

PAUL F. SHARP
Interviewed and Edited by Thomas D. Isern
Introduction by Bruce Shepard

Introduction¹

I still find it ironic that it was Paul Sharp, an American scholar, who first kindled my interest in western Canadian history. I had studied my country and region in high school and had read some Canadian history as an undergraduate. I must confess, though, that I found it uninspiring compared to the Russian, German, and American history which I was also studying. As I recall, it was when I went searching for a dissertation topic that a colleague referred me to Paul Sharp's *Whoop-Up Country*.² I can still recall my amusement at the title, and the positive impact of the book itself. I discovered regional history which was at once thoroughly researched, thematically provocative, and elegantly written. I was inspired to write that kind of history; and I still am.

The man who showed me that regional history could be written at a sophisticated level is not a native of the area he studied. Paul Sharp was born in Kirksville, Missouri, in 1918. His father was a medical doctor who later moved the family to Crookston, Minnesota, some seventy-five miles from the border with Canada.

Paul Sharp's interest in western Canada may have begun with his personal proximity to it, and the trans-national influences on his life. His interest was expanded when he attended Phillips University in Enid, Oklahoma, from which he graduated in 1939 with a B.A. in History. There he encountered Frank Wellman, whose dissertation for the

University of Washington had utilized the archives of the Hudson's Bay Company.

Sharp's interest in western Canada grew and matured when he undertook graduate work at the University of Minnesota. Sharp credits a number of faculty members with influencing his intellectual development, particularly Alfred L. Burt, a Canadian and author of a history of Quebec. According to Sharp it was Burt who inspired his doctoral dissertation, later published as *Agrarian Revolt in Western Canada*.³



*Lieutenant Paul Sharp,
 U.S. Naval Liaison Officer
 HMAS Hobart 1945-46*

Sharp's graduate work was interrupted by naval service in the Pacific during the Second World War. He returned to the University of Minnesota following his

military duty, and received his Ph.D. from that institution in 1947. Sharp then taught at Iowa State University for the next seven years, during which time he began *Whoop-Up Country*. He moved to the University of Wisconsin in 1954, and completed his second book while there. In 1957 Sharp accepted the presidency of Hiram College, beginning a new career in administration which culminated in his appointment as the President of the University of Oklahoma. Paul Sharp still lives in Norman, Oklahoma, and as President Emeritus continues to be active in university work.

Paul Sharp's contribution to the historiography of the North American Great Plains was his ability to combine regionalism and cosmopolitanism. His writings convey both a broad understanding of the northern plains and a deep sympathy for the region and its people. Yet perhaps because he approached the area as an outsider, Sharp was able to maintain a dispassionate stance approaching scholarship's much sought after objectivity.

Paul Sharp's regionalism has been mistaken for a variety of Turnerian thought. Sharp was clearly familiar with Turner and his disciples, but his regionalism stems from the environmentalism of Walter P. Webb. Sharp acknowledges his intellectual debt to Webb, although he found Webb had limitations.

Paul Sharp intended his book *Whoop-Up Country* to be a test of Webb's Great Plains thesis. He discovered that the Great Plains' environment was indeed a critical factor influencing the society which developed. Sharp also discovered, however, that inherited traditions and practices could be powerful determinants in their own right.

Sharp's cosmopolitanism emerged from the fact that his work dealt with another country, and one of its regional

cultures. In both of his works Sharp was obviously conscious of the important differences in Canada's plains experience. Yet because he was examining that experience from his perspective as a neighboring scholar, Sharp was able to achieve insights into similarities which had eluded Canadian researchers.

Sharp was able to use his insights into the western Canadian experience to suggest an international overview of the northern plains which took him far beyond the more limited viewpoints of other American historians. He later began to extend his overview to Australia. Sharp's decision to enter administration has meant that this avenue of endeavor has languished, although it still offers exciting possibilities.

Probably because it was unique, Sharp's work was not fully appreciated on either side of the forty-ninth parallel. His books attracted considerable attention when they were published, but in neither North American country did they lead to lasting traditions of trans-border studies. The sad reality was that Sharp's work fell victim to the powerful nationalist biases resident in the historical traditions of both Canada and the United States.

Despite its proximity as a potential testing area for their theories, Canada has never occupied a major place in the intellectual endeavors of American historians. Western Canadian history has been even more obscure. Sharp's efforts to point to the important similarities and noticeable differences in the settlement of the northern plains of western Canada, compared to that of the United States, were met with studious indifference.

The response in Canada to Sharp's work was cool, if not frigid. Canada's English-speaking historians were at that time engaged in efforts to create a nationalist history of their country. One of the unfortunate side effects of such work has been a degree of anti-Americanism.

Canadian scholars for the most part treated Sharp as a dangerous interloper. His *Agrarian Revolt* in particular was harshly treated in Canadian reviews because it dared to suggest American antecedents and parallels to western Canada's agrarian upheavals.

Paul Sharp made a significant contribution to the study of North America's Great Plains region. His sophisticated approach, at once regional and cosmopolitan, stands as a model for any scholar, of any nationality, who wishes to understand the plains in their entirety. Paul Sharp was the first to recognize that history did not stop at the forty-ninth parallel, whether you were traveling north or south.

