

# Wet Prairie

People, Land, and Water in  
Agricultural Manitoba

SHANNON STUNDEN BOWER



UBC Press • Vancouver • Toronto

Sample Material © 2011 UBC Press

The Nature | History | Society series is devoted to the publication of high-quality scholarship in environmental history and allied fields. Its broad compass is signalled by its title: nature because it takes the natural world seriously; history because it aims to foster work that has temporal depth; and society because its essential concern is with the interface between nature and society, broadly conceived. The series is avowedly interdisciplinary and is open to the work of anthropologists, ecologists, historians, geographers, literary scholars, political scientists, sociologists, and others whose interests resonate with its mandate. It offers a timely outlet for lively, innovative, and well-written work on the interaction of people and nature through time in North America.

General Editor: Graeme Wynn, University of British Columbia

Claire Elizabeth Campbell, *Shaped by the West Wind: Nature and History in Georgian Bay*

Tina Loo, *States of Nature: Conserving Canada's Wildlife in the Twentieth Century*

Jamie Benidickson, *The Culture of Flushing: A Social and Legal History of Sewage*  
William J. Turkel, *The Archive of Place: Unearthing the Pasts of the Chilcotin Plateau*

John Sandlos, *Hunters at the Margin: Native People and Wildlife Conservation in the Northwest Territories*

James Murton, *Creating a Modern Countryside: Liberalism and Land Resettlement in British Columbia*

Greg Gillespie, *Hunting for Empire: Narratives of Sport in Rupert's Land, 1840-70*  
Stephen J. Pyne, *Awful Splendour: A Fire History of Canada*

Hans M. Carlson, *Home Is the Hunter: The James Bay Cree and Their Land*  
Liza Piper, *The Industrial Transformation of Subarctic Canada*

Sharon Wall, *The Nurture of Nature: Childhood, Antimodernism, and Ontario Summer Camps, 1920-55*

Joy Parr, *Sensing Changes: Technologies, Environments, and the Everyday, 1953-2003*

Jamie Linton, *What Is Water? The History of a Modern Abstraction*

Dean Bavington, *Managed Annihilation: An Unnatural History of the Newfoundland Cod Collapse*

J. Keri Cronin, *Manufacturing National Park Nature: Photography, Ecology, and the Wilderness Industry of Jasper*



# Contents

List of Illustrations / ix

Foreword / xi

*Graeme Wynn*

Acknowledgments / i

Introduction: The Wet Prairie / 1

- 1 Drains and Cultural Communities: The Early Years of Manitoba Drainage, 1870-1915 / 19
- 2 Jurisdictional Quagmires: Dominion Authority and Prairie Wetlands, 1870-1930 / 50
- 3 Drains and Geographical Communities: Experts, Highlanders, and Lowlanders Assess Drainage / 76
- 4 International Bioregions and Local Momentum: The International Joint Commission, Ducks Unlimited, and Continued Drainage / 110
- 5 Permanence, Maintenance, and Change: Watershed Management in Manitoba / 139

Conclusion: Chequer Board Squares in a Dynamic Landscape / 164

Appendices / 172

Notes / 175

Selected Bibliography / 209

Index / 234

# Illustrations

## FIGURES

- 1 Landforms of southern Manitoba / 5
- 2 Men and horses digging a drain / 27
- 3 Boating in a drainage ditch near Woodside, Manitoba / 30
- 4 Drainage districts in Manitoba, 1933 / 34
- 5 Posing with ditch-digging machinery / 35
- 6 The Mennonite West Reserve, Drainage District No. 12, and the Rural Municipalities of Morris, Rhineland, and Montcalm / 40
- 7 A dredge in a flooded area / 43
- 8 Map of Manitoba showing provincial government lands for sale, 1900 / 62
- 9 The northwestern interior of North America in 1894 / 65
- 10 Government survey party involved in drainage work, June 1911 / 79
- 11 Township plan, township XIII, range 1 east / 80
- 12 Map of Drainage District No. 12 / 81
- 13 Southern Manitoba showing elevation of drainage districts / 88
- 14 Municipalities and drainage districts, 1933 / 92
- 15 Double dyke drain / 102
- 16 Roseau and Souris Rivers / 114

- 17 The excavation of a drain in Drainage District No. 8 / 123
- 18 Big Grass Marsh in relation to the Mississippi flyway / 126
- 19 Ducks Unlimited publicity material / 129
- 20 Early conservation districts in Manitoba / 159

## TABLES

- 1 Range of deviation from the average growing season precipitation / 7
- 2 National origins of residents of rural municipalities involved in the Red River Valley Drainage and Improvement Association according to the 1921 census / 41
- A.1 Annual capital expenditures on drainage, approximate to nearest thousand, 1896-1932 / 172
- A.2 The status of drainage districts in 1934 / 173

FOREWORD

# Wetland Elegy?

by  
*Graeme Wynn*

Aldo Leopold knew a thing or two about wetlands. He once thought to call the collection of essays that his publishers titled *A Sand County Almanac* a “Marshland Elegy,” and the first of his “Sketches Here and There,” which make up the second part of the book, entered the world wearing that label.<sup>1</sup> Here are its haunting opening lines:

A dawn wind stirs on the great marsh. With almost imperceptible slowness it rolls a bank of fog across the wide morass. Like the white ghost of a glacier the mists advance, riding over phalanxes of tamarack, sliding across bog-meadows heavy with dew. A single silence hangs from horizon to horizon.

Silence ... and foreboding. Even as the quiet was broken by the dawn chorus, Leopold observed that “a sense of time ... [lay] thick and heavy” on this small part of Wisconsin.

The peat layers that comprise the bog are laid down in the basin of an ancient lake ... These peats are the compressed remains of the mosses that clogged the pools, of the tamaracks that spread over the moss, of the cranes that bugled over the tamaracks since the retreat of the ice sheet.

An “endless caravan of generations” had contributed to the making of this place, so that the cranes whose clangor rang out over the marsh each spring stood, “as it were, upon the sodden pages of their own history.”<sup>2</sup>

Pages of Leopold's "Sketches" later – after accounts of sand counties, wild rivers, farms, wolves, pigeons, cheat grass, and other things in places as diverse as Wisconsin, Illinois and Iowa, Arizona and New Mexico, Chihuahua and Sonora, and Oregon and Utah – Leopold came to reflect on another marsh, in Manitoba. This was Clandeboye. Leopold's companions on his visit there in 1941 found little at which to marvel. The marsh may have been "lonelier to look upon and stickier to navigate than other boggy places," but they failed to recognize its secret message. The mysterious western grebe that found refuge among Clandeboye's reeds was no more worthy of attention than any other bird: to their minds it was just another name to be checked off in the bird list, as its alluring "tinkling bell" call was jotted down (Leopold lamented) in "syllabic paraphrase" as "*crick-crick,*" or some such inanity." For Leopold, by contrast, Clandeboye was "a marsh apart, not only in space, but in time" and a place that begged translation and understanding.<sup>3</sup>

Clandeboye Marsh, northwest of Winnipeg, on the southern edge of Lake Manitoba, is part of the Delta Marsh, at 15,000 ha the largest fresh-water marsh in the Canadian prairies. Early in the twentieth century, this area accommodated a number of hunting lodges built by local businessmen and wealthy people from afar (including English royalty and Hollywood leading man Clark Gable). In 1941 when Leopold visited, water levels were relatively low, but the ten- to fifteen-year cycle of rising and falling waters in lakes and marshes that marked the early twentieth century (and many before) was essential to maintaining the vitality and diversity of marsh habitats.<sup>4</sup> Leopold knew this, and he was well aware that Clandeboye was, even then, a remnant in the larger scheme of things. "Uncritical consumers of hand-me-down history" might think that 1941 "arrived simultaneously in all marshes," he wrote, even as he reserved a different understanding for himself and the birds. Coming upon Clandeboye *they* knew that they had fetched up in "the geological past, a refuge from that most relentless of aggressors, the future." Yet unlike the grebe and the mink, and the wrens, ducks, herons, and falcons that animated the marshland, Leopold feared that this marsh would shrink like countless others under the relentless onslaught of "dredge and dyke, tile and torch" that had helped farmers drain and dry thousands upon thousands of hectares in the cause of "improvement." Some day, he reflected, even Clandeboye, "dyked and pumped will lie forgotten under the wheat, just as today and yesterday will lie forgotten under the years."<sup>5</sup>

Clandeboye lies squarely within the Manitoba landscape that is the focus of *Wet Prairie*, Shannon Stunder Bower's fine and innovative account

of people, land, and water in agricultural Manitoba; and her study, like Leopold's brief commentary on Clandeboye Marsh, offers important insights into the course of prairie development. Where Leopold treats Clandeboye symbolically, as a transcendent encapsulation of large processes, Stundén Bower's work is both more deeply scholarly in its approach and broader in its spatial and temporal scope. Her work ranges beyond marshes and bogs, to consider the place of periodically, as well as permanently, wet land in the settlement of the west, and its arguments rest on prolonged and close-grained engagement with historical evidence. Strictly speaking, it is not an elegy (a mournful, plaintive poem), but an intriguing treatise on the consequences of the disjunction between settler aspirations and environmental circumstances in southern Manitoba. Still, Stundén Bower's quest to understand the development of prairie wetlands provides much food for thought to those who crave more than hand-me-down histories of Manitoba. Just as Leopold's essays heighten our appreciation of the world by bringing an ecological sensibility to observations of nature and a poetic sensibility to scientific description, Stundén Bower's chapters sharpen our vision of, and shift our perspective on, the development of lowland Manitoba, the wider prairie, and the Canadian state. She shares with Leopold a desire to get beneath the surface of things and to examine the world from several different angles, a commitment that Leopold scholar Daniel Berthold has compared with Nietzsche's notion of "*Winkelübersehen*," seeing around corners, or looking into the nooks of things.<sup>6</sup>

For Leopold, getting beneath the surface of things sometimes meant doing just that. Seeking to understand the grebes of Clandeboye, he buried himself "prone in the muck of a muskrat house," so that his eyes could absorb "the lore of the marsh," even as his "clothes absorbed local color." Dedicated student of the Canadian past though she is, Shannon Stundén Bower never went quite that far. Having come to her interest in the wet prairie through the disciplines of English, History, and Human Geography, however, she did deepen her knowledge of wetland science by immersing herself in an ecology field course based at the University of Manitoba's Delta Marsh Research Station, not far from the site of Leopold's earlier submersion. And just as the latter's efforts to observe young grebes "receiving instruction in the grebe philosophy" illuminated his Clandeboye essay, so Stundén Bower's commitment to developing a better understanding of the biogeophysical intricacies of marshes and wetlands allows her both to adopt unusual ways of looking at her native province, and to shed new light on the connections between environmental processes and social change by asking fresh questions of evidence in the archives and the landscape.<sup>7</sup>

The basic argument of *Wet Prairie* echoes a fundamental tenet of environmental history – that environmental and social forces interact in innumerable, intricate ways to change both landscapes and human cultures. This book offers a finely tuned narrative of back-and-forth interactions – interactions understood to be both open-ended and indeterminate – between human desires and environmental circumstances. More than this, however, Stunden Bower’s work offers a convincing demonstration that environmental history is not simply, and merely, a distinct subfield of scholarship fenced about by an insistence on nature’s power to influence the course of human history, but a wide-ranging, integrative approach to the past capable of providing new perspectives on, and a more complete understanding of, topics and themes long of interest to historians.

