Carl J. Tracie, *Shaping a World Already Made: Landscape and Poetry of the Canadian Prairies*

Alison Calder

Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ces/4803>
DOI: 10.4000/ces.4803
ISSN: 2534-6695

Publisher

SEPC (Société d'études des pays du Commonwealth)

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 September 2016
Number of pages: 129-130
ISSN: 2270-0633

Electronic reference

Alison Calder, "Carl J. Tracie, *Shaping a World Already Made: Landscape and Poetry of the Canadian Prairies*", *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* [Online], 39.1 | 2016, Online since 05 April 2021, connection on 19 June 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ces/4803> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ces.4803>

This text was automatically generated on 19 June 2021.

Commonwealth Essays and Studies is licensed under a Licence Creative Commons Attribution - Pas d'Utilisation Commerciale - Pas de Modification 4.0 International.

Carl J. Tracie, *Shaping a World Already Made: Landscape and Poetry of the Canadian Prairies*

Alison Calder

REFERENCES

Carl J. Tracie. *Shaping a World Already Made: Landscape and Poetry of the Canadian Prairies*. Regina: University of Regina Press, 2016. 220 p. ISBN (pb): 9780889773936. CA\$ 27.95

- 1 It is a daunting task to write a study in a field that is not your own. In *Shaping a World Already Made*, Carl J. Tracie turns a geographer's eye towards the poetry of the Canadian prairies. As he writes, his goal is "to recognize the importance of not only the scientific, the factual, the 'real' of prairie landscape, but also the imaginative and emotional, so that together they might express the full range of observations and reactions to this spare land" (124). To this end, he examines a number of largely canonical writers from a variety of perspectives. Noteworthy here is his inclusion of writings by Indigenous poets and his recognition that their position is fundamentally different from that of settlers. He rephrases Robert Kroetsch's famous question thusly: "For Aboriginal peoples, the question is not *how do you grow a poet* in a new land, but *how do you grow a poet* in an occupied homeland?" (15). Tracie's study moves from a focus on depictions of basic geographic elements of the prairie, to a consideration of the differences that race and gender might make in representations of the prairie, to a discussion of the spiritual and intangible aspects of prairie poets' work. While his survey focuses primarily on literary poetry, he includes a chapter on popular poetry, speculating about which category could be more influential. He concludes with an argument for the value of poetry to geographers, positing that it provides a vocabulary to express complicated emotional ties to place that cannot be accommodated in scientific language alone.

- 2 Tracie includes a lot of gorgeous poetry in this book, and it would be a useful starting place for a general reader who is looking for an introduction to prairie writing. Each chapter provides a sampler of writing on a particular theme. His second chapter, "Poets of the Prairie," is representative, including discussions of nine poets in quick succession. Some of these discussions, such as the one of Dennis Cooley, consist mostly of serial quotations and it can be difficult to tell where one poem stops and another begins. Tracie's discussion is primarily thematic, cataloguing references to light, space, and so on, with little reference to form. As he notes, the picture that emerges among canonical prairie poets is marked by nostalgia, with remembered landscapes overtaking actual ones. His observation that this nostalgia is not found in writings by Indigenous authors suggests a fundamentally different relationship to place that would be intriguing to explore further.
- 3 *Shaping a World Already Made* would be a completely different book if it included non-canonical authors under the age of 50. Because Tracie excludes cities from the prairie landscape on the grounds that they occupy only a small area of the region, he also excludes almost all of the contemporary poetry being produced here. This selectivity points to a significant problem that still exists in regional studies: a reluctance to include urban landscapes and an insistence on locating regional "truth" in rural landscapes that most people in the region no longer experience directly. To decide which writers to track, Tracie falls back on the idea that the writing he considers "should show signs that it came out of the prairies," (10) but such a model predetermines what the scholar will find. If you accept as "prairie" only poetry that includes rural landscapes, then you will find that rural landscapes are represented in prairie poetry. Tracie's statement that "largely negative attitudes towards the city persist in prairie poetry" (122) may be true, but only for the small sample of senior canonical authors that he relies on for data.
- 4 Ultimately, *Shaping a World Already Made* is more an appreciation of prairie poetry than an in-depth study of it. While this book shows a love for both land and language, it falls short in terms of analysis. Critical context seems curiously dated; at one point, as an example of "recent critical work in ecopoetics," Tracie cites Diana Relke's *Greenwor(l)ds*, which was published in 1999. A number of his critical assumptions come across as naïve. After a brief discussion of ecofeminism, for example, Tracie remarks that one might think that "female poets would be more likely to react negatively to domination of the land," (100) while the male poets that he examines would "celebrate[] domination over the land and its peoples" (110). This is not how systems of thought work; ideology is not biological. And although Tracie provides an admirable amount of writing by Indigenous authors, he seems unwilling to critique the problematic language or positioning of his canonical authors. For example, he quotes Lilburn's statement that paying poetic attention to the landscape will "set up a small / homestead of thinking in you," (52) but lets the colonial imagery in this metaphor pass unnoticed. More attention to these ingrained ways of thinking about and imagining the Canadian prairie would aid Tracie's project of considering both Indigenous and non-Indigenous voices together. In fact, a number of the Indigenous writers that Tracie discusses explicitly criticize the settler/colonial landscape and history that are celebrated by the more canonical writers he includes. While Tracie concludes that "Aboriginal poetry can give us new ways to envision the prairie landscape," (98) he does not deal with the fact that

this “new” way is fundamentally incompatible with, and deliberately challenges, the “old” way that his study ultimately reaffirms.

AUTHORS

ALISON CALDER

Alison CALDER teaches Canadian literature and creative writing in the Department of English, Film, and Theatre at the University of Manitoba. She has published widely on prairie literature and culture, including two critical editions of works by Frederick Philip Grove. Her third poetry collection, *Connectomics*, is forthcoming from IRON Press (UK) in 2017.