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Towards a Prairie Atonement by Trevor Herriot

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The prairie that holds us

***Towards a Prairie Atonement* by TREVOR HERRIOT**

University of Regina, 2016 \$22.95

Reviewed by **GILLIAN HARDING-RUSSELL**

In *Towards a Prairie Atonement*, Trevor Herriot writes a thoughtful and well researched account of the impact that colonial and capitalist greed has had on the fragile ecosystem of the prairie. When the Canadian government abandoned its community pasture plan to protect the prairies in 2012, Herriot, in looking back at their historical development, discovered a previous injustice had been done to the Métis of Ste. Madeleine, who had formed their own first version of a communally-shared prairie and had been driven from it. As Herriot consults Métis elder Norman Fleury, the author's voice emerges with heartfelt need to unbury the truth of the past and to find a solution to the present. Here is an account, at moments stunningly lyrical, that will make the reader acutely aware of the dangers faced by the prairie with thirty-one species at risk, but also a hope for reconciliation with the Métis people that could be achieved by rebuilding the land.

In the first chapter, Herriot recounts how the book began. After the federal government passed the prairie pasturelands over to the province so that they might be sold to the private sector, a concerned federal employee approached the author asking him to help defend the birds and creatures on that territory and a group called Public Pastures—Public Interest

(PPPI) was established a month later (6). Adding a complicating and immeasurably sad thread to the story of the book's genesis, Herriot tells the reader of his missed meeting with filmmaker Narcisse Blood, an elder from the Blood Reserve who wished to talk with him about the grassland project and who, along with his actor daughter's friend, Michele Sereda and two other artists, were tragically killed in a car accident in 2014. In honour of Narcisse Blood, Herriot chooses his beguiling and apt words "one tent peg to share" (7) concerning the indigenous and white people's need to share the prairie as the epigram for the opening chapter (3). The tender and lyrical opening to the first chapter leaves no doubt about what inspires the naturalist Herriot to write this most important book about the prairie:

The longspur, white tail feathers flashing, exploded into flight at our feet and then settled a short distance away. We stooped to look at the swirl of green shade hiding her four speckled eggs, warm and holy. (3)

For one of the many endangered birds of the prairie, such as the longspur, to reproduce in its natural prairie setting is a gratifying feat and must be heartening to a naturalist and to us all. In many ways *Towards a Prairie Atonement* reads as an ode to the prairie on the brink of elegy.

"Colonialism, we have learned too late, is an utterly unreliable narrator" (13), Herriot sorrowfully remarks, and proceeds to discover the roots of the abuse of the land and its people in colonial and capitalist

interests and transactions among invading peoples. Although conventional history books portray the Métis under the leadership of Cuthbert Grant as having butchered Governor Semple and brutally mutilated several settlers, Herriot offers an alternative account by the historian Coltman (based on sixteen dispositions from settlers) that suggests the mutilations came at the hands of one particular Frenchman and his three sons (58). Accordingly, throughout Canadian history such distortions have interfered with our understanding of the indigenous and Métis people whom Herriot believes have a more balanced understanding of the prairie and how to sustain it.

After the rivalry of the Northwesters and the Hudson Bay Company over beaver furs turned into a rivalry over buffalo skins (buffalo formerly hunted as a source of pemmican to sustain the fur trappers) and the corporate giant, Hudson Bay, bought out the Northwesters, the buffalo came to be hunted on too large a scale and their numbers rapidly diminished on the prairie. Herriot offers a sinister image of Governor Simpson's plan to keep the indigenous people subordinate by making them dependent on the white man. The Governor's self-incriminating words from a private journal reflect his grotesque view:

I am convinced that they must be ruled with a rod of iron, to bring and keep them in a proper state of subordination....In the plains however this system will not do, as they can live independent of us, and by withholding ammunition, tobacco, and spirits, the staple

articles of trade, for one year they will recover the use of their bows and spears and lose sight of their smoking and drinking habits. (63)

Such an account by the head of the corporate giant of the Hudson Bay's Company, in many ways equivalent to our contemporary CEOs of corporations such as Monsanto, who overturn ethical concerns for the sake of profit, is chilling to say the least.

After the near extinction of the buffalo, which is vividly pictured with a three-year-old Gabriel Dumont among those participating during the last hunt in 1840 (75), the Great Depression and degradation of the land through over-farming and the draining of swampland ensued. In the 1930's, Herriot recounts, the federal government set up the Community Pastures as a way to replenish the land but in so doing displaced a group of Métis in northern Manitoba who had themselves developed a sustainable farming method that included a mix of private and public lands maintained for the commonwealth of the community. Theirs was a strip farming model in which each private land holding faced the river and extended to the community pastures behind it where each owner owned a "hay privilege" that included the first two miles of the open prairie (99). After that distance, the wildness of the prairie was maintained for all to share in its natural state.

Building on this Métis model of three-way land entitlement practised in Ste. Madeleine, Herriot proposes a solution to the present ecological dissolution of the prairie in the form of a compromise system

in which public and private interests would be met (99). Although the details of such an arrangement and land allotment are not discussed, the concept is a worthy one that *Towards a Prairie Atonement* leads us towards most eloquently.

Who can resist Herriot's portrait of the prairie with the more enduring avian species of lark sparrow seen as "a tiny guard at the gates of a lost kingdom" (84)? The sadness that we must feel when we hear that the longspur (whose eggs we encountered on the first page) might be lost along with other birds, including Sprague's Pipit and Swainson's Hawk, is real (85). Here Herriot, also author of *River in a Dry Land*, and *Grass, Sky, Song*, among other books about the prairie, provides us with a heartfelt and clear-eyed account of the dire

situation we face on the prairie as told in both facts and poetry (camouflaged as prose even as birds hide in the prairie grasses)—not to mention the groundwork for a path that may be its solution.

GILLIAN HARDING-RUSSELL is a freelance writer, reviewer, and editor working for a number of magazines, among them *Event's* Reading Service. She received an MA from McGill (1976) and her PhD from the University of Saskatchewan (1986). She has three poetry collections and five chapbooks published. A sequence of poems "Making Sense" was chosen as the best suite of poems in *Exile's* Gwendolyn MacEwen chapbook competition (2016). A chapbook *Fox Love* came out last autumn in The Alfred Gustav Press series.