

The Urban Prairie

Dan RING

With essays by: Dan RING,
Guy VANDERHAEGHE and
George MELNYK

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It is more than a truism - it has become a platitude - that Canadian art and identity have, for much of the twentieth century, been defined by landscape. Urban scenes have occupied only a small area in the Canadian visual consciousness. In 1990, Dorothy Farr reminded the readers of her catalogue *Urban Images, Canadian Painting* that there has been no shortage in Canada of exhibitions of landscape art. She then went on to remark, entirely accurately, that "until now, few [exhibitions] have looked at the urban image."¹

This does not, of course, imply that pictures of urban scenes are rare in Canadian art. In fact, some of the canonical works in the history of this country's visual culture describe towns and cities: views by topographers such as James Pattison Cockburn, James Duncan and Richard Short (the city observed); J.E.H. MacDonald's *Tracks and Traffic*, 1912, and harbour scenes by Adrien Hébert (the city as workplace); Robert Gagen's *Temples of Commerce*, 1914 (the city triumphant); Marian Scott's *Stairway*, mid-1930's



(the city as symbol); and even Joseph Légaré's *Incendie du quartier St-Roch...* (the city destroyed).

Yet, with regard to the Prairies, it is difficult to think of more than a very few representations of the urban milieu that can approach these works in terms of familiarity or popularity. In *Urban Images, Canadian Painting* the three Prairie Provinces combined were represented by only four of the fifty-one exhibits: an 1850's view of Fort Garry and St. Boniface (Paul Kane); a 1928 Illingworth Kerr oil of buildings in a small Saskatchewan town; a 1943 scene in Edmonton by Henry G. Glyde; and a rooftop view of Calgary, painted in the 1950's by Roy Kiyooka. Given this situation, the Mendel Art Gallery's *The Urban Prairie*, published to accompany a touring exhibition of representations of towns and cities in the three Prairie Provinces,² is a welcome and intriguing catalogue.

Prior to *The Urban Prairie*, most of the scholarship on representations of Western towns and cities had been in the context of literary studies. It is therefore appropriate that one of the catalogue's three essays is entitled "'Brand Name' vs. 'No-Name': A Half-Century of the Representation of Western Canadian Cities in Fiction." Written by Saskatchewan novelist Guy Vanderhaeghe, it offers a useful introduction to the problematic nature of Canadian prairie towns and cities as subject.

While the creation of fictional small towns as settings for novels seems unsurprising and unremarkable, Vanderhaeghe identifies a tendency for Prairies novelists to do the same even with Western cities. For example Sinclair Ross, in his 1957 novel *As for Me and My House*, has his protagonists move from the fictional Manitoba town of Horizon to a "small city" with a university, two hundred miles south-east of Horizon. As Vanderhaeghe deduces (p.120), the city can only be Winnipeg, yet it remains unnamed throughout the novel. Vanderhaeghe suggests that, in an era when urban identity tended to be defined by Hollywood movies that made reference to only a few very large cities - New York, Chicago, Los Angeles - prairie-based novelists set their works in "no-name" cities because "the place where they lived failed to meet 'world-class' standards and might possibly provoke

snickers as the subject of literature" (p.128).

Whether or not one accepts Vanderhaeghe's theory to explain the shadowy representation of urban life in Prairies literature prior to c.1960 (the year that marks the cut-off point for *The Urban Prairie*), the phenomenon itself is an intriguing one. That the prairie city is as undervalued a subject in the visual arts as in literature is made clear by the fact that *The Urban Prairie* is the first study of its type.

Perhaps so little scholarly work has previously been done on the subject because the prairie landscape has tended to be conceived as the *sine qua non* of Western experience. Stretching off in more or less absolute flatness to the horizon itself, the landscape seemed incomprehensible to early explorer and settler artists: not so much a landscape ("an extensive area of scenery as viewed from a single aspect," according to the dictionary definition), as a desert-like expanse in which the view in any one direction was likely to be identical to the view in any other. In its stripped-down, rigorous geometry, the landscape laid out the parameters that determined the psychological reality of rural life.