The Interview⁴

I: I know you were born in Kirksville, Missouri, in 1918, but graduated in 1935 from high school in Crookston, Minnesota. What's the story of this move?

S: My father was a doctor and moved up to northern Minnesota in the Red River Valley. He bought into a clinic there, and I went to school in northern Minnesota. That's only about 75 miles from the Canadian line, so very early I got interested in Canada. I remember doing a paper in a social studies class as a senior in high school on a trip I'd made to Canada. We were often in Canada. We did most of our shopping in Winnipeg rather than Minneapolis, because it was about 120 miles and Minneapolis was 340 or 50 miles. So the names T. Eaton and Hudson's Bay Company [department stores in Canada] were very familiar to me. I always thought that was something of a background for my interest in western Canada. It was a very natural thing. For example, I've often told friends, who greet this with utter disbelief, that when I was in high school we used to go over to Grand

Forks, North Dakota, to the University of North Dakota, where our high school band was one of several bands they'd bring in for their football games. They played an annual game with the University of Manitoba. They played Canadian rules the first half and American rules the second half. That seems incredible today, but that's how close those areas really were in those years.

I: Somehow you wound up to do your bachelor's degree at Phillips University in Enid [Oklahoma]. How did that come about?

S: That had two sources. The first source was that my mother, of course, was from the Enid area. Her parents had made the run to Kremlin, Oklahoma, which is just north of Enid, and I had numerous relatives in Enid and Garfield County. The other thing was at that time I thought I might be a minister in the Christian Church. So I went to Phillips because of our familiarity with it and because of my interest in that type of institution.

I fell under the influence of a historian who had done his doctorate out at the University of Washington, Frank Wellman. His influence was pronounced on me, there's no question about it. I found his teaching exciting. I found his interest in history formative. It was under his influence that I went on to graduate school in history. He had done early research in the Hudson's Bay Company when they first opened those files in London. I recall his enthusiasm for the Hudson's Bay Company and for its activities in the British Columbia-Washington area, and I think that had some influence on me.

I: Were you intent on academic life when you went back [to the University of Minnesota] for graduate work?

S: Yes, I think I had made the decision that I wanted to be a professor of history.

At that stage, of course, I had a rather limited view of it, as most undergraduates do. The view I had was primarily that of what I saw in the historians I worked with at Phillips. Of course they were essentially teachers, but both of the men I worked with had doctorates, and they had done very good work in their doctoral dissertations, and shared with me the sense of research, though not in any full-blown or comprehensive way. I still thought of it as being a teacher in a college. I got the larger vision later as I did graduate work.

E: Talk about that graduate work a little bit--professors worked with, programs involved in, this sort of thing.

S: I think I was at the University of Minnesota History Department at an unusually good time. I know we all feel that way about our graduate studies, but the men and women who influenced me the most were publishing scholars. All of them were international in their context and training. I worked primarily, of course, with Alfred LeRoy Burt, who was a Canadian. That had, I think, a predominant influence, but another influence on me that reinforced that was Herbert Heaton, the economic historian who had also taught at McGill. But he had taught also out at the University of Adelaide, and he got me interested in Australia. That had a later influence of considerable strength. His stories about Australia had fired my imagination, and when I had a chance in the Navy some years later to volunteer for duty on an Australian ship, I volunteered. It was a great experience and reinforced this earlier interest and led me to a Fulbright in Australia and writing about Australia and Australian settlement. But the influence on me of Herbert Heaton, I realize now, was considerable.

I had two American historians who had considerable influence on my life. One

was Alice Felt Tyler in American social history; her *Freedom's Ferment* [(Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1944)] is one of the best social histories an American historian has done. Her influence was marked. She became a very good friend of both my wife and me.

And the fourth one that had the most influence was George [M.] Stephenson, a student of immigration, knighted by the King of Sweden for his work in Swedish-American immigration. I recall so many instances where his advice and counsel as to what to do professionally were very important to me. But I realize, too, that he added another brick to this little tower that I later built: that was the interest in immigration, the movement of peoples. With Burt, then, that was focused on the mingling of the Canadian and American peoples and the whole [John Bartlet] Brebner emphasis on the mingling of North Americans. That again, you see, focused on interest in western Canada and the movement of Canadians and Americans in this instance--the last movement of Americans into the Canadian West. All of those in a curious way combined to create a sharply focused interest, but at the same time in a very interesting way on a very large scale--international.

[Walter P.] Webb later wrote what I believe to be his finest book [*The Great Frontier* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1952)], one of the best books in that whole field of understanding the impact of that great movement from Europe into the unsettled areas of the world. I saw this in terms of the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand. I was beginning that whole thing when I had a chance to go off to be a college president, and that put an end to it. But that little article on three frontiers ["Three Frontiers: Some Comparative Studies of Canadian, American and Australian Settlement," *Pacific Historical Review* 24 (November

1955): 369-77] was the beginning of that. It was laying a foundation for that larger study. I think there's an evolutionary process here intellectually, starting with the very specific Red River Valley area and moving ultimately into the unsettled areas of the world.

