

**To Endure and Become Humble:  
Myth and Reality of the Climate of the Prairies**

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## Abstract

Historians and geographers have focused on the study of the images of the West. Their studies have demonstrated that the images of the West were as important as reality itself in understanding the history of western Canada and the western Canadian identity. Both the region's history and identity have been influenced by the images of the West. Another way to look at the history and identity of the West is through climate. This thesis examines the images of the climate of western Canada in order to obtain new insight into western Canadian history and western Canadian identity. This new attempt is considered from three perspectives. First, the way in which Canadian expansionists advertised the West is described. In the latter half of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth century, Canada needed to dispel negative images of the western climate in order to attract millions of homesteaders. The climate portrayed in immigration pamphlets was all positive. Secondly, the actual experience of pioneer homesteaders is investigated by examining pioneer questionnaires, recorded interviews, and diaries. Settlers encountered the harsh reality of the climate. The real perception of the climate was very different from the idealized climate. Finally, literature and arts of the 1920s and 1930s demonstrate how the climate of western Canada was viewed at that time. The expansionists' views were still influential even after the settlement boom. The actual perception was minimized by the ideal climate myth.

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## Introduction

The study of the images of the Canadian West is indispensable to a comprehensive understanding the history of western Canada. Historian Douglas Francis, a specialist on the topic, says “the history of the West has often been governed as much by what people imagined the region to be as the ‘reality’ itself.”<sup>1</sup> The image of the West has changed over time and been shaped by the aims and power of artists, such as writers and painters, and by the interest of people such as politicians, journalists, and promoters whose positions were strongly influential. Social condition and physical landscape have also helped create the western image. Whether positive or negative, the image and perception of the West are part of western Canadian history.

But how did the image of the West shape or influence the identity of western Canadians? The late prairie historian W. L. Morton, for example, analyzed the image of the West in terms of its relationship to central Canada rather than the topography. He found a subordinate consciousness permeating the western Canadian identity, something that also runs through western Canadian history.<sup>2</sup> Douglas Francis also acknowledged that the subservient position and consciousness would be “more persuasive in influencing the history of western Canada than the environment.”<sup>3</sup> Nor did the inferior image of the western provinces to the centre change much after the Second World War even though the region underwent remarkable economic growth, particularly in the last decade.

The study of the image of the West by Morton did not necessarily reflect an exact understanding of the western Canadian consciousness. In the 1920s, some writers tried to find the image which could best capture the westerners’ identity by looking at landscape to construct

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<sup>1</sup> D. R. Francis, “Changing Images of the West,” in David Taras and Beverly Rasporich, ed., A Passion for Identity, (Toronto: ITP Nelson, 1997), 419.

<sup>2</sup> W.L. Morton, “Clio in Canada: The Interpretation of Canadian History,1” in C. Berger, ed., Approaches to Canadian History, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967), 47-48.

<sup>3</sup> D.R. Francis, Images of the West: Changing Perceptions of the Prairies, 1690-1960. (Saskatchewan: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1989), 195.

a regional consciousness. But as Author Eli Mandel has argued “the image within the mind was only the projection of the beholders’ perception.”<sup>4</sup> The painting of the prairies, the words of songs and poems, and the images in literature did not necessarily reflect the region but rather helped to create it. His argument has encouraged prairie artists, writers, and historians to take an “inward” journey to investigate their own image of west--“as westerners’ children of the region”-and discover for themselves and establish a more realistic image of the West.<sup>5</sup>

This cultural approach to deciphering and interpreting the image of the West in relation to the western Canadian identity is just as important as Morton’s historical work. At the same time, there are still other ways to look at the image of the region to gain some understanding of the identity of the region. This thesis will examine the connection between westerners’ perception of climate and whether climate has been a major contributor to the western Canadian identity, especially during the settlement period.

When Canada looked to the North-West in the 1850s and began to consider ways to acquire the western territory and make it part of Canada, it expected the region to become the home of hundreds of thousands of farmers. One way to promote immigration was to talk about the climate. The general assumptions about the western climate were negative and included images such as harshness, frost, snow, and cold. These images reflected the perception of the fur traders of western Canada, and were embraced in the early nineteenth century by Englishmen and eastern Canadians. When Upper Canadian expansionists drafted pamphlets to encourage immigration in the mid-nineteenth century, they tried to transform these negative images into positive ones by using such terms as invigorating, bracing, pleasant, and healthy to describe the climate. In fact, it was often suggested that sickly people moved to the Canadian West to

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<sup>4</sup> Francis, “Changing Images of the West”, 433.

<sup>5</sup> Francis, Images of the West, 194.

improve their health and spirit. It was also advertised that the middle-aged man felt as if he had restored his youthfulness by ten or fifteen years. Climate was something that Canada had to surmount in settling the West, but expansionists as myth makers turned it to Canada's advantage.

Several historians have studied the image of the western climate but mostly from the perspective of settlement, not identity. Historian Doug Owsram's *Promise of Eden* shows the importance of changing images of the western climate for Canada in acquiring Rupert's Land from the Hudson's Bay Company. He examines the connection between the expansionist movement and the image of the West between 1856 and 1900: how expansionists changed the image of the West for Canadian benefit. The changed image of the West was necessary to promote acquisition of the territory. Owsram's study of the image of climate, however, is limited to the expansionist movement. G.S. Dunbar, in his article, "Isotherms and Politics: Perception of the Northwest in the Northwest in the 1850s," examines the relationship between the observation of the climate in the West and the potential for agricultural cultivation in the 1850s. In spite of the scanty meteorological data for the North-West, American climatologist Lorin Blodget used isothermal lines to infer that there was enough warmth and rainfall in the western interior.<sup>6</sup> His map and reports were useful for expansionists to call for the transfer of Rupert's Land to Canada. His study shows the connection between the scientific understanding of the western climate and the image of the climate and that the idea of climate by expansionists was one based on what they wanted to see.

Geographer John Warkentin, in his article, "Steppe, Desert and Empire," examines what terms have been used to describe the West in the nineteenth century. He argues that the same term used to depict the West had different meanings to people. The difference is because of the

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<sup>6</sup> G.S. Dunbar, "Isotherms and Politics: Perception of the Northwest in the 1850s," in *Western Canadian Studies Conferences*, ed., Prairie Perspective 2, (Toronto: Holt, Rinehart and Winston of Canada, 1973), 80-101.



different interest people hold for the land. When the Hudson's Bay Company men observed the southern interior where Indians hunted buffalo, they described the region as 'barren land.' Even though the territory was rich in buffalo, 'barren land' for fur traders was a landscape term for grass land. 'Barren land' in the mind of expansionists, however, meant limited cultivation potential.<sup>7</sup> There was no standard image of the geography to everybody.

Douglas Francis, in his book, *Images of the West*, deals briefly with the "ideal climate." He tracks the history of the image of the West from the nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century and looks mainly at literature, poems, songs, and paintings each time to capture the changing image of the West. But as in the case of O'ram's work, it has not been treated comprehensively. It seems that the investigation of the "ideal climate" idea has been limited to immigration pamphlets. However, this examination is not comprehensive enough to see the consistency of the "ideal climate" idea through the settlement era. As to the settlers' perception of the climate, there is not much analysis. No one has studied in any detail the connection between climate and identity in the history of western Canada. Nor is there any comparable study in the United States. This is a new attempt and challenge. In seeking a connection between the image of the West and its relation to westerners' identity, historians and other scholars have not paid much attention to the westerners' consciousness of the western climate.

There are other important reasons for choosing 'climate.' The climate of western Canada is unique. Climatologist Elaine Wheaton points out that "the prairies are one of the most sensitive and vulnerable weather regions on Earth.... We cannot ignore the weather. It entertains

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<sup>7</sup> J. Warkentin, "Steppe, Desert and Empire," in *Western Canadian Studies Conference*, ed., *Prairie Perspectives 2*, (Toronto: Holt, Rinehart and Winston of Canada, 1973), 102-36.

us. It humbles us. It can destroy our life's work, or make us rich.”<sup>8</sup> In addition, the West has changed over time because of the changing physical environment. By contrast, climate is mostly constant and has changed little through the history of western Canada since the mid-nineteenth century. It has not changed significantly and will not change as dramatically and rapidly as social conditions. Climate is also a common feature of daily life for everybody. The uniqueness of climate of western Canada was addressed when I came to University of Saskatchewan. In the orientation for international students in September 2007, representatives from the International Student Office talked about the climate in Saskatoon: how to survive in the winter climate. They showed how the inexperienced students should dress warmly. That demonstration has raised the questions: whether westerners are proud of the climate and whether there is the connection between climate and identity. The question has turned to the challenge. The image and perception of climate is one way to look at western Canadian history and to examine the relationship between the pioneers' identity and the image of West.

In trying to understand the connection between climate and identity, it is important to understand the “ideal climate” promoted by expansionists. Other scholars have done this for the land and how the prairies were seen as a kind of agricultural Eden, but the ideal climate has not been examined in great detail. From the mid-nineteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth century, many pamphlets were published to generate immigration and settlement. The wonderful climate in the pamphlets and promotional literature had given future pioneers a preconception of the climate they could expect when they came to western Canada. An examination of these ideal images of climate will form the first chapter of the thesis. At that time, government pamphlets, Canadian Pacific Railway pamphlets, newspapers, and the writings of explorers, visitors and

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<sup>8</sup> Elaine Wheaton, But It's a Dry Cold!: Weathering the Canadian Prairies, (Calgary: Fifth House Ltd, 1998), 1.

other people promoted the advantageous features of the climate of the North-West Territories. Among dozens of promotional literatures, the immigration pamphlets produced by the departments of Agriculture and Interior, and the Canadian Pacific Railway were abundant between the 1870s and the 1910s. Next to the government pamphlets, the literatures by expansionists who explored the North-West Territories are very useful and available resources for the first chapter. They include: Thomas Spence's *The Saskatchewan Country* and *The Prairie Lands of Canada*, George M. Grant's *Ocean to Ocean* and *Picturesque Canada*, and George Bryce's *Our New Province: Manitoba*. A sampling of promotional literature for the period between the 1850s and the 1910s will be examined.

The responses to the ideal climate and the actual perception of climate by pioneers will be examined in Chapter Two. The pioneers' perception of the West is a fundamental and key topic that has to be studied more comprehensively to pursue the origin of westerner's identity. In order to discover and understand the consciousness of western people who are products of time and place, it is the pioneers' minds who have an influence most on coming generations and shape the traditional framework of the images and perceptions of the West for westerners' consciousness. Expansionists propagated the West by making wonderful images of the North-West Territories to attract people from Ontario and European countries.<sup>9</sup> But the research on the images of the West during the pioneer era has been mainly limited to what images expansionists made up to propagate the North-West Territories and the paintings, poems, songs, and literature at that time. Such studies, however, do not reach the real perception of the West by pioneers, to say nothing of their consciousness. They are not pioneers' but the painters', poets' and writers'

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<sup>9</sup> See Doug Owsram, Promise of Eden: The Canadian Expansionist Movement and the Idea of the West 1856-1900. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980).

image of the West and their consciousness. Therefore, these studies never lead to the pioneers' identity.

The key materials for this chapter are the pioneer questionnaires and other sources such as published memoirs and diaries in the Saskatchewan Archives Board. The pioneer questionnaires cover many aspects of the pioneer experience in western Canada at the beginning of the twentieth century. In settling the West, people had gone through several difficulties before they could enjoy their new life in Canada. The Saskatchewan Archives Board in the 1950s sent the questionnaires to residents who settled in the prairies between 1878 and 1914 to record their actual experience.<sup>10</sup> The questionnaires have ten series, including farming, house, diet, health, schooling, religion, government, and so forth. The new settlers mention the climate in their answers. The answers on the questionnaires will make possible a comparison between the pioneers' reaction to the climate and the promoted climate. What was the actual sense of climate? These sources for this chapter are impressionistic and reflect only what some pioneers thought about the climate.

To investigate the connection between the climate as part of the image of West and the early settlers' identity, literature and art are the main sources to be considered. This third and final chapter will attempt to understand how the pioneers' statements about climate on the questionnaires led to the contemporary literature and art which suggested that westerners took pride in their distinctive climate and perceived it as positive attribute of the region and their identity. The literatures to be studied come from the first quarter of the twentieth century. H. Jeffs' *Homes and Careers in Canada* (1914), Frederick P. Grove's *Settlers of the Marsh* (1925), and Ronald Stead's *Grain* (1926), are some of the main and representative sources in the final

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<sup>10</sup> Harper, Majority, "Probing the Pioneer Questionnaires: British Settlement in Saskatchewan, 1887-1914," *Saskatchewan History*, v. 52, no.2, (Fall 2000), 28.

argument of the thesis. The congruence between the statements on the pioneer questionnaire and contemporary literatures concerning the climate will measure how deeply and closely the climate shaped the pioneers' consciousness.

This research will provide some insights into the role and place of climate in the western Canadian identity. Furthermore, the examination will result in finding the most basic, unitary, and shared symbol for part of Westerners' identity. It will contribute not only to the future development of the study of the image of the West, but also to intellectual history.

## **Chapter One** **Ideal Climate**

“Climate depends on so many elements that it is not surprising it should have been most keenly debated.”<sup>1</sup> When Canadians began to call for the acquisition of the North-West for large-scale agricultural colonization, they emphasized the agricultural potential of the land and the climate. But in looking at the expansionists’ campaign, historians have tended to focus largely on the promotion of the land of the North-West. The assessment of agricultural potential of the North-West was done initially by the Palliser and Hind expeditions in the 1850s. “Being unfamiliar with peculiar prairie environment,” they concluded that the parkland region (“fertile belt”) was suitable for cultivation, but the treeless grassland region (“the desert”) was a “sign of aridity.”<sup>2</sup> The image of the fertile belt and the desert, however, was dismissed completely in 1870 without any other detailed assessment of the region<sup>3</sup>: The land was assumed to be all good. The North-West was consequently seen as a garden of Eden. At the same time, the climate was also an important part of the expansionists’ campaign.

Climate was seen as key to successful cultivation. The incidence of summer frosts, the amount of rainfall, and the length of the growing period had been questions calling into doubt the colonization in the North-West.<sup>4</sup> The climate was consequently presented in the most positive terms possible. In fact, the positive or favourable climate was applied not only to agriculture but also to health and civilization. This positive and ideal climate was expressed in nationalist, imperialist, and romantic views throughout much of the nineteenth century and into the early

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<sup>1</sup> George Bryce, “Our New Provinces: Manitoba,” *Canadian Monthly and National Review*, 3, (May 1873), 372.

<sup>2</sup> William A. Waiser, *The Field Naturalist: John Macoun, the Geological Survey, and Natural Science*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989), 18.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 16-17.

twentieth century. It was expressed by politicians, scientists, and professionals, and anyone with an interest in the North-West and its future. This chapter will examine how that ideal climate of the North-West was portrayed through the latter half of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth century.

It was an urgent necessity in the 1850s that Canada acquires Rupert's Land from the Hudson's Bay Company. That was because of the growth that Canada experienced in the 1840s and 1850s. Canadians found themselves hemmed in by the Canadian Shield and running out of agricultural land. Toronto also needed a new hinterland and market to continue its commercial expansion.<sup>5</sup> The North-West Territories were seen as a new world to conquer.<sup>6</sup> This sense of economic progression heightened Canada's need to look to the North-West and the huge unexploited land under the Hudson's Bay Company.<sup>7</sup> In other words, the North-West presented Canada with the possibility of a brighter and more prosperous future. Otherwise, the region faced certain stagnation if it could not expand.

At that time, however, the North-West was not considered an agricultural country. Nor was the climate given much attention at all.<sup>8</sup> In persuading the British government to consider the Canadian claim to Rupert's Land, expansionists advocated that the region would bring wealth not only to Canada but also to Great Britain. They also believed that the best features of British civilization would take root in the North-West Territories.<sup>9</sup> These assertions promoted a reconsideration of the quality of land in the North-West Territories. In this way, then,

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<sup>5</sup> Doug Owsram, Promise of Eden: The Canadian Expansionist Movement and the Idea of the West 1856-1900. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980), 47-49.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 56.

expansionists started promoting the potential of the North-West Territories as an agricultural hinterland.<sup>10</sup>

Although the re-evaluation of the North-West in terms of an agricultural frontier had been started, it was based on scanty and spotty data. The records of cultivation, that depended on such factors as soil condition, drought, frost, and rainfall, were inconsistent and varied from region to region.<sup>11</sup> But despite this uncertainty, expansionists played up the region's potential and what Canada could expect by settling the land.

This new emphasis on the great potential of the land also meant that the climate was reconsidered.<sup>12</sup> Climate went hand-in-hand with settlement and consequently any negative features were ignored in favour of the ideal climate. Before Canadian interest in the settlement potential of the region, the climate of the North-West was seen as subarctic, especially given the reports of fur traders, missionaries, and explorers. But from the middle of the 1850s, any negative views, such as severe cold and heavy snow, were downplayed.

The most influential work that contributed to the expansionist campaign to recast the climate of the North-West was by American climatologist and statistician Lorin Blodgett. He challenged the general idea of the climate of Canada and the North-West by drawing lines across the map of the North America, known as isothermal lines. Canadians had been thinking of the climate of the Hudson's Bay Company's territory based on latitude: the higher the latitude, the lower the temperature. Blodgett, however, made a different observation using the concept of isotherms that Alexander Humboldt, German naturalist and explorer, had developed.<sup>13</sup> What Blodgett discovered was that in summer, the temperature at several North-West locations was

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>11</sup> Waiser, Field Naturalist, 17.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>13</sup> G.S. Dunbar, "Isotherms and Politics: Perception of the Northwest in the 1850's," Western Canadian Studies Conferences, ed., Prairie Perspective 2. (Toronto: Holt, Rinehart and Winston of Canada, 1973), 84-85.



quite high.<sup>14</sup> He concluded that the North-West had enough heat and precipitation to grow crops and thereby confirmed the possibility of settlement there. Ironically, this conclusion was based on only six sets of meteorological data from British North America, all of them from Canada and Nova Scotia, and none from the North-West. Blodgett simply generalized the climate of the North-West.<sup>15</sup> But his isothermal lines were accepted as a verified scientific finding among expansionists and were used in their campaign to project an ideal climate.