More importantly, however, the landscape also imposed its presence on those who lived in the towns and cities strung across its apparent emptiness. The physical attributes of the environment seemed to exist in something of a

cause-and-effect relationship to urban life and art, defining the criteria by which authenticity could be judged. As Paul Hiebert wrote of his fictional Saskatchewan poet Sarah Binks, "This simple country girl has captured in her net of poesy the flatness of that great province."³ In a more serious vein, literary historian Laurence Ricou has suggested that writers in the Canadian West have tended to define their towns and cities as extensions - physically and psychologically - of the emptiness and flatness of the surrounding landscapes.⁴ Thus, although urban settings tend to remove the protagonists from the isolation and meteorological violence of exposed rural areas, on another level they replicate those same qualities of isolation and vulnerability in the face of an empty and meaningless world. Geographer Ronald Rees has also noted the strangeness of the relationship between landscape and town: "The prairie is never just background. Nature dominates even in the cities. Blizzards and dust storms roar in across the unprotected and unprotecting plain; low, thinly spread buildings do little to mask the overarching sky; and broad, straight streets lead the eye outward to the country."⁵

This same sensibility is evident in the very title of the Mendel Art Gallery publication, as "The Urban Prairie" firmly locates the urban scene within the determining context of the landscape. It is therefore no surprise to

find that the impact of the landscape upon perceptions of the urban centre is noted sporadically throughout the catalogue. For example, in his essay "The Urban Prairie 1880 to 1960," exhibition curator Dan Ring reproduces a bird's-eye-view oil painting of Lethbridge (c.1915) that shows the geometrical orderliness of the city surrounded, isolated and threatened by what appears to be an utterly "featureless and empty void" (p.33). He then links this long-distance view to the very different close-up perspective employed in two fold-out sets of engravings (1881, 1892) of every building on Winnipeg's Main Street. Arranged in a serial format and determinedly filling the entire field of vision, the engravings of the buildings take on a protective, talismanic character. Here the open landscape is nowhere to be seen. Still, the images' almost obsessive objectification and valorization of a specifically urban phenomenon function as a psychological reaction against the empty and dangerous Prairie.

The issue of urbanism in relation and response to the landscape is vast and opens up a myriad of possibilities for argument and analysis.⁶ In exploring this and other issues, *The Urban Prairie* is severely hampered by the amount of space available for text. Because the catalogue tackles a subject that has been little explored in other publications, its three essays must do

many jobs at once. Dan Ring presents a history of visual responses to the urban environment, attempting always to situate these within broader social, political, economic and aesthetic contexts. As mentioned, Guy Vanderhaeghe's essay considers the status of the Western city in the literature of the region. George Melnyk, in "The Five City-States of the West," proposes strategies for the understanding of Western identity as expressed through the urban settings which are now home to a substantial majority of the citizens of Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta. Inevitably, full coverage of these diverse topics would require a significantly longer publication than this substantial (160 page) but heavily illustrated catalogue.

However, the important service performed by *The Urban Prairie* goes a long way toward compensating for its occasional sketchiness. So does the variety of artifacts that have been marshaled by Dan Ring to document and illustrate the arguments raised in the catalogue in general, and his essay (the longest of the three) in particular. The exhibition's ambit is wide, encompassing 298 paintings, prints, drawings, sculptures, photographs, promotional materials, postcards, maps, such fanciful whatnots as a Wedgwood plate with a handpainted view of Moose Jaw, and a film of the construction of Saskatoon's Broadway Bridge. By according documentary and promo-

tional materials importance and interest equal to those of the "fine arts," Ring has grounded his work within a set of contexts that go beyond the merely aesthetic. This serves well his attempt to come to terms with the changing expectations and ideals that have been evident in visual representations of the urban Prairies. Such a broad basis is essential because, as Ring first proposes and then demonstrates, "the representation of urbanism in the Canadian West embodies both a mythology of progress and the reality of a collective imagination" (p.11). Mythologies and collective imagination are necessarily abstract concepts, difficult to grasp if presented in isolation from the contexts in which they developed. Their clear and concise elaboration is the greatest strength of Ring's text.

