Transforming the Prairies

Agricultural Rehabilitation and Modern Canada

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For Alison and Danica

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Introduction

Rethinking the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration

The Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration (PFRA) was eliminated by the Canadian federal government in 2009 but continued to make the news for more than another decade. In 2021, two national political parties referenced it in the run-up to a federal election. The Green Party promised to restore it.[1] The incumbent Liberal Party echoed an earlier pledge to create a new Canada Water Agency, which was described as a resurrected PFRA.[2] References to the PFRA were also common beyond politics. The agency figured large in a 2019 report by the National Farmers Union that identified "high-output, high-input agriculture" as a major driver of the climate crisis. The report urged the creation of a new entity – the Canadian Farm Resilience Administration – characterized as a "super PFRA."[3] In 2020, amid the devastation and disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic, Richard Florizone, president of the International Institute for Sustainable Development, offered the PFRA as an example of emergency assistance by government that had long-term benefits.[4] These years also saw activists urging revival of the agency and newspaper columnists calling for its resurrection.[5] Invoking the PFRA has become a means through which politicians signal and advocates demand robust commitments to state action on agricultural, environmental, and societal problems.

The Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration was created in 1935 by the Canadian federal government amid perceived agricultural collapse on the Canadian Prairies. Much of south-central Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta were experiencing an environmental reckoning, one exacerbated by an international economic depression that significantly suppressed

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prices for wheat, a commodity produced by many prairie farmers. Over the following decades, the PFRA operated under both Conservative and Liberal governments and within various federal departments. In 2009, the agency was incorporated into Agri-Environment Services, a new branch within the Department of Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada.[6] A few years later, its remaining functions were eliminated as part of what became known in some quarters as Conservative prime minister Stephen Harper's "war on science."[7] In this book, I examine the PFRA's history between its foundation and the mid-1980s to identify the agency's enduring consequences and to reckon with recent valorizations of the PFRA.

The PFRA's persistently positive press rests on the idea that the agency was involved in fixing settlement mistakes that had disadvantaged individual settlers, the prairie provinces, and the region at large. The understanding that prairie settlement involved significant mistakes became established through efforts to secure the transfer of natural resources, including land, from Ottawa to the prairie provinces. Historian Chester Martin argued in 1920 that Ottawa's retaining of control over natural resources amounted to a wrong-headed deviation from British principles of responsible self-government.[8] In a later contribution to the Canadian Frontiers of Settlement series, Martin pointed to the federal government's failure to ensure that available prairie lands were environmentally appropriate for farming and to guard against settlement by newcomers ill-positioned to succeed in creating productive farms.[9] He also noted that problematic farming techniques degraded prairie soils.[10] Martin urged the federal government to collaborate with farmers in addressing these failures and pointed to the PFRA as an example of what was needed.[11]

For early PFRA leaders and supporters, presenting the agency as a remedy for past errors enabled them to tap into an understanding of prairie history that was already prevalent and that offered a ready justification for agency activities. This view of the PFRA proved enduring. Variants on the notion of the PFRA as a fix for settlement mistakes showed up in the correspondence of federal and provincial governments,[12] and it was invoked by civil servants describing their activities and those of their colleagues.[13] It also appeared in federal and provincial royal commissions focused on prairie problems,[14] and it echoed like a refrain throughout various PFRA reports and communications,[15] both those intended for internal government purposes and those aimed at broader audiences. The anchor word in the agency's name – rehabilitation – functioned as shorthand for the notion that the PFRA was reparative: to rehabilitate meant to fix mistakes.

