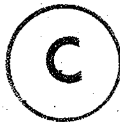
THE UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA

LANDSCAPE AND TECHNIQUE:

THE BACKGROUND AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE NORTH AMERICAN PRAIRIE NOVEL

by



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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of
the University of Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirements
of the degree of

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For my parents:

Ned and Joanne Thacker

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ABSTRACT

Historically ill-equipped to comprehend the prairie landscape, European man came to understand its unique topography only gradually. This study traces the transformation of the prairie from unknown land into familiar landscape, beginning with an examination of the major explorers' journals and travelers' accounts.

Those who first used the landscape as artistic setting were painters and illustrators, and their work is treated here in order to provide an analogue for the primary focus--prose fiction--which also exhibits a confrontation between artistic convention and the prairie landscape. Turning to the literature, this study then traces the incorporation of the landscape into the North American literary tradition; works such as Cooper's _The Prairie_, Irving's _A Tour on the Prairies_, Parkman's _The Oregon Trail_ and Melville's _Moby-Dick_ illustrate the way in which topography was transformed into setting.

Turning next to the romantic and realistic fiction of the latter half of the nineteenth century, this study demonstrates that the development of the prairie literature tradition recapitulates the individual's reaction to the landscape: from initial enthusiasm to an awareness of the prairie's bleaker aspects. Finally, viewing the prairie novels of Willa Cather, O. E. Rölvaag, Sinclair Ross, and W. O. Mitchell within the context of their predecessors, then, this study explores the way in which their commingling of realism with romance constitutes the

maturity of the prairie landscape tradition.

This study departs from previous criticism in that its scope is bicultural: Canadian examples are considered equally with American ones. Similarly, this is the first study of North American prairie fiction to treat the development of landscape technique from first exploration to the present.

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INTRODUCTION

The prairie is a phenomenon unique to North America. Geographically, it is defined as that area of generally level unforested farmland--formerly grassland--between the Ohio River and the plateaus of the West which extends north into Canada to include portions of the provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta, and south to include the area extending to the gulf coast of Texas. Its significance in the history and development of North American literature stems mainly from its singularity: no old-world topography equals the prairie's stark expanses (barring, of course, the Russian Steppes with which few North American settlers were familiar). To Europeans glimpsing it for the first time, the prairie was the most unfamiliar of landscapes. The hardwood forests of the Atlantic seaboard, though dense and foreboding, presented the same topography as European forests and much the same may be said of the Appalachian Mountains. The North American prairie, however, was another matter altogether.

The central premise of this study is that European man was historically ill-equipped to view the prairie, and that its unique topography posed both practical and epistemological problems. In the mid-sixteenth century, for example, the Spanish explorer Coronado, searching for gold in present-day Kansas, found only grass and buffalo--the prairie in its natural state. The area was like nowhere else he had ever been, and Coronado was vexed to find that the only way he could keep his party to-

gether was by collecting piles of buffalo dung and sun-bleached bones and using these as markers. In adapting in this way, Coronado and his party began a process which was to continue for centuries: the creation of landmarks in a region which hitherto had been without them. In turn, the records left by these Spaniards constitute the beginning of a series of documents which reflect the imaginative adaptation required of those who attempted to come to terms with the prairie.

During the period of exploration and expansion into the region, stretching from 1534 through 1884, numerous explorers left written records of what they saw, heard about, and surmised while on the prairie. These records take the form of journals, narratives, and letters; some are elegantly written while others are mere factual descriptions in terse language. But all are colored to a certain extent by the nature of the writer's overall purpose: the attention an individual pays to the prairie landscape depends upon his reason for being there in the first place. Thus Coronado found the place confounding: not only did it contain no gold, but he could not keep his party together properly and, to further his vexation, the expedition was lost much of the time. Coronado's own letters, which were written while he was in the midst of the prairie, complement the observations of the expedition's chronicler, Castañeda; together their writings provide the first extended description of the effect of the prairie landscape on Europeans.