Besides the expansionists' efforts in the 1850s and 60s, romantic views of the West also contributed to help cultivate a positive image of the climate. For example, the Earl of Southesk, Scottish aristocrat, left for the North-West in 1859. He expected to hunt large animals and improve his health there. But he found the winter climate of the North-West to be extremely cold. Although he had to endure the severity of the winter, he learned the importance of adjusting to the winter: the art of endurance.<sup>16</sup> Other visitors to the region had similar experiences.<sup>17</sup> They discovered the beauty of untapped nature and regarded climate as something to embellish the landscape. For example, William Butler, a British major and intelligence officer, headed for the North-West Territories in 1870 to report on the condition of the Aboriginal peoples for the Canadian government.<sup>18</sup> He published *The Great Lone Land* in 1872 and *The Wild North Land* in 1873, and observed the beauty of the winter landscape:

In summer, a land of sound, a land echoing with the voices of birds, the ripple of running water, the mournful music of the waving pinebranch; In winter, a land of silence, a land hushed to its inmost depths by the weight of ice, the thick-falling snow, the intense rigour of a merciless cold-its great rivers glimmering in the moonlight, wrapped

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<sup>14</sup> Dunbar, "Isotherms and Politics," 89.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>16</sup> D.R. Francis, *Images of the West: Changing Perceptions of the Prairies, 1690-1960*, (Saskatchewan: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1989), 41; Earl of Southesk, *Saskatchewan and the Rocky Mountains : a diary and narrative of travel, sport, and adventure, during a journey through the Hudson's Bay Company's territories, in 1859 and 1860*, (Toronto : J. Campbell, 1875)

<sup>17</sup> Francis, *Images of the West*, 40.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 37-38.

in their shrouds of ice; its still forests rising weird and spectral against the Aurora-lighted horizon; its notes of bird or brook hushed as if in death; its nights so still that the moving streamers across the northern skies seem to carry to the ear a sense of sound, so motionless around, above, below, lies all other visible nature...If then we call this region the land of stillness, that name will convey more justly than any other the impress most strongly stamped upon the winter's scene.<sup>19</sup>

The climate of the North-West had specific positive features each season, which enhanced the scenery and supposedly improved the well-being of people from industrial societies. Even the severe winter was embraced as something positive. The North-West fascinated people – not only because of the ‘untamed’ land, but because of the climate. They imagined the North-West as a kind of garden of Eden. Its climate was also captured within this framework. The romantic views of the climate could be seen through the latter half of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. Thomas Spence, Clerk of the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba, observed; “winter, with its short days of clear bright sky and bracing air, and its long nights of cloudless beauty, complete the circle of season.”<sup>20</sup> Another author said, “there is a certain charm in the bright, crisp and frosty air of winter, with its sparkling sunshine, that makes it altogether one of the most pleasant seasons of the year. The scenery of winter, though to some extent monotonous, is nevertheless charming and novel.”<sup>21</sup> The beauty of the winter included the morning: “The winter is wonderfully attractive- cold, clear, dry, bracing, healthy, and the beauty of the snowy prairies [with] the morning sun’s rays.”<sup>22</sup> This

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<sup>19</sup> William F. Butler, The Wild North Land: being the story of a winter journey, with dogs, across northern North America, (London: S. Low, Marston, Low, & Searle, 1873), 4-5.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Spence, The Prairie Lands of Canada: Presented to the world as a New and inviting field of enterprise for the capitalist and New Superior Attractions and Adventures as a Home for Immigrants, (Montreal: Gazette, 1880), 21.

<sup>21</sup> F. Arnold Wightman, Our Canadian Heritage: its resources and possibilities, (Toronto: Briggs, 1905), 36.

<sup>22</sup> Nicholas Flood Davin, Homes for Millions: the resources of the great Canadian North-West: the reasons why agriculture is profitable there and why farmers are prosperous and independent, (Ottawa: Government Printing Bureau, 1892), 22.

romantic image of the North-West also contributed to the amazing transformation of the image of the climate.

Positive aspects of the atmosphere of the West replaced the previous negative images of the climate. Among the positive features of the climate of the North-West, the most common attribute was the dry atmosphere of the cold winters. Every single pamphlet on the region recognized that it was cold in winter in the North-West. It was believed, however, that the dryness of the winter alleviated the coldness and that people did not feel the cold as much as the thermometer indicated. “The thermometer, during winter, sometimes ranged from 30 to 40 degree below zero, but the atmosphere is bright, dry and exhilarating,...old countrymen do not find the cold at all severe, and are agreeably surprised at the absence of hardships which would be caused by the same degree of cold in a more humid climate.”<sup>23</sup> One guidebook by Department of the Interior reported in 1897 that “the humidity or the dryness of the atmosphere in such circumstances decides its degree of comfort or discomfort, and largely its healthfulness or unhealthfulness.”<sup>24</sup> Author George Bryce, who read a paper on Red River history before the Historical and Scientific Society of Manitoba in 1873, tried to capture the relationship between the resistance of a human body against the cold and the degree of humidity:

The damp surface of the body is a better conductor, and so produces a greater evaporation and greater sense of cold, as may be seen by the increased sense of cold if we encounter the frosty air with damp hands or face; so that in the less humid climate of Manitoba the cold will not be felt so much as the same degree would be in a damper climate, like that of Ontario. Again, the fact that the air is very exhilarating both in summer and winter, is noticed by all; thus the vital functions are quickened and the animal heat increased in the body to resist cold...the lighter air stimulates the functions, respiration is quickened, the blood circulates more rapidly, and so the animal heat is greater; the power of resisting cold being increased, the rigour of winter is not

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<sup>23</sup> Acton Burrows, North Western Canada: its climate, soil and production, (Winnipeg: s.n., 1880), 11.

<sup>24</sup> Department of the Interior, An official Handbook of Information Relating to the Dominion of Canada, (Ottawa: Government Printing Bureau, 1897), 3.

felt to the same extent.<sup>25</sup>

Besides the dryness of the air of the North-West, it was argued that other characteristics of the atmosphere alleviated the winter coldness. “Although the mercury ranges from 15 to 35 degrees below zero, falling sometimes even below that, the severity of these days was much softened by the brilliancy of the sun, and the stillness of the air.”<sup>26</sup> The atmosphere of the West was very bright, and almost every day the sun shone with little wind.<sup>27</sup> The winter atmosphere was not only cold, but also clear, dry, bracing, and exhilarating. The cloudless skies and the stillness of the air also eased the cold.<sup>28</sup> The brightness and amount of sunlight were other features to encourage adaptation to the winter severity. “If Canada had earned the title of ‘Our Lady of the Snows’, she certainly equally deserved the title of ‘Our Lady of the Sunshine’; nowhere was sunshine so bright and abundant.”<sup>29</sup> The transition of the negative winter climate started with the wonderful atmospheres. The ideal air was favourable and enjoyable to everybody settling in the North-West; the western Canadian winter, “instead of forcing people to hibernate like bears and snakes, was the season of all others in which the settlers, both old and young, of both sexes, and of all classes, most enjoy themselves.”<sup>30</sup>

Nor was the climate of the North-West an inconvenience in a farmer’s life. George M. Grant argued in 1882 that the settlement of western Canada was assured: “During the greater part of the winter the air is remarkably still. The thermometer may sink to 50 degrees

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<sup>25</sup> George Bryce, “Our New Provinces: Manitoba,” 374.

<sup>26</sup> Spence, The Prairie Lands of Canada, 21.

<sup>27</sup> Canadian Pacific Railway, Farming and Ranching in the Canadian North-West: general account of Manitoba and the North-west territories, superior advantages for agricultural settlers, unrivalled ranching districts, free grants and cheap lands, and how to get them, climate and health, how to go, and what to do at the start, testimony of actual settlers, (Montreal: s.n., 1888), 10.

<sup>28</sup> George M. Grant, Ocean to Ocean: Sandford Fleming’s expedition through Canada in 1872: being a diary kept during a journey from the Atlantic to the Pacific with the expedition of the engineer-in-chief of the Canadian Pacific and Intercolonial railway, (Toronto: J. Campbell; London: Sampson Low, Marston, Low, & Searle, 1873), 93-94.

<sup>29</sup> Wightman, Our Canadian Heritage, 48.

<sup>30</sup> Harvey J. Philpot, Guide Book to the Canadian Dominion: containing full information for the emigrant, the tourist, the sportsman, and the small capitalist, (London: E. Stanford, 1871), 61.

below zero, but people properly clad experience no inconvenience; and teaming, logging, rock-cutting, go on to as great an extent as in the Eastern Provinces in winter.”<sup>31</sup> The winter climate made farmers feel glad to work outside. One government pamphlet in 1887 insisted that the settlers would never feel hardship, but pleasure under the superior climate:

The winters are apparently severe, but the temperature and atmospheric conditions of the fine season, which lasts more than six months, are so favourable to cultivation and to comfort...; the air is so pure, so exhilarating, so stimulating, that there is hardly a land in the world, where...man can lead an existence more active and more happy in all its aspects. Here the active and industrious man experiences a true pleasure in working the fertile soil which spontaneously offers him its astonishing riches, without exacting, as elsewhere, the tribute of a hard preparatory labour.<sup>32</sup>

The influence of the warm winds from the western mountains also favourably affected the winter climate.<sup>33</sup> The winds were called Chinook winds, which brought warm air to the east side of the mountains: “Chinook winds have their home in the Canadian North-West; and the transformations of temperature they cause is indeed one of the wonders.”<sup>34</sup> It was even believed that chinook winds encouraged thawing ice and snow: “Cold is seldom of long duration; at any time we may have the Chinook winds, driving away the icy blast and substituting its own strong warm breath, causing the snow to disappear as if by magic.”<sup>35</sup> The effect of chinook winds came from the Pacific, the Japanese warm currents: “The influence of this warm current on the Pacific Coast extended eastward across the western and into the Central Provinces, so that the winter climate of the Western part of the Central Province was considerably milder than of the eastern

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<sup>31</sup> George M. Grant, Picturesque Canada: the country as it was and is, (Toronto: Belden, 1882), 100.

<sup>32</sup> Department of Agriculture, North West of Canada: a general sketch of the extent, woods and forests, mineral resources and climatology of the four provisional districts of Assiniboia, Saskatchewan, Alberta and Athabasca, (Ottawa: [s.n.], 1887), 77.

<sup>33</sup> Canadian Pacific Railway, Two Blades of Grass: concerning central Alberta, (Winnipeg: Canadian Pacific Railway, 1909), 5.

<sup>34</sup> Department of Agriculture, Canadian North-West: climate and productions: a misrepresentation exposed, (Ottawa: Department of Agriculture, 1883), 21.

<sup>35</sup> Davin, Homes for Millions, 82.

part.”<sup>36</sup> In contrast to the warm currents on the Pacific coast, the Atlantic coast was affected by the Arctic current, which was cold. Therefore, the climate on the Atlantic coast and inland was “colder than in corresponding latitudes of Europe because of the Arctic current which flowed southward along the coast.”<sup>37</sup> On the other hand, the Japanese currents brought warmer temperatures than in corresponding latitudes of other countries:

It is necessary to establish well the important effect that these warm winds from the Pacific, or from the great Japan current, have on the climate of the North-West, and to demonstrate clearly that if the elevation of the latitude has the effect of lowering the temperature in these regions, the winds from the Pacific more than counterbalance this effect.<sup>38</sup>

This lessening of the winter cold created the impression that western Canada had a winter climate as cold as the eastern provinces, or not even as cold as them. In the stillness of the air of the North-West, the lack of wind reduced the intensity of the cold. The cold weather was never a serious problem, especially when compared to the denser atmosphere of Ontario.<sup>39</sup> “The weather of the West was not felt to be colder than that in the Province of Quebec, nor so cold as milder winters in climates where the frost, or even less degree of cold than frost, was accompanied with dampness.”<sup>40</sup> Even naturalist and agricultural specialist John Macoun asserted that “comparatively speaking, winter months in the district (the North Saskatchewan and Athabasca country) are not as severe as at Toronto.”<sup>41</sup> The mildness of the climate was mentioned in the contrast to the European countries, where the atmosphere was more humid than in the North-West: “The raw wet weather of Great Britain and the north of Europe was unknown on our great

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<sup>36</sup> Department of the Interior, Canada, the land of opportunity, (Ottawa: Department of Interior, 1910), 5,11.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 5

<sup>38</sup> Department of Agriculture, Canadian North-West, 51.

<sup>39</sup> Charles Mair, “The New Canada; Its Natural Features and Climate,” The Canadian Monthly and National Review, 8, (July 1875), 5-6.

<sup>40</sup> Department of Agriculture, Province of Manitoba and North-West Territory of Dominion of Canada: Information for Emigrants, (Ottawa: Department of Agriculture, 1878), 3.

<sup>41</sup> John Macoun, Manitoba and the Great North-West, (Guelph, Ontario: World Pub. Co., 1882), 118.

western plains, and one could go out without suffering from cold in the least degree when the thermometer registers 10, 15 degree, or even 20 degree below zero, especially as when it was very cold, the wind never blew.”<sup>42</sup> One government pamphlet in 1910 included the testimony of an American immigrant who claimed it was colder in Michigan: “I (American farmer) think the climate here (western Canada) is far head of Michigan.., if it is cold here sometimes we do not feel it as we did there (Michigan).”<sup>43</sup> These comparisons to other regions in Canada or Europe were essential to re-conceptualizing the climate of the North-West. Being able to compare something with which people were familiar to something unknown, they could imagine the climate more easily and in a positive way.

It was also claimed that the winter climate of the North-West had been overstated. F. Arnold Wightman, for example, maintained that the climate of the North-West and Canada had been misrepresented: “Rigor of the Canadian climate had been so dwelt upon that many of the inhabitants of this country thought of our climate as being the worst in the world, while other lands were bathed in perpetual sunshine: when prejudices or slanders became current they were hard to live down.”<sup>44</sup> Promotional literature, on the other hand, claimed to provide the right assessments of the climate: “The almost universal testimony received from actual settlers has perfectly convinced me that the disadvantages of the severe winter have been greatly exaggerated in this country.”<sup>45</sup> In fact, the accounts were not universal: They were extracted only from positive testimonies. The writers saw what they wanted to see in the climate of the North-West. The make-believe universal statements were matched by an entirely uniform temperature

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<sup>42</sup> Department of Agriculture, North West of Canada, 57.

<sup>43</sup> Department of the Interior, Prosperity follows settlement in any part of Canada: letters from satisfied settlers, (Ottawa: Department of the Interior, 1910), 11.

<sup>44</sup> Wightman, Our Canadian Heritage, 36.

<sup>45</sup> Miller Christy, Manitoba described: being a series of general observations upon the farming, climate, sport, natural history and future prospects of the country, (London: Wyman, 1885), 50.

and climate throughout the West. In a Department of the Interior pamphlet in 1910, it was claimed that there was a “great similarity of temperature throughout the whole prairie area.”<sup>46</sup> Even more northerly latitudes had the same features as southern Manitoba. The winter was dry and the temperature was moderate in the Peace River country, even though it lay between the parallels of 55 degrees and 56 1/2 degrees north latitude, and between the 116 degrees meridian and the Rocky Mountains.<sup>47</sup>

The enjoyable and pleasant season was not only winter, but also summer. The most common features of summer were the long, bright sunny days, which made settlers want to work outside according to one pamphlet published by Department of the Interior.<sup>48</sup> The longer sunlight helped ripen crops earlier.<sup>49</sup> After a fine and sunny day, it went cool at night. The transition of the temperature enabled farmers to take a good break, sleep, and refresh themselves. George M. Grant in 1872, traveled from the Atlantic to the Pacific with engineer Sanford Fleming, and reported on summer in his book *Ocean to Ocean*: “The feature of cool nights after hot days is an agreeable surprise to those who know how different it usually is in inland countries, or wherever there is no sea breeze. It is one of the causes of the healthy appearance of the new settlers even in the summer months.”<sup>50</sup>

It was initially believed that the Great American Desert had an influence on the summer heat of the Canadian prairie. In the promotional literature, however, the summer heat was portrayed not as hot as the western States. “The great heat of summer was generally tempered by the wind which was constantly stirring on the prairies. It seldom blew from the south more than a

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<sup>46</sup> Department of the Interior, *Canada, the land of opportunity*, 11.

<sup>47</sup> Charles George Horetzky, *The North-West of Canada: being a brief sketch of the north-western regions, and a treatise on the future resources of the country*, (Ottawa: A.S. Woodburn, 1873), 16.

<sup>48</sup> Department of the Interior, *Prosperity follows settlement in any part of Canada*, 40.

<sup>49</sup> Burrows, *North Western Canada*, 11.

<sup>50</sup> Grant, *Ocean to Ocean*, 120.



few hours continuously, which was fortunate, for there was trouble in its breath, and anything but healing in its wings.”<sup>51</sup> The wind and cool nights did not make settlers feel as hot as the actual temperature.<sup>52</sup> An 1898 Department of the Interior pamphlet included the testimony of a settler who compared the summer heat of western Canada with that of the western States: “I met Americans travelling there surprised and delighted with the conditions which make western Canada probably the best summer health and pleasure resort in the world.”<sup>53</sup> These kinds of comments were important since Canada was competing with the American Western frontier for settlers in the nineteenth century.

The wonderful winter and summer weather conditions in the North-West were believed to have a positive effect on the physical well-being of settlers. In fact, people in such a climate would become hardy and powerful: “the air is pure, dry, and bracing all the year round, giving strength of body.”<sup>54</sup> If people lived in the North-West, their body would become more muscular. Thomas Spence, in his pamphlet *The Prairie Lands of Canada* (1880), mentioned how people would be “improved” by the western climate: “His (the future citizen of the North-West of Canada) countenance, in pure, dry, electric air, will be as fresh as the morning. His muscles will be iron, his nerves steel.”<sup>55</sup> The increased muscular development was mentioned mostly as a result of the great climate. The speedy growth of muscles was considered important for the future development of western Canada since farm children were expected to become hardened workers. William Hales Hingston was one of the best known Canadian surgeons in the second half of the nineteenth century and president of the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Quebec

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<sup>51</sup> Davin, Homes for millions, 12.

<sup>52</sup> Wightman, Our Canadian Heritage, 48.

