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The Canadian West in an Era of Crisis (1919-1935) Historical and Fictional Representations

Résumé

Cet article présente des récits fictifs des prairies en état de transformation au cours des trois premières décennies du XXe siècle. Une attention particulière accorde à la Grève Générale de Winnipeg de 1919 et à la Grande Dépression avec les bouleversements sociaux en résultant au cours des 'Dirty Thirties.' L'accent sera également mis sur la montée du Parti Social Crédit de l'Alberta sous le leadership de William Aberhart. L'analyse comparative de Fox (1991) de Margaret Sweatman et de The Words of My Roaring (1966) de Robert Kroetsch examine les caractéristiques thématiques, esthétiques et linguistiques qui distinguent ces romans. Un autre texte, mentionné en passant, est The Aberhart Summer (1983) de Bruce Allen Powe. La lecture des œuvres individuelles est guidée par l'interaction entre le contenu et la forme. L'examen littéraire est également inspiré des résultats d'études historiques et politiques qui donnent un aperçu des (des)ordres du Canada au début du XXe siècle.

Abstract

The paper discusses fictional accounts of a changing prairie west during the first three decades of the twentieth century. Particular attention will be paid to the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919 and the Great Depression with the subsequent social upheavals during the 'Dirty Thirties.' An additional focus will be on the rise of Alberta's Social Credit Party under the leadership of William Aberhart. The comparative analysis of Margaret Sweatman's Fox (1991), Robert Kroetsch's The Words of My Roaring (1966) and – in passing – Bruce Allen Powe's The Aberhart Summer (1983) looks at thematic as well as aesthetic and linguistic features that distinguish these novels. Thus, the reading of the individual works is instructed by the interaction between content and form. The immediate literary scrutiny will also be inspired by the findings of socio-economic, cultural and political studies that provide insight into Canada's (dis)orders in the early twentieth century.

Introduction: Narrating/Narrativizing History

At the centre of this paper are two novels which take the reader into the world of Canada's Prairie West during the first two decades after World War I. Margaret Sweatman's *Fox* (1991) and Robert Kroetsch's *The Words of My Roaring* (1966) are historical and political novels which deal with a formative period in Canada's regional as well as national development.¹ Each follows patterns known from historical and meta-historical fiction² but does so in its own particular way – with the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919, the impact of the Great Depression, and the rise of the Social Credit Movement in the 1930s as their special focal points.

The chosen texts make use of empirical data, refer to historical personae, political events, or ideological pleas, but also take into account people's feelings, attitudes and desires during these years of hardship. Therefore a few general remarks concerning the literary treatment of history will precede the discussion of the individual works, before literary analysis is placed against the foil of findings of historical studies. Throughout the paper fictional representation and historiographic narration will complement each other, whereby the underlying scheme follows the chronology of events.

In his seminal study *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (1987) Hayden White has argued that "narrative might well be considered a solution to a problem of general human concern, namely, the problem of how to translate knowing into telling [...]" (White 1987, 1) How to tell, which kind of narrative format to use, i.e. how to describe facts "in order to sanction one mode of explaining them rather than another," (White 1976, 44) remains a problem though. Similar to writers of fiction, historians need to "constitute their subjects as possible objects of narrative representation [...] And they do so by the very structure and language they use to present those subjects." (Hutcheon 1988, 111)

Generally, it can be argued that historians attempt to escape a partisan rhetoric, while writers of historical fiction easily and often deliberately opt for another language in their depiction of actors and events. Furthermore, it is especially true of the postmodern meta-historical novel to subvert 'objective', written evidence by disclosing the partisan nature of the documents. Historiographically founded master narratives are challenged by the use of non-linear chronologies and multiple narrative voices that often debunk the 'great story' with the help of parody. In such approaches, the reader is constantly made aware of the constructedness of past documents and begins to question what is 'true' history – and if there is such a thing at all.

1 For a critical overview of historical prairie fiction see Calder/Wardhaugh 2005.

2 For a comprehensive summary of critical approaches to Canadian historical fiction see Cabajsky/Grubisic 2010, "Historical Fiction and Changing Ideas of Canada." The changing concepts and patterns in Canadian historical fiction during the last decades of the 20th century are described and analyzed by Wylie 2002; 2007.

