

resources which they had gained only after a hard struggle with the federal government in 1930.

There was a time when these interests had been exclusively defended by Gardiner in Saskatchewan and Garson in Manitoba. After 1957, however, the Liberal Party became more centralized and less tolerant of regional demands. The metropolitan areas of the east were regarded as the primary sources of political strength. To this end, reforms in the party organization were introduced by Walter Gordon, a confidant of Lester Pearson, and with the assistance of Keith Davey, who engineered the defeat of Diefenbaker in 1963. The activities of the reformers outraged Saskatchewan's Ross Thatcher, who criticized them as spokesmen for the geographic centre and the philosophic left.

Because Canada was becoming a more decentralized federation, with provincial governments seeking and acquiring greater power and influence, the federalists were increasingly frustrated. Because their program of bi-lingualism was so unpopular in the West, Pearson adopted the concept of multi-culturalism as a government policy, but he had been forestalled by the prairie governments who introduced school instruction in languages other than English and French. Thus they, in a highly visible way, had recognized the variety of ethnic groups within their boundaries, and had, in the author's words, "blunted the impact of the federal government's multi-cultural policies."

Smith claims "the Liberal Party has been the author of its own demise in western Canada." He supports this contention in a wide-ranging and closely-reasoned argument. This is a work of national importance and will be welcomed by all concerned with the study of Canadian politics and government.

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A Voice in the Land: Essays By and About Rudy Wiebe, Edited by W. J. Keith. Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1981. pp. 254, \$16.95, cloth, \$8.95, paper.

With the publication of *Peace Shall Destroy Many* in 1962, Rudy Wiebe established himself as a writer to be reckoned with, and since the novel was set in Saskatchewan, the term "regional" was at once applied to him. His reputation as a "regional" writer seemed to be confirmed and strengthened with the publication of his monumental novels *The Temptations of Big Bear* (1973) and *The Scorched-Wood People* (1977).

Of course, Rudy Wiebe is a writer of the Canadian West, of the prairie, and since he so strongly identifies himself with that region, he is a "regional" writer. But that label obscures as much as it reveals, and the recent publication of *A Voice in the Land*, which brings together interviews with Wiebe and essays by and about him, allows us to gain a clearer perception of what precisely, in his case, the appellation "regional" means.

Several of his interviewers raise the question. Brian Bergman, saying to Wiebe that, more than any other Canadian writer, he is "a prairie writer," asks him: "Do you ever worry about being labelled a regionalist?" (p. 167). George Melnyk opens an interview by asking point-blank: "Do you consider yourself a regional writer?" (p. 204).

To Bergman, Wiebe replies by citing the case of William Faulkner. Faulkner, says Wiebe, did not worry "about being a regionalist." For Faulkner, the little corner of the earth out of which he created his fictional world was sufficient to "go on forever, endlessly, exploring the human condition." As for himself, he says, since he has "three hundred thousand miles of prairie to work with," he doesn't have to worry. And if Faulkner is to be called a regionalist, then he will accept that definition, too (p. 167).

To Melnyk's question he gives what seems at first glance an unequivocal answer. "I don't like to think of myself as a regional writer." But he goes on to say that a novelist must be rooted in a place and deal with particular people, since there's no such thing as writing about people in general. He's not sure whether the term "regional" has any meaning in a country that's so vast and varied as Canada. Indeed, a certain kind of regionalism disturbs him because it's based on stereotypes accepted by both writers and readers and leads inevitably to hackneyed perceptions of reality. Thus the West is forever associated with the Depression, and he's tired of the constant reiteration of that theme, for it makes the West seem "static and monotonous," and that is a false and misleading image (p. 204).

In an interesting conversation between Rudy Wiebe, Shirley Neuman, and Robert Kroetsch, a different kind of light is thrown on the whole issue. As people become ever more mobile, as the concept of a stable and relatively homogeneous society bound to a distinct place and region becomes ever more tenuous, and as the modern media, particularly the movies and TV, show everyone living the same story, the whole controversy about regionalism and internationalism says Shirley Neuman, has become irrelevant (p. 232).

Wiebe seems inclined to agree. The modern urban novel has demolished all distinctions. "Most characters (in the modern metropolitan, urban novel) are totally impoverished. . . . In a sense, all the cities of the Western world are the same." (p. 232). He (and Kroetsch, too) have pursued a different path. And so, he argues, have writers like

Matt Cohen, Jack Hodgins, and Alice Munro, who have made particular, non-metropolitan localities the centre of their fiction.