I: There's a quote I copied down here out of the foreword to *Agrarian Revolt in Western Canada*. It says, "This study in Canadian-American relations is the outgrowth of a challenge issued some years ago by Professor A.L. Burt in a Canadian history seminar"--where he evidently discussed the fact that the parallel development of the Canadian West and the American West was obscured by national bias. What's the story here? Is this a fairly full-blown idea in his mind?

S: No, he planted the seed, no question about it. Burt was primarily interested in French Canada, which is rather interesting. But he had taught at the University of Alberta for some years. Burt was a remarkable man, no question about it. His first career was as a concert pianist, and he could have been one of Canada's great concert pianists, but he gave that up in favor of history.

But his primary interest was French Canada and Canadian-American-British diplomacy. His *Old Province of Quebec* [(Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1933)] is undoubtedly the finest thing written by an English-speaking historian about the old province of Quebec. French Canadian historians have been remarkably generous in their judgement. The English-speaking historians have not been handled very gently by the French Canadians. But Burt, because of his--two things, I think: his extensive research and his sympathy for the French Canadians. He genuinely enjoyed them and enjoyed living with them. His summer home was in Quebec.

The Canadian historians at that time

were a small number, and they practically all congregated at the Public Archives in Ottawa. It was a reunion after a hard winter's academic travail and troubles; they all gathered and shared their stories. I got in on just enough of it to realize that it was a very closely knit group of historians and archivists, too.

Burt, as he looked out over the Canadian-American West, was impressed with the parallels of development and the dissimilarities. Now that ties in with my interest in the Canadian West, because when I read Webb's *Great Plains* [(Boston: Ginn and Co., 1931)], I was struck by the fact that much of what he said about the plains simply wasn't true in the same geographic environment in western Canada. Whenever he came to institutional development, there was a fault line. The easiest explanation, as I used to tell students, is to realize that when the Baptists moved into the Great Plains, where there was no water, they did not give up immersion as baptism. Nor did the Canadians give up their institutions which were formative.

Canadian nationalism is the best illustration. They didn't become plainmen who took on the American institutions. They may have taken on the material adjustments to the Great Plains, obviously. The cowboys dressed as cowboys, and the axe wasn't of much use out on the Alberta-Saskatchewan plains, and the material adjustments were certainly the same. But when you got into such vital issues as institutional formations in government, education, in almost any area you want to look at, the formative influences were not geographic. They were the inherited characteristics from eastern Canada, they were transplanted, and they overwhelmed whatever influence there might have been from invading Americans, as I like to call them, or the influence of geography. Thus you have such a difference in the history of law

enforcement, for example, where you have obviously the influence of the British experience and the Irish constabulary, or the constabulary in India, rather than local law enforcement through a sheriff. That wrote an entirely different history in the western plains of Canada with respect to Indians, with respect to law enforcement of the settlers and all.

Now I was in this seminar with Burt, and I began to look at some of these things. I had Webb's writing—he was writing a great deal. I was much impressed with this. But as I began to work in the Canadian prairies, as they call them, it occurred to me that there were real differences, and in that seminar we began to look at some of those. Burt was very helpful in that he knew the Canadian side of the story much better than I did, and I had to learn all of that.

That's the difficulty with these parallel studies, you've really got to be a national historian in two countries; that's carrying water on both shoulders, and it's a tough assignment. Tough not so much in terms of actual research and learning the history, but emotionally you have barriers to conquer which most people don't think about. It's interesting as you get into this to see the reaction of reviewers on each side of the line as they handle particular aspects of it. We do have these strongly implanted national biases, and historians, like others, find it difficult to live above them.

Minnesota was one of the few places that really taught Canadian history in any depth. Burt taught it, and Heaton reinforced it. And out of that seminar came this idea of studying the farmers' movements, because I had studied those in American economic history and American social history and western history and I grew up with it. And here is where you get into that difficult and gray area of how much did it influence the institutions of western Canada. You know

the Nonpartisan League moved over, but its whole emphasis was institutionally so different; it did not succeed in the Canadian parliamentary system. Its views, its criticisms of the marketing system, of transportation, all these frontier matters met a ready response, but its organization, and the pattern which it inherited from its American cousins, simply didn't fit the Canadian parliamentary system, and it was absorbed by movements that were much more amenable to the Canadian structures of politics.

I: This is getting into quite a bit of the content of *Agrarian Revolt*. Let me ask you, for the context of this interview, to give a summary of the argument of the book.

S: What I was trying to do there was to show the Canadian parallels of the farmers' revolt that had occurred somewhat earlier in the United States. And in that, of course, I was trying to show both similarities and differences, because there are both, and they're critical to understanding both American influence and the limits on American influence.

What I was trying to look at was, why did the movement in the Canadian West to reform the structure of politics in Canada, why did it fail? It failed for very different reasons than Populism failed in the United States, and those reasons were tied more to the institutions in Canada. The overwhelming predominance of Ontario, for example, in politics. The structure of Canadian politics. The relationship of leadership to the parliamentary movement. The Canadian western farmers had lost all faith in parties as such. Henry Wise Wood, for example, who came from Missouri; Henry Wise was the famous governor in Virginia after whom he was named. He never wanted the agrarians to go into politics, because he felt that politics had ruined the movement in the United States. He was

overruled, and he became the political leader in Alberta. But it was a very different experience, and one of the forces that is beautifully illustrative of this is that he had so many Americans around him--Daniel Webster Warner, and John W. Leedy, and all these people. But these people all clamored for political action. Henry Wise Wood, on the other hand, wanted economic action, and his emphasis was on the great cooperative movement that is still very strong in western Canada. This was the other movement. And it was interesting to see how these forces contended.



