

Our Shared Destiny? Saskatchewan in 1905 and 2005

Bill Waiser

Volume 35, numéro 2, spring/printemps 2006

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad35_2for05

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Department of History at the University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0044-5851 (imprimé)

1712-7432 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Waiser, B. (2006). Our Shared Destiny? Saskatchewan in 1905 and 2005. *Acadiensis*, 35(2), 157–162.

Our Shared Destiny? Saskatchewan in 1905 and 2005

THERE COULD HAVE BEEN NO better setting for the landmark agreement. On 22 September 1992, a perfect fall day in Saskatoon, 700 invited guests and dignitaries gathered at the new Wanuskewin Heritage Park just north of the city to witness the most important land deal in provincial history. For several millennia, Native peoples had been coming to this traditional gathering place along the South Saskatchewan River. Their ancestors had now returned to the sacred spot to sign a Treaty Land Entitlement (TLE) agreement between the federal and provincial governments and the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations (FSIN). In his remarks that day, Premier Roy Romanow used the occasion to remind his audience that Saskatchewan had to embrace its Aboriginal people or the province's future would be compromised if not lost. "We have great reason to be proud – great reason to celebrate", he observed. "We're acknowledging our shared destiny".¹

These comments stand in sharp contrast to another provincial celebration at the beginning of the 20th century – the party in Regina for Saskatchewan's entry into Confederation in September 1905. One of the highlights of the ceremonies was the mounted Indians, proudly decorated in traditional dress, riding at the head of the inauguration parade. But their placement that morning had nothing to do with honour or status. Instead, their presence symbolized a dark, pre-modern past that the new province wanted to put behind it if not forget. "There they were", lampooned the *Moose Jaw Times*, "the remnants of a departing race . . . peoples of an inferior civilization . . . a motley crowd . . . the true type of . . . Indian as he is found today".² This conviction that First Nations were not to be part of Saskatchewan's future characterized the public's attitude for the first half of the 20th century. If the province was to fulfill its great destiny, then Indians, like those in the inauguration parade, were expected to ride off into oblivion and never be heard from again.

This very different attitude towards Aboriginal peoples was only one of the many differences between Saskatchewan at the beginning and end of the 20th century. When Frederick Haultain, the first and only premier of the North-West Territories, debated the region's future in December 1901, he attacked the federal plan to "cut this country up into little provinces" and called instead for one large province to be called "Buffalo". Haultain never got his wish. The new province of Saskatchewan was created amidst great confidence about its destiny. Indeed, if galloping population growth and wheat production in the early-20th century were any indication, then Saskatchewan seemed well on its way to greatness. The future would just have to catch up.

And what was this future? Saskatchewan was to become Canada's most powerful and populous province. The political leaders of the day not only believed that the future belonged to the province but, more importantly, that the province could decide and shape that future. The Saskatchewan government consequently embarked on an

1 Regina *Leader-Post*, 23 September 1992, p. 1; Saskatoon *Star-Phoenix*, 23 September 1992, p. 3.

2 *Moose Jaw Times*, 8 September 1905, p. 1.

ambitious province-building programme, determined to put the old territorial days and any lingering sense of colonialism behind it while cultivating a new and separate identity as Canada's powerhouse prairie province.³ Saskatchewan was to be based on one dominant culture (Anglo-Canadian) engaged in one dominant economic activity (the production of wheat for the export market) in one dominant zone of activity (the southern half of the province). By such means, Saskatchewan would fulfill its great destiny. Any deviation from this one culture and this one economic activity was regarded as a threat to the province's future. Saskatchewan had hitched its wagon to these key ideals and was not about to be diverted from its chosen path.

Perhaps the best place to start is with numbers. So many immigrants were pouring into western Canada in the early-20th century that Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier ordered a special census of the three Prairie Provinces in 1906 to serve as a kind of statistical snapshot of the phenomenal growth. The statistics told a remarkable tale of unprecedented growth. In Saskatchewan alone, the 1891 population (41,522) grew 127 per cent by 1901 (91,279) and then another 182 per cent just five years later (257,763). The immigrants effectively swamped the First Nations population. It would be a mistake, however, to see settlement of Saskatchewan during these years as a deliberate attempt to create a multicultural province. The Saskatchewan government fully expected immigrants to accept and embrace the ways and traditions of their new country – to be “Canadianized” according to the popular terminology at the time. And the only way to bring about this transformation was to get them established on the land and interacting with Anglo-Canadian institutions. Settlement and assimilation went hand in hand.

This concern about the cultural makeup of province dominated Saskatchewan political life during the first third of the 20th century. By the 1920s, many residents of British origin had come to regard the persistence of ethnic identities as a blight on the province's future and actively pushed for cultural uniformity. Some had even come to question whether the integration of continental European immigrants into the larger society was desirable, let alone possible, and called for an end to the kind of immigration that had helped make the province the third most populous province (921,000) in Canada. Although Saskatchewan may have had the most ethnically diverse population in Canada at the time, it stubbornly resisted becoming a multicultural society.