As the first attempts to write about the prairie landscape, to fit and frame its vastness within the confines of the written page, commentaries such as Castañeda's constitute a necessary point of departure for any study of technique in modern prairie fiction. Stretching as they do from the mid-sixteenth through the late-nineteenth centuries, such

first-person accounts--written by travelers, traders, missionaries, and tourists, as well as explorers--establish the ways in which the prairie landscape, both practically and imaginatively, affected those who traveled through it. Largely without any avowed literary intentions, these writers record directly the interaction of the European mind with the prairie landscape--at first impression, at initial comprehension, and at eventual understanding. Together, these accounts define the means by which European man attempted to transform the prairie from a strange, wild land into a familiar, human landscape.

Although the non-literary accounts provide the basis for this transformation, they do not delimit its accomplishment--that phase lies within the realm of art. But because the prairie was no more a conventional subject for art than it was a familiar landscape to the European, its use in both painting and literature produced conflicts between conventional aesthetic assumptions and the actual nature of the land. Just as early commentators were hesitant to pronounce a prairie vista sublime, so early literary and pictorial artists were reluctant to focus directly upon the vastness of the land, preferring more conventional subjects and methods, and only gradually did they adapt their techniques to its imaginative demands.

This study will explore the nature of that adaptation--and will trace its development--from its background as reflected in the commentaries of sixteenth-century explorers and their successors to its maturity as reflected in the work of twentieth-century writers like Willa Cather and Sinclair Ross. It will also be argued that the individual's gradual understanding of the strange new environment is paradigmatic of the landscape's incorporation within the larger tradition. Like Coronado,

who had to devise means of finding his way through a land which was (to his mind) without landmarks, authors had to devise techniques designed to articulate the vast essence of the prairie landscape; they had to develop a set of prairie landscape conventions. Also like Coronado they found these lying, as it were, at their feet: prairie landscape conventions and techniques of symbolic depiction, as this study seeks to demonstrate, were derived from the essential elements of the land itself.

* * *

Perhaps with poetic justice, the attempt to trace the development of prairie landscape depiction is fraught with as many complications as the actual confrontation with this area itself. The area upon which I wish to focus, for example, is variously called "prairie," "plains," and "Great Plains," depending on individual background and local usage. The situation is compounded further by the fact that the northern extension of the area referred to by geographers as "The Great Plains"--that is, the Canadian section--is called "the prairies" by Canadians. Conversely, Americans frequently refer to the Dakotas as "The Great Plains." Accordingly, for the sake of consistency I have opted to employ the term "prairie" throughout this study, and I take it to mean the area delineated in my opening paragraph.

A second problem pertains to the fact that the 49th parallel intersects the North American prairie, with the result being that strictly speaking there are two prairies. Topographically, however, the prairie is one region, and this is the way in which it will be treated in this study. This is not to say that I will refrain from mentioning which area

of the prairie is in question in a given case, but rather that I will not group commentators in terms of nationality.

How a study like this should be structured, in turn, poses the third problem. Since my general approach is developmental, a chronological structure might seem the most logical. If adhered to with too much rigor, however, such a method could serve to weaken the major line of my argument and also result in the *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* fallacy. My decision, therefore, is to employ a combination of the chronological and common-denominator approach.

Thus Chapter One, "'We nowhere saw mountains': First European Impressions of the Prairie, 1534-1807," begins with the Spanish explorers and extends to Zebulon Montgomery Pike, who traveled the prairie during the first decade of the nineteenth century. What the figures in this group have in common is the virgin nature of their encounter with the land: such was the state of knowledge of the western interior of North America at the time, that these commentators had little, if any, prior information regarding the land they were entering.