Paul Sharp, Ross Toole, and Robert Athearn--all noted western historians--making "big medicine" in the lobby of the Placer Hotel, Helena, Montana, 1953.

The Americans who were in leadership had to conceal their American experience. Daniel Webster Warner, for example, never called himself Daniel Webster Warner, he was D.W. Warner. Another aspect of the story just simply was what influence was there in western Canada from Americans who moved over in such large numbers. The Canadian press, the Canadian politicians in the east, were all clamoring that this was threatening the integrity of the dominion. On the American side there were all kinds of articles and prominent journalists, like Agnes Laut, for example, who wrote articles that this was a prelude to

annexation. That was an interesting side to the story that I wanted to look at. [Donald F.] Warner later picked that up and wrote a good book [*The Idea of a Continental Union* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1960)] about it. I didn't pursue it in depth. I was interested in its influence on the farmers.

I: It seems that the controversial point here is the proportion between the American influences and the British influences--the relative strengths of the two. Critics are prone to examine a particular work and say the proportion isn't right. For example, William K. Rolph of New York University, in a review of *Agrarian Revolt* [in *Journal of Economic History* 9 (May 1949): 87-88], said good things. He says, for instance, "He [Sharp] recognizes that the forty-ninth parallel is only a line and not a wall shutting out the free movement of people and ideas." Then later in the same review he says, "The emphasis on the American influence on the farmers' movement has led to a neglect of the equally important influences of English radicalism."

S: And that's true. That book [concerning British influences] was being written by [William L.] Bill Morton, and Bill Morton and I were in constant communication over that. My study was showing American parallels; it was a limited study. It did not propose to look at all the other influences that were at play. I think the predominant influence in this whole mix was the Ontario influence, which of course was reinforced by the British influence, because the Ontario people thought of themselves as part of the empire and brought into western Canada British ideas. But my book was intended to call attention to the American parallels and the American influences.

Bill Morton did a very fine book [*The Progressive Party in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1950)]. His

book was oriented primarily to Ontario, and to the influence the Ontario farmers brought into western Canada, and even more important in some ways, the influence of Ontario finance, education, political influence and all the rest. Those influences were the ones that ultimately triumphed, obviously. But the tincture of American influence was there, and the brief life of the Nonpartisan League was just a beautiful illustration, because it was wholly born in the United States. The ideas were imported from North and South Dakota.

L: You didn't disagree with Rolph.

S: No, I don't disagree with that. Harold Innis made something of the same point in his review, as I recall.

L: Speaking of Innis, this gets to the emphasis business again. He says [in a review of *Agrarian Revolt* in *Journal of Political Economy* 57 (April 1949): 257], "Concern with political activities has involved the neglect of economic problems." Another emphasis question. "The limitation greatly impairs the value of the book."

S: I don't happen to agree with that. I think the point I was making was the acceptance of the economic analysis of farmers' movements that occupies so much of our literature on the farmers' movements. I didn't feel that I needed to write two or three chapters elaborating once more the farmers' grievances against the transportation system or against the marketing system or against the currency and monetary system--their grievances against the whole structure of finance. That's been documented so thoroughly and analyzed so thoroughly that I really didn't feel I needed to write all that. I accepted what [W.J.] Bill Wainess, for example, the economist at Manitoba, had written.

Now Harold Innis at that time, you remember, was the great Greek god in

Canadian scholarship. The Harold Innis school has only recently been shattered. It's remarkable the strength and long life that his influence had. So that as an economic historian, he was not really all that interested in politics. Bill Morton ran into the same problems, incidentally, in reviews of his book. So I didn't accept--I accepted tongue-in-cheek-- that criticism, because I didn't feel I had to rewrite the whole economic history.

L: This does tie up to the question of nationalism, too. I think about the last line of his [Innis's] review was, "A Canadian will feel that he has over emphasized similarities between movements in the United States and Canada."

S: I didn't agree with that at all. That's similar to the author of the Northwest Mounted Police official history, [John P.] Turner. He found that I was unfair to the Canadians, too. But I think that is the kind of bias that is going to enter in any time you get into the international arena. Scholars are not above that, and Innis of course developed that national school. It followed on the heels of the imperial school of historical writing in Canada. Innis was more than an economic historian; his influence strongly reinforced the sense of nationalism in Canada, which I must say at that time wasn't nearly as strong as it is today. One of the developments in modern Canada has been the resurgence of nationalism and the search for identity in Canada. There was very little of that at that time. Canadians were remarkably international in their view--Canadian scholars. But he [Innis] emphasized, in his writings, economic nationalism as a theme in the development of basic industries of Canada.

L: That leads me to some comments made by our mutual friend from Regina, R. Bruce Shepard; he's been picking up some of this historiographically. As Shepard describes the reaction to *Agrarian Revolt*,

it was "coolly received" by Canadian scholars. He contends (in "Paul F. Sharp and the Historiography of the North American Plains"), "Canadian scholars recognized both the value of *Agrarian Revolt* and its inherent threat to the nationalist themes which they were developing."

