

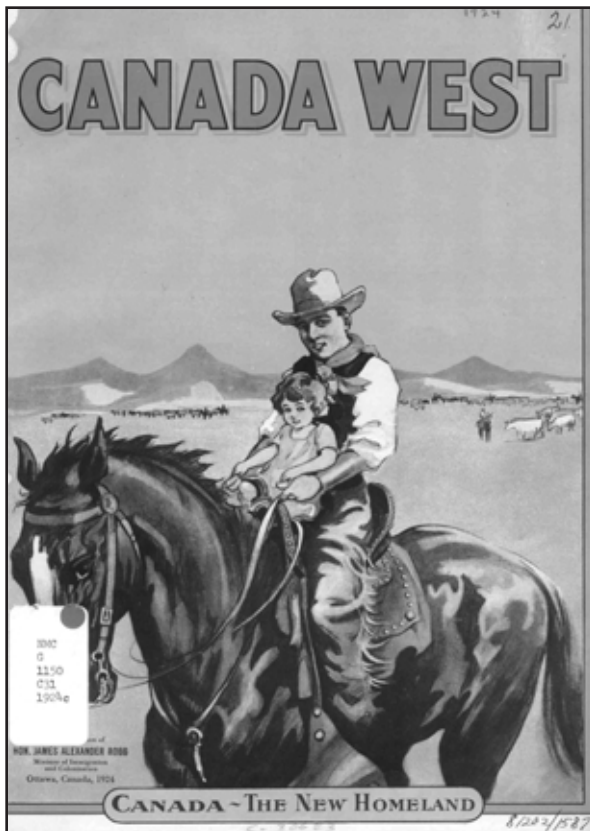
## LE MONDE DES MUSÉES WORLD OF MUSEUMS

### ACRES OF DREAMS: Selling the Canadian Prairies.

SANDRA MORTON WEIZMAN, curator.

Canadian Museum of Civilization, Gatineau, Quebec.

From 28 October 2005 through 29 January 2006.



*Illustration appearing in Acres of Dreams.*

*Original from Library and Archives Canada*

*Illustration faisant partie de l'exposition Arpents de rêves.*

*L'original provient des collections de Bibliothèque et archives Canada*

The poster for this exhibition features a sturdy yeoman farmer hoisting a bountiful sheaf of wheat before a pastoral background of endless productive farmland and blue skies. It is one of many official images produced by the federal government, railway companies, steamship lines and other business interests to sell the prairies to prospective immigrants. Curator Sandra Morton Weizman's storyline tells how the Edenic image of a "promised land" in the promotional publications gave way to bitter disappointment when the officially touted "promised land" failed to meet settlers' rosy expectations. The Museum's website nevertheless promises

that the exhibit will show, "that Prairie optimism endures, as new energy sources are found and as pluralistic societies find a place for themselves in communities across the West."

The Canadian Museum of Civilization commissioned this exhibition to commemorate the centenaries of Alberta and Saskatchewan in 2005. Its intended audience includes residents of the National Capital Region and Canadians visiting the capital during the period of its display. In lieu of a catalogue, the Museum's website provides information on the exhibition's aims, a statement from the curator, and a timeline detailing key events that shaped prairie settlement between 1867 and 1916.

Interpretively, the exhibition explores two central themes. The first examines how the federal government fulfilled its National Policy objectives of populating and developing the prairie region. In the decades between 1870 and 1920, more than two million people abandoned their homelands for an uncertain future in western Canada. By 1930, most of the prairies' arable land had been settled, thereby fulfilling the aims of the Dominion government in western settlement. The exhibition also highlights the different settlement experiences of six ethno-cultural groups: Americans, Mennonites, Doukhobors, Ukrainians, French (meaning francophone), and British settlers. Personal stories from these groups, presented through recordings of actors reading the participants' words, or through textual excerpts from diaries or letters, effectively reveal that the settlement of the prairies was achieved at significant cost to many participants. The second theme explores the character of the society newcomers established on the prairies in the period 1870-1930, showing how the shared difficulties of immigration and settlement fostered the development of a tolerant and inclusive culture in the West.