Central to all that follows in Stunden Bower’s analysis is her recognition that surface water is a particular form of mobile nature. This places her analysis of the wet prairie in conversation with a growing body of work on the communities of interest created by those elements of the natural world that transgress human-made boundaries and challenge human conceptions of the proper order of things. As weeds spread, animals roam, winds and soils blow, diseases diffuse, and waters flow, they cross fences, defy attempts at control, create new niches, find their own levels, and undermine ideas of ownership and responsibility based on assumptions about the permanence, stability, and malleability of nature. Those people affected by such challenges are often drawn to engage one another, as they recognize the need to grapple collectively with problems that affect them personally. But the terms of this engagement have to be worked out anew in every case. Views of the issues involved – about causes and effects, about rights and responsibilities, about strategies and solutions – differ. Efforts to address them seem as likely to produce conflict as to lead to cooperation. And thus problems of nature – or more specifically of the disjunction between human expectations and natural processes – become crucibles of community formation.

This is true at a range of scales. At the very local level, the old adage reminds us, good fences (that keep my stock from your alfalfa) make good neighbours. So too, as Stunden Bower demonstrates, “good” ditches did not simply divert water from the wet fields of one farm onto an adjoining property. Neighbours needed to talk and plan, and (ideally) cooperate; and because drainage problems typically extended over considerable areas, and attempts at solving them invariably involved transgressing ecological and jurisdictional boundaries, many had to be engaged in the conversation. In practice, such engagement was more easily facilitated through the

political process, in policy debates and voting booths, than by engaging district populations in a continuing conversation. Local and provincial governments, therefore, began to insert themselves between flooded fields and the dissatisfied farmers. But still there were costs to bear, and everyone's circumstances, needs, and aspirations differed. It was not easy to achieve consensus on the best course of action, and as so often in local politics during the nineteenth century, patronage helped to oil the wheels of action.

Scale up a notch and the problems are compounded. Much of southern Manitoba is flat, but water runs, naturally, downslope from the "naturally" higher terrain that flanked the wet prairie. Should those residents on higher ground be held responsible, in any way, for water that accumulated at the bottom of what Stundén Bower aptly characterizes as the physiographic "soup bowl" of southern Manitoba? Opinions differed, and for the most part they divided geographically. Again, resolution of this conundrum had to be worked out in the political realm as hydrologists and engineers argued the need to address flood problems at the watershed scale, settlers worried about the expansion of government implicit in the creation of new administrative districts, and politicians baulked at the costs, in dollars and votes, which might be incurred through any such action. Through all of this, as Shannon Stundén Bower points out, Manitobans with an interest in the drainage question "kept one eye on their government and the other on their land, evaluating each in the context of the other," to such an extent that the local environment affected the deployment of government authority and the implementation of ideological principles (page 168 below).

At yet another scale, wet prairie lands and the mobile water that rendered them so difficult to identify and map, shaped interactions between dominion and provincial governments in Canada and impinged on international relations between Canada and the United States. Through a series of complicated negotiations that are well reviewed in Chapter 2 of *Wet Prairie*, the federal government agreed to transfer wetlands (to which it retained title) to the Manitoba government in recompense for the latter's investment in draining and improving these tracts. But, with dominion or provincial ownership hinging on difficult questions about the wetness or otherwise of particular parcels of land (answers to which were affected by seasonal and longer term shifts in climatic conditions as well as by anthropogenic factors), coupled with scant understanding of the wet prairie environment in Ottawa's distant corridors of power, suspicion and confusion marked intergovernmental discussions, and ongoing environmental processes assumed considerable political significance.

Dealing with water flowing across property or township lines, or capriciously extending and shrinking the extent of “wet land,” posed a significant set of challenges, but these challenges reached another order when mobile water ignored national boundaries. Early in the twentieth century, swamp drainage schemes in Minnesota ran excess water into the Roseau River, which flowed north across the forty-ninth parallel to join the Red River in Manitoba, and was – said distressed residents of the river’s lower reaches – “too small in its bed to carry that mass of water” (page 116 below). Yet, where highlanders and lowlanders in Manitoba were often at loggerheads (largely because their upstream-downstream positions, and thus their interests, were fixed), conciliation shaped ensuing discussions about international flows of water (largely because rivers run north and south across the Canada-US border, and both nations prefer to find specific solutions to particular problems rather than invoke immutable upstream-downstream precedents). Here, as in much of the story of human engagements with the wet prairie recounted in these pages, local interests were balanced with those of the states involved, tempered by the advice of experts, and addressed with the relatively limited resources available. The cumulative consequence, as Stundén Bower notes, was to make the history of settlement and development in Manitoba’s wet prairie “a collection of human-sized tragedies and triumphs, rather than an overarching narrative of power and exploitation” (page 10 below).

In detailing this collection of tragedies and triumphs through her singular focus on the challenges of wetland development, Stundén Bower opens a fascinating and important space for rumination on the role of the state in, and the ideological underpinnings of, Canadian society – past and present. This is no accident. Her work engages – indeed in some sense it might even be said to begin with – Ian McKay’s argument, made a decade or so ago, that the history of Canada should be understood as a project of liberal rule.<sup>8</sup> In doing so, it picks up an interpretive thread, and joins a debate that has engaged a number of Canadian scholars in recent years.<sup>9</sup> For McKay, the rise and ultimate hegemony of liberalism in Canada (which he sees taking place between the mid-nineteenth and the mid-twentieth centuries), requires thinking about the nation’s past “simultaneously as an extensive projection of liberal rule across a large territory and an intensive process of subjectification, whereby liberal assumptions are internalized and normalized within the dominion’s subjects.”<sup>10</sup>

At its most straightforward, McKay’s claim is perhaps simply an affirmation that Canada is less a traditional (ethnic) nation than a product of liberal values or the triumph of “a certain politico-economic logic – to wit

liberalism.”<sup>11</sup> But read more profoundly it carries discussion into deep, dark, and even treacherous waters. Liberalism is a slippery word, and critics have lamented the imprecision of McKay’s formulation of it as “*both* a set of *values* and a *project*, a universe of meaning and a will to act.”<sup>12</sup> The “liberal order,” some aver, is such a plastic concept that it contains “almost anything associated with what has traditionally been understood about modern developing societies, premised as they are on property relations of inequality and bourgeois individualism.”<sup>13</sup> Moreover, there is little that is distinctly Canadian about the liberal order so conceived. In response, McKay has emphasized the value of a “workable and sensible definition that can enable useful conversations and shared insights,” and it is in this vein that Stunden Bower engages McKay’s work in the pages that follow, by exploring the implications of what she terms “colloquial liberalism” in Manitoba.<sup>14</sup>

Like generations of British North American settlers before them, and most of those who accompanied and followed them into the “old Northwest,” many of those who came to Manitoba in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries harboured a strong desire to acquire a farm and the independence they believed land ownership would bring.<sup>15</sup> Widespread as it was, this desire was likely as much a reflection of experience, of long-remembered histories of insecurity, rising rents, evictions, and oppression among migrant families, as it was of theoretical or abstract principle derived from the writings of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and their ilk. Wherever its roots lay, however, the desire to own land spawned a strong sense of private property rights and a lasting affection for the virtues of hard work and self-reliance – of an attachment to some of the central values of liberal individualism – among successful newcomers.

Understanding this is of some help in understanding the conflicts produced by mobile water on the wet prairie. Talk of private rights tended to undermine necessarily more diffuse notions of shared responsibilities, and it quickly carried those engaged with mobile nature to an impasse: once water flowed off a particular parcel of land it was no longer the responsibility of the person who owned that tract; but when rising water spread across the lowlands, it trespassed on private property and encumbered its owner’s right and capacity to use his land productively. Similar convictions shaped ideas about how drainage works should be organized and funded. The user-pay principle seemed most appropriate to those residents whose lands were dry: because successful drainage would increase the productivity and value of private property, it seemed self-evident that those who stood to benefit should bear the costs of improvement. But, those who lived in wet

areas could, and did, argue that drains were not unlike roads and land surveys – necessary parts of the infrastructure required for successful settlement – that were widely and properly set in place by the state.

Here one confronts the complexities of nineteenth-century liberalism. For McKay, the liberal project is a pervasive and unitary order “in which liberty, equality, and private property are sanctified as the foundations of a civil society that valorizes individualism.”<sup>16</sup> When the state appears in this formulation its mandate is to facilitate and protect the wealth-generating activities of individuals (by enabling them to establish title to property, by allowing them to get goods to market, by ensuring law and order so that they are not deprived of the fruits of their labours, and so on). So argued an earlier generation of economists and so, Stunden Bower suggests, the drainage works undertaken by the Manitoba provincial government were logical enough investments “for a liberal state concerned with facilitating capital accumulation” (page 11 below). Indeed they were. But might they have been more? Could other dreams find space alongside the market calculus? And, if so, what are the implications of seeing these types of investments simply and solely as strategies in the service of capitalism?

More than thirty years ago the historian of ideas, Allan Smith, thought it necessary to challenge the widely held view that Canada was a society built on deference, in which “belief in the rights of the community” trumped individualist doctrines.<sup>17</sup> It was time, he argued, to move beyond the notion that a “lack of enthusiasm for doctrines espousing the primacy of the individual” had led Canadians “to structure a transcontinental nation dedicated to the furtherance of essentially conservative aims.”<sup>18</sup> Against American sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset’s clever assertion that “Horatio Alger has never been a Canadian hero,” Smith mustered a great deal of evidence that “the myth of the self-made man informed no small part” of English Canadians’ thinking about their society in the sixty or seventy years before the First World War.<sup>19</sup> Although agricultural historian Vernon Fowke had, earlier, demonstrated that “pioneer agricultural self-sufficiency … has been and remains a persistent Canadian myth,” Smith argued, convincingly, that commentators’ descriptions of the developing country were tinged with a strong and particular individualist hue.<sup>20</sup> Catherine Parr Traill voiced a common sentiment when she wrote: “In Canada, persevering energy and industry, with sobriety, will overcome all obstacles.”<sup>21</sup>

Today the consensus is clear. Liberal individualism was a fundamental tenet of early Canadian development. But, as Quebec historian Jean-Marie

Fecteau has pointed out, “in liberalism the ‘individual’ is both a fundamental premise and an eminently problematic category, open to an enormous diversity of interpretations.”<sup>22</sup> In nineteenth- and early twentieth-century practice, liberal values were defined and arranged in different ways in different circumstances. As Stundén Bower notes, “the mismatch between liberalism (with its emphasis on individuality and private property) and the wet prairie environment (with its water flows that continue in disregard of property boundaries) prompted ... [efforts both] to redesign the landscape and [to] reimagine liberalism.” Flooding and drainage, she avers, affected how Manitobans worked their land, how they related to state, and “how they thought of themselves and their neighbours” (pages 168 and 12 below).