So we are back again to the importance of place, of "region." "There is an authentic kind of western Canadian experience," says Wiebe, "and I look upon myself as a prairie writer. I've always written about this country. This is my place and I don't want to leave it." (p. 208).

Always, and foremost, there is the land itself and its overwhelming presence. In a moving essay ("Tombstone Community") he writes of the early life of his parents, who'd settled in a remote Mennonite community in northern Saskatchewan in 1933, a year before he was born. It was a hard life, but it was loneliness, he says, that caused the greatest hardship. "Russia had been vast; but Canada was not merely vast; it was impassively empty and lonely." (p. 18). In passages that remind one of Grove, he writes of the price in hard work that had to be paid to wrest a mere living from the land. Ultimately, the price was too exacting. "By 1950 the church, and with it the community, had ceased to exist." (p. 21) When he returns for a visit in 1963, only the shells of houses are left, and "the poplars and the willows are quickly reclaiming the territory they once lost, very briefly, to the axe and plow." (p. 23).

In rendering the experience of the early white settlers, Wiebe clearly stands in the main tradition of Western writers. But there are also significant ways in which he stands outside that main tradition. He is, first of all, a committee Christian writer. Indeed, he goes so far as to speak of his "Christian vocation." (p. 127). One might also add that Wiebe stands in the Anabaptist tradition as it developed during the Reformation period, and also in the prophetic tradition as it has come down to us from the Old Testament. There are indeed instances in his work when the prophet overwhelms the novelist. There is no doubt, however, that this religious dimension of Wiebe's work transcends his attachment to place and region.

Wiebe was born into a Mennonite family, and his own relationship with the Mennonite community has often been rocky. The sections of *A Voice in the Land* that deal with his Mennonite background are in some ways the most interesting parts of the book.

Wiebe argues that the Mennonites have become an ethnic group "at the expense of Christian doctrine." (p. 26). With a certain amount of sorrow, one suspects, he is drawn to conclude that "blood and culture, not belief, make the Mennonite." (p. 27). Although he understands the historical circumstances that have led to this result, he would like to see a change. The Mennonite churches, he says, should "cease emphasizing that they are primarily linear descendants of original Anabaptists, and place emphasis on their spiritual heritage. . . . The main thrust of the churches as such must be to reapply the Biblical interpretations of the Anabaptists—and the Biblical interpretations

which we can now see they lacked—to our time.” (p. 28). The Mennonite churches, he says further on in the same essay, significantly titled “For the Mennonite Churches: A Last Chance,” should reject “the middle-class paradise we have been struggling for—and have largely attained. Rather, captured by the revitalizing uniqueness of the Gospel, we must leave ourselves open to the leading of the Holy Spirit.” (p. 29). Herbert Giesbrecht and Elmer F. Suderman in their essays on *Peace Shall Destroy Many* recognize these concerns as central preoccupations of that novel.

The history of the Mennonites has been a history of persecution, of suffering, of loyalty to a faith even unto death, and of constant searching and journeying. It is a history that certainly transcends a particular region, and thus when Wiebe set out, in *The Blue Mountains of China*, to give fictional form and shape to the experience of the Mennonites, he was at once forced to move outside the space of the prairies, to spend time among the Mennonites in Paraguay, and above all to examine their relationship with the native people among whom they now lived, an experience he sets down in the essay called “Moros and Mennonites in the Chaco of Paraguay.” And in translating the Mennonite experience into fictional form, he was also drawn, as Ina Ferris shows in a perceptive article, to examine, particularly in the figure of Frieda, the relation between language and the idea of the church.

As a result of the controversy that arose in Mennonite communities after the publication of *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, Wiebe was also forced to address himself to the connection between faith and art, and to take issue with the orthodox, if perhaps simple, view that the task of the Christian novelist should be to explicate and strengthen doctrine. In the face of opposition, he must insist that the novel “is not a systematic theology which explains commonly held doctrines: it is a work of art which can and should contain ideas no one else has broached before and no one, perhaps, will ever believe.” (p. 47).

Wiebe’s attempt to enter imaginatively into the Mennonite experience in order to recreate it in his fiction, and his philosophical and doctrinal arguments with members of the Mennonite churches thus naturally lead him to expand and enlarge and move away from the purely regional concerns of the Western Canadian experience. His discovery of the experience of the native people who lived and worked and worshipped in Western Canada long before the white man came, on the other hand, lead him deeper into the Western experience, and thus deeper into the region.

