on which they once relied during periods of economic instability. At the same time, these two processes, working in tandem, generally produced wealth and a bureaucratic structure, allowing states both to finance and to administer welfare programs that could fulfill the function that kin networks once served. As James Struthers points out, the functionalist approach does much to reveal the shortcomings of earlier Whiggish analyses of the welfare state that cast welfare policies as the work of benevolent social reformers. The theory also explains the combination of state-funded unemployment relief and bureaucratic forms of welfare administration that emerged in Prairie cities well before the onset of the Depression. What it does not account for, however, is the persistence of kin networks that helped individuals and families survive Depression-related unemployment during the 1930s despite the existence of state-funded unemployment relief. Nor does it explain the variation in the welfare programs that have developed in states that
have undergone similar processes of industrialization, urbanization, and the creation of a wage-earning class. The functionalist approach, in other words, cannot account for the different welfare trajectories of, say, the American and Canadian states.

For some critics, a viable alternative to the functionalist approach involves the consideration of a state’s political culture. Understanding the development of social welfare policy, these theorists argue, requires an approach that takes national (or even regional) peculiarities into account and emphasizes the uniqueness of particular political cultures. For political culture theorists like Louis Hartz and Gad Horowitz, specific national cultures, much more than structural economic changes, determined the character of welfare programs and regulated both the pace of their development and the extent of their reach into civil society. For example, a comparison of the character of toryism versus liberalism, or of corporatism versus individualism, in Canada with the forebears of these ideologies and politico-economic orientations in Great Britain clearly offers an explanation for the difference in welfare policy in these two industrial states. But while the political culture approach shows why one nation or another produces welfare policies of a particular character, it lacks the specificity required to explain the precise timing of particular policies or the changes in policy over time.

In response to this critique, other theorists have proposed the idea that organized labour or other social forces push states toward enacting welfare legislation at critical moments. This approach, referred to as social democratic theory, accepts the idea of a dominant national culture but emphasizes the potential (or real) existence of competing “intrational” cultures. One expression of this theory argues that Prime Minister Mackenzie King’s fear of a left jab from the CCF prompted his governing Liberals to enact social welfare legislation during the early 1940s to an extent they otherwise would not have. At that time, according to this view, Canada’s leftist political culture, as articulated by the CCF, faced off against the centrist or even conservative political culture of King’s Liberals. At its simplest, social democratic theory reduces the development of welfare policies to a polarized confrontation between pro-labour groups on the one side and the business-friendly state on the other. In the
Canadian context, such a labour-centred approach tends to neglect the role of farming interests, whether in the CCF or in other farmer-labour collaborations across the Prairies and in Ontario throughout the 1920s and 1930s. In more complex forms, however, social democratic theory can incorporate many groups that band together in political coalitions or blocs to lobby for social welfare legislation.

Social democratic theory, then, is useful in exploring, at the municipal level, the relationships between unemployment relief policies and the recipients of that relief, whether politically organized or not. Policy-makers fashioned relief policy with their understanding of recipients’ needs in mind. And although I take the view that this understanding was often at odds with both the recipients’ actual needs and their own sense of what they needed, the Depression nevertheless bound policy-maker and recipient together in intricate ways. The relationship between these two agents was, in other words, more of a contest, a give and take, than a polarized, pitched battle among differing economic and political interests. The Depression compelled both policy-makers and recipients to take account of one another and respond to, if not necessarily acquiesce to, each other’s experience.

A fourth approach argues that capitalist forces initiate (or support) social welfare policies in order to exert control over workers. Marxists and neo-Marxists, for example, argue that, despite a political rhetoric of serving the poor, welfare programs have actually served big business. Such programs function more to maintain the capitalist order than to better the lives of citizens; welfare policies in fact control and regulate welfare recipients and legitimize state power. American social scientists Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward, in an early and influential exposition of this perspective, argue that seemingly progressive and benevolent state interventions, through measures such as the unemployment relief implemented during the 1930s, constitute little more than attempts to maintain social control over the working population during times of mass unemployment. In Piven and Cloward’s view, the maintenance of social order depends in large measure on occupational stability. “So long as people are fixed in their work roles,” they argue, “their activities and outlooks are also fixed; they do what they must and they think what they
must. Each behavior and attitude is shaped by the reward of a good harvest or the penalty of a bad one, by the factory paycheck or the danger of losing it.” During periods of economic stability, then, private industry employment controls civil behaviour and maintains civil order. During such periods, some unemployment is not only acceptable; it is desired. After all, there are few greater threats to a worker’s job security than a lean and hungry jobless population waiting on the fringes for its chance to replace the employed. During periods of economic instability and mass unemployment, however, such checks and controls on worker behaviour evaporate. Private industry’s promise of a paycheque disappears, and the lean and hungry become more the rule than the exception. “Without work,” Piven and Cloward contend, “people cannot conform to familial and communal roles; and if the dislocation is widespread, the legitimacy of the social order itself may come to be questioned.” Once that legitimacy is questioned, a palpable threat of civil disorder looms, a threat that “may even overturn the existing social and economic arrangements.”