Within liberalism, there was also and always significant space for the state to regulate and limit individual liberties and aspirations in the interests of the common or collective good (defined in more than monetary terms); and there were, perhaps increasingly frequent, instances of governments using their authority and resources to protect the vulnerable. Then, too, as Fecteau has shown in his recent work on crime and poverty in Quebec, individualism is often tempered by mutualism and the development of a shared sense of identity and responsibility.<sup>23</sup> This was the case even in the United States where liberal individualism has been much celebrated over the years.<sup>24</sup> So Stuart Blumin wrote in an impressive 1976 study of early nineteenth-century Kingston, New York (where the population increased from 3,000 to 16,000 in forty years), that this was “a town that moved toward community as it grew toward urbanism.”<sup>25</sup> So too in Stundén Bower’s account of Manitoba’s wet prairie, the individualism associated with prairie farming conflicted with the realities of regional development, as the planning of drainage districts conceptualized the landscape in ways that “prioritized environmental conditions over [private] property boundaries” and prompted lowland Manitobans to work together in addressing the challenges they faced (page 82 below). Moreover, because flooding occurred without regard for human geographies, responses to it helped create communities of shared interest across settlements otherwise divided by cultural, ethnic, or religious affiliations.

These, it seems to me in conclusion, are important contrapuntal notes to set against liberal individualism’s dominant key, with its emphasis on private property rights. By drawing them to our attention, Stundén Bower reminds us of the importance of paying careful mind to particular historical circumstances and suggests to me, at least, the dangers inherent in, too

simply, equating liberalism with capitalist market principles. Defining people through their relations to property, as mere consumers of utilities or as “bundle[s] of appetites demanding satisfaction,” insisted the great Canadian political theorist C.B. Macpherson, offering a critique of this tendency in classical liberalism, leaves “an impoverished view of life, making acquisition and consumption central and obscuring deeper human purposes and capacities.”<sup>26</sup>

For Macpherson, the liberal tradition was much richer than this. Rightly understood it encompassed a humanistic democratic strain, which was typically overlooked by those – such as economist Milton Friedman – who regarded competitive capitalism as the foundation of economic and political freedom and for whom “freedom of the individual or perhaps of the family” provided the ultimate yardstick of the liberal condition. Macpherson was scathing in his assessment of *Capitalism and Freedom*, describing it as “an elegant tombstone of liberalism.”<sup>27</sup> But it is Friedman’s ideas that hold sway, permitting market forces to penetrate new, previously protected, realms of existence, allowing the regulatory and welfare functions of the state to be rolled back in the name of neoliberal governance, and confounding efforts to limit human impacts on nature by the rhetorical foregrounding of opportunity, growth, and individual choice. Distort though they do the ideas of a long line of political philosophers, and weak as the logic of some of their claims may be, these ideas resonate because they simplify the complexities of earlier relations between people, institutions and environments, because they have been naturalized to the point that they have become “common sense,” and because they tap into a collective, albeit generally poorly understood, intellectual and social heritage. There can be no better argument for taking the past and the ways in which we represent it, as well as the careful arguments of this important book, with the utmost seriousness, as we grapple with the task of shaping a humanistic, civil society for the twenty-first century.

## INTRODUCTION

# The Wet Prairie

---

In May 1889, prospective settler Alex Ingram wrote a letter to the Manitoba minister of public works. He had arrived in the province some months earlier “in search of land to settle upon.” His intention was “to make a permanent home to my self.” In this way, Ingram formed part of a wave of immigration following the Canadian government’s assumption of control over a large swath of northwestern North America, the lands now known as the Canadian Prairies or northern Great Plains. The federal government solicited newcomers to help assert its claim to these lands in the face of an expansionist United States of America on the one hand and long-resident Aboriginal people on the other and with an eye to the creation of a political and economic empire across the region. Ingram and others who shared his ambitions arrived in search of available land in what was presented as a rich and only sparsely inhabited territory.

In an area near Roseisle, a small settlement west of the Red River and south of the Assiniboine River, Ingram found a soil that “was all that could be desired.” For all the area’s initial promise, however, a few wet spring weeks revealed a problem. What Ingram described as a creek without banks flooded the land and rendered it “unfit for cultivation.” He was quick to recognize this was not a singular occurrence: it seemed clear to him that “the  $\frac{1}{2}$  section that I was thinking of taking will be useless in wet seasons.” Despite the fact that “in many respects this is one of the most desirable localities in the Province,” Ingram was convinced that if circumstances remained unchanged he would be obliged “to seek a home [some]where else.”<sup>1</sup>

Alex Ingram had arrived in the wet prairie. His experience there was far from unique. This book is the story of the countless Manitobans like Ingram who found their agricultural ambitions in conflict with the region's environmental realities. The lands over which the Canadian government assumed control included a large, rather flat, often dry expanse that stretched like a tabletop from the Manitoba Escarpment west to the Rocky Mountains. But in an area extending north from the international border to the southern end of Lake Winnipeg and west to halfway along Lake Winnipegos (an area described in various places in this book as southern Manitoba or agricultural Manitoba or, more precisely, Manitoba's wet prairie), the situation was different. There the land was more large soup bowl than tabletop, with slopes seemingly designed to collect precipitation and relatively impermeable soils that ensured the water pooled.<sup>2</sup> In many years, during the time when farmers most needed to be working ready fields, areas of the soup bowl were far too wet to farm. This book asks questions about agricultural life in Manitoba's wet prairie. How did residents perceive their surface water problems and those of their neighbours? In what ways did they attempt to alter what they saw as an unsatisfactory landscape? What happened when environmental change did not add up to the landscape they had envisioned?

This book is also the story of the Manitoba state's efforts to alter the region's environmental realities in favour of permanent and prosperous agricultural settlement. Early on, the province took charge of a significant effort to drain areas afflicted by excess surface water. Over the years, this effort evolved from digging a small number of key drains to creating a district system charged with managing the financing and engineering of intricate drainage systems. Successive political administrations were flooded by the complexities of surface water management: the problem of determining what was to be done and how best to do it; the competing claims of various experts and the dissenting opinions of local residents; the shifting parameters created by actions of other governments and evolving scientific thinking; and the challenge of coping with Manitobans' compounding fury when lands remained wet. These complexities had consequences: as the landscape was altered, so the government itself was affected. This book examines efforts to render the wet prairie landscape more suitable for agriculture and the patterns of conflict and cooperation that emerged early on and changed over time.

Alex Ingram's story has not been told before. Despite the prominence of agricultural themes in both Canadian and environmental history as well as the substantial amount of Manitoba farmland affected by excess water,

the story of drainage in the province has attracted only a little scholarly attention.<sup>3</sup> To keep stories such as Ingram's at the centre of the narrative, this book differs from the many others that address prairie agricultural topics. It says little about the types of crops planted in the province or about other matters basic to any history of farming. In place of plowing techniques and commodity prices and transportation problems, this history addresses water flow patterns and engineering expertise and public opinion. What emerges is the story of the thinking behind and debates over land drainage, a particularly important, particularly complicated, and particularly contentious public project.

Most scholars concerned with the prairie environment have focused on the important issue of drought. Surface water was not hugely more abundant in Manitoba than in Saskatchewan and Alberta. For southern Manitoba, the mean annual total rainfall ranges from about 300 to 600 millimetres (12 to 24 inches). In most parts of southern Alberta and Saskatchewan, it ranges from about 200 to 300 millimetres (8 to 12 inches).<sup>4</sup> But even this relatively small measure was enough to make a significant difference, especially given the soup bowl character of much of agricultural Manitoba.<sup>5</sup> Overall, Manitoba was less prone to drought and could produce a greater variety of crops than the other prairie provinces. But it was more at risk of flooding. While scholars have suggested how the fortunes of the prairie provinces have diverged in recent decades, focusing on Manitoba's wet prairie reveals an earlier history of provincial difference rooted in the province's particular environment.<sup>6</sup> The wet prairie was a distinctive landscape, with distinctive challenges for those looking to farm it. This book, then, is the story of a landscape that Manitobans with their provincial government have long sought to alter and that scholars have not yet examined in detail. It is the history of a region that, while profoundly changed, remains persistently wet.

#### PHYSICAL GEOGRAPHY

What is the wet prairie? The term “wet prairie” was used by nineteenth-century settlers to describe parts of the north-central United States that were, as later observers would determine, ecologically similar to much of southern Manitoba.<sup>7</sup> Although adopted early on by the United States Soil Survey, the term has fallen from use in recent years.<sup>8</sup> This is due in part to the development-focused American federal government's decision to exclude the wet prairie category from wetlands classification systems, thus

reducing the amount of land subject to protective legislation.<sup>9</sup> A number of historical works addressing the wetlands of the United States in general, or focusing on the wet prairie region in particular, suggest the variety of political, social, cultural, and legal pressures bearing on the process of classifying some areas as wetland.<sup>10</sup> In this book, the term “wet prairie” refers to agricultural areas in which settlers often wrestled with what they believed to be too much surface water. The term provides a way of referring to the landscape without introducing distinctions that were meaningless to drainers, such as those between ecologically dissimilar wetlands such as bogs and swamps. It also incorporates the understanding that to identify any land as “wet” or “dry” is anthropocentric. Ultimately, the land simply is as it is – whether it is wet, dry, or just right is a human judgment.<sup>11</sup> Settler Alex Ingram was clear in his assessment of the land he wanted: it was too wet, and something needed to be done. The term “wet prairie” is used to refer to what he and his fellow settlers perceived as a problematic landscape.

Ingram’s problematic landscape lies within the physical geography of agricultural Manitoba. In rough terms, the provincial south comprises three distinct landforms, oriented north-south: the Precambrian Shield, the Manitoba Lowlands, and the Southwest Uplands beyond the Manitoba Escarpment (see Figure 1). The lowlands have been described as the first prairie level and the uplands as the second prairie level.<sup>12</sup> The igneous rock of the Precambrian Shield, also known as the Canadian or Laurentian Shield, extends across northwestern Ontario and into Manitoba. This is, almost everywhere, a rough-hewn landscape, carved up by rivers, dotted with lakes, and covered with boreal forest. In southeastern Manitoba, the land generally slopes down to the west, with the transition to the lowlands occurring around the 300-metre (980-foot) contour line.