Those accounts treated in Chapter Two, "'terrible grandeur': First-Person Reactions to Prairie Landscape, 1811-84," constitute a less homogeneous group. Owing to to the publication in 1810 of Pike's *Account* of his travels, which was followed in 1814 by the publication of the Biddle *History* of the Lewis and Clark expedition, the travelers, traders, and missionaries treated in the second chapter most likely had prior knowledge of the western landscape. Considered in this chapter, too, are men such as H. M. Brackenridge and John Bradbury, whose background and education lend a polish to their prose not seen in the writings treated in the first chapter. And because like Brackenridge, some of these commentators trav-

eled west for the express purpose of seeing the area, and so were not just passing through on some errand, their writings reflect a greater sensitivity to the qualities in the landscape than in previous accounts. Additionally, there are treated in this chapter figures whose experience on the prairie was extended and various, men like Josiah Gregg and Pierre-Jean De Smet, S. J. What the figures in this group have in common, however, is their generally non-artistic orientation, and this, in turn, is the rationale for excluding in this chapter those literary and pictorial artists who fall into this chronological period.

Chapter Three, "'strange, too, and striking to the imagination': Landscape into Art," considers the first appropriation of the prairie landscape by artists, and covers the relatively short period from the early 1820s through 1860. During this time painters and illustrators traveled west and sought to incorporate the prairie and its scenery within their work. Because George Catlin and Paul Kane described their experiences with words as well as through their illustrative work, they fall logically within the scope of this study. But because the conventions of pictorial art were as much at odds with the prairie landscape as were those of literature, I decided to broaden my scope to include all significant illustrators who used the prairie as setting prior to the middle of the nineteenth century. Examples of their work, included at the end of this study as an Appendix, provide numerous analogues to the literary treatments of the landscape and show that painters and writers often confronted similar problems when they adopted the prairie as their setting. A discussion of _The Oregon Trail_ concludes the chapter, because Francis Parkman's travelogue, when compared to his Oregon Trail journal on which it was based, reveals that he experienced the same difficulties

and hesitations seen among the painters who sought to give the landscape artistic form.

Chapter Four, "'breathing life and fire into a circle of imagery': Literary Visitors," focuses on the first attempts to employ the prairie in purely literary works, and encompasses the period from 1827 through 1866. As it happens, these attempts are the result of both literal and imaginative visitations made by some of the most prominent American literary figures of the day. The Prairie constitutes the first deliberate use of the landscape as a fictional setting, although Cooper had never seen the prairie. In writing A Tour on the Prairies, Washington Irving faced an opposite task; he did not have to imagine his landscape, but he had to make an interesting tale out of an uneventful trip. In these works the prairie landscape is treated in a purely literary manner for the first time and, because of the previous accomplishments of their respective authors, they granted that landscape a certain respectability, as well as a wider currency. This chapter also considers the use of the prairie landscape by the writers of the American Renaissance, most notably Melville in Moby-Dick.

Chapter Five, "'throwing a man back upon himself': Prairie Romances and the Beginnings of Realism," treats the fiction in which the prairie is the actual or nominal setting, from the publication of Albert Pike's Prose Sketches and Poems in 1834 through the popular novels of Arthur Stringer which appeared during and just after the First World War. Much of this writing took the form of the popular romance and, while such romances persisted into the twentieth century, by the 1880s realistic accounts of the prairie became dominant. None of those treated writers was of the first rank, although with one exception each had personal

experience of the prairie landscape; some, like Hamlin Garland, had extended prairie experience. Thus I have selected examples from both the popular romances and the realistic accounts to show the various ways in which the landscape was used as setting by writers who fall chronologically between the literary figures of antebellum America and the acknowledged prairie writers of this century.

In the final chapter, "'the great fact was the land itself': Modern Prairie Fiction," I consider the recognized authors whose work constitutes the flowering of the prairie literature tradition. Foremost among them is Willa Cather; after her, in order of importance, are Sinclair Ross, O. E. Rölvaag, Frederick Philip Grove, W. O. Mitchell, Conrad Richter, and Wallace Stegner. Contemporary writers such as Wright Morris and Margaret Laurence (and to a lesser extent, Robert Kroetsch and Rudy Wiebe) are examined briefly to suggest the continuity of the tradition and the new directions it seems to be taking.

My overall objective in this study, finally, is to demonstrate the recurrence of certain motifs and the persistence of certain responses to the prairie, and to argue in turn that it is only when our classic writers of prairie fiction are seen in the context of their predecessors and across national boundaries that the nature of their respective achievements can be properly evaluated.