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Scholars adopted, adapted, and perpetuated the theme. Political economist George Edwin Britnell, in *The Wheat Economy* (1939), described federal government policy of the 1930s as focused on "correction of the most glaring mistakes of settlement."[16] So consistent was the work of Britnell with the PFRA's own rhetoric that, in November 1939, PFRA director George Spence wrote to thank Britnell for another publication that offered "particularly good publicity for our work."[17] In *Canadian Agricultural Policy: The Historical Pattern* (1946), economic historian Vernon Fowke portrayed the PFRA as a federal government effort to salvage the beleaguered agricultural economy of western Canada.[18] A decade later, in *The National Policy and the Wheat Economy* (1957), Fowke described the PFRA as engaged in "correcting the mistakes of the homestead period."[19] A joint publication by Britnell and Fowke, *Canadian Agriculture in War and Peace, 1935–1950* (1962), was largely consistent with the pair's earlier publications, at least in the attention that it accorded to the PFRA.[20]

The most influential published account of the PFRA remains James H. Gray's *Men against the Desert* (1967), which detailed a range of state-sponsored efforts to respond to 1930s agricultural difficulties.[21] This volume followed the publication of Gray's first book, *The Winter Years: The Depression on the Prairies* (1966), a description of the Depression-era Prairies based largely on Gray's own experiences, which included difficult years of unemployment.[22] *The Winter Years* expresses Gray's frustration with governments that offered little assistance to hard-hit prairie dwellers. This frustration helps to explain *Men against the Desert,* in which Gray lauds a range of actors (identified as agricultural engineers, university researchers, soil scientists, entomologists, plant breeders, stock raisers, and farmers) whom he viewed as having responded to the crisis with vigour, in part through their work with the PFRA.[23] As a newspaper reporter in the mid-1930s, Gray was what he termed "a spectator at the birth of PFRA," and Gray's admiration for the agency is clear in his assertion that the experience left him "with memories to last a lifetime."[24]

Men against the Desert surveys a range of ways that the 1930s prairie crisis was addressed, including population movement out of the hardest-hit areas and the development of more appropriate farm machinery. Gray positioned the PFRA at the centre of the crisis response, which Gray called "the greatest Canadian success story since the construction of the CPR."[25] Given the focus on the agency and Gray's compelling prose, *Men against the Desert* amounted to a particularly heroic rendering of the PFRA's role in fixing the mistakes of settlement. Experts from multiple fields have lauded Gray's work. A history of the Saskatchewan Institute of Agrologists

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proposed that it should be "required reading for all agrologists."[26] Gray's book won an award from the Historical Society of Alberta, and in 1987 historians John Herd Thompson and Ian MacPherson called it the best nonacademic work on Canadian prairie history.[27] PFRA leadership was equally enthusiastic, feeling that Gray's interpretation operated to their benefit. They incorporated Gray's title into their own publicity work, using the phrase "Men against the Desert" to headline a mid-1980s photograph display commemorating the PFRA's fiftieth anniversary.[28] Also in the 1980s, likely based at least in part on the publicity that Gray offered the agency, the PFRA became an important touchstone in elementary school history textbooks.[29]

Later scholars, despite making valuable contributions to broader understandings of prairie history and adding nuance to prior interpretations of the PFRA, have not challenged the general conclusions of early analysts. Gerald Friesen, author of an innovative volume titled *The Canadian Prairies: A History* (1984), saw the PFRA as an effort to "correct the tragic mistakes" of farming unsuitable areas such as southwestern Saskatchewan and southeastern Alberta.[30] In *Empire of Dust: Settling and Abandoning the Prairie Dry Belt* (1987), David C. Jones lauded key figures within the PFRA for their work to "save the vile heart of the desert," as Jones termed the effort to reclaim degraded prairie areas.[31] Barry Potyondi's *In Palliser's Triangle: Living in the Grasslands, 1850–1930* (1995), despite concluding prior to the creation of the PFRA, expands our understanding of settlement's mistakes by focusing on underlying capitalist imperatives.[32] In *Places of Last Resort: The Expansion of the Farm Frontier into the Boreal Forest in Canada, c. 1910–1940* (2006), David Wood refers to the PFRA as a government-driven effort to correct problems with prairie settlement.[33] In *Happyland: A History of the "Dirty Thirties" in Saskatchewan, 1914–1937* (2011), Curtis McManus argues that the PFRA contributed to shifting prairie agriculture from exploitation to adaptation, which he sees as an important conceptual fix.[34] Gregory P. Marchildon sheds light on the PFRA's political dimensions, proposing that the agency should be understood as a political calculus as well as "an evidence-based policy response to socio-environmental disaster."[35] Although valuable for its emphasis on the PFRA's political dimensions, Marchildon's article echoes and entrenches the remediation-of-mistakes narrative. Murray Knuttila's recent analysis of national agricultural policy and transnational economic processes touches briefly on the PFRA, but it does not include sustained analysis of the agency's activities and their effects.[36]