Ring's discussion begins in 1880. By that date the romanticism of earlier artists, born of their inability or unwillingness to come to psychological and artistic terms with the Prairies, had largely been replaced by more thoroughly pragmatic approaches to the prairie setting. In "The Cities of the Rail," the first of the five sections of his essay, he surveys commercial, fine-art and documentary images associated with the building of the CPR across the West. The Railway brought settlers, began the process of dislocating the Native inhabitants, and created new markets for agricultural and

manufactured goods. It was the impetus for the founding of a string of new towns across the southern Prairies, and gave the hitherto "barren" West a new identity as an important source of capital *within the expanding nation*.

Ring's topic in "The Cities of the Rail" is a huge one which he perforce covers in a mere four pages of text. However, the text manages to convey a vital sense of the frenzy of the times, in part because its otherwise regrettable brevity requires Ring to toss off new references and ideas in every second sentence. All of these are vividly documented by visual references: photographs by William McFarlane Notman and others; a bird's-eye-view map of Winnipeg at the time when it became the CPR's western hub; and paintings and prints of burgeoning (sometimes exaggeratedly so) settlements.

The same emphasis upon of a plethora of ideas and references characterizes the next section of Ring's history of the urban prairie, "The Empire of the West," which covers the two decades between c.1900 and c.1920. These were years of sensational growth. Of all the settlements on the Prairies in 1891, only four - Winnipeg, Calgary, Brandon and Portage La Prairie - had populations of more than 1000, but by 1911 forty-nine towns could make this claim.⁷ By 1913 five cities - Winnipeg, Regina, Saskatoon, Calgary and Edmonton - had emerged as important

urban centres. According to Alan Artibise, the percentage of Westerners living in urban settings soared from 19.3% to 28.8% between 1901 and 1911; Paul Voisey gives alternative figures of 25% and 35%, respectively.⁸ Between 1901 and 1916 Saskatoon's population increased from 113 to 21,000, Regina's from 2,200 to 30,200, Calgary's from 4,400 to 56,500, Edmonton's from 5,500 to 53,800, and Winnipeg's from 45,000 to 187,200.⁹ Unfortunately, *The Urban Prairie* is somewhat lacking in statistics and suitably extensive background information of this kind. Ideally, it should be read in conjunction with more detailed economic, social and political histories of the West, such as those by Artibise and Voisey.

Although these spectacular rates of growth were primarily a response to the massive degree of contemporary rural settlement, they were also supported by civic boosterism. Alan Artibise has catalogued some of the forms taken by this uniquely urban phenomenon: "early city incorporations, massive boundary extensions, huge public works programs, deficit financing, special tax policies, railway promotion, immigration encouragement, industry attraction, municipal ownership, and efforts to attain status as both provincial capital and home of the provincial university."¹⁰ Such policies contributed to an urban growth rate on the Prairies that exceeded those

everywhere else in Canada. At the same time, the mechanistic and socially progressive ethos upon which these policies were premised was also manifested in the City Beautiful Movement. This movement was pioneered in Great Britain in reaction to the visual and social devastation that had blighted urban centres in the wake of the Industrial Revolution. It was transplanted to Canada at the beginning of the twentieth century.

The importance of boosterism and the City Beautiful Movement to urban self-definition dominates the c.1900-c.1920 section of *The Urban Prairie*. Virtually excluded from the text are documentary and promotional materials showing anything other than elegant structures, gracefully futuristic town plans (including Thomas H. Mawson's utopian *The {Calgary} Civic Centre As It May Appear Many Years Hence* of 1912), and photographs and maps of cities in which omnipresent industry has apparently brought wealth and happiness to all. In fact, however, boosterism had a dark side: its failure to address growing problems of economic inequity and social injustice. A supposedly shared commitment to urban growth and prosperity could not reconcile the often contradictory interests of different classes and ethnic groups; the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919 occurred despite the ideals of industriousness and civic pride recorded in an anonymous photograph

(c.1918) titled *Statuary Group "Industry" Before Elevation to the Dome of the Manitoba Legislative Building*. The "Empire of the West" section of Ring's essay comments only tangentially on this question.