CHAPTER ONE

"We nowhere saw mountains":

First European Impressions of the Prairie, 1534-1807

The first Europeans to glimpse the prairie were motivated by a variety of impulses, the least of which was to appreciate the aesthetic character of this new world. Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca, who traversed a corner of the prairie about 1534 and is the first European on record to have seen it, came because he was lost. Having been treasurer of the ill-fated Narváez expedition to Florida in 1528, he spent eight years wandering from the expedition's landfall at Tampa Bay--and for a time was held in slavery by local Indians--before he met up with some Spanish slave traders in Sonora, northern Mexico.[1] Published in 1542, his Narrative contains, amid a welter of detail involving the practices of the natives he met and lived among, a few descriptive passages concerned with the prairie. Because of his disorientation, historians have had difficulty deciding upon his exact route; he probably traveled through the prairie, however, just inland from Galveston along the Texas Gulf coast. Cabeza de Vaca's descriptions are of the most general order: "Throughout the country are extensive and beautiful plains with good pasturage; and I think it would be a very fruitful region were it worked and inhabited by civilized men. We nowhere saw mountains."[2]

Cabeza de Vaca's descriptions of the buffalo were also the first to be published. He compares them to "the cows of Morocco" and observes:

"They come as far as the seacoast of Florida, from a northerly direction, ranging through a tract of more than four hundred leagues; and throughout the whole region over which they run, the people who inhabit near, descend and live upon them, distributing a vast many hides into the interior country."[3] Apart from recording his impression of the beauty of the plains, de Vaca's comments regarding the character of the land do little more than verify that he did indeed travel the prairie. His description of the range of the buffalo, however, is more significant. Apparently those Indians among whom he was dwelling knew of the vast size of the prairie-plains, for such a knowledge is implied in de Vaca's estimate of the extent of the buffalo range. Although such estimates of distance should be viewed skeptically, it is interesting that, if the Spanish league is equal to three English miles, his evaluation of the northward extent of the buffalo--and of the prairie-plains region--is remarkably accurate.[4]

The next Spaniard to travel through the prairie was Coronado, seeking gold in an area the Spaniards had been told was called Quivera (present-day Kansas). Traveling there, Coronado sent patrols off in various directions. Pedro de Castañeda, who wrote the most extensive narrative of the expedition, states that one such group returned only to report to "the general that in the twenty leagues they had been over they had seen nothing but the cows and the sky."[5] The trackless quality of the land, its lack of landmarks, draws considerable attention from Castañeda since it causes numerous problems: "It was impossible to find tracks in this country, because the grass straightened up again as soon as it was trodden down" (p. 331). He reports that one man who went off to hunt was entirely lost because of the tracklessness of the prairie, and many others were

nearly lost:

> Many fellows were lost at this time who went out hunting and did not get back to the army for two or three days, wandering about the country as if they were crazy, in one direction or another, not knowing how to get back where they started from . . . . Every night they took account of who was missing, fired guns and blew trumpets and beat drums and built great fires, but yet some of them went off so far and wandered about so much that all this did not give them any help, although it helped others. . . . It is worth noting that the country there is so level that at midday, after one has wandered about in one direction and another in pursuit of game, the only thing to do is to stay near the game quietly until sunset, so as to see where it goes down, and even then they have to be men who are practised to do it. (p. 336)

Castañeda's exasperated tone may result as much from the fact that the expedition was in the midst of the prairie in mid-July as from the nature of the landscape itself.