S: Yes. I think that's an interesting insight. It reinforces what I've just said, that this was a period when Innis and others were trying to develop this spirit of nationalism.

L: Let me read a couple of quotes from F.G. Stanley (in his review of *Agrarian Revolt* in *American Historical Review* 54 (January 1949): 393-95). Here's one: "Historians must not forget that however superficially obvious historical parallels may appear, there are often dissimilarities of a fundamental nature which must not be overlooked." That's one of those statements which you can't exactly disagree with.

S: That's true. Now when you get into *Whoop-up Country*, you find a lot of the dissimilarities emphasized. Because there I was writing a regional history and felt obliged to look at both the similarities and the dissimilarities. And the dissimilarities in Indian policy, railroad policy--superficially they're very parallel--but you find these dissimilarities which come out of the differences in, as I say, the Canadian political structure and system, the difference in Canadian politicians. We've never had a Sir Wilfrid Laurier in the White House, nor have we had a Sir John Macdonald in the White House. They're very different, and all of these are influences. But I was strongly influenced on this score by the metropolitan theory that there was a good deal of conflict here between the metropolitan centers as they sought to develop the west--Minneapolis and St. Paul on the American side, and Winnipeg, and prior to that the eastern centers in Ontario, particularly. That gave

me a useful tool in looking at the dissimilarities as well as the similarities in railroad policy, for example, and settlement and law enforcement, land policy and all the rest. Again, as you say, that's the kind of statement that you really can't deny, because there are dissimilarities and many of them very important. Ultimately they are the ones that triumph institutionally.

L: Here's a quote from the same source that takes another tack entirely: "Dr. Sharp is an adherent of the [Frederick Jackson] Turner school. He therefore emphasizes the great importance of environmentalism." Is that a fair assessment?

S: No, I don't think that's a fair assessment at all. I was influenced by Turner in terms of analytical tools. I didn't reach the same conclusion that environment is as important as Turner thought it was. I thought that there were many other influences, and when you get into the Canadian West, you can see this sharply drawn against the American experience. This whole experience of law enforcement in the Canadian West, and the model that Canadians had of law enforcement, was very different from the Americans. I think that that's a very good illustration. Now, of course, the Canadians again have exaggerated that also into a mild, mild West, as if they never had any difficulties. The Riel Rebellion is now understood to be a good illustration of some of the ethnic problems that western Canada had. They denied that for many years.

L: If you want to talk about a mild, mild West, that reminds me of somebody who was one of your more severe critics in the Canadian West--Vernon Fowke--and a review that he wrote for *Saskatchewan History* [2 (January 1949): 33-35]. There are two things that he brought up. One of them was the idea of the parliamentary

system not being conducive to agrarian radicalism, particularly the point of responsible government. That it forced a more conservative stance on agrarianism.

S: I don't think there's any doubt about that. I think that's why it ultimately failed. I think that's one of the differences, the dissimilarities. It was within a different political structure. And yet when you look at Australia, you find a very strong influence of the labor groups in the [18]80s which is comparable to the American groups but within the parliamentary system. You have to weigh that against the local conditions. The gold rush in Australia is a good illustration of differences, but the labor movement is also a very interesting dissimilarity between Canada and Australia in the 1880s. The period of [Andrew Barton] Banjo Paterson and all that.

I: Speaking of the mild West again, Fowke goes so far as to quibble with the word, "revolt."

S: That didn't bother me. I remember that. That's just an American term. We use that term in a political sense, which probably is open to criticism. But I was using it in the accepted and typical American sense.

I: He [Fowke] contends that there was this broad Canadian consensus, and that it was not seriously challenged.

S: I don't agree with that at all. And the subsequent developments in Alberta and Saskatchewan, with Social Credit and the Progressive Party and all that, no, I don't accept that at all. I don't see the evidence in that period that there was a genuine consensus. I think that there was a sense of rejection of parties, and they were searching for new political expressions.

I: You've given some insight from what you said earlier as to your relationship both intellectually and probably personally

with W.L. Morton. He opens his review of *Agrarian Revolt* [in *Canadian Historical Review* 24 (September 1948): 317-18] by saying, "This scholarly monograph is as timely as it is excellent." Of course, that might be timely in relation to his own work, too.

S: That could well be.

I: And it goes on further with really complimentary things. Why is he so favorable to your line of argument in *Agrarian Revolt*, whereas the consensus among Canadian historians was not so?

S: I've thought about that a number of times. I'm not sure I know, because W.L. Morton represented, both personally and professionally, the influence of the British educational system. I remember a little anecdote. I arranged a program for the old Mississippi Valley Historical Association. I had Webb on the program, and W.L. Morton, and as Morton was reading his paper-- Morton had an Oxonian accent; he was a Canadian actually, but this was one of the transfers, and we've seen that in American academic life, too--but Webb leaned over to me and said, "Sharp, who's that goddamn Britisher?" I had to explain to him that he was a Canadian, but he had done his work in Britain.