The early decades of the twentieth century were characterized in the West not only by boosterism, but by something resembling its antithesis: an agrarian populist and idealist reaction against Central Canada and the "big-city" phenomena it symbolized. These phenomena included, most notably, big business, rampant industrialization and urban encroachment. To a significant degree the political, economic and cultural history of the Prairies during the early decades of the century grew out of the agrarian movement. Yet Ring makes as little mention of this as of the underside of boosterism. His concern with elucidating the noteworthy changes that occurred in the design and character of Western cities in the twenty years ending in c.1920 pushes to the fore the city as subject, but it also blurs the essential background against which urban change occurred. As something of a complementary flip-side to the urban utopian vision of boosterism and the City Beautiful Movement, the concept of agrarian idealism needs to emerge as a more visible context in *The Urban Prairie*.

These lacunae notwithstanding, Ring's essay testifies to his ability to tie

together a variety of ideas and issues, even if he has room to supply only limited analysis and background information. "A Sense of Region" and "The War Years," the third and fourth of the five sections of his essay, are distinguished even more by these strengths. "A Sense of Region" documents the imagery associated with the development of a distinctive regional identity, culture and economy after the Great Depression, when (although the catalogue makes no mention of this) the urban percentage of the population in the Prairie Provinces rose by a mere 4.9% (1921-1941) - less than one-third the rate in British Columbia, Ontario and Quebec, and less than half the rate in the Maritimes.¹¹ It was in the 1930's, during years of economic and social collapse, that artists such as Fritz Brandtner and Caven Atkins recorded their vision of the prairie city as a self-contained subject and a site of political and economic activism. Here Ring manages to evoke and sustain the feel of the times, but without becoming at all reductivist in his analyses of visual representations of urban centres. Thus, Dick Bird's 1935 photograph of strikers in Regina is complemented by the stillness and intimacy of Lionel LeMoine FitzGerald's *Doc Snyder's House* (1931), and by Bartley Robilliard Pragnell's bucolic *Outskirts of Lethbridge, Alberta* (1938), the latter showing the interface between town and country. The same breadth of

treatment stamps Ring's study of urban imagery during the Second World War, a time when economic vigour was renewed, but was not sufficient to lift the Prairies out of their position as the least urbanized part of Canada. Discussing urban imagery during the war years, Ring presents a heterogeneous view that includes documentary photographs, promotional billboards, the quasi-biblical allegories of Henry G. Glyde, an "almost social realist" watercolour (p.87) by Walter J. Phillips, and much else.

The final section of Ring's essay, "Modernism and Popular Culture," is a fitting, though rather too brief, conclusion to a text that has traced the constantly shifting lines of contact and mutual influence between the rural landscape, the city, broader economic, social and political phenomena, and the discrete sensibilities and interests of individual artists. By 1960 much Western architecture and interior design showed the influence of the International Style. "Abstraction, with its multiple reflective viewpoints, fractured planes and geometric forms, was especially suited to the modern cityscape" (p.102). Earlier in Ring's essay urban portrayal, typified by the aforementioned aerial view of Lethbridge and the two fold-out brochures of Winnipeg's Main Street, was seen as something of a desperately pragmatic attempt to fend off a hostile and encroaching environment. By the

end of the essay this has given way to the urban subject as a pretext for the exploration of such purely pictorial concerns as abstraction and gesturalism. Ring thus succeeds in giving the reader a developmental overview of the image of the "urban prairie" as extraordinarily complex, unexpectedly rich in associations and possibilities, and capable of assuming a variety of meanings in response to a multitude of circumstances and expectations. In this sense his choice for the catalogue's cover illustration seems entirely appropriate. Henry Glyde's *The Exodus* (1941) envisions Edmonton not only as a modern city, but also as the site for a re-enactment of the biblical Exodus and thus as a focus for the artist's commentary on "the universality of suffering and displacement caused by the war" (p.87). Allegory, symbolism and topographical references combine to create a multi-layered vision of a city of many meanings.