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The often told story of the PFRA's role in fixing the mistakes of settlement should be revisited. The need for a re-examination of the agency is made clear through a careful assessment of Gray's *Men against the Desert,* which since its publication has anchored the prevailing interpretation of the PFRA. Notwithstanding its acclaim and influence among professional historians, Gray's work is unfootnoted, making it challenging to evaluate the basis for his interpretations. It predates much contemporary environmental and agricultural science that now permits a reassessment of PFRA activities. *Men against the Desert* considers the PFRA only amid the 1930s crisis, although the agency continued to operate for many additional decades. Given the PFRA's importance within common understandings of prairie history, it is time for an up-to-date assessment that accounts for the agency over a longer period.

The broadest argument in this book is that the PFRA was intended to drive forward transformation in the prairie region, not simply to correct past mistakes. This interpretation is clear when the varied activities of the agency are considered in aggregate and over decades, an approach not taken by prior scholarly analysts. The PFRA aimed to profoundly transform prairie environments and prairie agriculture. The agency also contributed to change in how politicians and technical experts understood the role of the state. Yet the PFRA's ambitions were never completely realized. Change did not always take place as intended, and the agency lacked the capacity to implement some of its most transformative plans.

Over many decades, the PFRA's broad array of activities ranged from on-farm engagements with an individual farmer to the construction of massive hydroelectric infrastructure affecting multiple communities and ecosystems. Despite the diversity of these activities and their difference in scope, three common features mark the agency's work. First, the PFRA was engaged in state-driven environmental transformation that reflected what anthropologist James C. Scott described as a high-modernist ideology.[37] High modernism is defined by faith in the capacity of experts to improve the human condition. Flowing from this ideology are practices that emphasize the activity of experts and the production of expert knowledge. Historians focused on Canada have ably engaged with Scott, working to shed light on various aspects of the Canadian past and also to critique Scott's ideas. Key contributions to this literature have focused on infrastructure construction, with radically disruptive undertakings such as water-engineering projects and roads or freeways providing particularly powerful representations of high modernism.[38] Other contributions have

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referenced the influence of high modernism in diverse historical contexts, tracing its influence in northern and rural spaces, international relations, and urban governance, for example.[39] Positioning the PFRA in relation to high modernism offers a new way of understanding the agency.[40] Additionally, study of the PFRA brings something new to our understanding of state-driven environmental change in mid-twentieth-century Canada. Much existing literature takes a project-focused approach, with scholars drawing on Scott's conceptualization to help explain particular state undertakings. Because the PFRA undertook a range of activities over decades, the agency reflects high modernism as a process rather than an event. Studying the PFRA suggests how high modernism found purchase in Canada, how it resonated with a range of state imperatives that included conservation and development, and how it was influenced by political considerations within Canada's federal system. In this way, my study of the PFRA sheds new light on the various ways that state-driven environmental change was negotiated in Canada.[41]

The significance of the transnational context is a second characteristic feature of PFRA activities. The agency was a vector through which transnational scientific models, techniques, and approaches were brought to bear on the rural Prairies. In turn, the PFRA engaged transnationally in various ways, with the work of the agency's administrators, scientists, engineers, and economists effectively coupling the Prairies to global contexts. In emphasizing the significance of the transnational dimension, I follow in the wake of earlier scholars who have examined the influence of transnational forces on the Prairies, including empire, ecological processes, and communications technologies.[42] I also connect my work to a recent trend in the historiography of the mid-twentieth-century Prairie provinces. Scholars Erika Dyck, Alex Deighton, Valerie Korinek, and Esyllt Jones have conceptualized prairie history not as a subset of the Canadian nation-state (a region alongside other Canadian regions like Atlantic Canada and the North) but as something defined in key ways by historical processes that are transnational in scope.[43] Although our respective topics differ widely – with my colleagues attending to mental health treatment, the experiences of queer peoples, and the emergence of Medicare – we share an inclination to situate the modern Prairies transnationally, recognizing it as a region of the world.[44]