Because this book is concerned in part with the ways in which city policy-makers used relief policy to promote specific roles among married men and to discourage the negative behaviours that they associated with single men, I draw heavily on this perspective. Leaving aside for the moment how the unemployed themselves subverted and otherwise contested city relief policy, the picture that emerges out of the urban Prairie Depression experience is one of municipal government–designed relief policies that aimed to control unemployed workers. From the perspective of the policy-makers’ ideal, rather than that of the much messier reality replete with compromise and contestation from myriad quarters, the social control approach at least illuminates policy-makers’ assumptions that underlie welfare policy. But relief recipients, business interests, local media, women’s groups, citizens’ organizations, church leaders, organized unemployment groups, unions, and other social forces played a role at least equal to that of policy-makers in influencing how welfare policy played out. Incorporating recipients’ (and anyone else’s) resistance and agency into the story is essential to producing a sharper description of policy development. Without taking account of the diversity of voices contributing to welfare policy, the social control model risks falling into

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the governing-and-governed dichotomy so characteristic of the more simplistic version of the social democratic approach.

Bureaucratic autonomy theorists such as Theda Skocpol take seriously the roles of governments and, especially, bureaucratic administrators in the formation of public policy generally and of welfare policy in particular. In this view, governments and their agents are active participants in the articulation, promotion, and administration of social policy goals and activities. But they are at once enabled and constrained by the political and institutional structures of the government of which they are a part. The bureaucratic autonomy approach also emphasizes the reliance of policy-makers on institutional memories of past efforts to carry out welfare practices. Specific welfare legislation or policies, then, are signposts on a long and interconnected roadway of previous welfare policy development. This perspective explains in large measure the persistence, and the sometimes extraordinary influence, of concepts dating back to the poor laws of the seventeenth century—the principles of less eligibility, local responsibility, and the work ethic, for example—on the relief policies that emerged in Prairie cities (and elsewhere) during the 1930s. The theory also highlights the crucial importance of understanding the mechanics of relief administration during the Depression.

One of the most recent approaches to understanding the development of welfare policy relies on a gender analysis. This framework has proven especially fruitful in illustrating both the assumptions that policy-makers held about the social roles that men and women should play and the effects of these assumptions on welfare policy. These gendered assumptions, principally reflecting a notion of male independence and female dependence, have permeated the activities of private groups and individuals, public institutions, and governments. In this analysis, Depression-era municipal unemployment relief emerges as a tool to promote both a particular gendered social order (patriarchy) and a particular economic order (capitalism).

The concept of gender, of course, is as much about men and their experiences as it is about women and theirs. Beyond that, however, at its most powerful gender analysis considers gender as relational—that is, as something expressed in relationships between men and women, or even
among different groups of men or different groups of women. Only in the very recent past have some Depression studies been devoted to the effects of unemployment and relief on men in particular. Historian Lara Campbell, for instance, explores how the Depression’s economic and social instability affected the family, with a focus on masculinity and the family economy. Similarly, Cynthia Comacchio examines the Depression’s effects on fathers and husbands, arguing that “men whose self-identity hinged on their provider status experienced unemployment and public assistance as personal failure and dishonour.

Early scholarly analyses of masculinity emphasized a virtually universal sense of manliness that informed men’s actions. Men, in this view, were strong, vital, proud, risk-taking, aggressive. But while this conception might offer a broad, and somewhat vague, idea of what it meant to be a man, it does not represent the diversity of men’s past or present experience. Masculinities, to use sociologist Robert Connell’s very practical term, are historically diverse and continuously contested and redefined. They vary not only among different social groups (classes, ethnicities, sexualities, generations, regions, nations) but also among individuals of the same social group, and even within individuals themselves in different situations and at different times in their lives. These variations notwithstanding, however, during the latter half of the nineteenth century, a man’s sense of self-esteem came increasingly to depend on his ability to support his family by earning a wage.