Coronado clearly shared Castañeda's frustration, however. Writing to his king on October 20, 1541--while still on his expedition--the General's mystified response to the landscape is marked:

> After nine days' march I reached some plains, so vast that I did not find their limit anywhere that I went, although I traveled over them for more than 300 leagues. . . . I traveled five more days as the guides wished to lead me, until I reached some plains, with no more landmarks than as if we had been swallowed up in the sea, where they [the guides] strayed about, because there was not a stone, nor a bit of rising ground, nor a tree, nor a scrub, nor anything to go by. There is much very fine pasture land, with good grass. And while we were lost in these plains . . . .[6]

Antedating as it does Castañeda's Narrative, Coronado's letter provides an immediate, on-the-spot reaction to the prairie environment by one of the first Europeans to experience it. Coronado's rhetorical role in this letter is that of translator; through his descriptions he presents the prairie in European terms, terms which the king and his ministers at court can understand. Thus the trackless quality of the prairie is likened to the

ocean, and Coronado's litany of absent landmarks is made up of things a European expects to use for landmarks: things not found on the prairie. The prairie is singular for what it does not have, and for what it is like, not for what it is. In the same letter Coronado describes the number and extent of the buffalo herds, and this leads to his comment on the suitability of the prairie as pasture lands, but this appreciative comment is far outweighed by the General's knowledge that he has found no gold and cannot, moreover, keep his bearings in this strange land. Coronado recognizes, indeed, that he is lost a good part of the time.

Whereas Cabeza de Vaca had passed through only the southern fringe of the prairie, Coronado and his men marched directly into its center. Seeking stone dwellings with rooms full of gold in Quivera, Coronado found only grass huts inhabited by Wichita Indians. Upon hearing the true nature of conditions in Quivera, Coronado expressed his disappointment: "This news troubled me greatly, to find myself on these limitless plains, where I was in great need of water. Here the guides confessed to me that they had not told the truth in regard to the size of the houses, because these were of grass . . . ."[7] Having realized that he was not going to find any gold, Coronado was clearly despondent, and, since gold was the unit of measure of a Spanish expedition's success, he had every reason to consider himself a failure. Indeed, upon his return to Spain he was treated as such. But as this letter suggests, Coronado's disappointment was also aggravated by the prairie environment's singular strangeness: his mind was unable to assimilate it.

Another member of the expedition comments that Coronado and his men were forced "to mark the road by which they went with cow dung, so as to return, since there were no stones or [sic] anything else."[8] Castañeda,

when he notes the same action, does so in a chapter which is curiously out of place within the chronological pattern of his Narrative. This chapter, which significantly contains his most descriptive passages concerning the prairie, has been added toward the end of the work. Another anomaly in this respect is that here Castañeda felt compelled for some reason to inflate the size of Coronado's party. His own attempt to explain the situation is as follows:

> My silence was not without mystery and dissimulation when, in Chapter 7 of the second part of this book [the proper place of the prairie in the chronology], I spoke of the plains and the things of which I will give a detailed account in this chapter, where all these things may be found together; for these things were remarkable and something not seen in other parts. I dare to write of them because I am writing at a time when many men are still living [c. 1565] who saw them and who will vouch for my account. Who could believe that 1,000 horses and 500 of our cows and more than 5,000 rams and ewes and more than 1,500 friendly Indians and servants, in travelling over these plains, would leave no more trace where they had passed than if nothing had been there--nothing--so that it was necessary to make piles of bones and cow-dung now and then, so that the rear guard could follow the army. The grass never failed to become erect after it had been trodden down and, although it was short, it was fresh and straight as before. (pp. 381-82)

Although Herbert E. Bolton, in his standard history of the expedition, Coronado, Knight of Pueblos and Plains, provides some pragmatic reasons for Castañeda's earlier omission of these details,[9] the style of the passage suggests that a major factor was Castañeda's awe in the presence of the landscape and his concurrent feeling of insignificance. Hence the mystery, the special treatment of the subject, the exaggerated numbers, the rhetorical question and, of course, his emphatic repetition of "nothing."