A third feature common across many PFRA activities was the agency's role in consolidating the dispossession of prairie Indigenous peoples. Many Indigenous communities were by turns ignored, inadequately assisted, and harmed by the PFRA. The PFRA also contributed to entrenching racism

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and colonialism within and beyond the Prairies, with consequences for other groups subject to oppression as well as Indigenous peoples. In recognizing these processes, my rendering is in tune with scholarship that demonstrates how, globally, state-driven responses to agricultural drought or aridity often entrench prevailing inequalities.[45] There is much still to learn about interactions between the PFRA and prairie Indigenous peoples, as well as other disadvantaged groups. In what follows, I aim to make clear the importance of understanding the PFRA within the frameworks of settler colonialism and white supremacy. To do otherwise would be to profoundly misunderstand both the PFRA and the history of the Canadian Prairies.

The PFRA, an agency of the federal state, envisioned and undertook transformative activities that were defined by transnational contexts and that consolidated the ongoing process of settler colonialism. In this way, the PFRA was engaged in an ambitious project of regional refashioning aimed at producing a more stable prairie agriculture sufficiently profitable to afford an acceptable quality of life for those the agency served. Although forged amid the volatility and hardship of the 1930s, this broad organizational goal persisted for decades. It was made manifest in the agency's promotion of small-scale stock raising, which agency advocates thought would bolster the ability of farm families to endure economic and environmental ups and downs. The PFRA's broad organizational goal, the pursuit of agricultural stability to ensure rural quality of life, was also evident in the agency's contributions to intensifying prairie agriculture, which involved efforts to increase regional agricultural productivity by realigning land use and land capacity as well as by facilitating access to water.

The PFRA's effort at regional refashioning played out amid changes in agriculture that were global in scope and radical in effect. In North America in the 1910s and 1920s, farming was reshaped by new technologies such as tractors and by new ideas about efficiency.[46] These forces of change intensified during the Second World War, when labour shortages combined with improved farm incomes to increase reliance on machinery such as tractors and combines – what Ian MacPherson and John Herd Thompson termed a "mechanical revolution for grain growing."[47] This mechanical revolution was, in the postwar years, complemented by a chemical one, as herbicides, pesticides, and fertilizers increased in type and availability.[48] In the words of historian Grant MacEwan, new agricultural chemicals kindled "enthusiasm, scepticism, and fear" among prairie farmers even as these chemicals shifted the bounds of agricultural possibility.[49]

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New machines and new chemicals, many of which relied on or were derived from petrochemicals, knit agriculture into the fossil fuels industry in unprecedented ways.[50] They also drove shifts in the agricultural and human landscapes of the region. Prairie farms increased in size, and rural population dropped, with significant consequences for those who remained on the farm and for their governments.[51] As historian Royden Loewen puts it, mid-twentieth-century agricultural change "shook the foundation of rural North America."[52] Ongoing processes of agricultural industrialization meant that even as the PFRA sought to transform the Prairies, the ground was shifting beneath the agency's feet.

Historical and Environmental Contexts

Although enmeshed in processes playing out globally, the PFRA was oriented to the human and environmental circumstances of the mid-twentieth-century agricultural Prairies, the south-central section of the Canadian Prairies today dominated by capitalist farming. These circumstances were defined by the accelerating processes of resource exploitation and land colonization that were spurred by non-Indigenous newcomers. Resource exploitation and land colonization had catastrophic effects on Indigenous communities, and they also had significant effects on regional ecologies.