<sup>53</sup> Department of the Interior, The Wonders of western Canada: a U.S. press correspondent’s graphic description, (Ottawa: Government Printing Bureau, 1898), 22.

<sup>54</sup> Grant, Ocean to Ocean, 187.

<sup>55</sup> Spence, The Prairie Lands of Canada, 1.

and of the Canadian Medical Association. In 1884 he published a book on the climate of Canada and its relationship to life and health, and asserted that the western Canadian winter produced hardy youth. He “recorded the superior physique of the new-born infant in Canada; the subsequent more rapid development of his muscular system. It was undoubted the brain and nervous system here [in Canada] participated in that early and rapid growth.”<sup>56</sup>

The strong and hardy body produced by the ideal climate meant that people had more energy and stamina and experienced less fatigue. The same amount of work in the North-West did not cause settlers an equal degree of fatigue as in other countries. A government pamphlet in 1883 introduced a letter from an American who traveled around the North-West on the Canadian Pacific Railway to check land values and to improve his health. He “found himself capable of more physical exertion than he could possibly have stood in this climate at any time within the past ten years. A walk of ten miles which he made without extra exertion in two and a quarter hours fatigued him less than a walk of a third of the distance would have done here.”<sup>57</sup> He felt he was a superman. The lack of fatigue was equated with the restoration of youth. One C.P.R. pamphlet in 1894 touched upon this point: “The dryness and lightness of the air is very bracing and invigorating, and gives a feeling of buoyancy and energy to both mind and body, and makes the man of middle age feel as though he had renewed his youth ten or fifteen years.”<sup>58</sup>

Besides providing physical strength, the climate of the North-West also made people better looking. “The Canucks were fine, tall, handsome, powerful men, well built, active, tough

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<sup>56</sup> William Hales Hingston, The Climate of Canada and its relations to life and health, (Montreal: Dawson, 1884), 251.

<sup>57</sup> Department of Agriculture, Canadian North-West: climate and productions, 10.

<sup>58</sup> Canadian Pacific Railway, Western Canada: Manitoba, Assiniboia, Alberta, Saskatchewan and northern Ontario: how to get there, how to select lands, how to begin, how to make a home, ([S.I.]: Canadian Pacific Railway, 1894), 53.

as pine-knot, and ‘bearded like pards.’”<sup>59</sup> The great and wonderful climate was considered to be the best nutrient to raise supermen and superwomen.

The physical toughness and strength, in turn, dovetailed with the idea that people could live comfortably without serious health problems. This idea of healthy lives in the North-West was quite common in the promotional literature. One pamphlet by the Department of Agriculture in 1876 said that healthy bodies thrived in the atmosphere of the North-West. “As to the winter cold of Dunvegan, its steadiness and dryness are, for both man and beast, better than that of any other place in the Dominion. I never saw any person from that region but who was improved and strengthened in health and body....a region of essentially strong life.”<sup>60</sup> Settlers could expect to maintain their hardiness and seldom experience any sickness under the wonderful atmosphere. George M. Grant never heard any case of sickness in the North-West and thought it was because of the atmosphere: In “a healthy and--for the hardy populations of northern and central Europe--a pleasant climate, we ceased to wonder that we had not heard of a case of sickness in the settlers’ families.”<sup>61</sup> The lack of sickness applied to every region in the North-West. Journalist Charles Acton Burrows went to Winnipeg in 1879 and worked for more than fifteen years on newspapers and wrote a guide book of the North-West Territories in 1880. He saw only one case of epidemic disease, which was considered to be an exception, and pointed out the perfect health record. “No epidemic had ever visited any portion of the regions, with a single exception, when small-pox, first contracted in Montreal, broke out among the Icelandic settlers on the shores of Lake Winnipeg.”<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Philpot, Guide Book to the Canadian Dominion, 67.

<sup>60</sup> Department of Agriculture, Province of Manitoba and North West Territory of the Dominion of Canada, (Ottawa: Department of Agriculture, 1876), 48.

<sup>61</sup> Grant, Ocean to Ocean, 100, 110.

<sup>62</sup> Burrows, North Western Canada, 12.

The lack of epidemics and disease was attributed to the dry air. “Humidity was absent; the air was bracing and dry; stagnant waters and their poisonous exhalations were unknown; fogs and mists did not occur.”<sup>63</sup> The dryness of the air was mentioned in comparison to the humid air of the western States. Nicholas Flood Davin was a lawyer, politician, and journalist who founded and edited the first newspaper in Assiniboia, the *Regina Leader*. He talked about the relationship between illness and the climate of the North-West in 1892:

The summer is hot, but no matter how hot the day the nights are cool. No zymotic, epidemic or endemic disease exist, and the climate is especially favorable to those suffering from asthma or pulmonary affections ...it is found that the Canadian North-West generally, on account of its more northern latitude, if for no other reason, has a climate more conducive to health and vigor than the country further south in the United States, and that the new settler in the Canadian North-West has a greater certainty of retaining his health and strength in their fullest degree than the settler south of the line.<sup>64</sup>

Poet Charles Mair agreed. He argued that “the lightness, sparkle, dryness and relish in its pure ether quickened circulation without impairing the organism.” The ether of the North-West had a power to restore “decayed function and wasted tissue,” while in the south, the western States were “in a great measure a region of effeminacy and disease” without such ether.<sup>65</sup> This striking contrast between the United States and the North-West was one of the best ways to acquire more immigrants and keep Canadian farmers from moving to the south. In 1880 Acton Burrows told farmers to settle in Canada if they wanted to live longer. “Fevers were but little known; ague, so common in many of the United States, was almost unheard of. In brief, those who desired a healthy home, who wished to prolong their lives and to secure for their children vigorous constitutions, should settle in North-Western Canada.”<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>64</sup> Davin, *Homes for Millions*, 22, 91.

<sup>65</sup> Charles Mair, “The New Canada,” 5.

<sup>66</sup> Burrows, *North-Western Canada*, 12.

The most serious disease in the United States at the time was consumption, more correctly known as tuberculosis. The air of the North-West, unlike the western States, effectively prevented contagion. People with consumption could be healed by the dry and fresh air. One government pamphlet in 1883 included a letter mentioning people who recovered from consumption: “The dryness of the climate and the clear air were very advantageous frequently to consumptives, who came from other parts of America and were cured. I can name several persons of my acquaintance who, on coming to the country, were said to be far advanced in consumption, and who have now recovered.”<sup>67</sup> Davin pointed out in his book *Homes for Millions* that even just a trip to the North-West made people healthier and stronger: “Some settlers here are men who were far gone in consumption before coming here...A young man whose case was pronounced hopeless tried a trip to Manitoba and the North-West, with the result that an immediate change set in and he is now quite strong”<sup>68</sup>

Settlers, according to the promotional literature, did not suffer any disease. It was true that Aboriginal people had a hard time with epidemic disease. Davin attributed the suffering of Native people to their changed lifestyle.<sup>69</sup> John Macoun also reported that “he never saw a sick white man or half-breed, during the years 1872 and 1875,” and his own health was much improved in the purest atmosphere. The Natives apparently became infected because of their poverty.<sup>70</sup> Among white settlers, there was no epidemic disease – the prevalence of “influenza, measles and scarlet fever was very light and very rare.”<sup>71</sup> The death rate in the North-West was consequently lower than in England.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Department of Agriculture, Canadian North-West, 7.

<sup>68</sup> Davin, Homes for Millions, 71.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>70</sup> Department of Agriculture, Province of Manitoba and North West Territory of the Dominion of Canada,

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 91; Philpot, Guide Book to the Canadian Dominion, 67.

Some pamphlets and promotional literature took statements from settlers to lend an authority to government statements about the ideal climate. George M. Grant, for example, met a doctor on his cross-country trip to British Columbia. “The doctor spoke highly of the healthiness of the climate.”<sup>73</sup> One government pamphlet featured the health condition of a farm family. The husband was impressed by and happy with his wife’s healthy revival and their children’s hardiness, which made him believe that people could live without a doctor: “My wife’s health was poor when she came here, now she is wonderfully improved. Also [we] have four boys and two girls, all of whom are sturdy and healthy and never need a doctor.”<sup>74</sup> Another farmer from Manchester, England “has been in the North-West for six years and never had any sickness in his family.”<sup>75</sup>

The depiction of the healthy climate with the wonderful atmosphere was common everywhere in the North-West. The comment of how healthy the climate was could be seen in every single pamphlet and promotional literature. The physical hardiness and strength transformed to the perfection of health. It meant less sickness, especially epidemic disease, and compared favourably with health conditions in the United States and Europe. As Davin recognized: “the climate was known as a resort for consumptive people.”<sup>76</sup> In other words, the North-West was the best health resort in the world in the expansionists’ eyes.

The climate also stimulated mental health. The positive operation on the body worked on the spirit in a similar way. The specific effect was spiritual elevation. Harvey J. Philpot pointed out the effect in his guide book: “So exhilarating was the air we breathed, our spirits felt buoyant to a degree we had never experienced before,...the spirits were like champagne when the cork

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<sup>73</sup> Grant, Ocean to Ocean, 88.

<sup>74</sup> Department of the Interior, Prosperity follows settlement in any part of Canada, 68.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>76</sup> Davin, Homes for Millions, 52.

has blown from the bottle, they completely effervesced.”<sup>77</sup> An 1878 government pamphlet went even further: “A constitution nursed upon the oxygen of our bright winter atmosphere makes its owner feel as though he could toss about the pine trees in his glee.”<sup>78</sup> A fresh and elevated spirit produced a sound mind. The favourable air created both sound mind and body: “The atmosphere is highly purified, joyous and clear, and charged with ozone--that element which is mysteriously associated with soundness of mind and body”<sup>79</sup> A good mind translated to a good body. “A sound mind is a sound body is another consequence of a stern climate.”<sup>80</sup> Even surgeon Dr. W.H. Hingston considered harmony between body and mind: “What has been adduced is unmistakably in favour of increased muscular development, or, more correctly speaking I think, of density and strength of muscular tissue; and with it, *pari passu*, mental vigor,--more important still,--for if “on earth there is nothing great but man, in man there is nothing great but mind.”<sup>81</sup>

The dry, invigorating, pure, and brilliant air of western Canada helped to stimulate the brain. The strong effect of the climate lay in hastening brain development. “It was undoubted the brain and nervous system here (Canada) participated in that early and rapid growth.”<sup>82</sup> The North-West had the climate to give power to the brain. Thomas Spence, a clerk of the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba from 1878 to 1885 and an immigration pamphleteer, wrote two famous pamphlets, *Manitoba and North-West of the Dominion* (1876) and *The Prairie Lands of Canada* (1879). In the latter promotional booklet, he talked about the importance of the strong brain on sound behaviour: “Vigor will characterize his very action: for climate gives quality to the blood,

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<sup>77</sup> Philpot, Guide Book to the Canadian Dominion, 10.

<sup>78</sup> Department of Agriculture, Province of Manitoba and North West Territory of the Dominion of Canada, 1878, 12.

<sup>79</sup> Davin, Homes for Millions, 11.

<sup>80</sup> James W. Taylor, Central British America: physical aspects and natural resources, (S.I.: s.n., 1881?), 3-4.

<sup>81</sup> Hingston, The Climate of Canada and its relations to life and health, 260.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 251.

strength to the muscles, power to the brain.”<sup>83</sup> People with a strengthened brain were wise and intelligent. Wightman, in his book, *Our Canadian Heritage*, spoke of the capability of the climate to elevate one’s intellectual level: “We are reminded of the words of Sir Charles Dilke, who said of Scotland, but with equal application to this country, ‘The long winters cultivate thrift, energy and fore-thought, without which civilization would perish, and at the same time give leisure for reading and study.’”<sup>84</sup> The long winter of the North-West would give the residents time to engage in cultural and intellectual activities. These people behaved themselves and had good manners. They were equipped with a high moral standard. The rigour of the climate of the North-West “bred philosophers,” while a southern climate bred “naked savages.”<sup>85</sup>

The climate, especially the winter air, created people with physical, mental, intellectual and moral strength. “The dryness of the air..., the brilliancy of its sunlight, and its pleasing succession of its seasons, all conspired to make this a climate of unrivalled salubrity and the home of a joyous, healthy, prosperous people with strength in physical, intellectual and moral capabilities.”<sup>86</sup> The superior climate was the parent of the perfect man. The notion of the superman was heroic and glorious; consequently, the ideal climate was bound up with national construction. The climate “compact people into a national characteristic, and created a homogeneous race.”<sup>87</sup>

The ideal climate and its attributes also made it possible for Canada to rank equally with other civilized European nations. Expansionists wanted to see Canada, and the North-West in particular, achieve the highest level of civilization. A government pamphlet maintained: “The

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<sup>83</sup> Spence, *The Prairie Lands of Canada*, 1.

<sup>84</sup> Wightman, *Our Canadian Heritage*, 46.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>86</sup> Spence, *The Prairie Lands of Canada*, 20-21.

<sup>87</sup> National Club, *Maple leaves; being the papers read before the National Club of Toronto, at the ‘National evenings.’ during the winter 1890-1891*, (Toronto: National Club, 1891), ii. viii.



climate of Canada was bracing and healthful, and in all respects suited to the fullest development of the races of the British Isles and northwestern Europe generally.”<sup>88</sup> Indeed, the Canadian geographical position was comparable to other civilized countries with cold winters. Davin emphasized that the precedents for a successful civilized race “had been found north of the 49<sup>th</sup> parallel.” Even England pierced the 50<sup>th</sup> parallel at the southernmost point. “The great part of the commerce and power of the globe lay north of the 49<sup>th</sup> degree of north latitude.” Canada occupied “the best half of the northern temperature zone” and “the larger portion of wheat-producing land on the continent of America.”<sup>89</sup> Western Canada and its climate had more potential for advancement than the American western frontier had below the 49<sup>th</sup> parallel.<sup>90</sup>

The climate of the North-West was one of the most crucial factors in guaranteeing Canadian development rather than holding the country back. Since the North-West was expected to become a garden of Eden, the climate and the land had to be favourable to farmers. One government pamphlet in 1910 asserted the summer temperature in the North-West was actually better for farming: “The heat is not so extreme as in the populous portion of eastern Canada,” but induced a greater perfection in wheat, oats, barley and field vegetables.<sup>91</sup> There was also more sunlight during daytime. One 1888 pamphlet by the C.P.R. favourably observed of summer: “The days are very long, on account of the high latitude, and grain has more hours each day for ripening than in southerly latitudes, thus making up for the comparatively shorter season.”<sup>92</sup> Thomas Spence, in his pamphlet, *The Prairie Lands of Canada* (1880), affirmed the advantage of long summer: “While New Orleans has fourteen hours of sunlight, we have sixteen,

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<sup>88</sup> Department of the Interior, *Canada, the land of opportunity*, 5.

<sup>89</sup> Davin, *Homes for Millions*, 3-4.

<sup>90</sup> Carl Berger, “The True North Strong and Free,” in Peter Russell, ed., *Nationalism in Canada*, (Toronto; New York: McGraw-Hill Company, 1966), 3-26.

<sup>91</sup> Department of the Interior, *Canada, the land of opportunity*, 10-11.

<sup>92</sup> Canadian Pacific Railway, *Farming and Ranching in the Canadian North-West*, 11.

consequently our vegetation grows more rapidly than theirs, and matures much sooner. This is a beautiful law in compensation, as what we lack in heat is made up in sunlight during our summers”<sup>93</sup> Another feature of the North-West summer was the sudden change of temperature. Farmers worked in hot weather during summer, but could refresh themselves in sleeping since it was cool at night. The sudden change of temperature at night in the summer produced more “vigorous plants, than a gradual lowering of temperature,” since the ground and plants could still preserve “the heat previously absorbed after the latent heat has been given off.”<sup>94</sup>

Expansionists also suggested that the cold North-West winter was actually better for vegetation. The dry winter air encouraged vegetation to grow quickly, strongly, and maturely. Thomas Spence said the bracing winter gave plants an endurance to survive the winter: “The dryness of the atmosphere gives greater vigour to the plants, the plants grow rapidly but with firm texture, and are consequently, the same as a person who has dined heartily on rich food, is better able to bear the cold of winter.”<sup>95</sup>

Frost before the crop was harvested also had to be discounted. The dryness of the atmosphere and the rapid change of the temperature reportedly gave the vegetation enough endurance to deal with frost.<sup>96</sup> Frosts in winter had also an advantage to soil. It had “a powerful effect in pulverizing soil.”<sup>97</sup> “Without any chemical or mechanical appliances, in the spring, the ploughed ground was left completely pulverized and friable, and with little preparation was adapted to the reception of seed.”<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Spence, The Prairie Lands of Canada,” 21.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 25; Burrows, North-Western Canada, 10.

<sup>97</sup> Jesse Beaufort Hurlbert, Climates, Productions, and Resources of Canada, (Montreal: J. Lovell, 1872),

12.

<sup>98</sup> Wightman, Our Canadian Heritage, 44.

Snow covering the ground in the winter was another advantage for vegetation. It protected “the ground from the winds and sun of the late months of winter and spring,” keeping the soil moist, which was “necessary for seeds and plants.”<sup>99</sup> Snow also kept vegetation warm during the winter. Wheat could be “well covered by a warm blanket of snow” through the long cold winter, and, when snow melted, wheat would “shoot up as if by magic, green and healthy.”<sup>100</sup> The snow blanket and the sudden change of temperature prevented crops from becoming sick.

Future settlers did not need to worry about the climate of the North-West in relation to vegetation. The atmosphere and soil would help farmers grow all kinds of crops. The North-West could prosper with “the great fertility of the soil and the great variety of products.”<sup>101</sup> Besides crops, the ideal climate suited ranching, too. James Wickes Taylor, who was consul for the United States at Winnipeg and an enthusiastic supporter of western settlement, insisted in 1881 that the climate of the North-West “gives health and weight to the production of domestic animals.”<sup>102</sup> One government pamphlet in 1883 reported on the strength of livestock: “The cattle did well during the winter, the great bulk of them having been kept outside, and very few housed, with the increase in numbers expected.”<sup>103</sup> The climate of the North-West would consequently lead to prosperous farmers. People would never fail to succeed in farming and ranching. The climate was the best in the world. Agricultural society must flourish in the North-West.

