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Civilizing the West: The Galts and the Development of Western Canada (Book Review)

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Book Reviews

by Russell Maatman

Civilizing the West: The Galts and the development of western Canada, by A.A. den Otter. Edmonton, Alberta: The University of Alberta Press, 1982. 395 pp. \$21.00. Reviewed by Arnold Koekkoek, Associate Professor of History.

The appearance of this book has a special significance for the Dordt College community, as its author was a member of the college's first graduating class (1965), afterward completing a Ph.D. at the University of Alberta. (Lest this review be seen as in any way self-serving, it should be noted that the reviewer never taught Dr. den Otter and can claim no credit for his accomplishments.)

Civilizing the West is a good book, thoroughly researched, coherently organized and stylishly written. Solid, far-ranging research into primary sources and mastery of secondary works provide the author's material, and he makes the most of it. This is a work of real scholarly merit.

Den Otter focuses on the activities of Sir Alexander Galt and his son, Elliott, in promoting the settlement and exploitation of the prairies of southern Alberta, particularly the town and environs of Lethbridge, which came into being due to their efforts. Those efforts at promotion led the Galts and their associates to introduce coal mining, steamboats, railroads, irrigation, and agricultural settlement to the prairies, for they shared the view of most Northwest promoters that civilization had to be brought to the west. This civilization included not only the whole body of Canadian-British social and cultural institutions but especially "the whole economic paraphernalia" (p. x) mentioned above. "Civilizing the west" meant "it had to be integrated into the economy of the new technological society" (p. x). Government policy was to encourage such activities, at times with financial inducements. The Galts sought and obtained their share of the largesse. "Civilizing" was not only good for the nation; it was also expected to be profitable for the individuals who were active in the cause. Investors' money was also sought, found, and directed for civilization and profit from the mines, railroads, and canals. Tireless organizers, sharp businessmen, persuasive lobbyists, foresighted investors, and withal loyal Canadian nationalists, Alexander and Elliott Galt saw it as wholly proper and fitting that they and their associates got rich while they opened the southern Alberta prairies for the "civilizing" benefits their country deserved and needed.

This is not a biography of the Galts, however, and though their characters and personalities are clearly

portrayed (especially that of Sir Alexander, pious Calvinist but without the pervasive vision and application of that faith, as den Otter clearly notes), it is only in connection with the "civilizing mission" that we see them. Many others enter the story and play their roles. Especially delightful is the description of the Rev. Charles McKillop, the first Presbyterian minister in Lethbridge. Eastern clergyman in formal appearance, he was tough enough to take it and dish it out in the rough mining and railroad town on the frontier. Judging from den Otter's account, Lethbridge differed little from other frontier towns in providing men such as McKillop with many opportunities for campaigns against sin. The story of the settlement and development of Lethbridge itself is also an important aspect of the book, for that was the center of the Galt companies' activities.

While this book's first merit is sound scholarship, its worth is further enhanced by good writing. Too often scholarly books are deadly dull, authoritative but pedantic. This is decidedly not the case here. Den Otter writes well and with a lively style. The combination of scholarship and writing craft produces a work that makes reading enjoyable. The author is to be commended.

The publishers deserve a word of commendation, too, for the book is physically attractive, from its dust jacket to its cover to its illustrations to its type, line-spacing, and margins. The pages are not crowded, and the reader is enticed by their appearance, another virtue often sadly lacking in scholarly productions.

My only tiny complaint is not with the book as such but with the title. It is a bit misleading to use the title, *Civilizing the West*, for it suggests a broader coverage than den Otter ever intends. Southern Alberta, after all, is hardly the whole west or even most of it.

Still, that does not detract from the real substance and merit of the book. It is a fine piece of work and deserves to be read by more than professional historians. Anyone interested in the North American west, in Alberta development, or the process of "civilizing" undeveloped territories anywhere in the world can profit from this excellent study.