Before substantial numbers of colonizers settled in northwestern North America, the area that would become the agricultural Prairies was a profoundly multicultural space. Among the Indigenous peoples most substantially affected by the agricultural colonization of the Prairie West were Anishinaabeg and Inninewak in eastern prairie areas, along with Métis, Nakawe, and nēhiyawak extending westward.[53] The Dakota, Lakota, and Nakota were concentrated in central prairie landscapes, and the Siksika, Kainai, and Piikani extended from central to western prairie areas. The îyârhe Nakodabi also spanned central and western areas, and the Tsuut'ina were concentrated in the western Prairies. Affected groups living farther north included the Nehinuwuk.[54] Changes in the names used by Indigenous groups often reflect efforts to specify and reclaim identities that have persisted despite generations of colonial oppression, and these shifts signal the continued vitality of Indigenous communities. Historically, the Indigenous peoples of the Prairie West often organized themselves into multicultural bands united by kinship ties.[55] These communities engaged

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in significant and sustained ways with the environments that they lived in, moved through, tended, used, and altered.

Soil is one of the fundamental components of any system of agricultural production. Plants root in it, and they extract nutrients and water from it. Soil creation is defined by the geological, climatological, and historical processes playing out in any particular landscape. In a material sense, soil is long-term local history.[56] The history of the soils of the Prairie West extends back in time at least to the last glaciation, with glacial retreat and deposition bearing on the region's landscapes. The development of prairie soils continued across the millennia during which Indigenous peoples lived in and moved throughout the region, with burning practices being among the various ways that Indigenous peoples affected their environment. Over this long period, driven in part by climatic conditions, prairie soils came to catalogue the accumulating effects of human, plant, and animal life across the region. Distinct soil zones emerged: the brown soils characteristic of the drier grasslands, the dark-brown and black soils of the moister grasslands, and the dark-grey soils typical of the transitional area between grasslands and boreal forest.[57] The differences in these soil zones relate to the quantity and quality of the organic matter that accumulated in the topsoil prior to the establishment of colonizer agriculture, with less organic matter in the semi-arid brown region and more in the sub-humid black region. The dark-grey soil zone is distinguished by the inclusion of forest vegetation in the soil along with grassland vegetation. According to the Government of Canada's 2017 ecological classification, the agricultural areas of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta fall within the Prairies ecozone, which includes the Aspen Parkland ecoregion along the northerly limits of the agricultural Prairies.[58]

By the late nineteenth century, the linked processes of colonial expansion and capitalist exploitation had transformed the environments and societies of northwestern North America. Fuelled by demand in Europe and eastern North America, beaver and bison as well as other animals had been pursued so voraciously as to radically shrink their numbers. The fur trade was transformative on numerous fronts, including its impact on the significance of the waterways of northern North America. The prairie region includes rivers and streams of many sizes. Some, like the North Saskatchewan River, flow east from the Rocky Mountains (along Alberta's western border) and combine with other waterways before eventually draining into Hudson Bay as part of the Nelson River system. The northward-running Red River flows into Lake Winnipeg after bisecting

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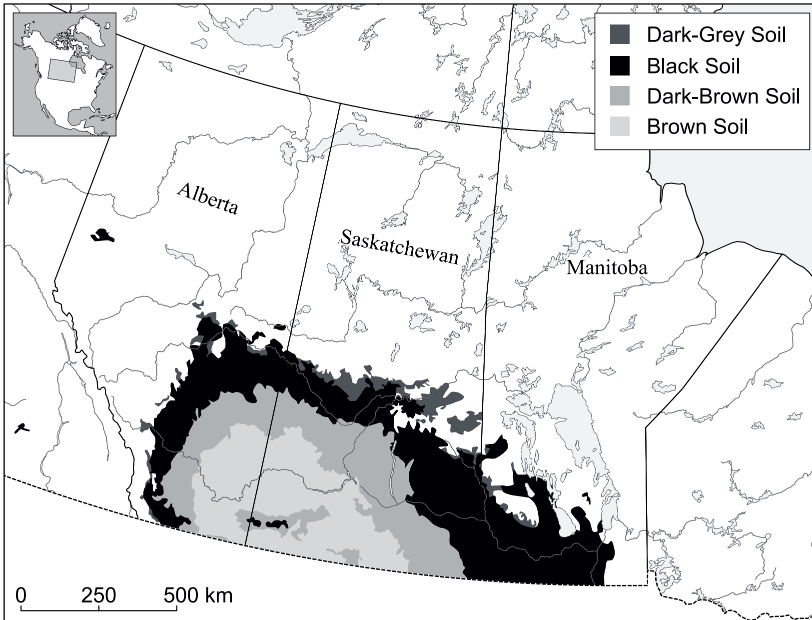