The ideal climate of the North-West, as propagated by the expansionists, played a key role in the campaign to settle the region. It became a powerful tool to promote the development

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<sup>99</sup> Hurlbert, Climate, Productions, and Resources of Canada, 12.

<sup>100</sup> Philpot, Guide Book to the Canadian Dominion, 65, 117.

<sup>101</sup> Hurlbert, Climate, Productions, and Resources of Canada, 9; Spence, The Saskatchewan country of the north-west of the Dominion of Canada, (Montreal: Lovell, 1877), 25.

<sup>102</sup> Taylor, Central British America: physical aspects and natural resources, 13.

<sup>103</sup> Department of Agriculture, Canadian North-West: climate and productions: a misrepresentation exposed, 24.

of the western Canadian frontier. Hingston said that “whenever Nature is more powerful than industry, whether for good or for bad, man receives from the climate an invariable and irresistible impulse.”<sup>104</sup> Since the climate was considered so important to the settlement of the North-West, first expansionists, then the Canadian government, deliberately exaggerated the positive features of the climate of the region. The superior climate created an imaginary Eden in the North-West, which would be filled with super men, super women, super plants, and super livestock. The ideal climate was also used to discount the American frontier. Expansionists exaggerated the climate, playing up its health-restoring features, in order to direct people to the Canadian West. The higher latitude of western Canada suggested that the Canadian frontier had greater potential and would enjoy greater prosperity and a higher level of civilization--all thanks to the wonderful climate. Some pamphlets by the government and C.P.R. included positive statements by American immigrants about the climate in the North-West, which further convinced people to come and start settling there. The civilization that would be built in western Canada would be as great as or even greater than European countries. The super climate of the North-West would help bring Canada to the position where it would replace Great Britain in time. The ideal climate gave people a deeply positive image of the western Canadian frontier at that time.

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<sup>104</sup> Hingston, The Climate of Canada and its relations to life and health, xxiv.

## **Chapter Two** **The actual experience**

The ideal climate mirrored the expansionists' hopes for the West. The images, however, did not necessarily reflect reality--what the western climate was actually like during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In fact, no one knew the western climate better during this period than the tens of thousands of immigrants who settled the region. When homesteaders arrived in the West, the weather was one of the hardest and most common obstacles that they had to deal with in order to succeed at ranching or farming. How did pioneers who were attracted to the West by the expansionist and government promotional efforts experience and talk about the prairie climate? Was the climate as ideal as they had been told? This chapter will examine how pioneers responded to the climate of the West. The regional reaction to the climate has to be constructed by looking at the pioneers' actual perceptions and experiences of the climate. The reminiscences that I looked into are the views of those who endured and did not leave the prairies. The responses have a tendency to recall long-ago events harshly, but do not necessarily reflect all settlers' experiences.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century expansionists expected that the western interior was going to be populated by millions of farmers. The ideal climate was expected to play an essential role in guaranteeing the future of the West. But despite the expansionists' expectations, "glowing reports about the unparalleled fertility of the soil" and "the ready availability of homestead land," the number of immigrants fell behind expectations; by the 1890s, the total population of the North-West Territories was only about 67,000.<sup>1</sup> The biggest reason that people did not come was the rival American frontier south of the border. The American western frontier attracted more immigrants than the western Canadian frontier did. The competition between the

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<sup>1</sup> Bill Waiser, Saskatchewan: A New History, (Calgary: Fifth House, 2005), 60.

two frontiers slowed the Canadian plan down. “Canada had a substantial net outflow of population during the last forty years of the nineteenth century, estimated as high as two-thirds of a million.”<sup>2</sup> The number of people who left Canada for the southern frontier was greater than the number of incoming immigrants up until 1901.<sup>3</sup>

In 1893 historian Frederickson Jackson Turner’s declaration of the closing of the western frontier marked the end of an era in American history and directed people to the huge northern Canadian prairies. In the American West, people had difficulty finding cheap free land. Thus, the Canadian western territories metamorphasized into “the last, best West.”<sup>4</sup> These were also better years for international trade and the Canadian economy, in particular, in the West.<sup>5</sup> An equally important factor was the appointment of a new Minister of the Interior, Clifford Sifton, from 1896 to 1905. Sifton believed that agricultural immigration and settlement were one of the last great nation-building tasks to be completed, and consequently the promotion of western Canada became a priority.<sup>6</sup>

The Department of the Interior put its energy into securing immigrants under Sifton’s leadership. In 1896 the number of promotional pamphlets that the department produced was 65,000: “by 1900 over one million were produced in the first six months.”<sup>7</sup> In addition to producing more literature, the government advertised at exhibitions, supported journalists to come to Canada on western tours, and encouraged land and immigration companies.<sup>8</sup> During the nine years that Sifton headed the Department of the Interior, the number of immigrants

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<sup>2</sup> W.P. Ward, “Population Growth in Western Canada, 1901-71,” in J. Foster, ed., The Developing West, (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1983), 158.

<sup>3</sup> Waiser, Saskatchewan, 63.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 63: D.J. Hall, “Clifford Sifton: Immigration and Settlement Policy, 1896-1905,” in H. Palmer, ed., The Settlement of the West, (Calgary: University of Calgary, 1977), 60.

<sup>6</sup> Hall, “Clifford Sifton,” 61.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 69-70.

dramatically increased. The population of Saskatchewan, for example, jumped 91, 279 in 1901 to 257,763 in 1906.<sup>9</sup>

Sifton believed that all great societies had agriculture as the mainstay.<sup>10</sup> This idea was reflected in the immigration advertising. While past immigration policy focused on people of British origins, Sifton wanted people who had farming experience, including ethnic groups from non-British countries. Still, he expected the new immigrants to assimilate themselves into Anglo-Canadian traditions and institutions.<sup>11</sup>

The largest group of immigrants was from Great Britain. The next largest were American farmers. The Canadian government put more energy and money into directing Americans with capital and farming implements to come north by increasing the number of immigration offices in the United States.<sup>12</sup> The free and cheap land of the American western frontier was gone.<sup>13</sup> Western Canada, in turn, attracted American farmers who wanted further wealth and prosperity for their family. The result of the push and pull elements was shown in the amount of American immigration: it increased “from 2,400 in 1897 to nearly 12,000 in 1899, and between 40,000 and 50,000 annually in the years 1902-05.”<sup>14</sup> American farmers decided to come and cultivate the land of the North-West for the promise of a better life.

The second largest group of foreign immigrants (including Americans) were from continental Europe, especially Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire.<sup>15</sup> The most densely populated region in Europe was Galicia whose residents were mostly Ukrainian. In the country,

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<sup>9</sup> Waiser, Saskatchewan, 64.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>12</sup> Randy William Widdis, With Scarcely a Ripple: Anglo-Canadian Migration into the United States and Western Canada, 1880-1920, (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1998), 290-291.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 292.

<sup>14</sup> Hall, “Clifford Sifton,” 70.

<sup>15</sup> O. Martynowych, Ukrainians in Canada: The Formative Period, 1891-1924, (Edmonton: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, 1991), 3.

peasants divided their land holdings among their children and the number of the holdings rapidly increased, which meant a diminishing land supply. The Galician peasants were not the poorest of the poor, but hard-working, progressive, and versatile. The quest for the same economic opportunity, especially for a better future for their children, encouraged the Galicians to emigrate to the North-West.<sup>16</sup>

Like the settlers from Great Britain, American farmers, and Ukrainians, most immigrants who headed to the Canadian prairies wanted to restart their life and enjoy a better future. What they found, though, was not always what they expected-- what they had come to believe from the promotional literature. On the way to those destinations where pioneers intended to homestead, some of them underwent a severe weather baptism. One pioneer from England wrote about the day he reached Winnipeg by train:

Our train arrived in Winnipeg at mid-night. It was 35 below zero and we had three hours before making connections. A few courageous ones decided to take a stroll through downtown Winnipeg. I decided it was too cold for me, after spending two years in the warmer climate of England, so stayed in the station with a few others I had chummed up with. I was glad at my choice, when just in the nick of time, my fellow travelers, came rushing in, with one of them bandaged around the head. He had got one of his ears completely frozen. "Winnipeg's dreadfully cold, I wish I hadn't gone out" he said to me.<sup>17</sup>

Fennell Emma Flora came West from Quebec with her parents in 1896 and remembered getting stranded in Regina that spring: "The train got stuck in the snow all men passengers were handed a shovel and had to get out and shovel, finally we got Regina and had to stay there a whole week as the train couldn't run on account of the snow"<sup>18</sup> Before they even got settled on their land, some immigrants were worried that they might not be able to deal with the weather conditions.

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<sup>16</sup> F. Stambrook and S. Hryniuk, "Who Were They Really?: Reflections on East European Immigrants to Manitoba before 1914," *Prairie Forum*, v.25, no.2, (fall 2000), 218-222.

<sup>17</sup> *Saskatchewan Archives Board*, Pioneer Diary, A.7 Johnson Manuscript, 71.

<sup>18</sup> *Saskatchewan Archives Board*, Pioneer Questionnaire, S-X2 2440, Fennell, Emma Flora.



Expansionists believed that the atmosphere of the West was pure, fresh and embracing. Many pioneers initially described the air in much the same way: “The windless, keen air was sharp and bracing,”<sup>19</sup> remarked one settler who had never experienced such a clear atmosphere before. Another pioneer noted that “to stand and breathe freely the good fresh air from north, south, east and west, and being able to see the horizon all around us, never ceased to thrill us.”<sup>20</sup> One pioneer, moreover, believed that the atmosphere of the West had a good physical effect on his well-being. He wrote that: “the night air was exhilarating and I seemed to understand why sleigh dogs perk up and work so well under a brilliant moon.”<sup>21</sup>

The summer air was also found to be fresh and untainted; every breath was joy.<sup>22</sup> The air of the West was far better than breathing the dirty, damp air of Europe, especially in the overpopulated and unsanitary cities of Britain. Harrison H. Marsden came from England in 1903 to improve his health. He thought that his pleurisy was caused by the damp climate of northern England. During his pioneer days, he considered the West the best place to live because of the pure air.<sup>23</sup>

The Canadian prairie seemed the best health resort. H. W. Fred, who came to Bruno from Germany for health reasons, agreed. He said that “my health was improving in the dry atmosphere and lots of fresh air on the prairie.”<sup>24</sup> Another pioneer felt sick in America and went to see a doctor. The doctor advised him to take up farming (he was working mostly inside), and he moved to western Canada. After he started homesteading, his health improved. He asked:

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<sup>19</sup> University of Saskatchewan Libraries Special Collections, A.S. Morton manuscript collection, C555/I/2.28/, Women’s Canadian Club in the Pioneer Stories Competitions, 1924, “It’s the Little things in life that count.”

<sup>20</sup> Pioneer Diary, A. 7 Johnson. Manuscript., 39.

<sup>21</sup> Saskatchewan Archives Board, Pioneer Diary, A.241 Skuli M. Backman, 69.

<sup>22</sup> University of Saskatchewan Libraries Special Collections, A.S. Morton manuscript collection, C555/I/2.36/, Women’s Canadian Club in the Pioneer Stories Competitions, 1924, “Pioneer Story.”

<sup>23</sup> Saskatchewan Archives Board, Pioneer Questionnaire, S-X2 695, Harrison Herbert Marsden.

<sup>24</sup> Saskatchewan Archives Board, Pioneer Questionnaire, S-X2 922, Hargarten William Fred.

“What is there in the west which makes people come back to it even if they have enough money to live in comfort elsewhere it must be in the air.”<sup>25</sup> Another pioneer from Nebraska preferred the cold of the Canadian West to that of America in terms of healthfulness. She noted that “no matter how cold it was, just so that there was no wind, it was far easier to stand this intense cold than the misty cold of southern Nebraska. Colds and coughs were only commented upon because of their absence.”<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, there were several cases where pioneers’ health did not improve by settling in the Canadian West. Marion Alexina moved to Saskatchewan with the hope that her husband’s illness was going to improve by living in Canadian West. But, he was no better and even started having trouble with his eyes.<sup>27</sup>

There were several common diseases during pioneer days: measles, typhoid fever, chicken pox, smallpox, consumption (tuberculosis), and mumps. The outbreak of these diseases depended on where and when pioneers lived. W. P. Carpenter started homesteading at Battleford in 1904. In his early pioneer days, in spite of mostly rest and fresh air, he discovered that people died of consumption because of overcrowded and unsanitary living conditions and the fact that settlers spent most of their time indoors during the winter.<sup>28</sup> Another pioneer Nicholas L. Gulstine came to Fishing Lake in 1903. He said that “people were mostly young, and healthy in pioneer days.”<sup>29</sup> In 1917 and 1918, however, he recalled three epidemic diseases and that several

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<sup>25</sup> University of Saskatchewan Libraries Special Collections, A.S. Morton manuscript collection, C555/I/2.21/, Women’s Canadians Club in the Pioneer Stories Competitions, 1924, “My experiences as a Settler in western Canada.”

<sup>26</sup> University of Saskatchewan Libraries Special Collections, A.S. Morton manuscript collection, C555/I/2.32/, Women’s Canadians Club in the Pioneer Stories Competitions, 1924, “For Her Children’s Sake- or – A Mother Braving A Wilderness.”

<sup>27</sup> Saskatchewan Archives Board, Pioneer Questionnaire, S-X2 1134, Marion Alxina.

<sup>28</sup> Saskatchewan Archives Board, Pioneer Questionnaire, S-X2 2780, Isaac Bain.

<sup>29</sup> Saskatchewan Archives Board, Pioneer Questionnaire, S-X2 2771, Nicholas L. Gulstine.

settlers died.<sup>30</sup> Another region lost many settlers because of the Spanish flu epidemic in 1918 through 1919:

The flue was very bad...The hotels were filled up with patients, and everything was quiet...there were quite a few deaths...everyone was sick. I remember one farmer down there, a big husky man. I don't think the man had ever been sick in his life and he came into the store and bought some merchandise and in a week's time he died too.<sup>31</sup>

These contagious diseases in some districts spread because of lack of medical facilities, doctors and nurses. People in early pioneer days could not get sick family members to a doctor because of severe winter weather.<sup>32</sup>

Many pioneers were not infected with these serious diseases, but most came down with the common cold. The first homes of homesteaders were made of milled lumber, sod, and wood from the nearest bush.<sup>33</sup> They were not winterized well for the first winter, and pioneers could easily catch a cold because they could not keep themselves warm. One pioneer woman noted that "as long as we stayed in that house we never had good health, it was an old long house plastered on the outside. I caught a terrible cold there which stayed with me for weeks, and one day the owner and his wife came out, and I was telling her something of the time we had. "Oh" she says, "It was quite a pioneer experience."<sup>34</sup>

If pioneers could keep themselves warm enough, they might not catch a terrible cold even in tent. One pioneer wrote that "the inside of the tent became as cold as the outside temperature after the fires were out in the stoves and we landed there at the beginning of the coldest part of the winter. But we were healthy and comfortable in our warm bedding. We all wore our winter

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Saskatchewan Archives Board, Pioneer Interview, C.17 H. Buckwood.

<sup>32</sup> Saskatchewan Archives Board, "Pioneer Life in the Prairies," A.945, Jones Tim.

<sup>33</sup> Waiser, Saskatchewan, 109.

<sup>34</sup> University of Saskatchewan Libraries Special Collections, A.S. Morton manuscript collection, C555/I/2.39/, Women's Canadian Club in the Pioneer Stories Competitions, 1924, "Memories of Pioneer Days in Saskatchewan."

caps in bed to keep our ears from freezing.”<sup>35</sup> E.R. Haase came to St. Walburg in 1913. His family was rarely sick, but still they had to deal with common colds, measles, and whooping cough.<sup>36</sup> He thought, however, that his family members, especially his kids, were healthy even though his family suffered from common diseases: “We had three children born without the help of a doctor or Nurse or Midwife and they all are strong and healthy. (still healthy)”<sup>37</sup> Another pioneer S.M. Bachman worked in the commercial fisheries north of Prince Albert. His family was also infected with colds, but in his diary, he said that “the virgin prairie was a happy, healthy land...Sickness was rare...winters healthy and robust activity.”<sup>38</sup> It was a rare case that a pioneer never caught a cold. One pioneer noted that “due to sudden storms in winter quite a few people were lost and frozen to death and many were badly frost bitten, but I will say I have lived here all my life and I have never been cold or hungry and I am now seventy-two.”<sup>39</sup>

It was suggested in the promotional literature that the dry and still air was not going to make settlers feel as cold as the thermometer registered. But the winter weather was undoubtedly severe and cold for immigrants. The temperature remained between forty and fifty degrees below zero in January and February, 1905-06.<sup>40</sup> The weather was sometimes even more severe. One pioneer noted that “it registered sixty below. By November the mercury went into the bulb [and] didn’t come out till May”<sup>41</sup> The thermometer could not sometimes register how cold it was.

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<sup>35</sup> Pioneer Diary, A.241, Skuli M. Bachman.

<sup>36</sup> Saskatchewan Archives Board, Pioneer Questionnaire, S-X2 2930, Ernst Reinhard Haase.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Pioneer Diary, A.241, Skuli M. Bachman.

<sup>39</sup> Saskatchewan Archives Board, Pioneer Questionnaire, S-X2 415, Muirhead Isabel. (Mrs. W.M.)

<sup>40</sup> “Pioneer Life in the Prairies,” A.945, Jones Tim.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

Leslie Neatby remarked that “the mercury stood at 30 below zero and today it is colder but I haven’t heard how much and my thermometer doesn’t go low enough to register it.”<sup>42</sup>

In extremely cold weather, it was very hard for pioneers to work outside. Fred C. Gilchrist kept a diary from 1883 to 1896, and said that in the winter of 1884, from December 16 to 29: “it had been very cold all the time, nothing done owing to weather.”<sup>43</sup> Pioneers had never experienced such severe winter and got injured in the cold by working outside. Percy Maxwell stated that “it was very cold here last week and the wind was bitter; I’ve never felt such a cold wind before, it nipped my face and ears very much.”<sup>44</sup> He continued:

One ear, one cheek, my nose and my chin were slightly frostbitten yesterday... The curious thing about it is that you don’t feel anything but one little sting and then it freezes solid and you don’t know anything about it until you get indoors and begin to thaw out, when it feels just like a burn; but if you feel the first little sting and immediately rub the part affected with your fingers you will stop the freezing.<sup>45</sup>

Winter in the West sometimes arrived right after August. Percy Maxwell explained how there was no fall in the Canadian prairie: “This is the season called the “fall” but I should call it winter as we have frost nearly every night and nearly all the leaves are down--they do say that there are only three seasons here viz. July, August and Winter.”<sup>46</sup> Some pioneers had never experienced as cold a winter as in the West. William Hays came from England and homesteaded in the Lipton district, Saskatchewan. In his first winter, he underwent a very cold day and remarked that “I was never out on such a cold day in my life.”<sup>47</sup> On the other hand, there were a

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<sup>42</sup> Leslie H. Neatby, Chronicle of a pioneer Prairie family, (Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1979), 47.