Why was he drawn to immerse himself in the life of the Indians and Métis, and to recreate their life and their history in novels that are not so much a re-telling of historical events, but rather meditations on the past?

In the conversation with Brian Bergman, from which I quoted earlier, he says that it was in part by accident. It was not until he began to write *Peace Shall Destroy Many* that he realized "in an emotional sort of way" that there had been people living in northern Saskatchewan long before the white settlers arrived there, and that the history of the aboriginal people goes back for generations:

And then I discovered that Big Bear and Wandering Spirit and all those other easily identifiable historical figures had actually lived in this area. As a matter of fact General Strange had chased Big Bear around Turtle Lake which was seven miles from where I was born. So I got this incredible sense of a *past*, and so then Big Bear appears in my first novel as an ancestor of one of the Métis characters in the book (p. 165).

From reading William Cameron's *The War Trail of Big Bear* he realizes that Big Bear and his diminishing band had probably traversed, in June 1885, the very homestead where he himself was born fifty years later; that on the very sand beaches of Turtle Lake, where the schools of the district used to hold their annual sports days, "Big Bear had once stood looking at the clouds trundle up from the north." (p. 134) And there is of course the moving moment (an epiphany really) when, in a small room on the sixth floor of the American Museum of Natural History in New York City, he holds in his hands Big Bear's sacred bundle (pp. 143-149).

Nothing in his early experience or in his formal schooling had prepared Rudy Wiebe for his encounter with the past of the region. Certainly, as he says in the interview with George Melnyk, he grew up in communities where Indians were part of the people. At the same time, he had a very typical Western Canadian childhood and was raised to think "we were superior to Indians because we were white and farmers. Invariably, in the Depression novels which are usually recollections of the writer's own particular childhood, the Indian people come across as drunken bums or thieves . . . never in the sense of a people with an identity of their own, or a family life or a community." (p. 205).

In school of course he had been taught nothing of the deep historical and human layers of the region. He had been taught about Cromwell and Lincoln, but Big Bear was a non-person. So he was forced (as most of us still are) to discover for himself the deeper meaning of "regionalism":

All people have history. The stories we tell of our past are by no means merely words: they are meaning and life to us as people, as a particular people; the stories are there, and if we do not know them we are simply, like animals, memory ignorant, and the less are we people (p. 134).

I would like to suggest a link between Wiebe's awakening to the region's past and his own Mennonite background. Mennonite history

is the history of a people who were pushed into the periphery of European and, later, North-American history, just as the Indian and Métis people were. Their suffering, their endurance, their wanderings are not widely known. Their history also had to be reconstructed, pieced together, and made known. They, too, had to be given a voice which those of us who are not Mennonites could hear.

Of course, it is a awesome task to try and give a voice to people whose traditions and experiences are totally different from our own. Eli Mandel recognizes the problem when he says that what he hears in Wiebe's *Big Bear* "is not so much Indian speech, whatever that might be, but Biblical speech. I hear the cadences of the Bible, and a prophetic voice in that sense, as if you'd made these Indian people a Biblical people." (pp. 151-152).

Wiebe demurs somewhat. Of course, he says, one must remember that he is writing a novel, and not an impartial history, but then in a way he concedes Mandel's point:

But I do think that, say, the Biblical prophets and *Big Bear* had a great deal in common, the sense of a heritage that has been sold out, that through ignorance or neglect has simply been left; and the voice very clearly says that you cannot neglect your inheritance like this, the gifts of—the Cree call it 'the Main One,' the Jews "Jehovah"; you cannot do that and expect to get away with it. (p. 152).

It can also be argued, as R. P. Bilan does in an essay on *The Scorched-Wood People*, that Wiebe is not as critical of the Indian and the Métis people as he is of the Mennonites and their shortcomings, so that the "kind of complex cultural judgment we find in the earlier books is missing here." Nevertheless, Bilan recognizes the service Wiebe has performed for us, for suddenly such seemingly mundane places as St. Boniface, St. Vital, and Kildonan are transformed for him (and for us also) "into settings of intense and significant historical action, actions that (he), like many other Canadians, grew up knowing little about." (p. 171).

It is because he has performed this service that Rudy Wiebe has earned the right to take issue with Edward McCourt's bemoaning of the fact that the West lacks tradition. Yes, says Wiebe, it is true that the West lacks *white* tradition. But we must "dig up the whole tradition, not just the white one." (p. 206).

Only then, one might add, will the region open itself in its full depth and we shall know the place for the first time.

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