Once dominated by tall-grass prairie, the Manitoba Lowlands have proven to be an especially rich agricultural area. Varying from 64 to 80 kilometres (40 to 50 miles) in width, the lowlands are bisected by the northerly flowing Red River. The land slopes toward the river as well as toward Lake Winnipeg, though at very modest rates in both cases. Indeed, the flat, low expanse is known colloquially as the Red River valley, though the river had little to do with the creation of the lowlands. Rather, the valley is a remnant of glacial Lake Agassiz, an immense water body that dominated the continental interior for many years before warming temperatures prompted glaciers to recede, causing the lake to drain into the oceans. Gene Krenz and Jay Leitch describe the Red River valley, including the areas both north and south of the international border between Canada

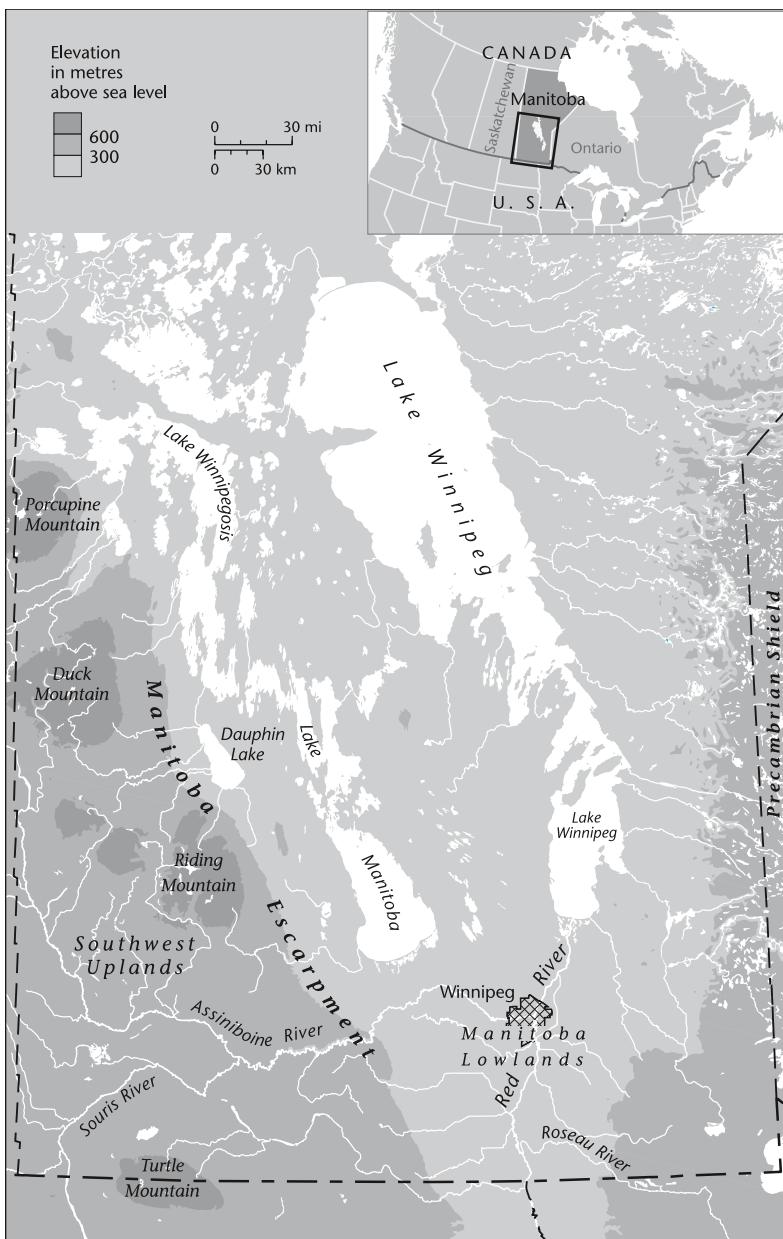


FIGURE 1 Landforms of southern Manitoba

*Source:* Adapted from Figure 2.9, "Physiographic Regions of Southern Manitoba," in M. Timothy Corkery, "Geology and Landforms of Manitoba," in *The Geography of Manitoba: Its Land and Its People*, ed. John Welsted, John Everitt, and Christoph Stadel (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1997), 21.

and the United States, as “one of the largest, truly flat landscapes in the world (roughly the size of Denmark).”<sup>13</sup> In many areas of the ancient lake bed, comparatively flat land and clay-based soils contribute to significant drainage problems. Above the western 260 metre (850 foot) contour line, soil permeability improves, though the land continues to rise at only a moderate rate.

The Manitoba Lowlands are bounded to the west by a southeast-northwest-trending escarpment, which is marked by a rapid increase in elevation. Beyond the escarpment are the Southwest Uplands, where the land is more undulating and the precipitation more limited. Over the past century, fire suppression and the absence of grazing bison have allowed aspen and bur oak to invade the uplands, with rapidly growing scrub cover moving south from the boreal forest that extends across the northern Prairies.<sup>14</sup> This has resulted in an expansion of the parkland, a transitional area between forest and grassland, even as more and more land has been cleared for agriculture. The Assiniboine River flows east through the Assiniboine Delta, a preglacial embayment that interrupts the scarp face to the south of Lake Manitoba. Diminishing rates of precipitation to the west are reflected in the river’s flow. Although the Assiniboine drains about 101,388 square kilometres (39,146 square miles), its average flow is much smaller than that of the Red River (which has a drainage basin of only 77,249 square kilometres [29,826 square miles], when the Assiniboine’s contribution is set aside).

Taken together, these three distinct areas form the macro-topography that affects surface water patterns in Manitoba’s wet prairie. They are the sides and bottom of the Manitoba soup bowl. Awareness of the changes in elevation that distinguish them and of the key geographical features of each takes us some distance toward an understanding of what would be perceived, beginning in the later years of the nineteenth century, as Manitoba’s drainage problems. The following chapters examine specific instances of flooding attributable not only to this basic physical geography but also to the local topography nested within it and to the climatic disturbances that moved over it.

The wet prairie was an extremely dynamic landscape, due in large part to variability in both precipitation and temperature regimes.<sup>15</sup> Variability operated geographically, creating a checkered landscape of wet and dry, as well as temporally, with some periods far wetter than others. The landscape’s dynamic character is suggested by Table 1, which provides the range of deviation from the long-term average growing-season precipitation at three

TABLE I

## Range of deviation from the average growing-season precipitation

Years of record	Place	Average growing-season precipitation	Standard deviation	Percent of average
62	Winnipeg	244.35 mm (9.62")	78.74 mm (3.10")	32
32	Cypress River	208.03 mm (8.19")	72.90 mm (2.87")	35
51	Morden	216.66 mm (8.53")	90.17 mm (3.55")	41

*Note:* This table lists rates of growing season precipitation as opposed to total annual precipitation as specified for southern Manitoba earlier in this chapter.

*Source:* Modified from A.J. Connor, *The Climate of Manitoba* (Winnipeg: Province of Manitoba, Economic Survey Board, 1939), 12.

places in southern Manitoba: at the City of Winnipeg (around the forks of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers), at Cypress River in the Rural Municipality of Victoria (about 155 kilometres west and slightly south of Winnipeg), and at Morden in the Rural Municipality of Stanley (about 130 kilometres southwest of Winnipeg). For all three locations, the growing-season precipitation varies from year to year by an average of over 30 percent. In creating the distinctive wet prairie environment, variability in rate of precipitation was more important than simple quantity.

In this dynamic hydroclimate, the risk of flooding at any given time or place was defined in part by soil moisture content, winter snowfall, melt patterns, and spring rain. Vulnerable Manitobans kept a close watch on the interaction among these key variables, not only in their immediate surroundings but also over a significant portion of the Saskatchewan-Nelson River basin. This immense drainage system discharges through Hudson Bay, and much of the water has first flowed through the provincial south. There is some truth to the assertion that Manitobans sit “downstream from everyone else,” and increased flow from the east, west, or south has contributed to flooding.<sup>16</sup> Change was basic to the environment of southern Manitoba, and water was a primary driver of change. Variability in water patterns should not, however, be regarded simply as a threat to regional well-being. Wetland ecologists have made it clear that expansion and contraction of wet areas are fundamental for continued ecosystem vitality.<sup>17</sup> Some of the province’s most fertile soils are those in the Red River valley that have been enriched by deposition during periods of flooding.<sup>18</sup> But even as it helped to create a rich soil in which it was easy to envision agricultural success, environmental variability was not conducive to what

newcomers understood as agricultural progress. For example, settler Alex Ingram, who complained about good land ruined by inundation, did not connect the richness of the soil to its susceptibility to flooding.

Given the post-1950 frequency of inundations large enough to threaten Winnipeg, the province's capital and largest city, it is hardly surprising that mention of excess water in southern Manitoba tends to evoke thoughts of catastrophic flooding along the Red or Assiniboine River. Expanses of water spreading back across farm fields, Winnipeggers labouring on sandbag dykes, and evacuated flood victims nervously watching the weather: all are among the well-known contemporary images of the region.<sup>19</sup> Catastrophic flooding has been a serious concern in Manitoba, and it is considered briefly in some of the book's later chapters. But by and large, the analytic focus remains on the problem of agricultural flooding, which was far more significant to the development of the province.

#### SCHOLARLY LANDMARKS

The history of Manitoba's wet prairie connects with a number of scholarly landmarks. Given the provincial government's important role in land drainage, scholarship on the state is particularly significant. State formation has been a key concern of Canadian historians in recent years, with legal, managerial, and economic processes seen as fundamental to the establishment and extension of government authority. Many historians interested in the state have been particularly concerned with power and how different social groups (such as those defined in terms of race or gender) had different rights and responsibilities. Others have been concerned with mechanisms of regulation, examining law enforcement, the census process, and the school system.<sup>20</sup> Despite the varied emphases of these scholars and the overall sophistication of their work, few have accorded much attention to the diverse landscapes over which the process of state formation played out. Only the bare fact of distance has received much attention, with technologies of administration such as the census understood as useful in part for how they facilitate governance from afar.<sup>21</sup> Historian Tina Loo is one exception, as her work on the legal system in British Columbia examined how mountainous topography complicated justice delivery.<sup>22</sup> Loo's more recent study of conservation in Canada, in a manner typical of much work in the growing field of Canadian environmental history, emphasizes actions by the state over effects on the state.<sup>23</sup> Particularly given the environmental differences within the vast Canadian

landscape, there is room for much further scholarship that explores how the development of the state related not only to the people but also to the landscapes that it incorporated.