Borrowing from Émile Benveniste (1971), Hayden White has differentiated between 'discourse' and 'narrative,' proposing that this distinction is

based solely on an analysis of the grammatical features of two modes of discourse in which the 'objectivity' of the one and the 'subjectivity' of the other are definable primarily by a 'linguistic order of criteria.' The 'subjectivity' of the discourse is given by the presence, explicit or implicit, of an 'ego' who can be defined 'only as the person who maintains the discourse.' By contrast, the 'objectivity of narrative is defined by the absence of all reference to the narrator.' In the narrativizing discourse, then, we can say, with Benveniste, that 'truly there is no longer a 'narrator.' The events are chronologically recorded as they appear on the horizon of the story. No one speaks. The events seem to tell themselves'. (White 1987, 3)

Historians tend to erase signs of the narrating ego from the discourse, while in the historical novel the protagonist actively gives shape to the events. Historical fiction provides readers with alternative perspectives on the past that focus on subjectivity. On the other hand, it should not go unnoticed that non-written documents such as oral stories are recognized as highly valid sources for historical research, and renowned prairie historian Gerald Friesen, whose seminal study *The Canadian Prairies: A History* (1987) stands unmatched, repeatedly makes use of literary texts to supplement his arguments. This will be further illustrated below.

Labour, Class and Politics: Margaret Sweatman's Fox (1991)

Looking at Margaret Sweatman's novel, four main impulses can be noticed that come to bear on her fictional treatment of history:

the wish to remain true to the past; the wish to recover the urgencies of the past; the wish to expose what is in the present that desires and uses the past, [and] the wish to undermine historical 'documents' by exposing them as partisan constructions. (Kramer 1999, 51-52)

Margaret Sweatman's fictional treatment of the Winnipeg General Strike moves between the conventional historical novel in the tradition of Sir Walter Scott's *Waverley* (1814) and its postmodern followers. Sweatman makes extensive use of written materials, such as historical documents, newspaper clippings, posters, letters, diary entries, cables and the like, suggesting that not just political action, but also language shaped the strike.

CHOOSE BETWEEN THE SOLDIERS
WHO ARE PROTECTING YOU

AND THE ALIENS WHO ARE THREATENING
The Winnipeg Citizen (Sweatman 1991, 116)

No matter how great the provocation, do not quarrel. Do not say an angry word. Walk away from the fellow who tries to draw you. Take everything to the Central Strike Committee. If you are hungry go to them. We will share our last crust together. If one starves we will all starve. We will fight on, and on, and on. We will never surrender.
 Ivens, *Western Labour News* (Sweatman 1991, 149)

The Strike is developing into a social revolution. The Bolshevik leaders intend to divide the country among themselves and their followers.
The Free Press (Sweatman 1991, 174)

As Reinhold Kramer has pointed out, "the *Western Labour News* complained that the partisan nature of the *Manitoba Free Press* made it impossible for workers' voices to be heard, while the *Free Press* complained of censorship, when in the early stages of the strike, walkouts prevented the *Free Press* from publishing." (Kramer 1999, 65)

Fox narrates the circumstances and the events that led to what has become known as Bloody Saturday, when the strike was knocked down by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) and Special Constables on Saturday, 21 June 1919, costing two lives and 30 casualties, among them four policemen. The strike saw more than 30,000 workers walk off the job for six weeks.³ At the climax of her novel, the author inserts a paragraph on the event in the mode of a factual report. It is indented and set in a different font. The short text describes the drama in a non-partisan, plain style:

The red-coats reined their horses and reformed opposite the old post office. Then, with revolvers drawn, they galloped down Main Street, and charged into the crowd on William Avenue, firing. One man, standing on the sidewalk, thought the Mounties were firing blank cartridges. Until a spectator standing beside him dropped with a bullet through his breast. Another standing nearby was shot through the head. (Sweatman 1991, 197)

Juxtaposed is an imagined scene in which the reader gets the view of MacDougal and Eleanor, two of the novel's main characters. The scene is turned into an emotional comment on the killing of a young innocent bystander:

MacDougal is standing on the steps of the Manitoba Hotel. Eleanor stands beside him. They both see young Stevie across the street. They can hear shots on Main. MacDougal waves to him, *Go home Stevie*, he waves. Stevie

3 For the development of the city of Winnipeg, see Artibise 1977.

smiles, like a flower in a battlefield, and walks across the street. It is as if the boy is enjoying the disruption, the men on the streets. He sees MacDougal waving to him, he goes to him. The Mounties come around from Main toward the hotel, firing into the air, into the crowd. Stevie, in the middle of the road, eager to receive a message from his friend this so-serious MacDougal. The bullet, the hot shell, in the boy's face, it shoots off the face, he falls.