Figure 0.1 Dark-grey, black, dark-brown, and brown soils of the Canadian Prairies. *Adapted from W.M. Drummond and W. Mackenzie,* Progress and Prospects of Canadian Agriculture, *ed. Royal Commission on Canada's Economic Prospects (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1957), 253; Les Fuller, "Chernozemic Soils of the Prairie Region of Western Canada,"* Prairie Soils and Crops Journal *3 (2010): 37–45; and* CanVec Series [Admin., Land, Hydro] *(Ottawa: Natural Resources Canada, 2019).*

southern Manitoba. Other rivers like the Qu'Appelle and the Assiniboine are both locally significant and important as tributaries to larger rivers. Compared to the Canadian Shield landscape to the north and east as well as the mountain ranges to the west, there are few substantial lakes on the agricultural Prairies, a circumstance that heightens the importance of rivers as well as smaller streams. Rivers and lands adjacent to rivers were of longstanding importance to Indigenous peoples.[59] During the fur trade, rivers continued to serve as key routes of transportation, and they also became important vectors within an exchange process that affected both people and nonhuman nature.

As the fur trade declined and agricultural colonization increased, the Indigenous peoples of northwestern North America suffered displacement and dispossession. These processes were part of what historian John Weaver has termed "the great land rush," in which empires expanded overseas and

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established private property regimes.[60] On the agricultural Prairies, Indigenous peoples made treaties with the Canadian state, but inequities in the treaty-making process were compounded in subsequent years by Canada's failure to live up to treaty terms.[61] Epidemic diseases such as smallpox, oppressive legislation such as the 1876 Indian Act, and genocidal apparatus such as the Indian Residential Schools system bore heavily on the Indigenous peoples of the Prairie West, further advancing the state-sponsored project that historian James Daschuk has called "clearing the plains."[62]

The Canadian federal government promoted the agricultural colonization of the Prairie West both to claim territory and to develop western markets for goods produced in the industrializing East. Railway construction, policing, and land surveying were publicly sponsored efforts to create conditions more amenable to the production of private profit. State legislation, particularly the 1872 Dominion Lands Act, was intended to attract settlers to the Prairie West. This legislation enabled individuals to access a quarter-section of land (160 acres) for a fee of $10. Provided that they fulfilled certain criteria – namely cultivating a specified amount of land, erecting buildings, and living on the homestead – they could after a number of years receive title.[63] Notably, not all people were always able to access a homestead. Women and Indigenous peoples were among those often excluded from doing so under the changing policies and practices governing prairie settlement, so the process of imposing a private property system in the Prairie West entrenched gendered and racialized inequalities.[64]

The provisions of the Dominion Lands Act were a poor fit for environmental conditions across much of the Prairie West, with quality of soil and supply of water being among the key factors. Precipitation records reveal that the Saskatchewan River watershed, which extends across much of the agricultural Prairies, is Canada's most variable in terms of rates of precipitation.[65] Making more land available to individual homesteaders through the pre-emption system and providing farming guidance through the Experimental Farms Service were some ways that the Canadian state sought to improve the odds for colonizer farmers. Abetted by both the Canadian government and an unusually large quantity of rain, in the final years of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth century, newcomers came to the Prairies in large numbers and sought to establish farms.[66] They did not necessarily arrive in one place and stay there. The settlement period was characterized by a significant degree of churn in human populations, with people moving out of, as well as into, the region and from one farm to another.[67]