Saskatchewan also pinned its destiny on one dominant economic activity (wheat farming) in one dominant region (the southern half of the province). The government's gaze rarely extended to the northern half of the province (the geographically centre is about 100 miles north of Prince Albert). One provincial cabinet minister even called northern Saskatchewan “another country altogether”.⁴ The people of Saskatchewan concentrated their energies on growing wheat for the Canadian export market. The province's leaders believed that this activity – and this activity alone – would be the means to Saskatchewan's greatness and growing power

3 David E. Smith, ed., *Building a Province: A History of Saskatchewan in Documents* (Saskatoon, 1992), pp. 5-6.

4 Cited in David Quiring, “Battling Parish Priests, Bootleggers, and Fur Sharks: CCF Colonialism in northern Saskatchewan”, PhD diss., University of Saskatchewan, 2002, p. 17.

in Confederation. The remarkable statistical evidence seemed to support such a strategy. As the vast network of branch lines and grain elevators spread over the southern Saskatchewan landscape in the early-20th century, the wheat economy took root and flourished. By the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, Saskatchewan was producing half the wheat grown in Canada.

Farmers grew wheat for the simple reason that Saskatchewan's settlement and development had been organized around its production. The homesteads, the railway branch lines, the country elevators – even the harvest excursions – were all part of a grand design to supply wheat to the international export market. The wheat economy would not have been established so quickly and efficiently if not for the active encouragement of the federal and provincial governments and the investment in the region by large, powerful companies. The huge, rural population, together with the steadily growing importance of agriculture, made farmers a dominant force in provincial life.

The dependence on a single crop also influenced urban growth in the southern half of the province. The tens of thousands of prospective farmers who poured into the West after 1900 required the services of villages, towns and cities if they were going to transform their homesteads into viable commercial operations. It was this new rural demand, precipitated by the record number of settlers, which fueled a town-building frenzy the likes of which would never be seen again. What is often misunderstood about this urban growth is that it was entirely dependent on the wheat economy and that Saskatchewan was first and foremost a rural province where three out of every four residents lived in the country.

These, then, were the defining features of the province a century ago – one dominant culture and one dominant crop in one dominant region. Together, they would pave the way to Saskatchewan's future as Canada's powerhouse province. It was an extremely narrow vision, but it was readily embraced by the political leaders of the day. The great expectations for the region led Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier to tour the province in 1910 to see first-hand how Saskatchewan had grown and, more importantly, to soothe farmer anger over federal agricultural policies. A strong Regina-Ottawa connection, meanwhile, quickly developed in the first half of the 20th century. Saskatchewan's first two premiers, Walter Scott and William Martin, served their political apprenticeship on the Liberal back benches in the House of Commons. Ottawa also came calling and recruited two serving Saskatchewan premiers, Charles Dunning and Jimmy Gardiner, for the federal cabinet. By the 1920s it seemed that the political stars were in alignment for the province when Prime Minister MacKenzie King sought a safe seat in Prince Albert. These arrangements ensured that the interests of Saskatchewan were not ignored nor neglected and that the province enjoyed some real political clout. It is not an exaggeration to suggest that the province not only expected to dominate the region but, in time, that it would be the banner province of Canada. Saskatchewan was the region, and this region would lead the nation.

Saskatchewan's chosen path would create problems during the Great Depression and in the following decades. Moreover, the insistence on one dominant culture and one dominant economic activity in one dominant region would compound the difficulties that the province faced in the post-Second World War period.

In 2005, Saskatchewan faces a much different, more difficult future. Unlike a century earlier, though, it is the province that will have to catch up, since the future

will not wait. As one Regina civic official philosophically commented in direct contrast to Haultain's earlier bravado, "There is no clear road map to the future. The path will not be 'found.' It must be 'created'"⁵

This future will be profoundly different from the comfortable image of the province today. In the national consciousness, "Sleepy Saskatchewan" is frozen in time, a land of wheat fields, grid roads and country elevators where nothing important ever happens and anybody with talent or ambition leaves to make their mark elsewhere. Journalist Peter Gzowski, who got his start in Moose Jaw, called it the most Canadian of provinces. The reality is that Saskatchewan is an increasingly urbanized society (two-thirds of the population lives in urban areas) with a diverse economic base and a rich cultural life that is trying to come to terms with both its agricultural past and the Aboriginal population within its borders. Indeed, at the start of this new century, the province is grappling with the twin challenges of meeting the needs of its Aboriginal community and maintaining a decaying rural Saskatchewan thanks to the peculiar provincial situation where there is both a growing, young, urban Aboriginal population and a declining, aging, non-Aboriginal population.

One of the big challenges for the province will be retaining people. No longer the third most populous province after Ontario and Quebec, Saskatchewan has slipped below the 1,000,000 mark since October 2001 and seems unable to reverse the downward trend. Regina and Saskatoon will continue to grow, but they will do so at the expense of rural areas, which seem to lose people like passengers from a sinking ship. Distance, in the meantime, has once again become a factor in rural lives as the low population density and low demand mean that many services are now available only in larger centres.