<sup>43</sup> Saskatchewan Archives Board, Pioneer Diary, A.76, Fred C. Gilchrist.

<sup>44</sup> Percy A. Maxwell, Percy Augustus Maxwell; letters home, (Toronto, 1967), 10.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>47</sup> Saskatchewan Archives Board, Pioneer Dairy, A.93, Hays William.

few pioneers who did not feel as cold as they expected. One pioneer woman noted that “the winter went slowly by and was not so severe as I have learned since a western winter can be.”<sup>48</sup>

One section of the pioneer questionnaire asked pioneers for similes about the climate. The following similes showed how pioneers perceived the cold of the West: “as cold as hell, as cold as charity, as cold as march hare, as cold as stone, and as cold as ice.”<sup>49</sup> The severe winter of the Canadian West caused unusual deeds among newcomers. Lewis Fletcher from Ontario saw a boy “go out in middle of winter bare footed and no outer garments such as even a sweater, jackets or cap.” He thought the boy was crazy and did not seem to feel the cold.<sup>50</sup> David K. Graham, who was born in New Brunswick, moved near Marsden Saskatchewan and started homesteading in 1905. His neighbour from America had difficulty adjusting to the winter of the North-West:

There was a fellow homesteaded, he was a Dane. He put up the poorest shack that ever was built anywhere. He was quite an old fellow. And he built a poor, cold shack and he couldn't live in it in the cold weather- I think he was going queer anyway, but he started to walk from that shack a mile from this house, he started to walk to Lashburn, and he got out half way. He got to Cayford's place and he went in and they gave him his dinner. He seemed to be not normal.<sup>51</sup>

Some pioneers joked about the cold weather. Men with mustaches were encouraged to cut them off as soon as they could get scissors since mustaches often grew icicles. “It took longer to thaw them out than the grub.”<sup>52</sup> Allin William R thought “during the first winter, he did not think it possible to stay here permanently.”<sup>53</sup> George McConwell came from the United States to Consul to homestead with his family. He noted how his dad perceived the winter: “In the first

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<sup>48</sup> University of Saskatchewan Libraries Special Collections, A.S. Morton manuscript collection, C555/I/2.26/, Women's Canadian Club in the Pioneer Stories Competitions, 1924, “Pioneer Days in Saskatchewan.”

<sup>49</sup> Saskatchewan Archives Board, Pioneer Questionnaire, S-X2 2605, Albert Edward Elderton, 2429, Peter Fraser, 2579, Lewis Fletcher, 2606, Mable Force, 2621 Rev. John Fetsch.

<sup>50</sup> Pioneer Questionnaire, S-X2 2579, Lewis Fletcher.

<sup>51</sup> Saskatchewan Archives Board, Pioneer Interview, C.7 David K. Graham.

<sup>52</sup> Saskatchewan Archives Board, Pioneer Diary, A.11, Gudlaugson Magnus G.

<sup>53</sup> Saskatchewan Archives Board, Pioneer Questionnaire, S-X2 816, Allin William R.

week of November, 1911, my father was here staying with the family, and he wanted to go back to Kansas for the winter as he did not think he could stand the cold up here.”<sup>54</sup>

Most pioneers experienced winter cold even in their houses. They used lamps for light in their homes. But in very cold days, the lamp froze. One pioneer noted that “it was so cold that the flame in our kerosene lamp froze so solid that we couldn’t blow the flame out.”<sup>55</sup> The pioneers’ houses were often not warm enough. They could not escape from the prairie winter. Leslie Neatby came to Saskatchewan from England in 1906 and remembered how cold his house was in the early years on the prairie: “Our house was a mere crate, a wretchedly inadequate shelter. Inside one saw bare studdings and silvery boards. The outer walls were two-ply and in part one-ply only of lumber; the foundations were unbanked, and the floor was so cold that to tread on it with bare feet was a most disagreeable sensation...Everyone suffered cold,...the house was abominably cold.”<sup>56</sup> Another pioneer, David K. Graham, struggled against cold when he was sleeping:

Now, I’ll tell you the truth without exaggeration. At the time it never dawned on me, but I wonder every time I think of it this last 10 or 15 years, I wonder why I didn’t freeze to death...I don’t know why I didn’t freeze to death in bed. I would curl up all in a ball with my head covered up...when you curl up like a ball, you can’t lay that way very long...I didn’t at the time. But I’d have to stretch out, I couldn’t help myself. And it was just exactly like putting my feet on bare ice. Now that’s the truth, the whole truth. And my feet would nearly freeze up and so I’d have to curl right up again in a ball.<sup>57</sup>

The newcomers did not usually have blankets or quilts. There was no choice other than staying in bed with all clothes that they brought. One pioneer remarked that “we lay in our bed trying to keep ourselves warm, and took all our clothing to keep us from freezing. In fact it was the most

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<sup>54</sup> [Saskatchewan Archives Board](#), Pioneer Questionnaire, S-X2 1137, MacConwell George.

<sup>55</sup> Pioneer Questionnaire, S-X2 2605, Albert Edward Elderton.

<sup>56</sup> Neatby, [Chronicle of a pioneer Prairie family](#), 18-19.

<sup>57</sup> Pioneer Interview, C.7 David K. Graham.

miserable day I ever had [sic] terrific storm.”<sup>58</sup> Many pioneers also lacked proper footwear and so their feet burned from frost bite and were swollen with chilblains.<sup>59</sup>

Pioneers had difficulty even preparing meals at home: “The preparation of breakfast took up a good part of the morning, for ice had to be melted before porridge could be cooked. The bread, home-baked and moister than the modern bakery product, froze to a hardness that made a billiard ball mere pulp by comparison.”<sup>60</sup> Some pioneers had trouble getting water because their pump or stream was frozen. Percy Maxwell wrote that “this morning the pump was frozen up so we had to have melted snow for breakfast and then go and light a fire to thaw out the pump. The creek is frozen over and I have to break the ice three times a day to [take] water [into] houses.”<sup>61</sup> Pioneers felt the severity of the winter weather in the West no matter where and when they were.

Blizzards sometimes hit the prairie. “Blizzards were extremely dangerous and long lasting. They would rise all of sudden.”<sup>62</sup> In the early years of homesteading, some pioneers got stranded in a blizzard when they were miles away from their house. It was easy to get lost in a blizzard and die even when they went to the barn. Conrad MacDonnell, the son of a pioneer from Ireland, “put a rope running from the house to the barn as a guide-line,” because during a blizzard he was not able to see anything.<sup>63</sup> Many men went missing when they left their farm to get wood. Amanda Caroline Norum came from Ontario to homestead in Watrous. Her mother could do nothing but pray when her sons were outside in a blizzard. She remembered a blizzard “that came up suddenly while my teenage brothers had taken cattle to a slough about a mile off to water, and how my mother gathered us three small children around her as she knelt and prayed

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<sup>58</sup> Saskatchewan Archives Board, Pioneer Diary, S-1.4 William Wallace Clarke.

<sup>59</sup> Norah L. Lewis, “Goose Grease and Turpentine: Mother Treats the Family’s Illnesses,” Prairie Forum, v.15, no.1 (spring 1990), 75.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>61</sup> Maxwell, Percy Augustus Maxwell, 40.

<sup>62</sup> Saskatchewan Archives Board, Pioneer Interview, A.945, Tim Jones.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.



for their safety.”<sup>64</sup> A blizzard sometimes hit at night, woke pioneers out of their sleep, and sent temperatures falling:

About 2 a.m. I woke up the sound of [hail] cracking in the frozen walls. Anyone used to these regions know this is a sign of extremely cold weather. A blizzard had started and the wind was howling. I could see my breath coming and going in icy sheets...the house was freezing when I looked in the stove, the fire was dead out...I lit the fire twice and it went out again...colder and colder I became. About 4 a.m. I made one more attempt to light the fire...and failed. My cold numb fingers refused to grip the ice cold lifter...In all these years in Canada. I [was] never so near freezing to death as that night.<sup>65</sup>

The winter of 1906-07 was so bad that the severity is still talked about from generation to generation.<sup>66</sup> The summer of 1906 had been good and the pioneers had a large harvest. They finished threshing by the end of October and started cutting and hauling wood for the winter.<sup>67</sup> In spite of the ideal summer and fall, the winter of 1906 started suddenly with a three-day blizzard. The temperature reached record lows and the amount of snowfall was unparalleled. Numerous people suffered; some died.<sup>68</sup> In the middle of February 1907, the weather was getting warmer. People thought that spring was approaching. In downtown Winnipeg, snow was melting fast and water was running on the streets. But, then, a storm hit Winnipeg. It started snowing and stayed cold until the first week of May. It was the middle of May before people could work full days there.<sup>69</sup> One homesteading area had an enormous amount of snowfall that buried all the houses. Some homesteaders had trouble getting out of their houses:

the winter 1906-07 [sic] One morning when we awoke, we found we were completely snowed in, when we opened the door, the snow fell inward, we cut six large steps up to the daylight, after that we had to carry the snow in the house outside ---When we were able to get outside and look around, the sight was terrible,

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Pioneer Dairy, A.7, Johnson Manuscript, 73.

<sup>66</sup> Joe Cherwinski, “The rise and incomplete fall of a contemporary legend: frozen Englishmen in the Canadian prairies during the winter of 1906-07,” Canadian Ethnic Studies, v.31, (Fall, 1999), 20-43.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Pioneer Diary A.11, Gudlaugson Magnus G.

nothing but snow here and there would be a hummock which might be a dwelling, we could only tell by the tiny wreath of smoke from the Stove pipe were the people at home in them, and how were they doing? were they all right?<sup>70</sup>

In the early pioneer days, settlers had to travel great distances to get wood or go to the general store. By 1920, while some pioneers had motor cars, most homesteaders had to travel by horse, ox and wagon or sleigh.<sup>71</sup> In winter, the lengthy trip was the hardest part for pioneers. In snow storms, oxen were an indispensable guide for pioneers to keep following trails: “In snow storm should have lost our way entirely had it not been for the oxen, who managed to stick to the trail in a marvellous way.”<sup>72</sup> When severe weather hit and snow piled up deeply, however, trails were impassable even with oxen. “Even if pioneers had made it to town, transportation disruptions were so [serious] that commodities like coal oil, tea and sugar were in short supply and the mail and newspapers were weeks late.”<sup>73</sup> One pioneer experienced the lack of fuel during the first winter and burned hay:

During the first part of December, however, the winter set in and it was the most severe up to after Christmas...the winter more than set in with even greater force up to the 20<sup>th</sup> of April. For four months we were isolated. All the settlers began to get panicky. They had nothing left to burn, some had to burn hay in their heaters, to keep themselves from freezing.<sup>74</sup>

Besides insufficient fuel, pioneers’ diet was limited because of the bad weather:

In 1892-93, there was no train service for a period of seven weeks. The snow was so deep along the railway line that the top of the loco-motive smoke stack could just be discerned above the drifts. The trains were unable to make the through trip, and the infant settlement was cut off from civilization and from food supplies... All some of the new settlers had to eat were a few potatoes and a little meat.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> University of Saskatchewan Libraries Special Collections, A.S. Morton manuscript collection, C555/I/2.35/, Women’s Canadian Club in the Pioneer Stories Competitions, 1924, “No title.”

<sup>71</sup> Lewis, “Goose Grease and Turpentine,” 80.

<sup>72</sup> Pioneer Dairy, A.93, Hays William.

<sup>73</sup> Cherwinski, “The rise and incomplete fall of a contemporary legend,” 20-43.

<sup>74</sup> Pioneer Interview, A.945, Tim Jones.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

During the winter months, pioneers could not get enough fresh fruit and vegetables, which made family members susceptible to illness.<sup>76</sup> Some pioneers had to make do with frozen food. One pioneer woman said, “we had eaten our dinner of frozen biscuits and frozen tomatoes eaten from the can”<sup>77</sup> In spite of these severe experiences, no pioneers had left after their first winter: “It was the first prairie winter for most of the settlers but none of them left the country the next spring”<sup>78</sup>

During snow storms, it was impossible for pioneers to undertake long trips to get commodities, fuel, and food. But even when the temperature was not so cold, lengthy winter trips were hard on pioneers. One pioneer family from England homesteaded in North Battleford in 1906, five years before the railway arrived. They had to go to Sounding Lake to get wood, seventy miles away from their home. They started traveling by wagon on Monday and returned home at Saturday noon. During the trip, they had to sleep under the wagon in temperatures 30 below zero and lacked food for three days. In spite of such difficulties, they survived.<sup>79</sup> During winter, it was hard for pioneers to take enough food. Stanley Haymen homesteaded at Moose Jaw in 1921 and remembered how difficult it was just to have bread in the cold weather:

We had two sackfuls of new bread. The weather was so darn cold that it froze solid. And you couldn't cut it with an axe because it would fly all over the place. One day I was going and I had a sack of this bread on and it fell off and the hind wheel of the wagon went over with all that darn stuff on it and it never even dented the bread. The only way we could eat it was to put a sack over it and hit it with the back of the axe and gather the crumbs.<sup>80</sup>

Severe winters also affected school life. During winter some schools were closed because of cold weather.<sup>81</sup> In certain areas, schools were closed the entire winter. One pioneer said he

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<sup>76</sup> Lewis, “Goose Grease and Turpentine,” 72.

<sup>77</sup> Morton manuscript collection, C555/I/2.26/, “Pioneer Days in Saskatchewan.”

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Morton manuscript collection, C555/I/2.35/, “No title.”

<sup>80</sup> Saskatchewan Archives Board, Pioneer Interview C 5 Stanley Haymen.

did not attend school from October to May “as roads were not easy to work on too much snow.”<sup>82</sup> Another pioneer, who moved to Kelvindhurst in 1910, had no school from December 1 to sometime in March because “most pupils were too young to stand the cold.”<sup>83</sup>

Those pioneers who went to school during the winter experienced hardship. In the morning before class started, teachers or caretakers had to make students keep moving by playing games because the school was not always warm enough to start lessons.<sup>84</sup> There was a cannon-ball stove in the middle of the classroom at school in the early pioneer days. The children near the stove were nearly suffocated by the heat and those away from the stove were almost frozen.<sup>85</sup> Some students needed to wear their coats or wrap themselves up in blankets that they brought from home.<sup>86</sup>

Severe and sudden winter storms made it dangerous for children to attend schools. In order to escape the danger, some pioneers had only summer school.<sup>87</sup> Winter storms sometimes hit schools and frightened the students. One day, during class, “a smoothing cloud of snow as fine as flour and as sharp and cutting as sand” approached the school. When the blizzard started, the smaller pupils began to cry. The pupils knew how dreadful a blizzard could be because they heard since infancy stories of men frozen to death in blizzards. It was useless to think of trying to go home in a bad storm. The students gathered around the stove with a few robes and blankets that they brought from home. The teachers stayed up all night with the students by telling them

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<sup>81</sup> Saskatchewan Archives Board, Pioneer Questionnaire S-X2 1323, McCrae Thomas.

<sup>82</sup> Saskatchewan Archives Board, Pioneer Questionnaire S-X2 1497, McFarlane Lila M. (Mrs. Silas)

<sup>83</sup> Saskatchewan Archives Board, Pioneer Questionnaire S-X2 1525, McConwell George.

<sup>84</sup> Saskatchewan Archives Board, Pioneer Questionnaire S-X2 1497, McFarlane Lila M. (Mrs. Silas) and S-X2 1267, McGuirl James.

<sup>85</sup> University of Saskatchewan Libraries Special Collections, A.S. Morton manuscript collection, C555/I/2.6/, Women’s Canadian Club in the Pioneer Stories Competitions, 1924, “Trying Experience.”

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Pioneer Questionnaire S-X2 415, Muirhead Isabel. (Mrs. W.M.)

stories and tending the fire. After the snow storm passed, “a few frost bites were the worst injuries” that students and teachers suffered.<sup>88</sup>

Winter weather experiences were deeply engraved in pioneers’ mind. The extreme cold, frostbite, cold air, and blizzards were all unique winter experiences of the Canadian West. One pioneer saw in the morning his neighbour wandering in circles in the snow after it snowed all night. The neighbour repeated over and over to himself, “So this is Canada!”<sup>89</sup> After several years of homesteading, pioneers became used to the winter climate of the Canadian West. One pioneer after several winters, got acclimatized to the cold with same clothes that he brought from Europe. He noted that “after the first two winters here, we were wearing the same kind of clothing that we had worn in the city with the exception of thicker sweaters, overshoes etc...whether it was because we had become acclimatized or not I don’t know, but I do know, it’s just as cold here now in the winter as it ever was.”<sup>90</sup> Once acclimatized to winter climate pioneers looked upon the climate favourably. Another pioneer remarked that “by sheer necessity we became acclimatized and since then we like it.”<sup>91</sup>

When winter ended, deeply piled snow thawed and changed to water. The snow was sometimes piled so deeply that rivers flooded, and there was water everywhere. The pioneers’ houses and barns near rivers were inundated with water. One pioneer remembered a story of a flood: “I heard one story of a man near the river who carried his wife out of their little log cabin on his back, while the chickens flew to the top of trees.”<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Morton manuscript collection, C555/I/2.6/, “Trying Experience.”

<sup>89</sup> Pioneer Interview, A.945 Tim Jones.

<sup>90</sup> Pioneer Diary, A.7 Johnson Manuscript.

<sup>91</sup> Saskatchewan Archives Board, Pioneer Questionnaire, SX 1221, Haase Ernst Reinhard.

<sup>92</sup> University of Saskatchewan Libraries Special Collection, A.S. Morton manuscript collection, C555/I/2.29/, Women’s Canadian Club in the Pioneer Stories Competitions, 1924, “Pioneer Days.”