In Manitoba, surface water was a local environmental factor that inflected how provincial authority was extended and entrenched. It affected when, where, and how state authority was deployed. Because drainage was expensive and had to be coordinated at a level beyond the individual farm, early on the Manitoba state interjected itself between the flooded field and the dissatisfied farmer. Considering the emergence of a system of special district government dedicated to surface water management as well as generations of lively debate over the province's role in all of this, surface water management bore on the ultimate shape of the government itself. Environmental historian Donald Pisani has called "the proliferation of special districts" such as drainage districts "the untold story" of natural resources administration in the twentieth century.<sup>24</sup> The history of drainage in Manitoba, then, speaks not only to those interested in scholarship on the state in a Canadian context but also to an international academic community concerned with the administration of natural resources.

An important thread in this international scholarship focuses on relations between the state and irrigation. Although it would be an oversimplification to identify drainage and irrigation as the inverse of the other, the two undertakings do share challenges related to water management, infrastructure construction, and public administration. In 1957, Karl Wittfogel proposed that the construction and operation of large-scale irrigation works contributed to the emergence of despotism among what he termed hydraulic societies.<sup>25</sup> Since that time, numerous scholars have built on or reacted to his thesis.<sup>26</sup> For environmental historians of North America, Donald Worster's analysis of irrigation in the American west represents a compelling illustration of the state in service to capital. The hydraulic society Worster saw was defined by "a coercive, monolithic, and hierarchical system, ruled by a power elite based on the ownership of capital and expertise."<sup>27</sup>

Although there are basic similarities between state-assisted drainage in Manitoba and state-assisted irrigation in the American west, there are also important differences. A key difference is the division of power between experts or managers on the one hand and local residents on the other. By the early twentieth century in the American west, as Worster explains, rich investors or large agriculturalists were enlisting engineering experts to manage water for their own benefit. In Manitoba, a landscape where the prize was effective drainage on an individual's land rather than a portion

of water transported from a perhaps-distant region, engineering expertise assumed a different quality. Manitoba farmers knew their own lands and were willing to challenge engineering experts and government administrators on the basis of their knowledge. Furthermore, through letter writing and collaborating with others and presenting at hearings, they first created and then were given opportunities to do so. This study provides a counter-point to Worster's vision by illustrating how water management might actually prompt meaningful interplay among experts, the state, and its citizens. In Manitoba, this interplay was intensely local, involving a broad swath of the interested public and invoking the local landscape. If one basic difference between Manitoba and Worster's American west was the quantity of water, another was the quality of engagement between people and their government.

All of this might have been possible because of another key difference between Manitoba's wet prairie and the arid American west: the amount of money in circulation. There were no fortunes to be made in draining the farms of Manitoba, as was discovered by the few private companies that, for a brief time, attempted to profit from drainage in the province by acquiring wet land, undertaking drainage, and then selling dry land at inflated sums. Both the enduring uncertainty surrounding the reliability of drainage and the continued availability on good terms of land from the federal government likely contributed to the early failure of these endeavours. Much drainage in Manitoba was undertaken by local contractors with the modest tools needed to accomplish the small contracts let by the provincial government. Although livelihoods were certainly at stake, no one was becoming shockingly rich. This might be an important part of the reason the sort of dramatic language Worster uses in relation to the arid American west, invoking concepts of empire and domination, seems to be inappropriate in relation to the newcomer experience in Manitoba's wet prairie, however much the province's agricultural transformation might have been part of a process of colonialism. Here there is a collection of human-sized tragedies and triumphs rather than an overarching narrative of power and exploitation. At least in the early decades of the twentieth century, when much drainage in Manitoba took place, this was capitalism at a different scale.

A second scholarly theme important in *Wet Prairie* is the issue of liberalism. From Fernande Roy's 1988 analysis of the liberal orientation of Montreal's business class at the beginning of the twentieth century, through Barry Ferguson's 1993 intellectual history of influential political economists at Queen's University, to Tina Loo's 1994 study of the legal apparatus in

mid-nineteenth-century British Columbia, liberalism has been in recent decades an important analytical concept for Canadian historians.<sup>28</sup> In its various forms, liberalism has been identified as the ideology underpinning the orientation of influential Canadian groups and institutions toward individualism, property ownership, self-determination, and capitalism. In 2000, Ian MacKay argued that, despite this significant scholarly attention, Canadian historians had not yet grasped the full significance of liberalism. In his view, the concept provided the basis for a reorientation of Canadian history toward the study of the nation as a liberal project. At the least, this was an argument for the continued importance of liberalism as an analytic concept as well as an invitation for debate with those who agreed on the importance of liberalism but differed on its particular presentation.<sup>29</sup> Influenced by works by Canadian historians as well as an older international scholarly tradition that fleshed out the intellectual and cultural origins of the liberal concept, recent monographs – including those by Ruth Sandwell (on the aliberal residents of Saltspring Island), James Murton (on the post-World War I soldier settlement programs in British Columbia), Catherine Wilson (on tenancy in nineteenth-century Upper Canada), Jarett Rudy (on smoking in Montreal), and Daniel Samson (on industry and improvement in Nova Scotia, 1790–1862) – have continued to ask important questions about the effects of liberal ideas on Canadian life.<sup>30</sup> It is Murton’s work that is most relevant to an analysis of the Manitoba situation, as his study of environmental change in the BC countryside illustrates the value of studying in tandem Canadian liberalism and environmental history.<sup>31</sup>

*Wet Prairie* contributes to this scholarly tradition by examining what happened to liberalism when deployed in a wet and variable landscape. Under liberalism, it was the state’s role to facilitate and protect the wealth-generating activities of its citizens. Transportation, law and order, and land surveying were all activities undertaken by liberal states to create an arena in which capitalism might operate more successfully. In the wet prairie, surface water was a serious and persistent threat to agricultural prosperity. The Manitoba government’s drainage activities were a logical undertaking for a liberal state concerned with facilitating capital accumulation. This assessment is in line with that of economist W.T. Easterbrook, who situated drainage among the diverse array of strategies (ranging from road construction to farm credit programs) through which Canadian governments extended assistance to agriculturalists.<sup>32</sup> Through digging individual drains and then through coordinating the engineering and financing of substantial drainage systems, the Manitoba government sought to ensure the productivity of privately owned farms. Drainage was part of

the infrastructure of settlement, similar in some respects to other undertakings by the provincial government as well as to undertakings by liberal governments located elsewhere.

Although drainage in some ways resembled other government undertakings such as road building, it was distinctive in a few important aspects. Drainage directly affected a large number of rural Manitobans, with local interest spread at least as wide as surface water flooding in the spring. Notably, this was not an interest that peaked at drain construction and then declined. As surface water management often remained a contentious issue even in the drained landscape, few became inured to which drainage had been undertaken, and many stayed engaged in ongoing debates over what should be done next. Both flooding and drainage served to unite Manitobans around shared experiences related to surface water management. Given the importance of state-managed drainage, communities of interest emerged largely to advocate more effectively for undertakings likely to bring significant widespread benefit or, later, to oppose financial involvement in schemes likely to bring little local gain. Such communities of interest overlay key divisions such as municipal boundaries, which in Manitoba often coincided with notable differences in ethnic concentration. In this way, these communities of interest reflected a distinctive way of conceptualizing the land and the people who lived there, a way that was based on vulnerability to surface water flooding. Flooding and drainage changed how affected Manitobans farmed, how they related to the government, and how they thought of themselves and their neighbours.

If liberalism is part of the explanation for why the Manitoba government undertook drainage, it is also part of the reason drainage was so controversial. Private property is a key liberal tenet. For farmers, independent ownership of a parcel of land, even if this was only an aspiration, offered the opportunity for productive labour as well as an assurance of individual freedom. In the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, many settlers came to Manitoba in the hope of achieving independent ownership of a farm. Likely, they did not give much thought to how water flow patterns would ensure their fortunes were intertwined with those of their neighbours. The steep sides and flat bottom of the Manitoba soup bowl meant that surface water ran from the lands of some (those on the sides) and pooled on the lands of others (those on the bottom). This soup bowl, then, collected not only water but also opinions about how land should be managed and drainage should be funded. Those on the sides thought they should in no way be responsible for the costs of dealing with the water that flowed off their lands: although various justifications were

offered, their fervour stemmed from the conviction that this was a matter of private property. Why should they pay for drainage works serving lands they did not own? Those on the bottom thought it was utterly unfair for them to be saddled with the task of disposing of water that had flowed in from other lands: this was also a matter of private property, as water from elsewhere was encumbering their ability to make productive use of their lands. Why should they suffer under the excess water that ran down from lands over which they had no control? Both perspectives were examples of colloquial liberalism in Manitoba, of the ways abstract liberal principles were understood and deployed by non-experts in the context of a particular social, political, and environmental landscape.<sup>33</sup> They were the key poles in a long-running, bitterly fought battle over how the wet prairie should be drained and who should pay for drainage.

The third scholarly landmark significant to this book is actually a set of themes related to the challenge of managing a mobile resource such as water in a human world of borders, jurisdictions, and property lines. Environmental historian Mark Fiege has been concerned with the management of those elements of the natural world that cannot be easily made to respect property lines.<sup>34</sup> Unwanted plants, wild animals, and crop diseases are some examples. Plant seeds blow, animals roam, and agricultural plagues spread, all without concern for human attempts to divide up the farm landscape. Such movement creates what has been called an ecological commons, in which the private property landscape is overlaid by elements of the natural world that are of common concern to all landowners. In southern Manitoba, surface water was a particularly significant variety of mobile nature, creating an ecological commons among those touched by its flow patterns. Even liberal farmers preoccupied with their private property were interested in how others managed surface water since their own land might be affected by changed flow patterns. In the American west, a region divided into fiercely defended private holdings, Fiege illustrated that both conflict and cooperation emerged from efforts to adapt to environmental factors that extended across property lines. Similarly, in Manitoba's wet prairie, farmers were drawn into engagements with each other as they sought to address the surface water situation. This engagement persisted in the drained landscape, for even when drainage operated relatively successfully farmers remained profoundly interested in the flows of surface water. Ultimately, it was this engagement as much as the water itself that characterized Manitoba's ecological commons.

Just as flowing water bore on relations among landowners, so too it complicated dealings among governments. Difficulty often ensued from

the way this mobile resource confounded efforts to establish permanent lines on the land and to govern according to these boundaries. This was evident between the province of Manitoba and the government of Canada as uncertainty over land condition, whether flooded or dry, affected negotiations over which government had the rightful claim to the lands in question. This was also the case between Canada and the United States as surface water flows across the international border amounted to an environmental management problem addressed through protracted negotiations. In addressing these issues as well as conflicts between adjacent rural municipalities and between rural municipalities and the provincial government, *Wet Prairie* provides an opportunity to consider at multiple scales, from the rural municipality to the province to the nation-state, the challenges to surface water management. It illustrates how a single environment, the wet prairie landscape, confounded people and governments in a variety of ways over a long period of time. *Wet Prairie* also makes clear how transboundary environmental management offered certain opportunities along with an array of difficulties. From progressive environmental management along the Canada-US border to the significant work of Ducks Unlimited, an international agency, new ideas and approaches often developed from engagement with interests outside Manitoba.