THE IDEAL OF THE MALE BREADWINNER

By the interwar years, the male breadwinner ideal had long been in ascendance in the industrial world. According to historians like Ivy Pinchbeck and, later, Sara Horrell and Jane Humphries, economic changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution in Britain “promoted increased dependence on male wages and male wage earners.” But the male breadwinner ideal did not emerge fully born out of the Industrial Revolution. Instead, its rise to the status of conventional wisdom by the late nineteenth century occurred in fits and starts.
Historian Anna Clark proposes a three-stage process that, by the first decade of the twentieth century, had fully embedded the idea of the working-class breadwinner in British society. According to Clark, during the period between the introduction of the New Poor Law in Britain in 1834 and the 1850s, the main breadwinner role “was a rare privilege and onerous responsibility, not a right of working men.” In the next two decades, policy-makers came to view the breadwinner role as a “reward ordinary working men should be able to earn by proving their respectability.” All working men, in other words, could attain the “respectable” status of maintaining and protecting their own families through their labour without having to rely on their wives’ or children’s labours outside the home. It was not until British trade unionists, fearful that women’s lower wages would undercut their own, agitated for (and, in 1911, won) the introduction of unemployment insurance that a new era emerged in which the main breadwinner role was neither a rare responsibility nor a reward for respectability. Instead, it had become a right that all working-class men should expect.

This did not mean, however, that women’s waged work and their contributions to the family economy declined sharply with the transition from a pre-industrial to an industrial economy. Instead, as Horrell and Humphries show, the decline in women’s participation in the waged market economy throughout the first half of the nineteenth century was “neither continuous nor uniform across occupational categories.” Still, beginning as early as the mid-1800s, the idea of the independent male wage earner and the female dependent slowly became ever more fixed in both middle- and working-class society. By the 1930s, the role of the married man as the main breadwinner appears to have been firmly established.

The consequence for working women was an increasingly marginalized role in the workplace throughout the last half of the nineteenth century. But this process, too, was marked by fits and starts. In her examination of the idea of the family wage in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century America, for instance, historian Martha May argues that, even as late as 1895, budget analysts, progressive reformers, and academics intent on discovering scientifically the true needs of poor
families routinely counted the earnings of all household members in their calculations of family incomes. They thus recognized the importance of multiple earners to family survival and exposed the fallacy of the notion that a male breadwinner alone could earn sufficient wages to support his family. In the early twentieth century, however, social reformers had stopped including women’s and children’s contributions to the family economy. They were convinced that working women (and children under the age of fourteen or so) damaged the “family’s psychological health and welfare.” Every hour that a woman spent at work, reformers argued, was an hour spent not in contributing to her family’s survival but rather in neglecting her children.

By the 1920s, especially in the growing urban centres, men (and most women as well) viewed the man’s proper role as that of breadwinner, while woman’s proper place was in the home, looking after children. As men accepted the mantle of breadwinner, women were increasingly cast (by themselves as well as others) primarily as mothers. Among women, this belief represented a full-blown “maternalist” ideology that would have tremendous implications for the social understanding of welfare. Political scientist Theda Skocpol argues that in the United States, where a good deal of debate has emerged on the subject of welfare’s gendered implications, women of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries succeeded in influencing, guiding, and even directing public agencies toward the development of a maternalist welfare state that benefited women and children. Maternalism, historians Seth Koven and Sonya Michel suggest, was reflected in a welfare state that operated using “ideologies that exalted women’s capacity to mother and extended to society as a whole the values of care, nurturance, and morality.” Historian Nancy Christie has arrived at similar conclusions about Canada. She argues that the decades leading to the Depression were marked by social welfare policies (especially mothers’ allowances) more or less based on a maternalist discourse, emphasizing women’s role as mothers and, at least in practice if not in words, recognizing women’s contributions to the nation through their reproductive work.

But while this ideal was widely accepted, most Canadians found it difficult to live the reality of such sharply delineated and prescribed
gender roles. As late as 1929, on the eve of the Depression, Canadian women made up nearly 20 percent of the paid labour force. And yet, as historian Veronica Strong-Boag argues, “women’s increased presence in the paid labour force and their enfranchisement in the political system in the 1920s and 1930s did almost nothing to change [the] fundamental allocation of duties” that saw women primarily responsible for domestic work and men for breadwinning. Despite these prescribed roles, women who stayed out of the waged labour workforce contributed heavily to their families’ economic survival, performing much of the work associated with taking in boarders, producing goods like knitted clothing for sale, and providing paid services such as child care and laundry. As historian Gerald Friesen points out, it was doubtful that, in Prairie cities, “one adult wage-earner could provide more than the bare minimum in food, clothing, and housing for a family.” Yet even though the paid work of wives (as well as older children) was critical to the family’s survival in most working-class households, their contributions to the family economy were viewed as secondary, which allowed the male breadwinner ideal to remain untarnished. Whereas men were regarded as wage earners, women’s paid labour (taking in laundry, cleaning other people’s homes, and so on) was subsumed under the category of “domestic duties” and thus rendered invisible—while, of course, their unpaid household labour left their husbands free to go out to work. Ironically, then, the ideal of the male breadwinner was to a large extent an illusion sustained by the work, paid and unpaid, performed by women.