The exhibition uses a variety of media to develop these two themes. Sound, moving images, lantern slides, photographs, printed ephemera, and family artifacts all help illuminate various activities and groups connected with the settlement of western Canada, while interpretive panels place the assorted media into historical context. The majority of images and artifacts emphasize agrarian settlement and enable visitors visualize something of the settlement experience. They include a video version of a lantern slide show on the Canadian prairies that author Agnes Deans Cameron prepared for European audiences in the early 1900s. Larger artifacts include an Adams farm wagon and box, ca. 1920, and a Massey-Harris seed drill from 1920. Especially interesting are posters of bucolic farming scenes commissioned by the Canadian Pacific Railway and steamship companies to

promote the region's agricultural potential and its suitability as a home for the newcomers and their families. Examples of corporate propaganda, the pastoral images on these posters presented images representations at odds with the actual experience of many settlers.

The settlement of the Canadian prairies was not an exclusively agrarian phenomenon. In a section devoted to Winnipeg, entitled the "Gateway to the West," the exhibition also tells the stories of other settlers who chose to work in the towns, cities, or mining and logging camps. Here the exhibition employs a combination of media, including sound, synthesis texts, a diorama, superimposed images, and recorded personal stories activated by the pressing of buttons. Together these media help visitors visualize the immigrant experience and its challenges in the early 1900s. The exhibition also gives visitors a sense of Winnipeg as a burgeoning, multicultural metropolis where immigrants encountered a mix of opportunity and heartbreak.

The storyline acknowledges barriers of racism and prejudice faced by many newcomers. A panel in the exhibit on Winnipeg bears the sub-heading: "Many immigrants arrived with high hopes, only to face discrimination and life in crowded slums." In a segment devoted to steamship ephemera, a Head Tax Certificate associated with the notorious tax explains how it was applied and increased to \$500 per head by 1923, when Chinese immigration into Canada was completely prohibited. Various panels indicate that many immigrants' dreams of prosperity were shattered by their actual experience as settlers. At the end of the exhibition, a video featuring interviews with recent immigrants reveals that many are still confronting barriers to full participation in prairie society.

A segment of the exhibit devoted to the history of prairie Aboriginal people after resettlement on reserves implicitly acknowledges unresolved issues that arose from settlement. A series of paintings by the well-known Cree painter Allan Sapp reveals that First Nations people also practiced agriculture in the homesteading era, a fact often overlooked in treatments of prairie agricultural settlement. The Cree nevertheless confronted systemic racism that thwarted their agricultural aspirations.

Initially planned as a much larger exhibition, the scaled-back Acres of Dreams falls short of the epic treatment that the settlement of the vast Canadian prairies warrants. Visitors are not given a strong sense of the immense scale of the region,

the extent of population movement, and the enormous growth in the prairie economy in this period. The exhibition is also light on environmental history, including such factors as soils, topography, and climate which might usefully be referenced in explaining the relative opportunities or difficulties confronting different settlement groups. It would benefit from a greater contextualization of agricultural technology and its impacts on settlement. In particular, it might examine the role of technology in forcing producers off the land and the trend to larger and larger units managed by fewer and fewer farmers, a process which was underway even during the settlement era.

Nevertheless, within the scope of limited resources, the exhibition succeeds in addressing the cultural and religious diversity of the region, and in conveying the difficulties that many faced while trying to establish themselves. Both its artifacts and texts speak eloquently to these hardships. While cultural diversity has long been considered a cornerstone of prairie identity, in the settlement era it was often not embraced and at times the region's social relations were characterized by ethno-cultural and religious intolerance. To its credit, Acres of Dreams does not seek to downplay these issues. Its story of "harsh realities" continues to resonate, as various descendants of prairie settlers, more recent immigrants, emerging minorities, Métis and First-Nations people continue to struggle to find a secure place in this "promised land."

*Lyle Dick, Parks Canada  
Vancouver, B.C.*