Summer weather on the prairies, like winter weather, gave unique experiences to pioneers. The most distinctive feature of the summer was the dry atmosphere. The summer weather was also as unpredictable as winter weather. According to promotional literature, homesteaders were not supposed to suffer from summer heat. Pioneers, however, had a hard time working outside in hot weather. One pioneer from England wrote in June 27, 1883 that “it is too hot to work and had a bathe at 4 p.m.”<sup>93</sup> It was sometimes unbearably hot. Another pioneer noted in July 12, 1889: “very hot, everything is burning up.”<sup>94</sup>

Heat and dry air in summer often produced prairie fires. Although the fires became less frequent as the land was broken, the skies were sometimes smoky in the fall and spring of the early pioneer days. One pioneer said that “the fall and spring skies were usually smoky from far-off prairie fires. At night they would see the shooting flames rapidly moving along the horizon and vanish out of sight.”<sup>95</sup> In the early pioneer days, prairie fires broke out and spread fast over the prairie since little land was under cultivation.<sup>96</sup> One girl remembered how unpredictably fast a prairie fire could travel. A mountie warned a family that a fire was burning nearby. It was hazy all day and the family knew that the fire was about fifty miles away from their house. After dinner, when the father was going to the spring to fill the barrels, the fire was already sweeping their shack. “It [also] singed the hair off the horses’ legs.”<sup>97</sup> Her brother and dad dashed to get water and put out the fire.

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<sup>93</sup> Pioneer Dairy, A.93, Hays William.

<sup>94</sup> Pioneer Diary, A.76, Fred C. Gilchrist.

<sup>95</sup> Pioneer Interview, A.945, Tim Jones.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Morton manuscript collection, C555/I/2.29/, “Pioneer Days.”

Fire was a constant problem. One pioneer noted that a prairie fire was burning for weeks in the Dirt Hills territory (Yellow Grass district).<sup>98</sup> His father, mother, and brothers fought the fire to protect their hay stacks. When they came back to his house after the fire was over, they were exhausted, with their faces all blistered from the heat of the fire and their eyebrows and eyelashes burned off their faces.<sup>99</sup> His family nearly burned to death. They also had their house burned three times by the prairie fires.<sup>100</sup> Another pioneer remembered that a prairie fire took all the cattle feed: “Prairie fires used to be very bad as so little land was broken and the grass very high, the fire traveled underneath then the wind would carry the burning grass...We lost all our cattle feed.”<sup>101</sup>

The dry summer weather gave pioneers other experiences. Pioneer P.A. Maxwell got stuck in a bad dust storm in May, 1903. The winds blew very hard over the ploughed prairie land and the air was filled with dust. He noted that “the dust in the air was so thick that he could not work out of doors and even see the sun.”<sup>102</sup> Days without rain made things worse. Maxwell wrote that “it has been very hot here all last week and I have been pretty nearly dried up; the heat and dust gives you an awful thirst and we have been living in a sort of second edition of the dust storm.”<sup>103</sup> It was hard for some pioneers to keep enough water for their daily requirements. A thunderstorm was a welcome relief for them. Maxwell noted that “last night we had a thunderstorm and everybody immediately made a rush for the soft rainwater to wash their heads; so I thought it was a chance not to be missed and waited till the ladies had gone to bed and then

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<sup>98</sup> Saskatchewan Archives Board, Pioneer Questionnaire, S-X2 465 Miles Lilian. (Mrs. Richard)

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Saskatchewan Archives Board, Pioneer Questionnaire, S-X2 954 Pocklington George.

<sup>102</sup> Maxwell, Percy Augustus Maxwell, 11.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 12.

slipped off my clothes and went and stood in the rain and under the gutter pipe and rubbed off the dirt of two months farming.”<sup>104</sup>

Although the expansionists idealized the climate of the North-West as suitable for farming, the winter and summer weather served as obstacles to farming success for pioneers. The most troublesome weather conditions were frost and hail. Frost hit in late summer and early fall. L.C. Diggle homesteaded in Prince Albert and noted that “frost was a danger every year as the growth was heavy in crops.”<sup>105</sup> The frost often froze wheat and damaged most gardens.<sup>106</sup> One pioneer said that “in 1918 when the wheat froze in blossom on July 28 there was no crop to harvest.”<sup>107</sup> On the other hand, there were pioneers who did not experience frost. One pioneer in the Peace River district noted in his diary that “I have often wondered how we came to escape frost in late summer or early fall surrounded by bush as we were, but most homes were close to the lake and I guess the breeze of the lake kept the frost away. The people nearly always succeeded in raising all the most common garden vegetables like beans and corns by bushel.”<sup>108</sup>

Hail storms were also destructive to farming. It destroyed crops instantly and reduced plants to the ground. One pioneer remembered that “Around August 4<sup>th</sup>, 1916, we got a hail storm. I had a lovely crop at that time. The crop was all lost. The hail storm cut everything to the ground.”<sup>109</sup> Another pioneer from Quebec had a hail storm and cyclone together in August, 1899.

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 11-12.

<sup>105</sup> Saskatchewan Archives Board, Pioneer, Questionnaire, S-X2 2180, Lottie Clarke Diggle. (Mrs. Carl E.)

<sup>106</sup> Saskatchewan Archives Board, Pioneer Questionnaire, S-X2 2200, John Bates Dickey and S-X2 2369, George England.

<sup>107</sup> Pioneer Interview, A.945, Tim Jones.

<sup>108</sup> Pioneer Diary, A.11, Gudlaugson Magnus G.

<sup>109</sup> Saskatchewan Archives Board, Pioneer Interview, C.9, George Albert Bunn.



“They took all the crops, and killed hundreds of prairie chicken, up rooting trees and tearing down building.”<sup>110</sup> His neighbour lost his house roof and one of his daughters.<sup>111</sup>

The weather of the West made it difficult to raise livestock as well. The winter cold was very hard on animals. A pioneer, Fred C. Gilchrist, who homesteaded in the Qu’Appelle Valley, lost all of his hens to cold weather. Thus, he brought a new batch of hens into the house, made a place 7x7 and slept together. He noted that “hens were a nuisance but it is better to have them in than to have them all frozen to death.”<sup>112</sup> Another pioneer Peter Fraser from Scotland had a farm in Kelvington, Saskatchewan. He lost most of his cattle to starvation because the winter of 1892-1893 lasted from October 16 to May 2. He wryly noted that his cows became so cold that winter that “they gave ice cream instead of milk for the rest of their lives.”<sup>113</sup> Many pioneers from America also brought livestock but lost most of them because of the severe spring cold and heavy snows.<sup>114</sup>

The pioneers had trouble with irregular and insufficient rainfall on the prairies for farming. From 1909 to 1914, most of the farms around Sinnett, Saskatchewan had poor crops because it did not rain at the right time. “Seeds planted in May did not come up until the first rain in June and then the plants died in the intense heat.”<sup>115</sup> Thus, more than half of the original homesteaders moved to other places.

Despite the cold and snow, the western winter offered pioneers some amusement. After the snow piled up, they could enjoy sleighing, tobogganing, and skating. One pioneer noted that

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<sup>110</sup> Pioneer Questionnaire, S-X2 2440, Fennell Emma Flora.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Pioneer Diary, A.76, Fred C. Gilchrist.

<sup>113</sup> Pioneer Questionnaire, S-X2 2429, Peter Fraser.

<sup>114</sup> Pioneer Interview, A.945, Tim Jones.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

“in winter sliding down the hills was our chief amusement.”<sup>116</sup> It was an exciting experience for many pioneers to go on their first sleigh ride. One pioneer noted that “how wonderful an experience it was to go for a ride in a cutter pulled by a horse in winter... One could hear the “clip-clip” of the shod horses, and the tinkling of the bells in the frosty air.”<sup>117</sup> When it was too cold to play, some pioneers hiked across country several miles.<sup>118</sup> The Canadian prairie with the unique weather was an ideal place for these activities.<sup>119</sup>

Besides outdoor activities, dances, socials and debating were popular indoor activities. During winter, when there was little farm work, dances and all types of socials, such as birthdays, anniversaries and other special events, were held nearly every week.<sup>120</sup> In particular, dances were often held in winter and served as “Canada’s most popular pastime on the prairies” in the pioneer days.<sup>121</sup> One pioneer noted that “one thought nothing of a drive seven or eight miles, even with oxen, if there was a dance and a good time at the end.”<sup>122</sup> The pioneers also had enough time to do a lot of reading or other intellectual pursuits during winter. The intellectual pursuits included debating clubs. One popular topic was whether “winter is better than summer.”<sup>123</sup>

The prairie weather, especially winter, embellished the landscape. The weather produced distinctive scenery that the pioneers had never seen before. The most common scene was the winter morning with snowdrifts. One pioneer noted that the deep snow in the morning sun was

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<sup>116</sup> University of Saskatchewan Libraries Special Collections, A.S. Morton manuscript collection, C555/I/2.22/, Women’s Canadian Club in the Pioneer Stories Competitions, 1924, “Pioneer Life in Qu’Appelle Valley.”

<sup>117</sup> Pioneer Interview, A.945, Tim Jones.

<sup>118</sup> Pioneer Interview, C.5, Stanley Haymen.

<sup>119</sup> Morton manuscript collection, C555/I/2.22/, “Pioneer Life in Qu’Appelle Valley.”

<sup>120</sup> Pioneer Interview, A.945, Tim Jones.

<sup>121</sup> Pioneer Diary, A.7, Johnson Manuscript.

<sup>122</sup> Morton manuscript collection, C555/I/2.22/, “Pioneer Life in Qu’Appelle Valley.”

<sup>123</sup> Pioneer Interview, A.945, Tim Jones.

glittering diamonds for miles and miles.<sup>124</sup> Another pioneer described the effect caused by the reflection of the sunlight on the snow: “The sunshine on the snow made one feel as of one was looking at a world all heaped with crystal powder, and diamond dust.”<sup>125</sup> The bright sun in the winter also created beautiful scenery if there was an ice fog. One pioneer noted that “the weather was mild and the bright sun high in the sky was a beautiful contrast to the ice fog so prevalent during mid-winter’s cold.”<sup>126</sup>

There were also mirages on clear and cold winter mornings. One pioneer remembered that “we witnessed during the winter on clear cold mornings very distinct and fine mirages of distant landscapes that reflected against the horizon.”<sup>127</sup> The northern lights were another amazing and strange phenomenon that pioneers had never seen before. One pioneer noted: “It was a grand sight to watch the lights flashing across the northern heavens, first here, then there, then disappearing only to flash still more brilliantly again and zigzagging in streaks of yellow and purple colors.”<sup>128</sup>

The climate of the Canadian West made a lasting impression on pioneers. Both hardship and joy were rooted in pioneers’ consciousness of climate. Pioneers enjoyed breathing the pure, healthy and invigorating air of the West that was considered to be far better than Europe and the American West. In fact, some pioneers boasted better health than in their mother countries. Winter cold, on the other hand, bore little resemblance to the promotional literature. Pioneers needed to adapt to the new environment in order to keep warm even in their houses. Once

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<sup>124</sup> “Pioneer Days,” Morton manuscript collection, C555/I/2.29.

<sup>125</sup> “Pioneer Story” Morton manuscript collection, C555/I/2.36.

<sup>126</sup> Pioneer Diary, A.241, Skuli M. Bachman.

<sup>127</sup> Morton manuscript collection, C555/I/2.32/, “For Her Children’s Sake- or A Mother Braving A Wilderness.”

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

pioneers acclimatized themselves to the cold, the western winter was tolerated. People enjoyed the unique scenery and the outdoor activities specific to the Canadian West.

The actual climate of the Canadian West was not as ideal as portrayed by the expansionist and Canadian government. People not only found it difficult to adjust to the extreme cold, but faced the threat of blizzards and prairie fires. Frost and lack of rainfall, on the other hand, were two major obstacles to farming. The climate of the West sometimes overwhelmed pioneer families, made homesteading difficult, and taught them to expect variations from year to year and from season to season. There was no such thing as normal or ideal weather; rather, it was unpredictable. At the same time, homesteaders generally preferred their new life in the West, whatever the weather, rather than living in urban centres. They liked their new lifestyle and believed that the North-West was a better place for their children to grow up.<sup>129</sup> By learning to cope with the climate, pioneers became hardy and strong and managed to succeed in farming. One woman pioneer considered the climate to be harsh, if not terrible, but also as a “Life Experience.”<sup>130</sup> Pioneers accepted inconvenient aspects of climate as part of their new life, which was better than their past life in their mother countries. The climate of the West was both a source of pain and pleasure.

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<sup>129</sup> Lewis, “Goose Grease and Turpentine,” 68.

<sup>130</sup> Morton manuscript collection, C555/I/2.35/, “No title.”

### **Chapter Three** **Life Experience**

Pioneers found that the climate of western Canada was unique, unpredictable, and extreme. It could make their life not only pleasant and enjoyable but also difficult and challenging throughout all seasons. It was quite different from the ideal climate being promoted by the expansionists and the Canadian government. In fact, the pioneers' experience suggested that promoters of western settlement saw what they wanted to see in the climate, the favourable aspects, while downplaying any negative features. This third and last chapter examines how the western climate was portrayed in federal government publications, in literature and poetry, and in landscape painting in the 1920s and 30s after the settlement boom of the early twentieth century and in light of the day-to-day experiences of pioneers with the weather. This examination of literature and art during the interwar period seeks to determine how the climate of the region was being portrayed in high culture at that time: whether the pioneers' or expansionists' view of the climate became the received or accepted view. Furthermore, the comparison between the pioneers' actual accounts and literature and art from this period will measure, as Eli Mandel argues, whether artists and writers helped create the image of the West. Thus, this chapter also would find how deeply and closely the climate of western Canada was etched in the pioneers' consciousness. The concept of the ideal climate served to minimize the impact of the real climate.

Beginning in 1918, the government of Canada through the Department of Immigration and Colonization began publishing regular annual reports on the three prairie provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta. The reports were published under the name, "Canada

West” and provided general information about the region.<sup>1</sup> Every report in the 1920s and 1930s mentioned the climate; in fact, it was an important feature of the publication.

In the “Canada West” magazine, the climate of western Canada was often described as clear, crisp, fresh, and bracing with dry air and bright sunshine all season.<sup>2</sup> It was remarked that “sixty per cent of the days are sunshiny.”<sup>3</sup> Bright and sunny days were notable especially in Alberta, commonly called ‘Sunny Alberta.’<sup>4</sup> These two features made every season enjoyable. “Spring and autumn are [also] delightful seasons of moderate temperature and bright sunshine.”<sup>5</sup> In summer people had long evenings with brilliant sky until 10 o’clock or later, which was one of the most enjoyable characteristics of the summer climate.<sup>6</sup>

Besides the bright, sunny days, the winter climate of western Canada was known for its dry atmosphere and bright sunlight. The government reports suggested that winter cold was not felt as much as the thermometer registered. “Winter cold is tempered by the dryness of the atmosphere and the bright sunshine,” which makes it not difficult for people to endure it.<sup>7</sup> The reports did not hide the fact that the thermometer sometimes registered as low as forty degrees below zero. The magazine claimed, however, that “the calm that prevails at such times and absence of humidity gives the truth to the remark, ‘It is cold but you don’t feel it.’ ”<sup>8</sup> In addition,

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<sup>1</sup> Department of the Immigration and Colonization, Canada West: Canada—the new homeland, (Ottawa: Department of the Immigration and Colonization 1930).

<sup>2</sup> Department of the Immigration and Colonization, Canada West, (Ottawa: Department of the Immigration and Colonization 1920), 4, 41; Department of the Immigration and Colonization, Canada West, (Ottawa: Department of the Immigration and Colonization 1922), 30; Department of Immigration and Colonization, Canada West: Canada—the new homeland, (Ottawa: Department of the Immigration and Colonization 1924), 8.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>4</sup> Department of Immigration and Colonization, Canada West 1924, 25.

<sup>5</sup> Department of Immigration and Colonization, Canada West 1920, 17.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>7</sup> Department of Immigration and Colonization, Canada West 1924, 8.

<sup>8</sup> Department of Immigration and Colonization, Canada West 1922, 6.

the remarkable brilliance of the sunshine had “the effect of dispelling any dampness.”<sup>9</sup> The dry air of western Canada was compared with the damp air of other countries. “Most people prefer [the] dry cold to the damp, foggy weather in countries with a more temperate climate.”<sup>10</sup> The reports said that western Canadians preferred the winter to their native countries: “It is [a] common thing to hear settlers in Manitoba from the United States say that they prefer the Manitoba winter to that of the country which they left.”<sup>11</sup> The reports also said that the reader would be surprised because many settlers mentioned their preference for the dry winter: “you will be surprised at the number who will say, ‘I don’t mind the cold as much here as I did back home.’ ”<sup>12</sup> Thus, in the reports, Ottawa reinforced the idea that western Canadians did not complain much about cold weather. The 1922 edition said that “a visitor would find less complaint of cold weather there in an entire winter, than he would find in one day discussing that country with people in California or Florida, who had never been in western Canada.”<sup>13</sup> It acknowledged that the winter of the western Canada was cold, but it was tempered by the unique dry air. In addition, “Canadians have learned how to dress for their winter seasons so that even the most severe weather may be spent in comfort.”<sup>14</sup> In the more northern regions of western Canada, where even lower temperatures were explained, woods and large bodies of water modified the cold and protected settlers.<sup>15</sup>

It was also reported in “Canada West” that the winter climate of western Canada brought good health to settlers. The health of the children in western Canada was superior to any other

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<sup>9</sup> Department of Immigration and Colonization, Canada West 1920, 4.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 4: Department of Immigration and Colonization, Canada West 1924, 8.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>13</sup> Department of Immigration and Colonization, Canada West 1922, 6.

