

## INTRODUCTION

In these days of global, multicultural affairs the Great Plains may seem an old-fashioned anomaly, a throwback to a simpler era of homogeneous white folks pushing into an empty prairie, happily oblivious to the rest of the world. One of the legacies of the region's past to the present is in fact an attitude of isolationism and uncritical ethnocentrism. But there has been another side to the Plains experience that we need to remember. In the first place, this has been emphatically an international region. Let your eyes wander up and down the map and that fact becomes apparent. The midcontinent grasslands have never recognized any political boundaries, state or national, have never stopped abruptly at the 49th latitude. Texans, Kansans, Manitobans, and Albertans have all come to live in this single, common landscape; therefore, their history has many shared themes. In the second place, the Great Plains has been one of the world's most interesting meeting grounds for racially dissimilar peoples--Indians and Europeans most obviously. Keeping those facts in mind, it is hard to be narrowly provincial on the plains or to distance oneself naively from other places. This region has had all the cultural and ecological tensions and conflicts, all the strange encounters and stimulating contrasts, needed to promote international and interracial understanding.

The three interviews presented in this special issue compel us to look at the region in this cross-cultural light. Each of these historians has found the plains to be a doorway into a world of differences. Each has had to ask himself whose identity he was defining as a historian. I find it interesting that all three came out of distinctly nonmetropolitan communities, and not too far apart at that. Donald Berthrong (born in 1922) grew up in LaCrosse, Wisconsin, and even wrote his master's thesis on the town. William Lewis Morton was born (1908) in Gladstone, Manitoba, and has spent most of his life teaching not far from there. Paul Sharp (born in 1918) was a boy in the Red River Valley, a short ways south of the Canadian border in Minnesota. We have then two Americans, Berthrong and Sharp, whose professional paths crossed at the University of Oklahoma, and one Canadian, who never seems to have been much interested in the neighbor to the south. Yet all three were alike in making their way out of obscure, smallish, backwater origins into an awareness of big differences. They did so, paradoxically, by becoming regional historians.

Geographically, Sharp traveled the farthest in his writing. Influenced by Walter Prescott Webb's environmentalist approach to the plains and by his internationally minded teachers at the University of Minnesota, he tried to discover whether the plains had been as much a force for discontinuity for Canadians as Webb said they had been for Americans. He was interested too in the movement of agrarian reform ideas across the border. Unlike Webb, who in his secessionistic tendencies could only see eastward, Sharp found the most interesting aspect of the plains experience the movement along a north-south axis, though he was willing to admit that strong cultural continuities had indeed flowed from east to west, independently, on each side of the border. Eventually, the questions that plains history suggested to him led all the way to Australia and comparative frontier studies. In taking those directions, he was working against the professional and national grain. He paid a price when the reviewers got hold of his work, for repeatedly they insisted on making that 49th latitude an indelible line, not to be crossed under any circumstances, even in a quest for understanding differences. When he gave up history for university administration, the profession lost an unusual, creative imagination. We are still

in need of his sort of thinking--of an awareness of the plains as an ecological whole, of a willingness to examine questions comparatively, free of chauvinistic blinders.

Professor Morton, on the other hand, has been a determined nationalist but in a way that is uncommon to American experience. Raised in a self-consciously English and Anglican family on a subsistence farm west of Winnipeg, he early developed "a kind of dual way of living." On the one hand, he grew up an Anglophile, interested in all things English, educated at Oxford in English ways, and tuned into the globe-encircling interests of the British Commonwealth. Unlike many Americans, he saw no reason to repudiate those Old World connections. On the other hand, he has written history from a western Canadian point of view. In the 1920s he was a separatist, but after World War Two gravitated toward a pluralistic nationalism that would maintain the distinctiveness of the West but not at the cost of fragmenting the country, which might allow an American cultural invasion. Though he makes light of its title, his book of essays, *The Canadian Identity*, seems to indicate the chief project of his career. A son of the prairie world, he has always been preoccupied with questions of identity, difference, and continuity, so that even his nationalism has not been a species of innocence.

The last of three, Berthrong, has shown the least interest in the connections the plains region makes with the international scene, the United States, Canada, England, Australia, and beyond. But in other ways he has traveled pretty far, perhaps farther than the others. Almost casually, without any cultural agenda or long-term strategy, he discovered a people, the Cheyenne, more different from white Americans and Canadians than they from each other. He has tried to enter their minds and experience and to tell their story from their perspective. None of his graduate teachers pushed him in that direction; in fact, the old frontier and western school of history in which he was trained was almost completely oblivious of the Indian point of view. He explains that he came to study Indians simply because he was looking for rich archival resources--any resources on any theme--and happened to find some on the Cheyenne-Arapaho Agency in Oklahoma. Maybe that was the way it happened, all right, but he found himself trying to write the history of a people whose language he did not speak, whose cultural roots he did not share, but who by and by became his friends--to some degree, his community--and he their voice.

The Great Plains is not a region where one can get away from the rest of the world, as the old Turnerians used to think. They are not a hole in the middle of the North American donut, devoid of contemporary significance. Approached with imagination and curiosity, as they have been by these historians, they are a place where we can learn who we are by learning about all the others who have been here too, and about where they came from, and about what they have done with each other and the land since they got here.

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