MacDougal is already here, he cradles the boy in the middle of the street while the Mounties ride around the little scene. MacDougal with the dead boy in his arms. Eleanor standing beside them, her empty arms waving, waving, waving. (Sweatman 1991, 197-198)

Here, Sweatman employs two types of discourse distinguished by Hayden White: "a historical discourse that narrates and a discourse that narrativizes [...]." (White 1987, 2) She works with both a "discourse that openly adopts a perspective that looks out on the world and reports it and a discourse that feigns to make the world speak itself and speak itself as a story." (White 1987, 2)

Preceding the tragedy of Bloody Saturday is a development in Canada's West that is overshadowed by the aftermath of the First World War, which resonates not only in the background of *Fox*, but also of Kroetsch's novel. By the end of the "*War to end all Wars*," (Findley 1985, 11) in November 1918, over 600.000 Canadians had served in the army, 60.000 of whom had become casualties, 10.000 of whom were missing. In the Second Battle of Ypres (Belgium) alone, which lasted from 22 April – 25 May 1915, over 6,500 Canadians were reported wounded or captured, and more than 2,000 dead – among them many farmers, lumberjacks, and factory workers from the western provinces. In *The Words of My Roaring*, Kroetsch's protagonist thinks of his "old man dead from a shellburst outside a town called Ypres, dead beyond all caring, his regiment covered with glory [...]." (Kroetsch 2000, 22) And as the "Winnipeg Crater" at the war memorial of Vimy Ridge in northern France suggests, a large number of Winnipeggers had joined the Canadian forces.⁴ The war has inscribed itself deeply into Canada's collective memory.⁵ In *Fox* uprooted returning soldiers are searching for their place in a society which is stricken by economic inequality, class division, insecurity, social instability, xenophobic fears, and bitter post-war feelings. At the same time immigrants who had fled Europe with Marx in their back pockets sought a living wage. These are the general miseries that disturb the prairie world in the second decade of the 20th century.

The Winnipeg General Strike itself was the product of poor working conditions, unemployment, the economic recession and the activity of union organizers. They

4 For literary treatments of trench life in the First World War, see for example Findley 1977; C. Y. Harrison 1930; or Remarque 1928.

5 Between 1914 and 1926 approximately 40 novels dealing with the First World War were released. Cf. also Fussell's seminal study *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 1975.

demanded an eight-hour workday, collective bargaining and a living wage. The strike brought the city to a standstill. Work stopped at the railway yards and factories. Winnipeg had no mail, no streetcars, taxis, telephones, petrol, or milk delivery. Most restaurants, stores, and even barber shops closed. Police, fire fighters, and employees of the water works joined the strike, which commenced with the walk-out of the telephone girls:

Five hundred Hello Girls working the night-shift. [...] Today is the Fifteenth of May, the very centre of spring. The sun outshines the light bulbs when the girls unscrew the little electric globes that register your call. [...] They reach into pockets and purses and drawers, 500 hiding places for 500 small pieces of cork. And they put one piece of cork in the middle of the circuitry. Then they walk outside and there isn't anybody coming in to replace them. But they've left a message: This morning, the Hello Girls are saying Goodbye. (Sweatman 1991, 86)

Sweatman works with short chapters, sometimes only the length of a paragraph, so that the structure of the novel is determined by a sequence of vignettes with meandering voices that reflect the collision of the wealthy and working classes, a conflict that is further highlighted by the many juxtaposed events. A high society wedding is described right after the reader is informed that the strike leaders have been arrested. At the opening of the novel wealthy young Eleanor, who leads a privileged existence and knows little about the lives of Winnipeg's working class, is hosting a tobogganing party while the union leaders are meeting illegally at the Walker Theatre.

So, *Fox* is a contemporary filter for the social gospel of the day. Clamouring newspaper headlines and the passionate rhetoric of the new Left echo through the dream world of Crescentwood where Eleanor, her glamorous and naive cousin Mary, and the scrupulous real estate venturer Drinkwater, Mary's fiancé, live. However, the cushion of luxury is scant protection when words like 'sedition' and 'Marxism' explode in their midst, confronting them with the bigotry, greed and ambition of the post-war years. During the course of the narrative and with the help of MacDougal, a Methodist minister and owner of a bookshop, who supports the strike, holds with the radically communitarian politics of the Social Gospel, and becomes Eleanor's lover, the young woman is made sensitive to the working conditions of Winnipeg's lower classes as well as the suffering they experience as a result of the strike.