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Temporarily elevated precipitation around the turn of the century helped many new prairie farmers. Some parts of the Prairies had persistent difficulties with excess water.[68] But over the longer term and at a regional scale, large areas of the Prairies often fail to receive precipitation at rates meeting the requirements of common farm crops, a circumstance known as agricultural drought.[69] The shortfall of water is typically most severe in an area extending from southwestern Saskatchewan to south-central Alberta. Characterized by a mixed grassland ecosystem and situated within the brown soil zone, this area was sometimes termed Palliser's Triangle in reference to John Palliser, a British agent who deemed the area too dry for successful farming.[70] But agricultural drought is an ever-present risk on the Prairies even beyond this particularly dry area. Scientists Dave Sauchyn and Samantha Kerr explain that precipitation rates that are at best borderline for agricultural production are so common on the Canadian Prairies as to "define the region ecologically."[71]

The PFRA was created amid the agricultural drought of the 1930s. In those years, blowing dust was visceral evidence of farming crisis, a vivid sign of the precipitous erosion of prairie soils that had accumulated over millennia. Dust storms were seen to demand efforts at fixing what many observers – farmers, governments, and scholarly analysts alike – understood as the mistakes of prairie settlement.

Reckoning with the PFRA

By situating the PFRA in historical and environmental contexts, this book sheds light on the agency, the region, and the nation, as well as on the mid-twentieth-century global context. It is primarily a work of environmental history and historical geography, but the analysis draws from a range of historical sub-fields, including labour history, agricultural history, the history of science, new political history, aid history, environmental justice, and the history of Indigenous peoples.

My approach is thematic. Although the book progresses from addressing the agency's emergence in the 1930s (Chapter 1) to dealing with key events of the 1960s and 1970s (Chapter 7), with the Conclusion describing some important changes in the mid-1980s, there is no steady chronological progression throughout the pages to come. Traditional institutional biographies have their merits, but the PFRA is best understood critically and analytically. The chapters that follow reach backward and forward in time

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in perhaps unexpected ways in order to situate the agency and its activities in timelines defined by colonial processes and ecological change.

Chapter 1 locates the agency in large-scale historical processes, including the environmental changes associated with colonizer agriculture and conservationist concerns about natural resources degradation. It engages directly with the question of how the PFRA sought to fix the mistakes of settlement, as the agency framed them. This chapter deploys sociologist Jess Gilbert's notion of low modernism as a counterpoint to James C. Scott's high modernism.[72] Both modes of state action figure large in the PFRA's first decade. Finally, the chapter situates early PFRA activities in environmental context by examining an unintended consequence of strip farming, a soil conservation technique heavily promoted by the PFRA. Strip farming helped to guard against blowing soils, but it also exacerbated infestations by the wheat stem sawfly, an insect that damaged crops. Reckoning with the early PFRA means taking account not just of protected soils but also of sawfly problems.

Chapter 2 locates the PFRA's contributions to Alberta irrigation within longer and broader histories of colonialism and racism beginning prior to the 1905 creation of the province. The focus is on efforts to grow sugar beets, a potentially lucrative crop requiring both abundant water and intensive cultivation. On the Prairies, beet farmers relied on irrigation infrastructure and on labour from Indigenous peoples, Asian peoples, and other disadvantaged groups. By the mid-1930s, it was clear that public money was necessary to underwrite irrigation infrastructure, and the PFRA helped to validate this investment by maintaining that irrigation served the public interest. This notion of the public interest failed to include the people labouring in the beet fields. And so the sugar beet landscape casts into relief some of the racist and colonial frameworks that the PFRA helped to perpetuate.

The Community Pastures Program is the subject of Chapter 3. This was an important area of PFRA activity from 1937 onward. Publicly administered pastures played a key role in the unsettlement of the Prairies, the PFRA-led effort to move farmers away from unsuitable lands and to promote raising livestock. This chapter picks up on earlier discussion of high and low modernism, finding both in the PFRA's Community Pastures Program. This chapter also addresses the political constraints on and the environmental consequences of the program, particularly the reduction of ecological diversity due to the intensive seeding of crested wheatgrass. The chapter illustrates that the effects of the great land rush,

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which helped to create the 1930s crisis on the Canadian Prairies, were not easily reversed.