Later in the same chapter, Castañeda returns to his discussion of the extent and habits of the buffalo. Again he is at pains to communicate

his response in arithmetical terms: "Another thing worth noticing is that the bulls travelled without cows in such large numbers that nobody could have counted them, and so far away from the cows that it was more than forty leagues from where we began to see the bulls to the place where we began to see the cows" (p. 383). Castañeda's previous descriptions of the prairie landscape, in the earlier sections of his Narrative, were literal and factual; as he here continues his description of the buffalo on the prairie, however, he seems compelled to resort to symbolism and metaphor:

> The country they travelled over was so level and smooth that if one looked at them the sky could be seen between their legs, so that if some of them were at a distance they looked like smooth-trunked pines whose tops joined, and if there was only one bull it looked as if there were four pines. When one was near them, it was impossible to see the ground on the other side of them. The reason for all this was that the country seemed as round as if a man should imagine himself in a three-pint measure, and could see the sky at the edge of it, about a crossbow shot from him, and even if a man only lay down on his back he lost sight of the ground. (pp. 383-84)[10]

Conveying his own amazement over the extent and character of the prairies, Castañeda's metaphors also represent his attempt to make himself clear to readers who have never seen such a landscape--and may have difficulty imagining one; his description is designed to anticipate the same incredulity on the part of readers that Castañeda himself experienced and expressed in his rhetorical question: "Who could believe . . . ."

Since approximately twenty-five years elapsed between the expedition and his composition of the Narrative, Castañeda's account attests in another way to the impact which the prairie landscape had on its author. Even after almost a quarter of a century, his impression of the prairie remained vivid, and the landscape emerges as mysterious, yet compelling.

The primary effect of the prairie on the Spaniards--disorientation--is mentioned by many who left accounts of their experiences during the expedition,[11] but while to Coronado it posed as yet another practical problem, to Castañeda it constituted a phenomenon which challenged the mind. In turn, however much his detachment must be attributed to his distance from the actual experience, in Castañeda's account we have the first disinterested and incipiently aesthetic account of the prairie. The picture he paints--of trackless expanses, of herds of buffalo darkening the distances, and especially of a sky ringed round seemingly close enough to touch--has much in common with far more recent fictional treatments of the same landscape.

On the whole, however, the Coronado expedition illustrates what Bernard De Voto describes as "the paradox of minds which were as logical as any today and, further, were here working not with myth but with the most concrete realities but were betrayed by sheer strangeness." As De Voto also explains, compounding the problem of imaginative adjustment for the early Spanish explorers was the problem of nutritional adaptability: "The principal reason why Coronado went no farther than he did but turned back was that his supplies of corn were short and his men and horses might starve. For the horses there was only buffalo grass, the most nutritious grass in the New World, and for the army only buffalo meat, the most complete single food that mankind has ever known."[12] Hence Coronado turned back, fearing starvation, when all he needed was staring him, quite literally, in the face.

Coronado and his men were using land-routes, however, and to judge by the journals and letters of French exploration of the Mississippi basin during the latter half of the seventeenth century, this is an important

factor to take into consideration. When the prairie is mentioned in these writings it is usually seen through gaps in the trees along a riverbank, and often buffalo herds receive more detailed consideration than the landscape. The expeditions of Jolliet and Marquette and that of La Salle, too, passed through the prairies in a less arid region--today's Iowa, Missouri, and Illinois--than that seen by Coronado and his men--what is now western and central Kansas. This, in addition to the vantage point which the rivers afforded the French explorers, combines to make their overall view of the prairies at once more cursory and positive. Coronado and his men experienced the prairie; the French simply saw it.

In a journal which is ostensibly Marquette's but was actually written from his notes and a copy of Jolliet's lost journal by Fr. Claude Dablon, their Jesuit superior, the prairie is first described simply as "beautiful lands."[13] The site referred to is a point along the Mississippi between the present states of Wisconsin and Iowa; just below this point, the narrator observes, "we plainly saw that [the land's] aspect was completely changed. There are hardly any woods or mountains; the islands are more beautiful and are covered with more finer trees." Later Jolliet and Marquette see buffalo for the first time--"scattered about the prairies in herds" (p. 238)--and, some days later, they notice human tracks along "a narrow and somewhat beaten path leading to a fine prairie" (p. 238). After they discover the Missouri River in late June 1673, the narrator immediately pins all hopes for a water route to the Pacific on that stream; his musings result in the most extended passages concerned with the prairie in the journal. From talking to local Indians he has learned that "by ascending this river for five or six days, one reaches a fine prairie, twenty or thirty leagues long. This must be crossed in a northwesternly