MacDougal is based on Reverend William Ivens (1978-1957) who founded the Labour Church in June 1918. With its Christian Socialist outlook the church exercised its influence during the run-up to the strike, while the Social Gospel became a discourse central to the strike, and, during the following decade, also to the founding of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF, 1932). As a political coalition of progressive, socialist and labour groups that wanted economic reform, the objective

of the CCF would later be to help Canadians affected by the Great Depression. Eventually the CCF folded into the New Democratic Party (NDP) in 1961.

In contrast to Eleanor, her sensual cousin Mary, whose story runs parallel and intersects with that of Eleanor, remains in the world of the upper class and is primarily concerned with the preparations for her wedding. Again, different perspectives are juxtaposed. Public and private desires, the division of ideals are reflected in Eleanor and Mary. Although the two women belong to Winnipeg's wealthy establishment, and although in *Fox* life during the time of crisis is largely seen from the elevated view of the upper class from Crescentwood (dominantly through Eleanor's and her family's eyes), the voices of Winnipeg North End's working class and immigrant ethnic groups remain not entirely obscure.⁶ On the contrary, throughout the novel, the reader feels a pro-strikers' undercurrent and at the end of the text the viewpoint is that of the strikers. Given this inflection, the novel includes descriptions of a young prosperous woman moving into contemporary politics. Hence, MacDougal's connection with the Labour Church, his socialist sermons, his pacifist attitude, foremost, however, his occupation with the *Manifest der Kommunistischen Partei* (1848) becomes instrumental. For just how dangerously Marx's and Engels's message was conceived becomes obvious later in the novel, when MacDougal is arrested in his bookshop. The arrest is preceded by a scene where a fat little man visits the store. He has

a suspicious mother-look on his face [that] tells MacDougal, this man works for the Government [...] [The man] pries a thin book by Max Adler out of the case, *Socialism and the Intelligentsia*. [...] "Sedition," he says finally, placing the book on MacDougal's desk like it weighs a ton. "Who are you working with?" (Sweetman 1991, 22-23)

It needs to be recorded that the strikers did not reach their goals. Instead the strike "dealt a fatal blow to the western labour movement's hopes for radical social change. [...] employers would not accept industry-wide collective bargaining [...] and the state would not countenance general strikes [...]" (Friesen 1987, 363) The leaders were charged with seditious conspiracy, and worst, "the workers were themselves divided and exhausted." (Friesen 1987, 363) However strongly revolutionary socialism had entered western Canadian political thinking, it did not prevail. After Bloody Saturday it withered quickly, so that reformist ideas began to dominate public discourse during the following decade. On the other hand, as a consequence of the Strike, many western townspeople "had been made aware, intensely aware, of class interests and class lines in their communities – none more so than Winnipeg [...]" (Friesen 1987, 364) *Fox* is therefore also set against the background of an emerging

6 See for the historical development and social composition of the Prairie West Franzis/Palmer 1985; Franzis/Kitzan 2007.

class consciousness in the urban spaces of Prairie Canada and seeks to rekindle some of this energy in the early 1990s.

Gerald Friesen's observation that "what is representative of prairie working class-life is unknown" and his subsequent question "[h]ow can a picture of this life be drawn in the absence of adequate studies?" (1987, 288) may be answered by drawing on the literary imagination which helps to fill the gaps when empirical evidence is missing. It is here that fiction comes into play. Reality and fiction are related to each other like twins. For example, Friesen points out how Douglas Durkin's *The Magpie* (1923), a novel that is generally considered to describe post-war disillusionment in the Canadian West, served as a "guide to popular perceptions of social composition" (Friesen 1987, 284) in early 20th century prairie cities. Durkin portrays a veteran who has to discover that the "Great War had not improved social conditions in his own country." (Friesen 1987, 284) On the contrary, upon his return from Europe protagonist Craig Forrester meets his "closest comrade from the trenches who lives in a shack-like house on the edge of a western metropolis, clearly Winnipeg." (Friesen 1987, 284) Durkin gives a detailed picture of the setting, "including the tomato plants growing along one edge of the front yard and cucumber vines along the front porch." (Friesen 1987, 284) The historian Friesen underscores the realist quality of the novel which enables the reader to grasp contemporary social and political life graphically. "*The Magpie* can [...] be seen as a graphic revelation of class consciousness in western Canada. Fiction in this case corresponds with fact." (Friesen 1987, 285) Narrative thus complements historiography. As the novels under scrutiny demonstrate, the deliberate combination of the factual and the speculative that distinguishes historical fiction from historiographic accounts opens routes to the past, which can then unfold before the reader's eyes in a vivid and tangible way.