Bill Morton and I lunched pretty regularly when I was working in Winnipeg for two or three years. He loved Winnipeg goldeye, and we'd go down to the Hudson's Bay coffee shop and have Winnipeg goldeye together. We may have exchanged enough ideas so that in a way we understood the background from which each other was writing and what we were trying to do. I think Bill understood the Canadian West very well.

I: As I see it, there has been this persistent denial in western Canadian historiography of environmental influence on western Canadian society.

S: Oh yes.

I: And [Gerald] Jerry Friesen, I noticed his book [*The Canadian Prairies* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984)] on your shelf here, he talks about this "democratic veneer" in western Canada, but it's not a matter of environmental influence as he sees it.

S: No, he totally ignores all that. But to divorce totally, as he seems to do and as many Canadian historians want to do, the development of human affairs from environment becomes a pretty tortuous exercise. Even, we like to think once you get into the metropolitan area and the urban area you're free from environment, but you just have a different environment to cope with and it's extremely influential. It shapes our lives in all the critical things that we do. That would explain, in my view, some of the charges that I was Turnerian. I thought of myself as much more eclectic than that. But the influence of environment is clearly there, and when one goes through that repetitive environment, coping with environment in primitive ways for 300 years on the edge of the frontier, whether it's in the United States, Canada, Australia, wherever it is, it is formative, and it leaves deep stains and tinctures the history of a people.

To recognize the influence of environment on human behavior is not to become an environmentalist. It's to recognize it as one of the important factors in determining human behavior, and that's all I tried to do. I didn't try to erect a whole structure based on environment. Now in the dissertation [which became *Agrarian Revolt*], obviously because of its limitations as a dissertation, there can always be the charge that you've exaggerated one aspect or another.

I felt that the Canadian reviewers, perhaps because many of them at that time were trained in Britain, did not do a doctoral dissertation as such, but took the

D.Phil., they did a master's essay. It was highly literary. I had that influence from Burt and Heaton to write well. Everything had to be aged in the wood, well written. And that's why Burt took fourteen years, I think it was, to do *Province of Quebec*. It's beautifully written, every sentence, every paragraph, everything fits beautifully and it's a pleasure to read. Now I think that influence is quite different than the influences on the American historian.

I: *Whoop-Up Country*, then--this work was obviously percolating while you were teaching at Iowa State and then at Wisconsin.

S: Yes, that's right, primarily at Iowa State. When I went to Wisconsin I was given, the first semester I was there, a leave to finish *Whoop-Up Country*. In those years, in order to attract you, that was one of the things they did for you, was to provide leave time. I knew I had to finish the book, and fortunately I did--but primarily at Iowa State.

Now there were lots of influences at Iowa State that were very helpful in this. There was a cadre of Canadian scholars in agricultural economics led by Geoffrey Shephard. And his brother-in-law [William Murray] and two or three other Canadians, John Kenneth Galbraith was there. That whole group of agricultural economists, many of whom had come from Canada originally--now that was a stimulating environment for me. We had a weekly social science seminar with economists, sociologists, historians, etc. and read papers to each other. That did a lot to help shape my ideas and gave me a breadth of view that otherwise I wouldn't have had for that book.

I enjoyed writing that book. It was a lot of fun. My primary purpose in that book was just what we've been talking about--to take a region which embraced two national developments, in which the geography and environment were similar.

And when you cross that 49th parallel, if you don't see a sign or go through a customs office, you don't know it's an international boundary. The early settlers, of course, just ignored it for many, many years. I wanted to take an area like that and take a look at the Webb thesis and see whether in fact it was altogether true. Now today, were I doing that, I would have a lengthy introduction pointing to the fact that this was what I was going to do. Then I would have had a final chapter saying this is what I did. In those years we weren't that sophisticated about readers. We thought they could read it and understand it, so I never really underscored what my intent was. But my intent was to look at this whole thesis that Webb announced and wrote so impressively about the Great Plains. Was this true about the Great Plains when you moved over into another nation? I found it had serious limitations. There were similarities and dissimilarities. There were influences that were the same, and there were other influences that made it very different.

I tried to use it [*Whoop-Up Country*] as kind of a case study. I looked at it in terms of all the influences I could find and weighed them very carefully. So as a result I had some insights on events in Canadian history which weren't particularly popular in Canada, either. The Cypress Hills Massacre, which is a great folklore event showing the brutality of the Americans and the violence of the Americans. Well, one little thing I pointed out was that it was an international brigade. They weren't all Americans by any means, several of them were Canadians. One of them was an Englishman, one was a German.

I thoroughly enjoyed that book. It was a labor of love. It starts out in a very lively way. But that was another thing--if I were writing it today, I would make clear in a preface that the introductory chapters are not the whole book. Because what I

was really looking at was the multi-faceted character of a region. And as a result I think one of the best chapters in that book is "Merchant Princes of the Plains," because that describes the economic behavior of the entrepreneur merchant in a frontier area that is international.



Paul F. Sharp, historian of the Canadian-American plains. Photo courtesy Office of Public Information, University of Oklahoma

Of course the chapter that I enjoyed the most was "Sitting Bull and the Queen." I really enjoyed that chapter, because it added a dimension to the whole Sitting Bull story, the whole massacre and everything else, that no one had really taken a look at. I had in mind, as a matter of fact, to do a whole book on that, because the records in the Northwest Mounted Police files and the Archives of Canada are rich. They are rich sources.