Despite the relentless population decline over the decades, Saskatchewan remains the most rural of the three Prairie Provinces: 36.7 per cent of the population still resided in rural areas in 1996 compared to only 28.2 and 22.3 per cent for Manitoba and Alberta respectively. Rural Saskatchewan remains an integral part of the provincial identity. Nor is rural society any less complex, any less vibrant than its urban counterpart – it is certainly not static or one-dimensional. What has changed in the new century, however, is that rural residents probably have more in common with their urban counterparts than at any other time in the province's history because of new technology, such as television, the Internet and e-mail as well as a mass consumer culture.

The precipitous decline of rural Saskatchewan is a reflection of the changed provincial economy. Over the past century, geography and climate were two constant concerns as farmers grew and marketed crops to feed the world's population. Today agriculture makes only a marginal contribution to the provincial economy (about 10 per cent of the provincial GDP). Nor does the federal government seem to care about the plight of producers or the place of agriculture in the national economy. Ottawa has severely limited assistance to farmers who are increasingly a powerless minority nationally and internationally. Meanwhile, the close connection between the province

5 Terry Mountjoy, "Municipal Government Perspectives on Aboriginal Self-Government", in John H. Hylton, ed., *Aboriginal Self-Government in Canada: Current Trends and Issues*, 2nd ed. (Saskatoon, 1999), p. 326.

and the governing federal Liberals in the first half of the 20th century has gone sour since the end of the Second World War and worsened under Liberal leader Jean Chrétien, whose neglect of the region seemed intentional.

The decline in the relative importance of agriculture does not mean that the provincial economy is any less vulnerable. Although Saskatchewan's range of trade resources is diverse, including potash, oil and forestry products, and trade is carried on with several countries, the province has no control over international price and demand. The loss of a foreign market, such as the prolonged closure of the American border to Canadian beef because of the bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) or "mad cow" crisis in 2003, can have catastrophic consequences for Saskatchewan producers.

Some maintain that the best hope for the province's economic future continues to be greater diversification through provincial incentives. But no amount of forced growth can overcome the natural disadvantages of Saskatchewan's location and market size. Any new economic development must also involve northern Saskatchewan residents and end decades of marginalization during which time the region was treated as little more than a colony by imperial Regina. Had not Frederick Haultain demanded provincehood for similar reasons more than a century earlier? The integration of the provincial north will necessarily mean new jobs, which must be created throughout Saskatchewan in order to replace those being lost in agriculture. This quest for new employment opportunities means addressing the fact that Saskatchewan has the least-educated population in Canada. Education and training will be needed if the provincial work force is to participate in the new knowledge-based economy.

By far, though, the most critical challenge for Saskatchewan in the new century will be the role and place of the growing Aboriginal population – something that many citizens would rather not think about let alone deal with. As of 2001, Aboriginal people – Indians and Métis – made up almost one in eight of Saskatchewan residents (13.5 per cent). By 2045, just four decades away, they are projected to account for one in three people. Saskatchewan cannot afford to discount its Aboriginal population, particularly given its lowly place in provincial society, or there will be bigger, more serious problems in the future.

Responding to the changes underway in the province, David Smith suggests, "offers a new opportunity for Saskatchewan to lead Canada once more".⁶ These words might seem overly ambitious, if not unrealistic, given the complex challenges facing the province in the new century. But Saskatchewan has never been a province to think small nor one for believing that things were out of reach and that it had to settle for second place. And it is only by examining the province and its real and imagined place within the region and the larger nation that its history over the past 100 years can be understood and appreciated.

Despite all the recent talk about a kind of pan-western Canadian identity, Saskatchewan today sees itself as unique – and it is unique. Perhaps one of the best

6 David E. Smith, "Saskatchewan Perspectives", in Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations, *Saskatchewan and Aboriginal Peoples in the 21st Century: Social, Economic, and Political Changes and Challenges* (Regina, 1997), p. 26.

examples of this is the 2003 provincial election, which marked the first time in Saskatchewan history that neither of Canada's two original parties, the Liberals and Conservatives, held a seat in the Saskatchewan legislature. Politics in the province are now dominated by two distinctly home-grown parties – the New Democratic Party (NDP) and the Saskatchewan Party. The Saskatchewan electorate, meanwhile, has come to identify the province with the principles and programs put in place by the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation and its successor the NDP over the past six decades – another unique aspect of the Saskatchewan regional identity.

Dealing with the new provincial landscape has proven difficult and sometimes frustrating for Saskatchewan's two home-grown political parties in the first years of the new century. The road to the future for Saskatchewan will be bumpy. Solutions will be found – it is just that there will be no easy answers. The solutions, though, will be Saskatchewan ones. The people of the province can be expected to look to themselves and their innovative spirit, as they have repeatedly done in the past – particularly since the Great Depression. Saskatchewan has a history of dealing creatively with challenges, disadvantages and obstacles. That is what has made the province so special – a gritty resolve to focus on local issues while coming up with new strategies and maintaining a clear sense of the wider world. One only has to look at how Premier Romanow could talk about a “shared destiny” at Wanuskewin in 1992. The rest of the country should be watching closely.

BILL WAISER
University of Saskatchewan