Chapter 4 examines what George Spence, first director of the PFRA, viewed as the ultimate resolution of the mistakes of settlement: the South Saskatchewan Regional Plan (SSRP). This was a typical high-modernist undertaking. The SSRP involved the construction of dams and a reservoir that were intended to transform Saskatchewan by making available additional water and hydroelectricity. Focusing on the process of planning the SSRP, this chapter foregrounds the tension between expertise and politics underlying many PFRA undertakings. The chapter also explores the evolution of conservationism in a Canadian context, elaborating on what contemporaries saw as important connections between the wise use of resources and improvements in human well-being. These connections took on particular significance in light of concerns about quality of life in rural Saskatchewan, concerns that underwrote the decision to move ahead with the SSRP.

Chapter 5 details how a number of PFRA activities had significant negative consequences for Indigenous peoples and communities, underlining that the agency should be understood within the framework of settler colonialism. Three case studies suggest the diversity of Indigenous peoples' encounters with the PFRA. They also demonstrate how mid-twentieth-century state-led efforts at conservation and development prioritized the needs of settlers, often without considering harms to Indigenous peoples.

Chapter 6 follows the PFRA to Ghana, where the agency became involved in a water conservation project in the north of that country. As wealthy nations of the Global North and the West undertook so-called international development, the Canadian government turned to the PFRA for technical expertise in order to supplement other overseas activities. Whereas previous chapters make clear how PFRA agents were situated within global communities of experts, this chapter examines one of the agency's own transnational undertakings. The chapter elaborates on the significance of colonialism and racism within the work of the PFRA and documents the tragic consequences of deploying technical expertise in the absence of local knowledge.

Chapter 7 addresses key aspects of PFRA activities in the 1960s and 1970s. In the 1960s, the PFRA helped to inspire various federal agricultural and regional development initiatives that bore on the nation at large. The agency engaged directly with prairie Indigenous peoples in these years but failed to establish programs that effectively served Indigenous communities. By the 1970s, changes in prevailing ideas of development and shifts in

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federal government practices disadvantaged the PFRA, and the agency diminished in power and influence.

The 1980s began amid widespread political and public alarm about a serious agricultural drought on the Canadian Prairies, and prairie drought fears resonated with growing global concerns about soil degradation. The book's Conclusion considers the changed regional and transnational contexts within which the PFRA came to be seen, once again, as an effective agent for grappling with important problems. This 1980s redemption underlies early-twenty-first-century invocations of the agency by political parties like the Liberal Party and the Green Party as well as by advocacy organizations like the National Farmers Union and the International Institute for Sustainable Development.

Recently, scholars from disciplines across the social and natural sciences have directed new attention at the PFRA. Concerned about anthropogenic climate change, researchers have examined the 1930s PFRA, as well as the broader environmental crisis that defined the agency's earliest years, for clues to how governments might successfully intervene in the contemporary context.[73] Researchers have also explored the PFRA as an example of government success in promoting resiliency, a virtue that they attribute to a range of prairie actors.[74] This research on the PFRA is important in a number of ways, most significantly for its direct engagements with the pressing challenge of promoting human well-being amid a changing climate. But this body of work risks perpetuating an understanding of the PFRA that is inconsistent with what emerges from an evidence-driven historical examination of the agency's activities from the mid-1930s to the mid-1980s. Recognizing the PFRA as a driver of environmental transformation on the Canadian Prairies complicates the prevailing understanding of the agency as an example of successful agricultural adaptation. Further, using the PFRA as an example of government success fails to reckon with the agency's history of perpetuating environmental inequalities derived from settler colonialism and white supremacy. Finally, valorization of the PFRA does not take account of the agency's profoundly mixed environmental legacy, one marked by the creation and exacerbation of problems as well as by their solution or mitigation. Ultimately, the PFRA is not a useful shorthand for present-day solutions to the linked challenges of environmental justice and environmental change on the Canadian Prairies. I hope that the chapters to follow convincingly explain why not.

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