<sup>14</sup> Department of Immigration and Colonization, Canada West 1920, 2.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 41.

country. No country has children as healthy as Canada. It was believed in the 1920s that the northern climate was more advantageous to the growth of healthy races than more southern climates.<sup>16</sup> The 1920 publication considered the state of health of the children as “the best indication of the advantages of the climate of western Canada.”<sup>17</sup> Besides physical advantages, the winter climate of western Canada enhanced mental well-being: lower temperature regions produced a vigorous and exhilarating feeling.<sup>18</sup>

These positive descriptions applied to summer as well. The reports said that summer was hot but it was never a sweltering heat.<sup>19</sup> As the thermometer in winter indicated 30 to 40 degrees below zero, in summer it registered sometimes 32 degrees above and occasionally even 35 and 37 above.<sup>20</sup> These temperatures, however, were not common but rather extreme points. Even though extreme heat was registered, “it is only for a few hours in the middle of the afternoon.”<sup>21</sup> The summer days were regularly tempered by cool and comfortable nights.<sup>22</sup> Thus, “the summers are fine, with the long days of sunshine and the cool nights.”<sup>23</sup>

“Canada West” suggested that the climate of western Canada was favourable to the development of agriculture and livestock. In winter it snowed moderately heavily, “except in the southwestern portion, where it is very light.”<sup>24</sup> But the transition from winter to spring was very fast with a suddenly changing temperature, bright sun, and soft breezes called Chinook Winds. These features of the climate made snow melt in a short time, which “made agricultural

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 4; Department of Immigration and Colonization, Canada West 1924, 25.

<sup>19</sup> Department of Immigration and Colonization, Canada West 1920, 31.

<sup>20</sup> Department of Immigration and Colonization, Canada West 1924, 8.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>22</sup> Department of Immigration and Colonization, Canada West 1920, 18.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 4.



development possible to a great distance northward.”<sup>25</sup> “The ground surface dries up as fast as it thaws out and in a few days the dust is flying.” In early April, snow disappeared and seeding operations began around the first week of April. The reports said that “during the past ten years the average date of the commencement of seeding operations was April 8 and the average date at which seeding operations were general was April 18.”<sup>26</sup> It was said that “spring seeding dates for wheat and oat are earlier than in most of northern and middle States.”<sup>27</sup>

Summer was not as long as the eastern provinces, but “in May the heat is greater than it usually is [there].” In addition, western Canada had a long duration of sunlight in summer. These features compensated for the short growing season. July was the month of the greatest heat, as high as 37 degrees above, but was also known for its cool nights with dews to refresh and moisten the growing crops.<sup>28</sup> “Rainfall is light to moderate” and the annual amount is sufficient for vegetation because “the greatest part of [rainfall] came during the growing season” of May, June and July.<sup>29</sup> Thus, “rainfall is adequate for the production of all cereal crops and the growing of field roots, garden stuff, and foddors of great variety.”<sup>30</sup> The 1920 edition mentioned that there was a certain amount of hail in some areas before harvest. But the report also said that “the percentage of damage it does to growing crops, taking the provinces as a whole, is small, though often very severe locally.”<sup>31</sup>

The climate also benefitted livestock. The reports said that cattle could live outside through the entire cold winter: “In nearly every part of the Canadian West cattle and horses run

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>27</sup> Department of Immigration and Colonization, Canada West 1923, 4.

<sup>28</sup> Department of Immigration and Colonization, Canada West 1920, 4.

<sup>29</sup> Department of Immigration and Colonization, Canada West 1924, 8; Ibid., 4, 41.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 41.

out the whole year without any shelter than that afforded by nature in tree protection.”<sup>32</sup> Winter low temperatures were not intolerable for both man and animal. “Canada West” reported in the 1922 printing that while “fully 90 per cent of horses and cattle stay out all winter, there is no record of any animal having died from exposure where it has been properly fed.”<sup>33</sup> In addition, the 1920 printing said that “bracing cold weather puts bone and muscle, fat and hide on horses and cattle.”<sup>34</sup> The 1922 printing described how one Saskatchewan farmer went to Kentucky in the eastern United States, bought horses, and brought them back to his home. The horses were exposed to the winter climate. After winter they got fat and hearty.<sup>35</sup> These climatic features were more advantageous to agriculture than the climate of the western States: “Canadian grain, vegetables, horses, cattle and sheep when brought into competition with like articles grown and raised in more southern climes have no difficulty in securing the highest honours.”<sup>36</sup>

“Canada West” noted how strongly the climate influenced social lives of western Canadians, especially winter activities. Skating and curling rinks were seen in nearly every town and settlers were very enthusiastic about playing and watching these winter sports games. Even at 38 degrees below zero, a large audience gathered at the rink to enjoy watching the sport. Ice hockey and curling matches were never called off due to cold weather, but rather owing to warm weather and no ice.<sup>37</sup> The 1922 printing reported that “the desire for sports and pastimes [in

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<sup>32</sup> Department of Immigration and Colonization, Canada West 1920, 3.

<sup>33</sup> Department of Immigration and Colonization, Canada West 1922, 6.

<sup>34</sup> Department of Immigration and Colonization, Canada West 1920, 4.

<sup>35</sup> Department of Immigration and Colonization, Canada West 1922, 6.

<sup>36</sup> Department of Immigration and Colonization, Canada West 1923, 4.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 6.

winter] is as keen during sub-zero weather as at any other time.”<sup>38</sup> The lover of outdoor sports looked forward to the winter season.<sup>39</sup>

According to the government publication, winter in western Canada gave settlers an opportunity to enjoy their lives. The winter months were a season to revel in the circle of friendship. The settlers had many party gatherings and enjoyed singing songs, and dancing in winter. These winter activities, with frequent visiting from home to home, deepened social intercourse and encouraged friendships. The 1923 printing said that “‘a generous friendship no cold medium know.’ If we might play upon that phrase, we would say that the cold medium of the Canadian winter restores to us the warm and pleasant friendships that summer interrupts.”<sup>40</sup> Thus, it was said in the 1920 printing that “Canadians are a social people, not inferior to any other nationality in intelligence and in the friendly attitude displayed toward their neighbours.”<sup>41</sup> Winter sports and pastimes made winters enjoyable and better than those of the western United States: “winter is of no longer duration in Western Canada than in the Middle Northern States.”<sup>42</sup> The 1923 issue included one pioneer’s account about the social importance of winter: “William Brown, of Lockwood, Saskatchewan, was asked to write something of the social life in Western Canada.... I often wonder why some of the boys leave for the winter months. They do not know what they miss.”<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>39</sup> Department of Immigration and Colonization, *Canada West 1920*, 3.

<sup>40</sup> Department of Immigration and Colonization, *Canada West 1923*, 4.

<sup>41</sup> Department of Immigration and Colonization, *Canada West 1920*, 2.

<sup>42</sup> Department of Immigration and Colonization, *Canada West 1922*, 6.

<sup>43</sup> Department of Immigration and Colonization, *Canada West 1923*, 4.

The climate of western Canada, according to “Canada West,” raised men and women who were physically and mentally fit, which meant an energetic and healthy race.<sup>44</sup> Western Canadians enjoyed the climate, especially the winter months.<sup>45</sup>

While Western Canada can point with pride to the development of a race of energetic and healthful people, a people proud of their rich heritage, and who have demonstrated to the world successful accomplishments in every line of industry and commerce, owing somewhat to her bracing, cold, dry winter, it is not alone the benefits arising from such winters that give her the prestige she possess in producing what has been enumerated.<sup>46</sup>

In “Canada West” in the 1920s and 1930, the climate of western Canada was talked about positively. There were no negative aspects of climate mentioned. The climate in the reports brought only benefits to western Canadians. Settlers were proud of the climate. In the government reports, only favourable aspects of the climate were said to be part of the pioneers’ experience. In other words, the climate of western Canada had a positive and lasting influence on pioneers.

Historical works and textbooks are another important source on how the climate was perceived after the settlement period. Like the government reports, the writers of historical works and textbooks talked about winter cold and summer heat. Alfred Lefroy Burt, Head of the Department of History at University of Alberta, published a book in 1930, *The Romance of the Prairie Provinces*. He pointed out that winter was hard and severe, even though settlers, who at first lived in tents, could have warmer dwellings such as sod or log house.<sup>47</sup> In addition, the settlers had to build shelters for their livestock. They could not survive the winter without shelter; otherwise, they would die from exposure to the winter cold. The severe winter of western

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<sup>44</sup> Department of Immigration and Colonization, *Canada West 1924*, 8.

<sup>45</sup> Department of Immigration and Colonization, *Canada West 1922*, 6.

<sup>46</sup> Department of Immigration and Colonization, *Canada West 1923*, 4.

<sup>47</sup> A.L. Burt, *The Romance of the Prairie Provinces*, (Toronto: W.J. Gage, 1930), 217.

Canada was discussed in other historical books. The Dominion Bureau of Statistics in a 1927 publication declared that severe winter cold was one conspicuous characteristic of the prairie climate.<sup>48</sup> The winter came to the prairies with strong cold winds. However, despite the winter cold, Burt observed that the climate could give health and wealth to the settlers who were not afraid.<sup>49</sup>

In another contemporary work, *Things seen in Canada*, Joseph Edward Ray said that western Canada had a pure and bracing air and that the settlers testified to its healthfulness. He suggested that “A testimony to its salubrity [the climate of Saskatchewan] is the fact that it has the lowest death-rate of any province in the Dominion.”<sup>50</sup> John D. Higinbotham from Ontario ran his own drug store after university and had an interest in western Canadian History. In *When the West was young*, he also pointed out that, “On the whole, life in the rural districts and in the smaller towns of the whole Dominion is healthy physically, mentally, and morally.”<sup>51</sup>

These authors also explained how winter was an important time for pioneer leisure and entertainment.<sup>52</sup> Skiing, skating, tobogganing, ice-boating, and snow shoeing were held at winter carnivals.<sup>53</sup> The settlers enjoyed spending time playing these physical activities. Hockey and curling became favourite winter sports. Winter sports and amusements made pioneers have a better time and became one of the reasons that winter months were not simply a season that pioneers had to endure and survive. The Dominion Bureau of Statistics pointed out that “the

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<sup>48</sup> Canada. Dominion Bureau of Statistics, Sixty years of Canadian Progress, 1867-1927, (Ottawa: King’s Printer, 1927), 21.

<sup>49</sup> Burt, The Romance of the Prairie Provinces, 217.

<sup>50</sup> Joseph Edward Ray, Things seen in Canada: a description of life in town and country, the glorious scenery and boundless wealth of this great dominion, (Lndon: Seeley Service, 1928), 98.

<sup>51</sup> John D. Higinbotham, When the West was young: historical reminiscences of the early Canadian West, (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1933), 143.

<sup>52</sup> Frederic William Howay ed., Builders of the West: a book of heroes, (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1929), 71-72.

<sup>53</sup> Ray, Things seen in Canada, 112.

winter sports of Canada, representing the advantage now taken of what was once considered a disagreeable hardship, are annually attracting an increasing number of tourists.”<sup>54</sup> Western people were proud of their winter sports.

In the contemporary historical writings during the interwar period, the climate of western Canada was favourable to agricultural success. Ray wrote that “With so much virgin soil, such favourable natural conditions, and so excellent a climate, it is obvious that the province must become more and more important in the production of crops as well as stock-raising.”<sup>55</sup> Some people wondered if there was enough rainfall for vegetation to grow well. The rainfall of the western provinces was scantier than that of the eastern provinces. The Bureau of Statistics, however, pointed out that the timing of the precipitation was one of the remarkable features of the prairie climate: “fortunately the precipitation comes at the time of year when it is most needed, in the growing period, though in southern Alberta the summer precipitation is often deficient.”<sup>56</sup> Another climatic feature suitable to agricultural possibilities was the quick transition from winter to spring. Higinbotham introduced meteorologists’ reports to explain why snow disappeared rapidly. The moist air from the west side of Rockies condensed under pressure when it came over the mountains. As it descended over the foothills, the temperature increased and the air became less moist. Such air, which was called a Chinook, could melt snow with amazing speed. It was seen that “from one to two feet of snow disappeared within twelve hours, leaving scarcely a pool behind.”<sup>57</sup> These climatic characteristics were beneficial for grain, root, and fodder crops and resulted in large harvests. Ray insisted that “the soil and climate are so

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<sup>54</sup> Canada. Dominion Bureau of Statistics, Sixty years of Canadian Progress, 21.

<sup>55</sup> Ray, Things seen in Canada, 107.

<sup>56</sup> Canada. Dominion Bureau of Statistics, Sixty years of Canadian Progress, 21.

<sup>57</sup> Higinbotham, When the West was Young, 103.

gracious to the farmer that he may anticipate annually a harvest more than commensurate with the labour expended on its production.”<sup>58</sup>

In the historical writings, the climate of western Canada produced not only joy and happiness but threat and hardship. Mary Roberta Crawford wrote a Grade Five history textbook in 1927. In the textbook, *Romance of the Canadian Northwest*, she talked about the hardships of the climate. Blizzards were described as a cruel phenomenon beyond human control. One missionary party got stranded in a blinding snow storm. They crawled under the sled and covered themselves in blankets in order to keep warm until the storm weakened. When they could walk and go further, they dug a hole in a snow-drift and stayed inside with the blankets until rescue came. The struggle against the blizzard resulted in the party members freezing their feet badly.<sup>59</sup>

Another danger that the climate produced was frozen rivers. “Rivers freeze gradually, the most northerly part first. The waters flowing north pass over the frozen surface, are thrown back and frozen in all shapes--large blocks, hillocks, gullies, hummocks of ice.” The dogs and travelers cut their feet by these shapes of ice. Furthermore, crossing the frozen rivers with thin ice was even more dangerous. Sleds and dogs come to thin ice parts and would go through and “the blocks of ice would close over them.”<sup>60</sup> Crawford suggested that the climate was part of the hostile environment, and that pioneers confronted hardship and endured. She admired men’s bravery against the severe climate. She said that “the most romantic tales were of hairbreadth escapes from blizzards...and of the amazing bravery and endurance of men.”<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Ray, *Things seen in Canada*, 94.

<sup>59</sup> Mary Roberta Crawford, *Romance of the Canadian Northwest* (Grade V history), (Edmonton: Institute of Applied Art, 1927), 28.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

In *The Romance of the Prairie Provinces*, Burt described a destructive flood. In spring, snow melted rapidly and the waters from the melting snow overflowed the rivers. The water covered many miles and created an inland sea. “Buildings, livestock, farm implements were swept away by the flood which did not subside for weeks. When settlers returned from the hills to which they had fled, many of them had to begin life all over again.”<sup>62</sup> Burt believed that the climate of western Canada had the power to spoil pioneers’ lives. It was implied, however, that climate could make the life bounteous too. After the description of the flood, Burt pointed out that “then nature, having vied with man in a vain effort to blot out the little colony, repented of her cruelty. The curse was lifted, and from this time forth the land yielded a bounteous harvest almost every year.”<sup>63</sup>

The uniqueness and diversity of the western climate led to both positive and negative descriptions. Climate provided hope, pleasure, or terror for western Canadians. John Hawkes in his history book, *The Story of Saskatchewan and its people*, included a poem written by a pioneer woman. In the poem, “The Western Year,” she talked about each season and finished with the following conclusion:

So full our seasons, change on change,  
Hope and delight, and rest and fear,  
So wide we swing, so far we range,  
From Pole to Circle in a year,  
The wolf-fanged wind, the dust-dry snow,  
Then summer, and the after glow.  
Oh heart,  
Life’s living in Saskatchewan<sup>64</sup>

Or, as people say today, if you do not like the weather, wait five minutes for it to change.

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<sup>62</sup> Burt, *The Romance of the Prairie Provinces*, 133.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>64</sup> John Hawkes, *The Story of Saskatchewan and its people vol. 2*, (Chicago: S.J. Clarke. Co., 1924), 805.



Poetry and novels in the 1920s and 1930s were also essential to understanding how the climate of the Canadian West connected to pioneers' consciousness. Frederick Charles Miller from Liverpool, England emigrated to Manitoba when he was two years old. He grew up in a homestead family and was engaged in many kinds of jobs, including farming for himself. He wrote a collection of poems, *Songs of the Northland*, in 1925. In the introduction, Miller suggests that "poems are the natural expression of the indelible impress made upon my mind, heart and soul by the Spirit of the Great Lone Land in which I wandered, fought, struggled, and beat of all 'learned' in the days of my youth."<sup>65</sup> In one poem, "The Songs of the Northland," he perceives western Canada in winter as the land of ice and snow. He pointed out that only strong men could live and endure winter hardships and if men could survive, then, they would become stronger. It was believed that the winter climate could make people hardy:

I sing the Song of the Northland,  
The land of ice and snow,  
Where the strong man reigns as a king,  
And the weak man cannot go.

For the Spirit of the Northland watches!  
It makes them strong to endure,  
'Tis no place for the faint-hearted,  
And the "weeding" is very sure!

None but the strong may enter.  
None but the brave may stay!  
For the weak ones cannot endure  
The hardships day by day<sup>66</sup>

In another poem, "A Western Blizzard," Miller observed that blizzards often blew in without warning, but also made man stronger and more courageous.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Frederick Charles Miller, *Songs of the Northland: and other poems*, (Boston: Strafford Co., 1925), 1-2.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 36-39.

In his novel, *Settlers of the Marsh*, Frederick P. Grove also mentioned the climate's physical effect. One Swedish immigrant, Neil, started working at a farm. He felt that working in the prairies required him to use all his energy. But when the sky was bright and clear with no cloud in winter, working outside was joyful.<sup>68</sup> The winter air encouraged the settlers to work hard without much exertion. Grove also thought that the prairie atmosphere was healthier than the city. Mr. Vogel, a floor manager, had worked in the city. He became sick and went to see a doctor. The doctor asked him to live in the country. He moved to the prairie with his wife for his health.<sup>69</sup> The pleasant air comes with "the exhilarating crispness of the first few cold days" in fall, which are "days of healthy for healthy."<sup>70</sup>

Snow was the most common feature of winter climate. It was described positively in Susan Lewis's poem, "The Mission of the Snowflake." She described a flake of snow from when it falls from sky to a drop of water. The white snow had a pure intent:

"His [a snowflake] mission was small and his life was short,  
But armed with pure intent,  
He kept himself pure in a world of sin,  
And his was a life well spent."<sup>71</sup>

It was believed that the world was full of sin, but snow had a symbolic power to purify the world. The color of snow created such positive images.

In novels and poetry the prairie brought enjoyment and delight. Children enjoyed running in the snow and tobogganing:

And then the joy of Winter:  
Running lightly o'er the snow,  
Or on our swift toboggans  
Headlong, we'd downward go!

