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## Politics And Culture Of The Great Plains: An Introduction

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# POLITICS AND CULTURE OF THE GREAT PLAINS: AN INTRODUCTION

In April 1996 the Center for Great Plains Studies at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln sponsored its twentieth interdisciplinary symposium, "Politics and Culture of the Great Plains." From papers and presentations by scholars from the United States and Canada, dealing with Indian rights, women's suffrage, education, the economy, elections, social movements, and historical and contemporary personalities, four are presented in this issue of *Great Plains Quarterly*.

"Treaty Seven and Guaranteed Representation: How Treaty Rights Can Evolve into Parliamentary Seats" deals with relations between sovereign nations—the Blackfoot Confederacy of southern Alberta and the national government of Canada. Kiera Ladner argues that the Indians had a fundamentally different view than national authorities of Treaty Seven. Concerned about rapid westward expansion in the US in the 1870s, Canadian authorities encouraged their own westward expansion. Authorities viewed treaties as a way to secure title to the land and bring the Indians under control, but the tribes intended to protect their land and life style.

What is the legal standing and meaning of treaty rights today? How can the tribes "maintain peace and good order" as they agreed to do in the treaty? Ladner suggests one way:

guaranteed representation in Parliament. The indigenous peoples of North America were and continue to be sovereign nations. Agreements negotiated between them and national governments are still valid, and national governments are obligated to honor them, albeit in a contemporary context. Guaranteed parliamentary representation is an intriguing idea, though perhaps unlikely to be implemented. Ladner's essay encourages us to consider this and other alternatives that will enable national governments to fulfill their obligations to North America's first peoples.

National boundaries rarely prevent people and ideas from moving in or out. Ideas, of course, are the most mobile. In "Liberal Education on the Great Plains: American Experiments, Canadian Flirtations, 1930-1950," Kevin Brooks focuses on the spread of liberal education to American and Canadian universities of the Great Plains in the 1930s and 1940s. He distinguishes between the oratorical tradition, dedicated to inculcating traditional values and insuring social stability, and the philosophical tradition of seeking new knowledge in the hope of improving society. Universities in the Midwest and Prairies sought to make education "useful," combining the philosophical liberal education tradition with vocational and professional training.

In spite of the strong commitment of the universities in eastern Canada to the oratorical tradition and the recruitment of college educators from these institutions to oversee the development of prairie universities, it was the midwestern model, with its emphasis on the practical as well as the general, that took hold. Brooks argues lack of resources, distance, and the demand that education focus on the practical foreclosed other options. His study suggests that regional identities are sometimes as important as national ones in explaining the spread and adoption of ideas. The study also helps define the Great Plains as a distinct region, where environmental constraints ensure common responses to social problems, in this case sufficient to overcome the power of national identity and national boundaries.

Where a border is open, one might expect persons, particularly those involved in protest movements, to seek support and cooperation across the border. In "Cross-Border Ties Among Protest Movements: The Great Plains Connection," Mildred A. Schwartz examines the link between agricultural, labor, ethnic, environmental, and ideological movements in the Great Plains region of the US and Canada in the twentieth century.

United States farm organizations and cooperatives typically spread to Canada, while innovative Canadian farm policies served as models for the US. Farm organizers from the US often helped found Canadian organizations. In the 1920s, hard times made annexation to the US attractive to some farmers in western Canada. US labor unions were organized in Canada, and farmers and workers in Minnesota interacted and cooperated with their counterparts in Saskatchewan. Even the Communist party had its cross-border connections as did the Ku Klux Klan, New Left, Green Movement, and Native Americans.

Social movements are free to move, and the US and Canada, both democracies with a British heritage, are culturally compatible. Resource-dependent Plains people are vulnerable to the same kinds of economic problems on both sides of the line, so they assume that

common problems will lead to common solutions.

Carmen Heider in "Conceptions of the Nebraska Voter in 1882: Paradoxes and Complexities Among 'Women'" tells us about the little known midwestern suffrage movement of the late 1800s. Suffrage activism began in Nebraska in 1856, and prominent suffragists such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony toured the state in 1867, the year Nebraska entered the Union, but male voters defeated suffrage in 1871 and again in 1882. Heider identifies those who supported and opposed the measure and reconstructs their understandings of the "woman voter."

In general, the suffrage debate, both nationally and in Nebraska, was framed in terms of "separate spheres," how women were different from men. Others described women as similar to men, and some suggested that women were different from men but also different from each other. Some dwelt on what they considered women's limitations, pointing out that women could not compete with the "more robust and opposite sex."

The analysis suggests that the power and influence of women was enhanced by newspaper coverage of their efforts to win the vote, but that coverage tended to portray women in traditional and stereotypical ways. While women remain constrained by conservative conceptions of what it means to be a man or woman, things have changed. Today, thirteen of forty-nine Nebraska state legislators are women and one woman has served as governor.

The four articles provide a taste of Great Plains politics and culture. Lay readers who find them interesting will seek out more of the vast literature describing the region and its people, and the community of scholars who study the Great Plains will find them a contribution to research and a foundation upon which to build additional study.

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