The onset of the Depression finally challenged the ideal of the male breadwinner. When increasing numbers of family men no longer earned a wage, the breadwinner ideal became ever more difficult to sustain. The Depression’s challenge to the model of the male breadwinner had far-reaching implications for many newly unemployed men and their families. Cynthia Comacchio argues that the economic and social upheaval associated with the Depression broke down traditional gender and work roles and saw many men assuming the position of “voluntary spectator” inside the unfamiliar routines of life at home. Even as employment of the sort traditional to men became almost impossible to find, “women’s work”—jobs that would have jeopardized a man’s
masculinity, such as domestic service, child care, waitressing, or working in textile mills—remained available. Turning gender roles on their heads, some wives and daughters thus left the home to work, replacing their husbands and fathers as the chief breadwinners in the process. Since the very essence of masculinity was deeply tied to this notion of the male breadwinner and head of household, political scientist Margaret Hillyard Little suggests, “it is no wonder that many men were deeply troubled by events beyond their control.” Without doubt, the onset of the Depression ushered in an era of severe social anxieties about the role of men, especially those who were married, and their relation to their work (or lack of work), their families, and their society.

Unemployed men, as we shall see, attracted most of the attention of relief policy-makers during the 1930s. In city council chambers and relief offices, unemployed men, whether single or married, were the subjects of great anxiety and concern. Single unemployed men left to their own devices, relief officials believed, would congregate in cities and cause trouble—panhandling at residents’ back doors, organizing and participating in protest rallies, committing crimes, and otherwise engaging in negative behaviour that threatened relief policy-makers’ ideas of civil order. Married unemployed men were also troublesome, but city relief officials were less concerned about their potential danger to civil order than about the danger to social stability they represented. Left without work for too long and unable to provide for their families, relief officials believed, married men would become despondent, demoralized, and even emasculated. In the end, their inability to maintain their breadwinner role would upset “natural” gender dynamics and threaten the sanctity of society’s very bedrock: the family. In a society that placed great emphasis on prosperity and progress, stable growth, industriousness, and efficiency, the Depression and its related unemployment problems were an aberration, as were unemployed men themselves. But, especially in the early 1930s, their situation was a fact, aberrant or not, that municipal relief systems tried to address. Those relief systems did not, however, operate in a vacuum. Unemployment relief recipients, business interests, provincial officials, and the federal government asserted their own visions—sometimes complementary, sometimes contradictory—compelling city
administrators either to face down these alternate visions or to adapt their relief policies accordingly.

THE NORTH AMERICAN CITY IN HISTORY

The main protagonists of this story are interwar-era urban dwellers. It is therefore appropriate to reflect, theoretically and historically, on the nature of the city during that period. Through the early years of the twentieth century, Edmonton, Saskatoon, and Winnipeg were part of a North American phenomenon that saw increasing numbers of people moving from the country to the city. Indeed, cities on the Canadian Prairies were latecomers to a transformative process that stretched back to the mid-nineteenth century, when cities like New York, Boston, Chicago, St. Louis, and Cincinnati were emerging as the titans of political, economic, social, and cultural America. The transformation of the continental landscape from rural to urban was, as elsewhere in the industrial world, slow and uneven. Some cities, such as New York and Boston, emerged early as important port towns benefiting from the wealth generated by the transport of overseas and inland goods. Slowly—with the introduction and growth of extensive transportation, communication, and financial networks—such cities were able to extend their metropolitan influence over a wider and wider hinterland. Other cities, Chicago in particular, exploited their geographic position on the Great Lakes and served as important trading hubs between the St. Lawrence system and the continental interior. North of the border, Toronto, Montréal, and Hamilton had become cities of growing economic, political, and cultural import by the late nineteenth century. Through the early years of the twentieth century, notes historian Donald Wetherell, the city “exerted a powerful influence as the creator, vanguard, and leader of cultural, social, and economic life in Canada.”