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<sup>68</sup> Frederick Philip Grove, *Settlers of the Marsh*, (New York: Doran, 1925), 24.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>70</sup> Frederick Philip Grove, *The Turn of the Year*, (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1923), 219.

<sup>71</sup> Susan Victorie Lewis, *Collected verse of Susan Victorie Lewis*, (Ottawa: Ru-Mi-Lou Books, 1929), 28-

Yes, we made for ourselves toboggans,  
(Really nothing more than sleds)  
And then, lying flat upon them, down, down we went.  
Endangering our limbs and our heads.

But little did we reckon of danger  
In that heyday of our youth,  
To every doubt a stranger,  
And happy in all truth!<sup>72</sup>

In another poem, “When Winter Comes,” Lewis pointed out that winter lasted long but the people enjoyed indoor activities such as singing and dancing and outdoors sports below brilliant sunshine. These amusements provided delight even in winter. Thus, she wrote that “when winter comes we do not fear a season long and cold and dreary, there’s so much sunshine ’way out here, when winter comes....it’s delight with song and dance both day and night, and all winter sports in sight, when winter comes.”<sup>73</sup> Grove, in his book, *The Turn of the Year*, remarked that “if the winter was hard, this is the time when our country boys and girls indulge in winter sports.”<sup>74</sup>

Snow, combined with brilliant sunshine, made for joyful winter scenery. In the poem, “The Great Plains in Winter,” Miller spoke of the glittering snow over the flat prairies:

Oh the magic! oh the glory.  
Of that land covered deep with snow;  
And the sparkle of the crystals  
'Neath the moon's effulgent glow.

Such a view left a strong impression on him and was deeply etched in his mind. He continued:

Once seen 'tis never forgotten;  
That land covered deep with snow;  
And we carry the memory with us wherever we go.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Miller, Songs of the Northland: and other poems, 58, 59.

<sup>73</sup> Lewis, Collected Verse of Susan Victorie Lewis, 66.

<sup>74</sup> Grove, The Turn of the Year, 32.

<sup>75</sup> Miller, Songs of the Northland: and other poems, 12-14.

In his novel, *Settlers of the Marsh*, Grove described one of the outstanding features of the winter climate. When the sleigh passed along the trails, dry and powdery snow was raised aloft and sparkled: “The snow was dry and loose like powder; it sparkled and glittered as it was dusted aloft by the horses....A noonday sun glared down on the landscape.”<sup>76</sup> On the other hand, in another novel, *The Yoke of Life*, Grove described a similar landscape differently. He observed one morning after a blizzard:

An ineffectual morning sun glared down on the waster created by the night’s blizzard. The landscape- the drifts, the bare trees, and even the sky- looked ice-cold, wind-swept, and hostile. The absolute quiet of the atmosphere and the indifference of the sun intensified that impression, just as the song of a bird on a battle-field emphasizes its horrors.<sup>77</sup>

Grove, however, compared the aftermath of a blizzard to the beautiful landscape after an almost fatal experience.

Northern lights were another magnificent sight. In his poem, “The Northern Lights,” Miller composed the following:

The night is clear and cloudless,  
All serene the earth below,  
When in the North there flareth forth,  
A wonderful white glow!

Of glorious, glorious streamers,  
Waving their flags of white,  
Wonderful, grand, triumphant;  
O’er the strait dome of the night!

He also compared the waving lights to Jacob’s ladder.<sup>78</sup> The Northern lights provided a kind of sacred image, a belief that settlers could succeed in the future. In another poem on northern

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<sup>76</sup> Grove, *Settlers of the Marsh*, 41.

<sup>77</sup> Frederick Philip Grove, *The Yoke of Life*, (New York: R.R. Smith, 1930), 26.

<sup>78</sup> Miller, *Songs of the Northland: and other poems*, 8-9.

lights, “The Lesson of the Northern Lights,” he expected the West to prosper under the northern lights that incarnated God:

At this wondrous light in the sky,  
A faith springs up within us that we shall never die.  
A faith in God’s great mercy,...

A vision comes triumphant,  
Of a glory greater than all,  
Of our future home, where we’ll ne’er roam;<sup>79</sup>

The settlers were enraptured by the light which meant future prosperity.

F.C. Miller was fascinated with the brilliant and strong sun. The sunlight in western Canada was excellent for all crops. Thus, the summer climate, in his poem, “A Summer Day,” was the season of hope and delight:

When the strong, strong sun of Summer  
Casts its rays upon the land,  
Then all things grow and we do know  
That our Life is full and grand.

For the wondrous growth of all things green,  
Gives us courage and hope,  
Our sorrows fly- our hopes rise high,  
And we can with all things cope.<sup>80</sup>

Summer was also featured in another collection of poems, *Collected Verse of Susan Victorie Lewis*. For Lewis, summer was a happy time because the sky was so blue and still and gentle breezes blew lightly. The season cheered men and made them forget their sadness and depression:

Precious, precious summer time that our heavenly Father gives!  
'Tis the time for songs gladness:  
“Banish every thought of sadness.”<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 10-11.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>81</sup> Lewis, *Collected verse of Susan Victorie Lewis*, 14.

Each season, spring, summer, autumn, and winter had their own distinctive features. Miller said in the poem, "The Season of Our Life," that the settlers of the western Canada were greatly influenced by the climate. He also compared men's life to the seasons: Spring is Youth, Summer is Manhood, Fall is Middle-age and Winter is Old-age.<sup>82</sup> The similarity between the transitions of season and men's growth represented climate as a life experience. It was a clear sky with brightest sunlight in spring but a storm with cold winds came suddenly and blew away suddenly, which was compared to childhood's pain or passion. Summer had an extreme heat and hard rain, which was compared to increased men's hope and lustfulness. Fall was a season to harvest ripened grain, which was compared to men's hearts filled with hope. The season of ice and snow was winter, which stood for men's hair to grow white.<sup>83</sup> Winter and summer were especially memorable seasons. Winter was long with "cold snaps of great violence."<sup>84</sup> Grove, however, stated that western Canadians love the northern winter even though they long very much for spring when winter is approaching its end.

Paintings are another important medium for understanding how the climate of western Canada was portrayed in the 1920s and 1930s. In 1929, Grove declared that "national character was a product of the reaction of particular people to a particular place and that the reaction "tinged" attitudes to life and the world. Land and people were thought to be inseparable and it followed that by interpreting the land, painters would give people a stronger sense of who they were."<sup>85</sup> Painters could start searching for regional identities when they left behind their ties with European tradition. Western Canada was initially painted by visitors from the eastern provinces, such as journalists and travellers. Their drawings were used to "illustrate official reports and

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<sup>82</sup> Miller, Songs of the Northland: and other poems, 50-54.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 50-54.

<sup>84</sup> Grove, The Turn of the Year, 20.

<sup>85</sup> Ronald Rees, Land of earth and sky: landscape painting of Western Canada, (Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1984), 44.

travel narratives or were issued as a series with accompanying text.”<sup>86</sup> The paintings were based on what the painters wanted to see in western Canada, which were pastoral, romantic and optimistic images that appealed to the Victorian imagination.<sup>87</sup> The paintings had more to do with European tradition and did not reflect the actual sense of the western Canada. L.L. FitzGerald, Illingworth Kerr, and Robert Hurley, on the other hand, were remarkable painters of regionalism and realism.<sup>88</sup> In their paintings, what and how they drew reflected the real perception of climate.

FitzGerald, who was born in Manitoba 1890, spent most of his life in his hometown Winnipeg. In his boyhood summers, he stayed on his grandmother’s farm at Snowflake and was fascinated by the vastness of the prairie.<sup>89</sup> The early experience during summers on the prairie farm encouraged FitzGerald to paint the prairie with vivid impressions.<sup>90</sup> *Summer Afternoon, the Prairie* (1921) represents several features of the prairie climate. The painting shows the brightness of sun and the stillness of the air in summer. Winter also inspired FitzGerald. He remarked that “Both Val [his wife] and I are quite surprised at the way we have accepted the snow and even the below zero temperatures. Perhaps after all we belong here where the weather is positive almost any day of the year and no uncertainty about when it is winter and when summer.”<sup>91</sup>

Illingworth Kerr, Saskatchewan’s first native-born professional painter, was very enthusiastic to paint the prairie landscape, being affected by the strong regional and nationalist movement of the 1920s and the 1930s. At that time, he had a faith that the prairie landscape

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<sup>86</sup> Ronald Rees, *Images of the Prairie*, (Saskatoon: Mendel Art Gallery, 1979), 2.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>89</sup> Robert Ayre, “Lionel LeMoine Fitzgerald 1890-1956,” *Canadian Art*, Autumn 1956, 15.

<sup>90</sup> L.L. FitzGerald, “FitzGerald on Art,” *ART news*, Vol.8, No. 4, July-August, 118-119.

<sup>91</sup> Ayre, “Lionel LeMoine Fitzgerald 1890-1956,” 16.

could be captured by native-born painters.<sup>92</sup> Like FitzGerald, winter scenery became a captivating object to paint for Kerr. The pervading snow ground, snowdrifts, and snowflakes are well captured in *When Winter Comes* (1928), *Gravel Pits, Lumsden, Saskatchewan* (1929), and *Straw Stacks, March Thaw* (1935). Maggie Callahan argues that “in *Gravel Pits*, the snow patterns of winter are used to create rhythms. The muted browns and purples of old snow are contrasted with the intense orange in the sky.”<sup>93</sup> Robert Hurley from London came to the prairies in 1923 and started working on farms and lumber camps. Through his working experiences, he captured real landscapes in his paintings of the prairies. His painting method was watercolours. The paint colour of western Canada had to be softer than eastern Canada because of the dry air. Darker colours are for a dense and humid atmosphere.<sup>94</sup> Thus, translucent watercolours are very favourable to capture the prairie climate. Hurley’s works such as *Nocturne* (1933) and *Reflection, ca.* (1947) present his perception of the dry climate.

The analysis of the paintings does not give detailed perceptions of the climate by the painters. In their mind, however, summer afternoon with bright sunlight and winter scenery covered by snow or with snowflakes were two major objects that impressed the painters. In the two specific seasons, bright sunlight and clear, still dry atmosphere were climatic features of the prairies.

The contemporary writers and painters in the 1920s and the 1930s perceived both positive and negative powers in the climate of western Canada that affected prairie life strongly. Winter was considered cold, but snow turned the region into a playground for western Canadians to have much amusement and embellished the winter scenery. Winter was something pioneers

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<sup>92</sup> Ronald Rees, “The Prairie: A Canadian Artist’s View,” *Landscape*, 21, 2, 1977, 28.

<sup>93</sup> Maggie Callahan, *Harvest of the Spirit: Illingworth Kerr Retrospective*, (Edmonton: Edmonton Art Gallery, 1985), 20.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.



had to endure but also enjoy. Summer with its bright sunlight and long days was good for crops on the prairies. The heat was sometimes sweltering but nights usually cooled down for the settlers to relax. Hail, however, sometimes hit and took crops down. The dry air was also one of the climatic features of the prairies. It could melt snow in a short time so that the transition from winter to spring was smooth, which allowed homesteaders to start cultivating their land. On the other hand, the rapidly melted snow often led to floods. Thus, one climatic advantage was offset by another.

The climate in the contemporary literature and paintings more closely matched the experience of pioneers discussed in the second chapter. The accordance shows the depth of pioneers' sensitivity to the climate and the strength of the climatic influence on the settlers. The positive and negative aspects of the climate had been engraved in the pioneers' mind deeply. As Grove observed, the climate was likened to human life. Pioneers indentified the climate as life experience: pleasure, sorrow, and endurance.

Although the literature and arts in the 1920s and 30s provided both positive and negative images of the climate, the influence of the expansionists' view can be seen in federal government publications. "Canada West" was still promoting the ideal climate even after the settlement boom. The reports suggested that the winter cold was tempered by the dry air and that settlers lived comfortably even in severe winter because of the healthy and invigorating atmosphere. Physical, mental and intellectual well-being was still mentioned in the 1920s literature, which was not always true in the pioneers' experience.

Some historical works, poems, and novels were also influenced by the notion of the ideal climate. The severe winter and the hardship that went with it made settlers hardy, strong, and courageous. This ideology had its root in the expansionists' literature—"in pure, dry, electric

air... his [future settlers'] muscles will be iron, his nerves steel."<sup>95</sup> Expansionists exaggerated the climatic influence so positively that the ideal climate had a kind of holy power: the climate would create a garden of Eden. This sacred function of the climate was noted in the poems. Snowflake with pure intent and northern lights represented the divine grace. Both pioneers' and expansionists' views were seen in the 1920s and 1930s literature. The ideal climate, however, was so influential that the pioneers' actual perception of the climate was still downplayed. The features of the ideal climate appeared to be more important than the real one at that time in western Canadian history.

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<sup>95</sup> Thomas Spence, The Prairie Lands of Canada: Presented to the world as a New and inviting field of enterprise for the capitalist and New Superior Attractions and Adventures as a Home for Immigrants, (Montreal: s.n., 1880), 1.

## Conclusion

Historians and geographers have examined the changing images of western Canada in order to help explain the western Canadian identity and western Canadian history. This examination of the ideal and real climate of western Canada is another way to look at the western Canadian identity and its history.

The expectations of Canadian expansionists for the North-West created the ideal climate. In the early nineteenth century, before Canada began to consider the western interior as a potential settlement frontier, the images of the climate in the region tended to be negative—it was a cold wilderness, not suited for farming. This image was something that expansionists had to surmount if the North-West was to be settled and developed. All immigration pamphlets and expansionists' reports consequently had only positive accounts on the climate of the North-West. This popularized ideal climate dispelled the negative images of the region and its potential for immigrant farmers. This “transformed” climate was just a projection of expansionists' minds.

The expansionists gave the climate of the North-West almighty power, comparing the huge frontier to the garden of Eden. The pure, dry, cold, vigorous, and bracing air nourished men and created hard bone and muscle, sound minds, and healthy bodies. No man would know any illness, but rather live long, fruitful lives. The climate could also produce the best and largest quantity of crops and cattle in the world, and not require much labour from the homesteader. Nobody had to worry about the winter cold. It was not as bad as people imagined it could be. Finally, the ideal climate would help Canada realize the best features of British civilization on the prairies.

The expansionists' images became the perfect attraction for people who were from industrial societies or wished more economic success. The expansionists' promotion of the

North-West depended on the positive accounts of the ideal climate because it was believed that one of the most influential factors in settling and developing the western Canada frontier was a favourable climate for people, as well as agriculture. The ideal climate of the North-West may have been mythical, but it was a key element in the idea of the last, best West and marked a watershed in the history of western Canada. The ideal climate was an important part of the settlement boom of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

This concept of an ideal climate helped inspire immigrants from Europe and the United States to come to the North-West and start a new life. In reality, pioneers' homesteading was strongly and variously influenced by the climate. In contrast to the ideal climate, the harsh reality of the climate awaited pioneers. The pioneer experience with the actual climate was quite different from what they had been told or read about the climate of the region. Pioneers suffered during periods of extreme cold even in their sod or log houses; it was something they had never experienced. Destructive phenomena such as blizzards, prairie fires, heavy frosts, floods, and hail storms were also a great menace to pioneers' lives. Crop productivity was also limited by the climate and pioneers' labours were either rewarded or in vain depending on the growing season, which could greatly vary from year to year. Rainfall, for example, did not always come when crops needed moisture, and hail storms took crops away in an instant. Favourable weather, on the other hand, usually resulted in abundant harvests. The actual climate did not measure up, then, to what the expansionists imagined or the Canadian government reported. It was more unpredictable than ideal.

Pioneers, at first, were worried about their future because they found that the climate of the prairies could be harsh and destructive. The early homesteaders found that the climate sometimes threatened their lives. A sense of oppression and devastation was part of their actual

perception of the climate rather than that of hope and delight. The concept of the ideal climate strengthened this feeling because there was a huge gap between the expansionists' predictions and the actual hardship of the climate. The climate was something that pioneers actually had to surmount, learn to live with, in order to prosper. The pioneer, however, did not hold any adverse feeling about the severity of the climate. The destructive weather conditions provided lessons of endurance, perseverance, and partnership for the early pioneers. The climate taught pioneers that life in the region would not be easy, that they had to endure, and help each other to get through hardship. Such virtues were adopted as necessity to succeed on the prairies. Therefore, the early settlers had a life experience that was greatly shaped by the climate. Pioneers had the same idea of the climate as climatologist Elaine Wheaton's comment: The climate of the prairies makes the settlers amused, rich, terrified, and modest.<sup>1</sup>

Contemporary literature and paintings of the 1920s and 1930s observed that the climate of western Canada was unique and that settlers were much influenced by the weather conditions. Thus, the various portrayals of the climate meant that pioneers had a full appreciation of the climate. It was noted in the literature that pioneers were sensitive to the climate and compared it to "Life Experience." Such ideas of the climate in the 1920s' and 1930s' literature explained how pioneers actually perceived the climate and helped create the region. Pioneers were terrified and humbled by the destructive power of the climate, and delighted to have winter sports and great scenery that western Canadians are now proud of as a heritage.

After the settlement period, however, the expansionists' concept of ideal climate was still found in government publications. Climate was portrayed as a positive factor in the lives of westerners. It became part of the western Canadian identity. Despite their struggles with the

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<sup>1</sup> Elaine Wheaton, But It's a Dry Cold!: Weathering the Canadian Prairies, (Calgary: Fifth House Ltd, 1998), 1.

actual climate of the North-West, acclimatized pioneers were proud of their ability to live and prosper in the region in spite of the challenges presented by the climate. The ideology of the ideal climate became a form of environmental determinism. Future development of western Canada depended, in part, on its climate. The influence of the ideal climate was stronger than the actual climate. The concept of the ideal climate played down the actual impact of the climate on pioneers.

The myth and reality of the climate explained how the history of western Canada was governed by what people imagined the West to be, not always by what it really was. Climate is also important in understanding the identity of western Canadian pioneers because it influenced them. Settlers experienced the climate and were proud that they survived, stayed, and made a life for themselves and their children. Whether the portrayal of the climate has changed or not changed; the influence of the ideal climate has stayed.

The talk about the climate by the International Student Office was a lesson for me to endure and become humble to the severe winter. To survive on the prairies, one must endure and become humble.

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