Looking Back: Canadian Women’s Prairie Memoirs and Intersections of Culture, History, and Identity by S. Leigh Matthews

Reviewed by Graeme Voyer

Women played a vital role in the settlement of the Canadian prairies during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But conventional narratives of prairie settlement, literary scholar S. Leigh Matthews contends, have underscored the male-dominated sphere of large-scale agricultural pursuits, the production of cash crops.

Matthews’s book aims to redress this imbalance. It illuminates the contributions of women through a study of memoirs of prairie life. These memoirs were written and published by women after 1950 and recount farming on the prairies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Matthews’s elaboration of the themes of these memoirs constitutes the bulk of her analysis.

As Matthews shows, the project of settling the Canadian prairies, which began in earnest in the late nineteenth century, was predicated on dreams of future success. The agricultural economy was driven by hope – hope that the hard work of clearing and cultivating the land would eventually result in material rewards.

But Matthews’s study of prairie memoirs reveals that farmwomen did not share in the future orientation of their husbands. They were far too concerned with the concrete, the daily realities of existence. It was the prairie woman’s attention to the immediate needs of survival that enabled the family farm to operate.

Women promoted the subsistence of their families in many ways: tending gardens, gathering berries, repairing clothing. And their work was not confined to the domestic sphere; they would help their husbands and fathers in the fields when their labour was required. As Matthews observes, “we see that for young girls and women the expectation was that they could work quite fluidly, moving from working as a farmhand under certain conditions, then transitioning to more traditional domestic work in other conditions” (295).

Through a careful reading of women’s prairie memoirs, Matthews has, to use her term, “re-visioned” the history of Western Canada. She has brought much needed attention to the role of women in the settlement of the prairies.

The book has a few flaws, mostly stylistic; for example, the use of “principal” for “principle.” Matthews’s favourite words are “other,” “confront,” “privilege” (as a verb), and, especially, “transgression,” some form of which she uses at least thirty times. Also irksome is her habit of placing the terms civilization and civilized in quotation marks, as if these concepts are merely constructs of white male patriarchy.

But these stylistic flaws should not obscure the cogent aspects of the book’s analysis. Matthews’s interpretation of the corpus of prairie memoirs convincingly demonstrates that “the prairie woman and her Home ultimately became the linchpin of a farm family’s survival” (119). ♦

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