

Western Canada Before the War

By Helen McMurchie

The above is the title of a book which deserves to be read widely in Canada; it will be especially interesting to Westerners, for we all love to see ourselves with new eyes, but all Canadians should welcome the book as a convincing picture of Western conditions as well as a trenchant criticism of Canadian life in general. Miss Mitchell, the author, is a Scotchwoman and an Oxford graduate, who spent a part of the years 1913 and 1914 on the prairies; she sees the new world with the eyes of the old, but she has been happily delivered from that spirit of hasty and ill-considered criticism which has too often antagonized us in our Old-World visitors. Miss Mitchell has learned that sympathy is the first step towards understanding, and her work is done in a spirit as generous as it is discriminating. As a rule we Canadians are too much one with our conditions to be able to appraise them or ourselves; being in the picture we have not yet learned to step outside it occasionally, but Miss Mitchell, coming from another society is able to judge, even to understand us as we cannot ourselves. Perhaps it is because she comes from north of Tweed that she is able to criticize so justly and so sympathetically. "It is impossible," she writes, "for a Scot in Canada to feel like an outsider; and it was never our Scottish custom to refrain from all criticism of our brothers and sisters. It is all in the family, and I do not think the family will misunderstand."

In all Canadian life, but most particularly in the West, Miss Mitchell notices a great line of cleavage; that is the line which separates the city from the country. Economically the towns and cities are the favored communities, and socially they enjoy a prestige which the land does not convey. This surprises the Old Country visitor who is accustomed to see in land ownership either a mark of social distinction or else a means thereto. In England the country gentleman is pre-eminent, but in Canada, Miss Mitchell remarks, the ideal of society is the well-groomed company director. So she found during her sojourn in a western town, that the country of the waving fields of grain which had lured her from many a poster on her journey was largely terra incognita to the townsfolk who earnestly tried to dissuade her from any attempt to penetrate it. The town was a separate entity, rather scornful of the country and not eager to serve the interests of the farmers.

Since the towns were so chary of any relation with the country, what did they depend on for the wealth that was so evident on all hands? "The towns," Miss Mitchell writes, "are in essence big posters to attract first the investor in town lots and second the capitalist manufacturer who will make town-lot values still higher." There is much talk of the development of industry in the West, but Miss Mitchell's conclusions were that there was more talk than actuality. This insistence on real

estate, with its artificial values, coupled with the indifference of the towns to country needs (evinced, for instance, in the 'combines' among merchants to lower the prices for farm produce, resulting in the dependence of the farmer on distant markets for his produce as well as on the big mail order houses for his supplies) constitutes a serious problem for town and country alike. For "the towns should be the distributing and collecting centres on railways for the farming community," and again, "the town in the West depends absolutely on the country, and the country must be developed or else the towns will collapse in a few years like certain boomed cities in the U.S.A."

When Miss Mitchell went to the country she was amazed to find that for a radius of about five miles beyond the city the land lay waste; this area, she was told, was held by speculators, Easterners mostly, who were holding it against the city's hoped for "boom." One wonders if the people in Ontario whose money is tied up in these lots rejoice over this prospect. The land that should be used for market gardening, thus being made a source of true wealth, is left unproductive, in the hope of ultimately producing a wealth which is only falsely so-called. So, in the country. Although she saw some of the waving fields of the posters, Miss Mitchell saw, too, many fields once broken but now deserted, along with many acres of unclaimed, or, at least, unworked land. She began to realize that farming in the West is not as easy as it is sometimes pictured; all she saw confirmed her in the belief that politically and financially,

conditions favored the towns and placed the country at a tremendous disadvantage.

But leaving these tremendous questions of markets, or banking and the tariff, one comes to the more congenial problem of the social life of the country. Here Miss Mitchell's praise is unstinted; she turns gladly from the fashionable and superior lady of the town to the simpler countrywoman, whose ways are much more to her mind. So she writes of the country society:

"My general impression was of men, strong and rugged, of women, grave and capable, of sturdy, fearless, happy children, loving the pigs and the horses and the dogs with a natural and devoted affection."

The Homemakers' Clubs of Saskatchewan interested Miss Mitchell greatly, and she speaks with enthusiasm of their work. Here is her description of a meeting:

"... There were fine faces among the countrywomen who assembled, strong mouths and straight eyes, and quiet foreheads, as of those who had looked fate in the face and had not been cowed. They were full of hospitality and kindness, but who was I among these Mothers of Gracchi? I felt myself a poor spinster from a smaller world, and I went and hid in a corner with the schoolmistress, who was a spinster too, and marvelled at the goodness of the babies, who attend all ceremonies in the West. After the address there was a splendid tea, with homemade cakes and ice cream brought by the members; then there was business conducted in a most

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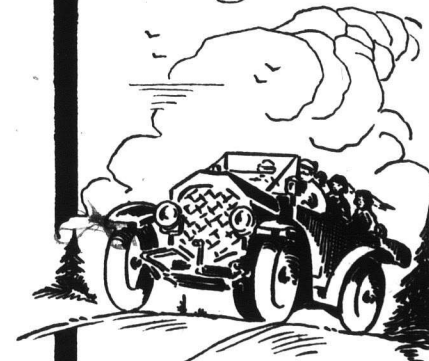
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