Politics and Rhetoric: Robert Kroetsch's *The Words of My Roaring* (1966)

The settings of Kroetsch's novel are small prairie towns in rural Alberta in a period of an overwhelming economic crisis. *The Words of My Roaring* is but another example of those works in which the author contests the "centralization of culture through the valuing of the local and peripheral" (Hutcheon 1988, 61) – hence Kroetsch's concern for oral forms of communication and the vernacular. The writer has argued that how a community imagines itself is linked to how it 'speaks' and thinks about itself, how oral forms of communication can dominate over written language.

The novel's title is borrowed from a verse in the 22nd psalm: "Why art thou so far from helping me, / and from the words of my roaring?" (Psalms 22:1) After the collapse of The New York Stock Exchange on 24 October 1929, the world awakened to discover that the Roaring Twenties with their cheerful message of abundance and good times were over. The Great Depression had begun and for the next ten years the entire world would feel its effect. In Western Canada the crisis was further fueled by a

devastating climate with endless droughts.⁷ It should also not go unnoticed that the Ku Klux Klan had spread into Eastern Canada in the mid-1920s and had made its way as far as Saskatchewan by December 1926, subsequent to which “Saskatchewan was experiencing [a] nativist backlash against immigration that had earlier poisoned Manitoba.” (Friesen 1987, 405) Religious fundamentalism and racism entered into a threatening alliance against people of colour and non-British foreigners, constraining ethnic diversity, and demanding selective immigration.

It is the time when William Aberhart’s (1878-1943) religiously inspired, fundamentalist Social Credit Movement continuously gained power in Alberta and was established as a new political party in 1934 that took over the provincial government after the election of 1935 (cf. Brown 2005). Of Aberhart, a devout Christian with fundamentalist inclinations, a school principal, and part-time Baptist preacher, it is said that he possessed a magnetic personality, a fiery oratory, and managed to capture the public’s imagination with his radical theories that promised to lift Albertans from their economic hardships (Friesen 1987, 411-413). In this he was inspired by C. H. Douglas (1879-1952), an English engineer from Liverpool who had published a book under the title *Social Credit* (1924), in which he combined economics, political science, history, and accounting, advocating a policy that disperses economic and political power to individuals. Aberhart ran in the provincial election on a platform that promoted a ‘basic dividend’ of 25 \$ per month, which would be paid to every adult Albertan, thus overcoming the Depression. When Aberhart realized the provincial budget would not allow him to fulfil his promise, his solution was to have Alberta print its own money, an obscure attempt that never materialized. As Premier of Alberta he also passed laws that restricted the freedom of the press and limited banking activities on farms. Aberhart became quickly known for his sermons, which combined his charismatic personality with a righteous religious wrath and xenophobic messages.⁸ He becomes the mighty voice in the background of *The Words of My Roaring*.

15 years after the Winnipeg General Strike, Kroetsch’s protagonist John J. (Judas) Backstrom, a small town undertaker, encounters the Great Depression in the imaginary rural town Notikeewin “whose first two syllables yield ‘naughty’, and whose first and last give us ‘no win’ [...]” (Atwood 1995, 53) Here John J., whom everybody calls Johnnie, was born in a farmhouse. The first thing he remembers is the sound of

7 An atmospheric depiction of these years is given by Gray 2004 [1966].

8 According to Cook (2019) Aberhart’s religious fundamentalism showed structural similarities to the political message of Social Credit which proposed: “All men have failed to overcome the problems of the Depression which derive from power beyond our control./These problems can be solved through faith in the Social Credit message. This faith will allow Social Credit to dispel the ‘illusion’ of the Depression./Through the election of a Social Credit government, prosperity will be restored./Faith in Social Credit is accompanied by a dramatic conversion to the Social Credit philosophy (which Aberhart considered a ‘style of life’ more than simply a set of principles.) Conversion gives assurance that one’s problems will be solved.” (Cook 2019, 60)

the wind, a phenomenon so vital to the prairie experience (Mitchell 1990 [1947]). Then he describes the landscape surrounding his parents' farm at length:

westward in the summer you could see the green of a windbreak, elm and maple and Russian poplar and caragana. Things that don't grow here by nature but have to be planted and tended. And then in the fall you could see through the bare branches out across a mile of wheat stubble; a gradual rise to the horizon, a clump of poplars, a line of telephone poles along a road a mile away, and another farm finally [...]. (Kroetsch 2000, 47)