By the late 1800s (in the case of Winnipeg) and the early 1900s (for Edmonton and Saskatoon), Prairie cities had already developed complicated forms of bureaucracy. Drawing on the experiences of older cities to the east, Edmonton, Saskatoon, and Winnipeg set up elected city
councils to represent urban ratepayers and mayors’ offices and to serve (at least in theory) the cities’ interests as a whole. In turn, the city halls directed squadrons of (primarily) men of specialized skills: a team of city planners headed by a chief engineer, a sanitation and waterworks department, a city solicitor to buy and sell debentures and draft city bylaws, a medical officer of health, a chief of police in charge of city constables and detectives, various inspections personnel, boards of education, fire and transportation departments, relief and welfare officers, city commissioners, and clerks. These bureaucratic forms provided municipal leaders with considerable control over the development of their cities. Urban historian Jonathan Teaford charts similar developments in the late nineteenth-century American context in his book *The Unheralded Triumph: City Government in America, 1870–1900*.51 He argues that early American cities were typically able to offer their middle-class residents a consistently high level of services. At the same time, he notes, the working class and the poor enjoyed relatively few benefits of those same services. Alan Artibise brings the story of urban development in the western Canadian context into the twentieth century, outlining how an early booster mentality slowly succumbed to a more corporate outlook as urban bureaucratic forms grew ever more solidified in western cities.52

Yet despite their level of bureaucratic organization, the cities were in no better shape to deal with the severe economic and social problems thrust upon them by the Depression (and by the concept of local responsibility) than they had been as villages or towns in their earlier days. The revenue generation available to them consisted of little more than property taxes and the sales of debentures. As the Depression wore on, both sources of revenue dropped off precipitously. Increasingly, especially through the early Depression years, worthless properties reverted to the cities in lieu of taxes, and debentures grew ever more difficult to sell on the open market. Simply put, Prairie city administrations did not have enough money to carry both themselves and their unemployed residents through the economic and social crisis facing them.

Nevertheless, all of this urban development meant that “the city” began to take on important meanings in the minds of both urban dwellers and rural folk. On the one hand, the city represented wealth, power,
prestige, and sophistication. On the other hand, it epitomized vice, debauchery, danger (especially for young single women), and alienation. By the 1920s, western Canadian urban centres shared these conflicting attributes, though to a much lesser extent, with larger and older metropolises elsewhere. The city, of course, was more than a collection of ideas or a set of representations. On the Canadian Prairies, as elsewhere, cities served as transportation nodes for the grain traffic produced on surrounding farms and destined for distant markets. They also functioned as marketplaces, offering diverse goods for sale, from agricultural implements to retail articles to professional and trades services. They were hubs of labour exchange, where farmers could secure seasonal harvesters and lumber companies could find workers. With their universities, orchestras and theatre companies, and government offices, they were educational and cultural and political centres. And, during the Depression, they were perceived as safe havens in which to wait out the economic storm.

It is no coincidence that the three cities under study here are all located east of the Rocky Mountains and west of the Lakehead. This book is premised on the assumption that regional peculiarities made the Depression experience in western Canada distinct from that in the rest of the country. For one thing, western cities were much more heavily dependent on surrounding agricultural production than were cities elsewhere in the country. When the farms failed, especially after 1932–33, Prairie cities suffered deeply. Compounding this dependence on agriculture was the fact that, by the late 1920s, these cities had a much smaller, less robust industrial base than other Canadian cities, especially in central Canada. This meant that Prairie cities lacked the stabilizing potential of more diverse economies, such as those of Hamilton or Montréal or Toronto. In addition, the Depression lasted longer in the western part of the country. While the economic crisis began to abate in central Canada in 1933, the recovery in the West did not begin until after 1937.

Otherwise, is there anything especially distinctive about Edmonton, Saskatoon, and Winnipeg? Did their policy-makers do anything unusual or innovative during the 1930s that would set these cities apart from other municipal centres of comparable size? In a word, no. In fact, relief policy-makers in Edmonton, Saskatoon, and Winnipeg drew on
widely held views and common assumptions about how best to deal with Depression-related unemployment. And while the Depression experiences of these three cities differed in certain respects from those of other urban centres in Canada, cities across the nation were operating under more or less the same provincial and federal governmental strictures with respect to relief funding, and cities everywhere laboured under the yoke of local responsibility. In this sense, Edmonton, Saskatoon, and Winnipeg serve as examples, yielding insights into how urban relief policy functioned more broadly.