The ways *Wet Prairie* addresses the ecological commons, jurisdictional disputes, and transboundary environmental management issues provide the basis for an engagement with the concept of bioregionalism. If an ecological commons is the result of an environmental characteristic that creates a shared interest among human land users, a bioregion is a geographical entity created by those who manage or study the land in reflection of an ecological element particularly significant to the area's past, present, or future. Some environmental historians argue for bioregional history, an approach that defines the study area in terms that make sense environmentally rather than culturally or politically. For instance, Dan Flores asserts that environmental historians should derive their subjects of inquiry from ecological categories. In a much-quoted phrase, he suggests that "the politically-derived boundaries of county, state and national borders are mostly useless in understanding nature."<sup>35</sup> Environmental historians, Flores puts forth, should investigate the "natural nations" of the world – those defined by boundaries that "make real sense ecologically and topographically."<sup>36</sup>

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, historians, geographers, scientists, and popular writers concerned with southern Manitoba produced a number of works addressing an environmental unit that spans the international border, focusing on concrete geographic linkages such

as a common glacial history, similar agricultural conditions, and the shared risk of catastrophic flooding.<sup>37</sup> These shared elements seem to be more than sufficient to fulfill Flores's criteria for a region that makes sense in ecological and topographical terms. So why not study the wet prairie as a natural nation that spans the forty-ninth parallel? This might seem to be sensible if the wet prairie alone were the subject of study; if the focus is also on the relations between the various governments and agencies responsible for its administration, then the matter is less clear. Although bringing the American states of Minnesota and North Dakota into play would present opportunities for comparative analysis, doing so would diminish the attention focused on the particular relations that developed in response to the Manitoba portion of the wet prairie. *Wet Prairie* is both more than and less than a bioregional history of the wet prairie, offering a great deal about human-environment relations in one portion of the bioregion but comparatively little about what went on south of the forty-ninth parallel. This study aims to contribute to the field of environmental history by illustrating the continued historiographical significance, even for environmental historians, of political boundaries.

#### CHANGE IN THE WET PRAIRIE

The chapters of this book trace the evolution of surface water management, emphasizing the particular perspectives that emerged in relation to provincial geography and illustrating changing approaches to life in the wet prairie. The first chapter lays out the problem of excess surface water as perceived by newcomers. It describes how the provincial government expanded to meet the demand for drainage and how the ecological commons prompted cooperation among culturally divided groups. Manitoba has a number of identifiable ethnic communities, including, for example, French, British, Ukrainian, and Mennonite. Many members of these communities live relatively close together in areas affected by surface water problems.

Chapter 1 briefly examines the Mennonite experience, using this group as an example of how affected Manitobans were prompted to work together on drainage. The chapter also addresses how Aboriginal people, who had a distinct relationship with the federal government, were poorly served when it came to drainage. Flooding on Aboriginal reserves did not threaten the larger process of agricultural expansion across the prairie. Although drainage districts were created in non-reserve areas to address the physical

and administrative challenges of surface water management, neither federal nor provincial officials were prepared to make any significant effort to tackle the particular barriers to drainage of Aboriginal lands. The ecological commons was fractured by what was perceived as cultural difference.

The second chapter engages what is surely one of the oldest themes in Canadian history: prairie control of regional resources. Much political history of the Prairies is dominated by discussion of inter-regional colonialism, stemming in large part from the conditions under which Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta entered Confederation. Contrary to the precedent set in 1867 when the provinces of Canada (consisting of earlier versions of the provinces of Ontario and Quebec), New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia were united by the British North America Act, all three prairie provinces were denied control of the lands and resources within their borders. *Wet Prairie* offers something new to the study of an intergovernmental dynamic that remains basic to understanding many aspects of the Canadian past. My argument is simple: dominion-provincial relations, at least insofar as natural resources were at issue, were affected by environmental conditions in the wet prairie. Especially in the second chapter, I illustrate how an inadequate understanding of the Manitoba environment, in combination with the dynamic character of the wet prairie landscape, compounded the problems inherent to renegotiating the province's terms in Confederation. The history of the wet prairie suggests that, with respect to this one matter at least, the question of what should be considered within Canadian political history is no clearer than the borders of a typically variable and indistinct prairie wetland. In this way, *Wet Prairie* illustrates that environmental history is not simply an alternative view of the past but is rather a basic approach necessary for a more complete understanding of topics and themes already of concern to Canadian historians.

The history of state development and environmental change in Manitoba's wet prairie would be incoherent, of course, without reference to larger processes, and I consider some of them in the third chapter. As the patronage practices that dominated provincial politics through the 1910s fell into disfavour, the scientific expertise becoming increasingly prominent nationally and internationally provided an alternative logic for government decision making. In the case of drainage, the participation of scientific experts reflected a growing appreciation for the complexity of surface water management, even while buttressing overly optimistic hopes for successful resolution of flooding. At the same time, expert recommendations aligned with how some Manitobans perceived the drainage problem but conflicted

with the views of others and thus served to complicate further the human landscape of drainage. A debate over values emerged as Manitobans tried out various ways of thinking about water management in the province. Interested parties deployed a variety of colloquial liberalisms, with the justification for an individual's assertion rooted in the geography of the individual's farm. Ultimately, one way that Manitobans evaluated the legitimacy of ideas about the role of the state was in relation to local environmental conditions.

Managing the wet prairie was challenging in part because it reached south into the United States, with water flowing across the international border. The first part of Chapter 4 considers how transboundary flooding along the Roseau River led Canadian and American officials in the late 1920s and early 1930s to endorse surface water management policies that seem, by contemporary standards, far more reasonable than those maintained by the Manitoba government at the time. The second part of the chapter addresses the human and environmental consequences of attempts to protect continental waterfowl populations. American waterfowl activists founded Ducks Unlimited, a conservation organization that remains in operation internationally, as a means of working toward the restoration of waterfowl habitat in Canada. But in neither the Roseau River nor the Ducks Unlimited case did innovative management of what were perceived as discrete environmental issues prompt wider change in surface water management across Manitoba. This chapter also illustrates how the drainage project had become entrenched in Manitoba, remaining the dominant approach to the wet prairie even as thinking evolved in relation to other environmental issues.

Eventually, in light of broad changes in thinking about economic matters, the public context for drainage discussions shifted. The fifth chapter examines these changes, beginning with a survey of ideas about the permanence of the drainage infrastructure. Extensive public funding became more acceptable in the post-World War II period. This helped to render viable administrative options that had been dismissed by many, with the provincial government dedicating substantial funds to environmental problems of personal concern to only some people in some areas of the province. At about the same time, new recognition of the problem of soil erosion by surface water expanded the community that perceived itself as directly interested in surface water management. Those occupying higher lands who had resisted any suggestion they were implicated in the flooding that afflicted lower areas became interested in watershed-based surface

water management once the upper reaches of the watershed began to suffer the effects of rapid and increased runoff such as soil loss and slope instability. But shifts in agricultural economics and technology meant that little real change ensued. Highlanders were now willing to accept watershed management in theory but were concerned about putting it into practice at a time of profound change in the human landscape of the wet prairie. Despite opportunities related to new federal government programs leading to some efforts to resolve persistent environmental problems, the situation remained largely unchanged across many areas of the wet prairie.

A major barrier to progress in surface water management was the prevailing dynamic between government and residents, which had become profoundly negative in light of the failure to achieve the desired drained landscape. Dissatisfaction and distrust prevailed and severely circumscribed the possibility of cooperation between Manitobans and their governments. In *Seeing like a State*, James C. Scott set out to examine why some state projects failed.<sup>38</sup> *Wet Prairie* builds on Scott's analysis by examining the consequences of what was perceived as government failure in the Manitoba context. Falling short of the ideal of a permanently drained agricultural landscape had significant and long-lasting consequences for those involved in the administration of drainage. The profound irony beneath all of this was that, despite the accumulating complaints of wet prairie residents and the corresponding frustration of provincial administrators, continued flooding was largely a consequence of an extremely dynamic environment. It was an environmental reality, not the product of human negligence.

The history of drainage in Manitoba illustrates some of the consequences of rapid settlement by newcomers with a limited understanding of their new region. But this history also exposes how acquiring knowledge of a place was not a straightforward undertaking, not simply a question of the passage of time. Rather, it was a matter of struggle and debate, with concrete outcomes that affected the environment of the province. The process also had important consequences for both the people of the region and the governments that administered it. And this process remains ongoing, as those in the wet prairie continue the work of reconciling human ideas and environmental realities.

# I

## Drains and Cultural Communities: The Early Years of Manitoba Drainage, 1870-1915

---

In the late 1850s, Henry Youle Hind explored the area that became the province of Manitoba as part of an assessment of the northwest on behalf of the Canadian government.<sup>1</sup> Heading westward from the southwest shore of Lake Manitoba, he traversed some of the most pronounced ridge and swale topography of the province. In his journal, he described how tiresome it was to “wade through marshes and bogs, separated by low ridges.” In fact, Hind wrote, the land “may be said to be made up of marsh, bog, ridge, marsh, bog, ridge in most wearisome succession.” This did not dampen his enthusiasm for the area. Drainage, he asserted, could transform the region: “I know of no other enterprise of the kind which could be executed with so little cost and labour and promise at the same time such wide spread beneficial results.”<sup>2</sup>

Later provincial officials would certainly have laughed ruefully at Hind’s projection, had it come to their attention. After but a few years of work, it was abundantly clear that the drainage necessary in many regions of Manitoba was both costly and labour intensive. Importantly, these difficulties were not entirely attributable to the wet prairie landscape traversed by Hind. The settlement system used on the prairie contributed to surface water problems. The federal government divided the land into square parcels without accounting for the surface water patterns of the wet prairie. These parcels were available to settlers at attractive terms, but many newcomers found their land was vulnerable to surface water flooding. Whereas the federal government was in charge of land settlement, the provincial

government was responsible for public works such as drainage. This jurisdictional separation meant that surface water problems did not operate as a brake on the settlement process and left the Manitoba government to do what it could to assist individuals and communities in need of drainage. Many settlers were struggling with flooding, and the province as a whole was not thriving. The particular pressures bearing on Manitoba at this time rendered it all the more important that the province act to protect the wealth-generating capacity of its citizens. In this context, residents were intensely interested in government actions bearing on surface water, and what the province did or did not do often became fodder for intense and persistent debate.

