INTRODUCTION

To read these revealing, often eloquent interviews with Gilbert Fite, a preeminent historian of America's agricultural frontier and of agriculture in this century, and with Lewis G. Thomas, a distinguished historian of Canada's prairie provinces, is to understand immediately why they have been such effective teacher-scholars. The interviews also give us valuable clues about how each man shaped the writing of history in his own field.

Since both were born in the Great Plains or Prairie areas of North America–Fite in rural South Dakota, and Thomas on a ranch near Calgary, one might think they would have much in common - and they do: a deep love of their native region expressed in their writings, a remarkable devotion to teaching students, and an acute sense of how one generation of historians trains and relates to new generations. Their information about the way this latter process works would alone make the interviews, conducted by Kenneth E. Hendrickson, Jr. and Gerald C. Friesen, eminently worthwhile.

Although Gilbert Fite grew up in a rural farming area of South Dakota, both his parents were also school teachers. Education was always foremost in their minds. When he went to the University of South Dakota, two very different historians, Herbert C. Schell, premier historian of South Dakota, and Bert Loewenberg, an intellectual historian hailing from the American northeast, stimulated Fite's interest in history, and helped him get into the University of Missouri graduate program. There he worked with Lewis Atherton, one of the outstanding historians of the midwest. Then when Fite landed a position at the University of Oklahoma, it is significant that he would describe his colleagues there as former students of Atherton, Frederick Jackson Turner, Herberr Bolton and Walter Prescott Webb. In turn, Fite was to continue this laying-on-of-hands tradition by training some thirty-two Ph.D.s, among them one of Oklahoma's foremost historians, the late Arrell Gibson.

And yet Gilbert Fite's reputation as an expert on Western and recent national agricultural history in the United States, is not based on echoing others, but on his own scholarship and wonderfully clear writing as evidenced in his well-known *The Farmers Frontier* and his most recent volume, *America's Farmers: The New Minority*. What he has done is to recapture the increasingly lost history of a rural agricultural America, and to guarantee that we do not forget that for its first 300 years, what became the United States was largely an agricultural economy and society.

As the reader will see, toward the end of his interview, Fite raises objections to historians' current all-consuming obsession with race, ethnic class and gender, urges us to look at economic factors and groups, and to continue to write so as to reach the lay audience as well as the expert. Herein lies one secret of Fite's success. His books, whether about the political leader, Peter Norbeck, or about the farmers' frontier, cover regional topics but speak to national - even international - audiences about politics, farming, and rural life in the United States. His larger perspective and the central importance of his subject make him a national historian in every sense of the word.

In his interview with Lewis G. Thomas, Gerald Friesen calls Thomas "the Alberta historian." Since he was born into a ranching family near Millarsville, southwest of Calgary in 1914, it would seem that Thomas' rural upbringing would be similar to Fite's, and in some ways it was. But there were also dramatic differences.

Thomas did not feel he was on a frontier and did not perform daunting physical chores on the ranch. His interest was in the community, horse races, social life and the Anglican Church. Like their neighbors, the Thomas' felt they were a part of a vast world, the British Commonwealth, concerning which there was no sense of hostility or physical or psychological distance. Thomas felt, in fact, that he lived in a "harmonious and plausible whole."

As was the case with Gilbert Fite, Thomas benefited from the counsel of inspiring teachers, such as A. L. Burt and George Smith at the University of Alberta, and later the "exceptional influences" of English politics and letters on their and Thomas' world.

While at Harvard, Thomas became more aware of being Canadian and of Central Canada itself, and after returning to Alberta, he eventually taught a course on the History of the West (Canada) in 1949. Thomas, always noted for his liberal, humane and international perspective, came to feel that variety in a country was good and healthy, and founded the first "school" of Western Canadian historical studies. Its great success is attested to by the fact that A. S. Morton, Margaret Ormsby, W. J. Eccles and Gerald Friesen, among others, are associated with it.

An abiding interest in church history led Thomas into prairie church archives and the careers of Anglican missionaries, which in time led to the study of the fur trade, and the history of mixed-bloods. As a social historian interested in community, kinship and friendship ties, and in institutions, Thomas feels there has been too much emphasis on the frontier concept, and in effect, he has created a remarkable social history of his region's part without stressing frontier characteristics. In effect his approach alone would mark his signal contribution to a new understanding of Canadian settlement.

At the end of these two interviews, one has a sense that the two historians have reached similar positions from opposite starting points. Thomas, with his liberal, humane and international view, found a career in regional studies but always with a larger perspective. Fite, beginning with a clearly regional approach to politics and agriculture, sees agriculture and America's rural past in a national, even international way. Their careers are examples of the honest, probing search for knowledge of the past that might serve as models for everyone in the historical profession.

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