The last of the three catalogue essays, "The Five City-States of the West," is by Calgary historian, author and editor George Melnyk. It combines personal and regional history to insist upon the cultural dominance, the demographic diversity and the thoroughly urban character of the region's five principal cities. The core of Melnyk's argument is that Winnipeg, Regina, Saskatoon, Edmonton and Calgary not only constitute the reality of prairie life for

most of the inhabitants of Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta, but that these cities are also central to any meaningful definition of Prairies culture. Unfortunately, however, he compromises his argument by likening the five cities to the city states of Periclean Greece and of Renaissance Italy. These unfortunately hyperbolic comparisons obscure more than they illuminate. They ignore historical and geographical specificity in the interest of shoring up an position that had no need for such improbable means of support.

As a catalogue, *The Urban Prairie* is attractively designed, and includes 60 excellent colour reproductions. Most important, however, it requires the reader to rethink his or her own preconceptions of the character of Western Canada - a region where over half of the 4.6 million inhabitants live in the five largest cities, and where an additional 400,000 live in communities that are smaller but essentially urban. As George Melnyk very accurately points out, "In the search for what is truly western, the prairie city has been systematically ignored and set aside" (p.150). *The Urban Prairie* is an important tool for correcting this longstanding and widespread oversight.

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Notes

1 Dorothy FARR, *Urban Images, Canadian Painting* (Kingston: Agnes Etherington Art Centre, 1990), p.xx. Probably the most substantial of these exhibitions was *Industrial Images*, organized by Rosemary Donegan in 1987 for the Art Gallery of Hamilton. Donegan's catalogue includes a brief chapter on representations of industry in the Prairie Provinces.

2 After its showing in Saskatoon (29 Oct. 1993 - 2 Jan. 1994) the exhibition will travel to the Winnipeg Art Gallery, the Dunlop Art Gallery, the Edmonton Art Gallery and the Glenbow Museum.

3 Paul HIEBERT, quoted in Eli MANDEL, "Images of Prairie Man," *A Region of the Mind: Interpreting the Western Canadian Plains*, Richard Allen, ed. (Regina: Canadian Plains Study Centre, University of Saskatchewan, 1957), 201.

4 Laurence RICO, *Vertical Man/Horizontal World: Man and Landscape in Canadian Prairie Fiction* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1973), 129-30. See also Edward A. McCOURT, *The Canadian West in Fiction* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1949); and Henry KREISEL, "The Prairie: A State of Mind," *Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada*, 4th series, vol. 6 (June 1968): 171-80.

5 Ronald REES, *Land of Earth and Sky: Landscape Painting of Western Canada* (Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1984), 53.

6 For example, see R. Douglas FRANCIS, "Changing Images of the West," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 17, no. 3 (Fall 1982): 11-16.

7 FARR, *Urban Images, Canadian Painting*, 9.

8 Alan F.J. ARTIBISE, "Patterns of Prairie Urban Development, 1871-1950," *Eastern and Western Perspectives: Papers from the Joint Atlantic Canada/Western Canadian Studies Conference*, David Jay Bercuson and Phillip A. Buckner, eds. (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1981), 118-20. Paul VOISEY, "The Urbanization of the

Canadian Prairies, 1871-1916," *The Prairie West: Historical Readings*, R. Douglas Francis and Howard Palmer, eds. (Edmonton: Pica Pica Press, 1985), 389.

9 VOISEY, 389.

10 ARTIBISE, 118-20.

11 ARTIBISE, 124.