And what about Hind's anticipated "wide spread beneficial results"? The second part of this chapter focuses on the human consequences of inundated lands on the one hand and drainage efforts on the other. The ecological commons of surface water extended across municipal boundaries, property lines, and cultural differences. When faced with the prospect of being flooded off their lands, Manitobans from various cultural communities sought solutions to flooding. Building effective drains required cooperation with other interested parties and the provincial government. Beyond a changed environment, the result was the recognition of shared interests and the creation of parallel orientations toward the provincial state. The Mennonite experience provides an example of this for a particular cultural group. For Aboriginal people, the situation was very different. Although water certainly flowed across the lines between reserve and non-reserve land, Aboriginal people were cut off by barriers of jurisdiction and race from the drainage options available to other Manitobans. The third part of this chapter addresses how the human factors that figured in the drainage problem were different on Aboriginal reserves. Because of this difference, drainage served to further entrench the racialized distinction between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal lands.

#### SETTLEMENT POLICY AND THE LOCAL ENVIRONMENT

Although wetlands exasperated travellers such as Hind, the same areas were valued by those with a lengthy history in the region. Native people had long used the northeastern prairie prior to European settlement, with different populations moving in and out of the area over time. Indigenous groups shifted locations of residence and provisioning partly according to environmental factors. Surface water conditions were among the many

variables that affected community movement. Early European settlers joined Aboriginal and Métis people in wetland exploitation, gathering valuable plants and preying on abundant game.<sup>3</sup> Wetlands were important for a variety of reasons. They supported various useful plants and provided a needed source of water on the open prairie. They also attracted migratory waterfowl, and the ducks and geese in turn drew hunters. In these ways, the wet prairie proved to be an invaluable resource.

After the creation of the province of Manitoba in 1870, and especially with the subsequent influx of newcomers, land use practices began to shift. Residents certainly continued to utilize wet areas, but the newly established government authorities focused on the expansion of agricultural settlement. Early residents had not only taken advantage of opportunities presented by wetlands but had also accommodated the irregular geography of the wet prairie, building houses at dry elevations and pasturing animals in the slightly wetter areas that grew excellent hay. In contrast, agricultural settlement was to be defined not by local environmental conditions but by the grid-based land management system established in 1872 by the Dominion Lands Act.

This legislation, largely modelled on the American Homestead Act of 1862, specified the terms governing the alienation of the crown lands of the North American northwest.<sup>4</sup> Although the specifics of the arrangement were amended on a number of occasions, the general parameters endured through the settlement period. Those who met certain qualifications of age and gender were entitled to make entry on a homestead: that is, to establish a preliminary claim to a parcel of land. There was a small filing fee of ten dollars to pay immediately and conditions of residency and cultivation to satisfy over a period of years, but these were nevertheless terms designed to entice newcomers. The Canadian politicians who adopted the system hoped to spark a land rush comparable to that under way in the United States. Ultimately, settlement in both the Canadian and the American wests was part of what historian John Weaver has described as the international land rush that helped to define the modern world.<sup>5</sup>

To manage the land rush, administrators needed some system to carve up the northwest into homesteads, to enable the identification of a plot of land, and to record when homesteaders made entry. The township survey, a massive project of the Canadian government already under way by 1872, made it possible to pinpoint particular parcels of land in a vast landscape. It divided the northwest into large squares known as townships. Townships were numbered northward, with township one abutting the international border. In Manitoba, range referred to the distance east or

west from the principal meridian, which ran north-south slightly west of what became the city of Winnipeg. For example, township one, range one west refers to an area of six miles square situated along the international border immediately west of the principal meridian. Each township was divided into sections of 640 acres, which were then divided into quarter-sections of 160 acres. These quarter-sections were available to newcomers.<sup>6</sup> The system of land alienation achieved the goals of facilitating administration and attracting newcomers, though it would take decades before the desired immigration rates were reached.

Manitoba was the first new province of Confederation, joining in 1870. This was some three years after the provinces of Canada (which became Ontario and Quebec), Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick signed the British North America Act. Although the older provinces had retained control over both provincial lands and local public works, the situation was different in Manitoba because rapid settlement in the prairie region was deemed essential to the establishment of a transcontinental nation.<sup>7</sup> By assuming authority over the lands of the prairie region, both in the province of Manitoba and in the territories farther west, the dominion government put itself in a position to manage the initial aspects of regional settlement. Yet though the Canadian government was very concerned with getting people onto the land, it was far less worried about how settlers fared once they were there. Although Ottawa maintained control over the lands of the province, the Manitoba government, like the governments of the other provinces, was accorded responsibility for local infrastructure. By Confederation in 1867, the eastern provinces already had extensive public works systems, including roads, railways, and public buildings. Manitoba had far less in the way of public works development when it joined Confederation some three years later, and establishing the necessary transportation infrastructure was a key challenge for the new provincial government.

Although Manitoba lacked an extensive road system, it was hardly untravelled. Before 1870, routes through the region generally reflected the character of the landscape. Overland travellers favoured well-used routes along the natural levees of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers.<sup>8</sup> Farther from the riverbanks, early trails followed ridges and bypassed low areas.<sup>9</sup> Efficient travel usually meant taking the driest – rather than the most direct – line between two places. These routes were, in the judgment of Department of Public Works employee J.A. Macdonell, “the best natural roads” of the region and became part of the shared resources of the community. But

avoiding wet areas was not always possible. Macdonell noted that, if the natural roads of the region were obstructed for any reason, the traveller would have “no alternative but to plunge too frequently through some times dangerous and almost impossible swamps and mud-holes.”<sup>10</sup> Engineer H.A. Bowman, a long-time employee of the Department of Public Works, remembered, in the early period, “women going [to] or returning from market who had to hold their clothes up round their waist when wading the muskegs.”<sup>11</sup> And even the natural roads of the region could present challenges. In an 1880 letter to a loved one outside the province, Lucinda Westover, wife of Asa Westover, who had taken a temporary position as farm manager in south-central Manitoba, described travel along prairie trails. Mrs. Westover was impressed by the trails that seem to “drive anywhere in any direction through the grass.” But still she worried about the risk of accidentally becoming bogged down in a wet area, which like Bowman, she called a muskeg. In her view, familiarity with the landscape was necessary to determine “by the appearance of the grass what the bottom is, or whether there is any bottom,” to any unavoidable “muskeg.”<sup>12</sup> For a provincial government keen to encourage settlement, such risk and inconvenience were unacceptable. From an early period, it was clear that facilitating travel and transport through the region meant undertaking drainage along highways. Because of this, some of Manitoba’s first drains were built along roads.

The need for road drainage increased exponentially as road locations came to be determined less by local conditions and more by the township survey. One feature that distinguished the Canadian survey system from the American system on which it was modelled was the inclusion of what were called road allowances.<sup>13</sup> In southern Manitoba, these were strips of 90 feet (27.4 metres) marked out between all townships and sections. Although construction and maintenance of local roads were provincial responsibilities, the location of many new major roads was determined by the Dominion Land Survey. This method of land division helped to ensure that the necessary land would be available, but it did not guarantee that the road allowance would be environmentally suitable for road building. In the 1940s, engineer F.E. Umphrey, a long-time employee of the Department of Public Works, mused in a letter to an associate that, if environmental conditions had been the primary determinant in the province’s early road-building efforts, “we would probably find many of our roads leaving the right angled section line location for angular location following the sand ridges and higher land, and our drains following the

lower lands where they should be, if required at all.”<sup>14</sup> As it was, with road locations defined without regard to local land conditions, new highways often required extensive drainage.

Both the dominion and the provincial governments wanted to encourage immigration, but their interests were not identical. Whereas the dominion government derived benefit from the settlement of lands, a process that was relatively easy to administer once the land had been surveyed, the provincial government was responsible for the public works such as roads and drains that were necessary to make agricultural settlement viable within the survey grid laid over the irregular and dynamic landscape of Manitoba’s low areas. Manitoba officials realized early on that increasing settlement “was a most serious problem for the provincial treasury” because of the increased demand for public works that would inevitably result.<sup>15</sup> In the late 1940s, engineer and former deputy minister of the Department of Public Works M.A. Lyons, in describing the settlement history of an area south of Lake Manitoba, recalled how, “almost immediately” after the dominion government opened these lands to settlers, “the provincial government was besieged with requests for drainage.” Public works construction varied in difficulty and expense depending on environmental conditions, Lyons noted. Had the dominion government done more to dissuade settlers from occupying unsuitable lands, the work of the province might have been substantially reduced. Consequently, Lyons thought that dominion land settlement policy in effect had left “the provincial government holding the bag.”<sup>16</sup>

Early drainage was largely aimed at improving the transportation infrastructure not only because of the need to open up routes through the province but also because flooding away from designated road allowances was not yet perceived as a major problem. The settlement grid did not itself accommodate environmental irregularity, but early settlers working within it had sufficient choice to enable them to avoid unsuitable land. Drier sites did indeed fill up more quickly.<sup>17</sup> However, while locating in a swamp was clearly a disaster, establishing a home alongside wet areas presented certain advantages. Some regions even marketed themselves by emphasizing advantages derived from their comparatively wetter character, such as good hunting and easy access to hay.<sup>18</sup> Those who followed the early arrivals made decisions about where to settle based on the human as well as the physical geography of the province, considering proximity to family and friends or those of similar cultural origin in addition to land conditions.<sup>19</sup> The result was a settlement pattern that curved around wet

areas but without much of a buffer between drier lands newcomers envisioned as productive farms and wetter lands they perceived as comparatively useless.

Unfortunately for those who settled close to wet areas, the wet prairie landscape was characterized not only by spatial variability (the wet-dry pattern noted by Hind) but also by temporal variability (change in the pattern over time). So lands selected as dry did not always stay dry, and locations that provided ready access to wetland resources often proved vulnerable to flooding.<sup>20</sup> Unexpected flooding could result from various factors. High rates of precipitation over a number of years could cause local watering holes to expand over neighbouring farmlands. A quick spring thaw or a few weeks of heavy rain could lead to pooling, especially in areas of relatively impermeable clay-based soils. Some farmers settled lands that were more often wet than dry, having had the misfortune to make homestead entry in a dry interlude or having made settlement decisions based on factors other than environmental conditions. In 1929, after substantial government investment in drainage infrastructure, H.A. Bowman, who had become chief engineer of the Department of Public Works, was asked to summarize the history of drainage in the province. In his opinion, settlers had occupied land that “should never have been put under the plough.” Settlers broke the land in dry cycles, and, “when the wet cycles recur, there is an immediate cry for help.”<sup>21</sup> But a few decades earlier, Bowman himself made comments making it clear that, despite the far greater role of non-anthropogenic environmental variation, the government was not entirely blameless. In explaining the work of the department, Bowman noted that, given the pioneering character of many road-building operations, “it is not possible in many districts to take the water to an outlet, which in numerous cases is many miles away.”<sup>22</sup> By directing water away without paying attention to where it was going, well-intentioned drainers built drains that could serve to create or exacerbate flooding on nearby lands, perhaps even rendering homesteads less suitable for agriculture. For a number of reasons, even settlers who thought they had chosen their lands wisely could end up in areas vulnerable to flooding.