I: It's probably just coincidence that you mentioned a moment ago the cosmopolitan flavor of the defenders of the Alamo, but there's one reviewer

[Thomas LeDuc, in *Journal of Economic History* 16 (September 1956): 427-28] of *Whoop-Up Country* who cited Herbert Eugene Bolton and Bartlett Brebner as the inspirations for you, as he said, "to transcend national boundaries and study as units the history of North America and its international regions."

S: I think that's true. They all influenced me, you know. When you look at the minglings of the North American peoples, you become a cosmopolitan.

One of the most difficult things that I had to work with in both those books was this judgment about how many [immigrants] and what their influence really was. That's a very difficult question. North American migrations are not neat. We've learned that in our Mexican frontier, our Mexican border. People of all kinds of nationalities were moving through paying no attention to the formalities, so the accurate count is a moot question. In the nineteenth century hundreds of thousands of people didn't take out citizenship. Moreover, records were inaccurate, and many of them went across the border informally. I've thought about that through the years as I've gotten more sophisticated with statistical methods. What would I have done in a different way? I can't really decide I would have done it much differently, because of the uncertainties, the problems of estimating exactly how many people were involved.

I didn't have that problem so much in *Whoop-Up Country*. *Agrarian Revolt* and *Whoop-Up Country* really were to be followed by a third volume on the farmers in the area--the Honyockers. One of the things that happened to me, Tom, was I got into writing these essays for the scholarly journals and then the books. I began to get very interested in writing, just the physical act of writing, style, content, everything else--characters, character development. I had a Ford Faculty Fellowship when I was at Iowa State to

work with George [R.] Stewart out at Berkeley. He's the author, the novelist-historian, who wrote *Fire and Storm*. I greatly admired not only his naturalistic approach to writing but also the way it tied into environmentalism, I guess you'd say. But in any case Iowa State University wouldn't give me leave to take that Ford Faculty Fellowship. And I guess that was the moment that I decided that Iowa State was really not the place for me, because the Ford Faculty Fellowship in those years was highly prized. Wisconsin, on the other hand, was very generous, offering me every possible support to do my writing, and I appreciated that.

We were talking about *Whoop-Up Country*. The physical experience of writing it. One of the things we did, to get a feel of the country, we camped up that Whoop-Up Trail just to get a feel--the alkali flats, all the buttes they mentioned, everything. That was a lot of fun, and it tied us to the land in a way that I think is very important for someone who is doing a study of that kind. When you are sitting in a research library or historical museum or whatever and do this kind of work, you lose the feel for the country. You lose the sense of what it's like to be there, what it's like to cross an alkali flat under the conditions in which they did it. I surveyed the Cypress Hills area, the massacre area. It may reinforce your concern about my being an environmentalist, but I like to see where these things happened. It isn't like writing an economic history, where you're concerned with finance and you can stay in the counting house and write it. That made it a lot of fun.

E: That's one of the things that makes the book elegant in its way, I think. Among reviewers and other people who responded to it in the United States, it seems to me that they were favorable and appreciative, but in some ways the evaluation of the work is light-weight.

S: That was what disappointed me, and that's why I say if I were to do that again, I would say look, this is an effort to estimate the realities of the Webb thesis as you move over into Canada.

E: The best review I found of that work was one in the *Financial Post* [50 (3 March 1956): 15]. The fellow [Robert L. Perry] who wrote it obviously had a grasp that in the early part of the book, what you're doing is setting the context, the region of environmental integrity, an international region; then describing the trail, an economic institution, the trail that bound that region together across 49° North; and then in later chapters, in effect, breaking up what you've created.

S: That's right, and not just the trail itself, but life on the trail, to show what it was like to be on the trail and to make your livelihood on the trail. And the people who went up and back on the trail, and then the communities that were created as nuclei at each end of the trail--Ft. Benton on one end and Ft. McCleod on the other. You're right, and I was disappointed at many of the reviewers. It shook me a little bit that they didn't get really back into the substantive material on Indian policy, on law enforcement, on economic development and the role of those who were engaged in economic development and so on. I was somewhat disappointed in the reviewers for that.

E: There was not so much reaction, and I mean reaction in some cases in the strident sense, not so much reaction to *Whoop-Up Country* as to *Agrarian Revolt* among the Canadian scholars. And Shepard again, in writing about this, says that the book was less controversial to them because it fit better with Canadian nationalism.

S: I think that's a very shrewd appraisal. I would agree that this didn't challenge them nearly as much. In fact in many

ways it reinforced their sense of superiority--law enforcement would be a good illustration of that. And also the development of the National Policy comes through more clearly in *Whoop-Up Country* than it does in *Agrarian Revolt*, partly because this was in the more formative period, when what happens in Ottawa clearly is formative in events and developments out on the plains.

E: I think he's [Shepard] drawing particularly on comments by Lewis H. Thomas [in *Canadian Historical Review* 27 (June 1956): 184-85], who speaks in real complimentary terms overall of the book, and then what he concludes is that the book, as he says, shows "the force of Canadian nationalism" operating through the Canadian Pacific Railroad. To him the book winds up with that, and that's the important thing.