In May 1896, settler G.S. Howard wrote to the minister of public works on behalf of his neighbours in the Cromwell district, located east of the Red River. The letter and accompanying petition provide a sense of what it was like to live in a frequently inundated area: “It is injurious to our health to go about from day to day wet footed. Anywhere we want to go we have to walk through water to get there. Our children cannot go to

school half the time they should go and they are [losing] their education in consequence." In the minds of these settlers at least, local flooding was more than an inconvenience. Living in the wet prairie posed serious difficulties for settlers hoping to achieve a reasonably pleasant life for themselves and improved circumstances for their children. And when agricultural production was brought into the picture, the situation seemed only more desperate. Since settlers were unable to "grow anything when the land is so wet," starvation seemed to be a real risk for many. Letters such as Howard's made it clear that good surface drainage was necessary not only to ensure the establishment of a reliable transportation infrastructure but also to bridge the gulf between the agricultural aspirations of newcomers and the environmental realities of southern Manitoba. As Howard put it, "if the Government want settlers to come to Manitoba, they ought to make the place fit for them to live in."<sup>23</sup>

The Manitoba government would try to do just that. Good surface drainage has been described as an interconnected network of appropriately sized channels, tree-like in how the smallest collector drains dump into larger channels that eventually lead to substantial trunk drains.<sup>24</sup> To replicate the tree-like pattern characteristic of effective natural drainage, artificial drainage required a coordinated infrastructure, with logical gradation among channel sizes and suitable outlets in substantial natural waterways. If these were not achieved, drainage projects could worsen existing surface water problems or even create new ones. Secure funding was necessary to support the careful project design and execution essential for the construction of good drains. In the early years, the government undertook drainage in an unsystematic fashion, with the public works department throwing money and resources at problem areas.<sup>25</sup> But it was ultimately government authority that would make possible the group finance and coordinated construction necessary for more successful drainage. Smaller, on-farm drainage likely took place through individual effort. Some drainage might have been achieved through neighbourly cooperation, though early on opportunities for this were limited in many still sparsely settled areas. Large-scale land change in southern Manitoba was achieved through government management, as institutionalized administration offered ways of coordinating the work and managing the finances.

In 1880, Manitoba passed its first drainage legislation. Under The Drainage Act, the province would undertake to drain nine large wetland complexes through the construction of nearly 200 miles of drains.<sup>26</sup> The wetlands to be drained were the St. Andrews Marsh, the Seine River Marsh, the Springfield Marsh, the Boyne River Marsh, the Westbourne Marsh,



FIGURE 2 Men and horses digging a drain. This channel was located west of Lake Manitoba. The implements pictured are relatively simple, the sort that many farmers would have used on their farms.

*Source:* Archives of Manitoba, Drainage 26, N 23022.

the Big Grass Marsh, the Woodlands Marsh, the Tobacco Creek Marsh, and the marshes southwest of Rat River in and around Provencher.<sup>27</sup> As explained in the minutes of an earlier Executive Council meeting, the legislation was designed to address a particularly worrisome situation. Because of these large wet areas, “immigrants were either deterred from entering the province, or were forced to pass through it and settle on the drier plains beyond.”<sup>28</sup> This was the province identifying the wet areas that were the most blatant contradictions to the agricultural landscape newcomers expected to find and committing to extending its administrative and public works capacity to address the problem.

This was also the province reacting to certain realities in its human geography. Although the settlement taking place created real challenges for the province in terms of infrastructure construction, Manitoba was not growing at a remarkable rate, and that would not change any time soon. Despite a significant boom in the land market in the early 1880s, recovery from the subsequent bust was slow. In 1883, 1,831,982 acres of land were alienated, down over 800,000 acres from the previous year’s figure. In 1884, only 1,110,512 acres were taken up. And in 1885, settlers laid

claim to 481,814 acres, a shockingly low number.<sup>29</sup> Rates of growth would not fully recover until 1897.<sup>30</sup> The 1880 drainage legislation addressed the flooding that was already perceived as a serious barrier to provincial development, seeking to ensure no one was discouraged from taking up land in the province. It confirmed the provincial government's important role in early drainage, in the context of real concern that continued flooding would impede settlement, at a time when the future of the province looked far from assured.

Despite its apparently public-spirited aims, the 1880 legislation caused concern among some Manitobans. With regard to these and other undertakings, there were suspicions of corruption in drainage contracting. Indeed, at least some of the public money invested in drainage was distributed in ways that served political ends. For example, in August 1892, Robert Wemyss wrote to Premier Thomas Greenway to explain how the Council of the Rural Municipality of Lakeview regularly expended public money (likely including grants from the province) on drainage projects "which while benefitting one or two people is of no use to the general body of settlers." Municipal councillors and their allies stood to gain from these undertakings as contracts let to political friends (rather than to the lowest bidder) shored up support. Wemyss perceived a relation between municipal and provincial politics and warned Premier Greenway, a Liberal, that the local municipal council was distributing drainage contracts in such a way as to favour the opposition Conservatives.<sup>31</sup> Like other public works undertakings in Manitoba and elsewhere, drainage became a political instrument, a means by which those in power could cultivate support.

There were other ways that party politics and drain construction affected each other. Not content to allow the provincial or municipal government to determine which projects should be undertaken, some settlers fashioned political leverage out of their experiences of flooding. They applied it to the government of the day, sometimes with seemingly little regard for political loyalties. One particularly telling example was a letter from farmer Oswald Berire to Premier Greenway. Although he had "voted grit for 40 years," Berire threatened that, if a government ditch in his area were not finished that fall, "I will turn my coat and there is some more of my neighbours like me."<sup>32</sup> While some settlers, such as Berire, threatened the government with voter dissatisfaction, others simply underlined that authorities had a responsibility to them, convinced that the provincial government was at least partially at fault for flooding. Some went so far as to entirely blame the authorities for their situation, claiming it was "owing to the energetic immigration policy of our Provincial government"

they had taken up land during dry periods that was flooded in wet periods, apparently oblivious to the fact that the federal government, not the provincial, had solicited immigration.<sup>33</sup> Beyond surface water, troublesome enough on its own, provincial governments were also confronted with the task of managing settler discontent.

For the provincial government, the situation was rendered still more challenging by objections from settlers to drainage projects. In 1887, farmer Thomas Usher wrote to Department of Public Works employee Wilson to complain about a newly constructed drain that cut across his farm in two places, with his “grain fields being on both sides of the ditch.” In the absence of multiple bridges, Usher foresaw the ditch would be the cause of “a great deal of inconvenience.” His dismay was exacerbated by the fact that he did not himself stand to gain from drainage.<sup>34</sup> Drainage ditches could be problematic because of their size as well as their location. As settler J.O. Smith explained to a Department of Public Works employee in 1886, the narrow ditch made by the department posed a risk to local cattle. As Smith put it, “if you like your [beef] I think you will be getting some on your market that will die in the dit[c]h with their feet the [w]rong way up.” Smith wished that the ditch had been built “wide enough for an animal to right itself if it should by accident get in on its back.”<sup>35</sup> The Department of Public Works received complaints about those ditches that had been built as well as those that had not, redoubling the complexity of the wet prairie landscape.

The government of Manitoba became involved in land drainage for a number of reasons. Most important was the discrepancy between the regular, grid-based settlement supported by the Dominion Lands Act and the irregular, variable pattern of surface water across many areas of the province. With responsibility for local public works, the province had the difficult task of reconciling the two. Beginning with road drainage and progressing to agricultural drainage, the Manitoba government sought to provide the necessary supports to newcomers. This was in keeping with the liberal practice of providing an infrastructure to support capitalist development. At this early period, Manitoba’s future was far from assured, and the province took up drainage with a vigour inspired by real fear that inaction might retard development. As provincial employees and contractors were hard at work in the wet regions of the province, engaged in the physical process of environmental transformation, they themselves were evidence of liberalism at work on the ground.

Newcomers arrived in Manitoba expecting to find a ready agricultural landscape. Over a period of years, many realized their lands were subject



FIGURE 3 Boating in a drainage ditch near Woodside, Manitoba. This photograph is rare evidence of recreational engagement with Manitoba's drainage infrastructure. Note that both figures in the boat seem to be women, whereas workers on drainage projects typically were men.

*Source:* Archives of Manitoba, Jessop 178, Drainage Ditch, Glen Farm, Woodside, N 3211.

to surface water flooding, and the problem went beyond what they could cope with on their own. Many turned to the provincial government for assistance, writing letters that record their hopes for the land as well as their disappointments with the current situation. Some Manitobans seem to have written in the expectation of receiving government assistance. For these individuals, the liberal ideology by which states would assist with infrastructure projects might well have been part of the baggage they brought with them to the province. Other Manitobans seem to have written out of sheer desperation, believing government assistance was all that stood between them and utter ruin. The pattern in both cases, however, was that of residents appealing to the provincial state.

But if settlers shared an expectation the government would assist with drainage, they did not share a common opinion about what should be done and how the government should do it. Drainage might have been consistent with liberalism, but it did not remain in the airy realm of intellectual abstraction. Drainage quickly became imbedded in the day-to-day

© UBC Press 2011

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without prior written permission of the publisher, or, in Canada, in the case of photocopying or other reprographic copying, a licence from Access Copyright, [www.accesscopyright.ca](http://www.accesscopyright.ca).

21 20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11      5 4 3 2 1

Printed in Canada on FSC-certified ancient-forest-free paper  
(100% post-consumer recycled) that is processed chlorine- and acid-free.

---

**Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication**

Stunden Bower, Shannon,

Wet Prairie : people, land, and water in agricultural Manitoba /  
Shannon Stunden Bower.

(Nature, history, and society series, 1713-6687)  
Includes bibliographical references and index.  
ISBN 978-0-7748-1852-0

1. Agriculture – Manitoba – History. 2. Drainage – Manitoba – History.  
3. Watershed management – Manitoba – History. 4. Agriculture and state –  
Manitoba. 5. Agriculture – Social aspects – Manitoba. I. Title. II. Series: Nature,  
history, society

---

HD1683.C3S78 2011

333.76'097127

C2011-900886-6

---

**Canada**

UBC Press gratefully acknowledges the financial support for our publishing program of the Government of Canada (through the Canada Book Fund), the Canada Council for the Arts, and the British Columbia Arts Council.

This book has been published with the help of a grant from the Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences, through the Aid to Scholarly Publications Program, using funds provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, and with the help of the K.D. Srivastava Fund.

Printed and bound in Canada by Friesens  
Set in Adobe Garamond by Artegraphica Design Co. Ltd.  
Copy editor: Dallas Harrison  
Proofreader: Lana Okerlund  
Indexer: Cameron Duder  
Cartographer: Eric Leinberger

UBC Press  
The University of British Columbia  
2029 West Mall  
Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z2  
[www.ubcpress.ca](http://www.ubcpress.ca)