S: And that is a very important thing. I make a good deal of that, because it not only replaced that umbilical cord from Ft. Benton, it destroyed it. And that meant an end to an era of American influences and American traffic and so on. It reinforces my earlier observation that the Canadian Pacific Railway was an extension of the Canadian National Policy. It brought British Columbia into the dominion as promised. It was also a necessity in their minds that they were going to put an end to any threat of annexation or American influence. So I think that's probably true. I did not write it as a Canadian nationalist, as a matter of fact. I didn't write it as an American nationalist, either. I was trying to put together the pieces as I saw them and how they fit into the larger pattern of development of both nations in that region.

E: The book, *Whoop-Up Country*--you find it listed in all manner of bibliographies and finding aids in the United States and commonly pointed to as a model study, although no one has really followed up

with similar studies, particularly in a trans-national way. The same book, though--if you pick up Jerry Friesen's work or others that are general about the Canadian West--they largely neglect it. As an example, one Canadian who reviewed *Whoop-Up Country* was Hugh Dempsey, who later wrote that splendid biography, *Crowfoot: Chief of the Blackfeet* [(Edmonton: Hurtig, 1972)]. But in that work he doesn't cite *Whoop-Up Country*, even though he was a reviewer.

S: I know. I asked him about that, too, because I wrote an introduction to that.

E: Now it seems to me the great irony here is that the University of Oklahoma Press brings out the American edition [of *Crowfoot*], and you write the introduction--

S: I think I have a partial explanation for that, Tom. And I don't know if this squares with your experience, or whether this is an egocentric kind of observation. But I dropped out of the history profession; once you're out of the history profession as such, as an active participant in its professional and social and total life (because that's what it really becomes for the active historian), and I became a college president, I didn't pursue any of this. I didn't pursue any reviews. And moreover, my very absence led them to kind of ignore it. I think that's reality in academic life in both countries. That was reinforced in Canada, of course, in that I was not Canadian. I was not one of them. But once I went into the college presidency, I had a whole new constituency, a whole new life--you may have heard about this--and I had altogether different correspondence. My life was in different associations.

That used to bother me a great deal. It kind of illustrates the gap that exists between the academic life of the university and the responsibilities of a university president. I find that rather disturbing. But I've thought about that many times, Tom.

One young historian told me he thought I was dead. I've had that experience several times. I went into a professional meeting not long ago in a group of historians, and there were several there who just thought I was dead. Well, I was the next thing to it--I was a university president. You move in a different world. That explains some of this. Not all of it by any means, but I've often thought that had I been there in the front trenches, defending my work, explaining it, following up on it with further essays, and indeed that third book I had in mind of comparing the life of the farmers--not the farmers' revolt--but the life of the farmers, economically, socially, and not emphasizing the political as I did in that first book--that would have been my third study there.

But as I say I went off to other things and did a lot of writing as a university president. I have quite a bibliography on that, but it's with different subjects, obviously, different themes. But it had the same reward for me in the sense of acceptance by the more scholarly elements in the university and college administrative ranks. I kept that up. I'm working now on a history of the American college and university presidency since World War II. I published an essay on that.

E: This other historian Sharp--finish up with him here.

S: Let me say one word, since you put it that way. Remember that the other historian Sharp was very young and inexperienced, and put that against my age. I think I would have written very different things in a very different way if I'd had the experience that I've had since then.

E: But it seems to me that it's the beginning of a body of work. What you had was the beginning of a body of work which itself would have satisfied many lifelong scholars to look back on in

retrospect. It's something that was for its time, and even today is, in fact, track-breaking--that is, its international, continental approach to the North American plains. The idea of accepting environment or geographic region as a basis for some potential commonality, but yet interposing nationality as a variable that in many ways will overwhelm environment--not in all ways. You talked about that it does in some ways and it doesn't in others. This constitutes a road not taken--proposed an academic generation ago, the trail blazed, but since then grassed over.

S: There are several reasons for that. One is the declining interest in western history per se. The other is the sharp increase in Canadian nationalism that's reflected in the Canadian historians. A third is that

had I stayed in Wisconsin (let me put it positively), had I stayed there, I was beginning to develop a group of students that would have followed up on this with me. My departure from that to go into a college presidency put an end to that development which usually follows the maturity of a scholar in a field. I had four or five who were working with me in seminars and I think would have carried on a good bit of this in specific ways, as graduate students do, so there would have been a larger body of literature around the field.

Well, that's one of the things I gave up. I had to make the choice, and I would make the same choice all over again, because the experience I had as a college and university president was unparalleled.

Notes

¹Biographical and historiographic information on Sharp here presented is abstracted from an article by Isern and Shepard, "Paul F. Sharp and the Historiography of the North American Plains," forthcoming in *The Historian*.

²Paul F. Sharp, *Whoop-Up Country: The Canadian-American West, 1865-1885* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1955). Reprinted by the Historical Society of Montana (1960) and by the University of Oklahoma Press (1973 and 1978).

³*Agrarian Revolt in Western Canada: A Survey Showing American Parallels* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1948). Reprinted by Octagon Books, 1971.

⁴Interview conducted in Norman, Oklahoma, 19 March 1988.