Backstrom's world is a horizontal world upon which man has left his vertical signature (cf. Ricou 1973; D. Harrison 1977). What is missing in this scenario is the railway track and the grain elevator. Notikeewin stands for the "hundreds of [such] places with names and histories. They ranged in size from a railway crossing with a hotel and an elevator to 'elevator rows' surrounded by several thousand residents." (Friesen 2017, n.p.) Nature and geography are controlling components in the design of these towns (see also Giffen 2004).

Johnnie J. Backstrom provides the main narrative impulse in a work of fiction where the author looks at the most enduring times on the prairies through the lens of the farming and labouring classes, and chronicles the days preceding the landslide victory of the Social Credit Party on Thursday, 22 August 1935. Consequently, the novel is structured according to the weekdays, beginning on a Saturday and ending on the following Thursday. The text "isolates a very real temporal-spatial frame [...]" but its representation is far from strictly realistic." (Lecker 1986, 36) Critics have noted that "*The Words of My Roaring* resonates with such a complex of mythologies and narrative traditions that it has refused to remain [...] merely a narrative account of the social and economic tensions surrounding the Alberta election of 1935." (Graham 1981, 177) This observation complies with Kroetsch's radical distrust for history and his interest in myth:

History is a form of narrative that is coercive. I don't trust the narrative of history because it begins from meaning instead of discovering meanings along the way. I think myth dares to discover its way toward meanings (if you have to have meaning). Myth comes at its stories completely from the other direction. (Newman/Wilson 1982, 133)

One of the book's central and for this paper most significant myths is the Social Credit party itself. Backstrom becomes Kroetsch's imaginary voice of this party's support for the ordinary people, the prairie farmers and underdogs. "As the title announces, *The Words of My Roaring* is a book of loud voices, most notably that of the narrator and hero figure [...], but also of his prairie community [...]" (Müller 2002, 109), and of John George Applecart, "a paperthin disguise for 'Bible Bill' Aberhart."

(Wharton 2000, vii-viii) Applegart does not appear as a persona in the novel, but disseminates his gospel through the machinery of the radio which Backstrom turns on ever so often to listen to his party leader. Kroetsch thus shows how important and influential the new medium was for the often-isolated prairie communities and how it was instrumentalized by a rhetorically skilled speaker such as Aberhart. Applegart remains a wired voice in the background of the story, a loudspeaker that not only inspires Backstrom, but repeatedly thematizes and capitalizes on the grudges an impoverished prairie population holds against wealthy eastern townspeople. The only way to change a brutal reality is with words. Relying on Biblical rhetoric, Applegart moves the clash between west and east, Alberta and Ontario, periphery and centre in the focus of his radio campaign:

“That Whore,” the invisible speaker said, his voice deep and ringing: sure of itself. That “Who-er,” he said. That “Who-er” of Babylon. [...] I had to listen. Applegart—he preached every Sunday [...]. It was the biggest event of the week. Nothing could touch it. “Who?” he said. He let his voice drop. “I ask you, who?” And he stopped, he left us hanging. “Who is that red beast of a Who-er?” [...] Just then Applegart let out a roar [...], his voice crushing the silence. [...] The Whore, it turned out, was Toronto, and all her high-muckie-muck millionaires. He had a magnificent voice, Applegart. [...] The people loved it. Applegart was connecting Satan and all of hell with the dirty Eastern millionaires. [...] He was the voice of the prairies speaking. (Kroetsch 2000, 30-34)

In *The Words of My Roaring* it is not Sweatman’s urban Winnipeg, but the isolated farm or little prairie town with the beer parlor which provides the setting. The voices of Kroetsch’s characters are connected to the vernacular. At the beer parlor the tall tale emerges as a distinct narrative formula, politics and bullshit collide, or as the author has it: “the great sub-text of prairie literature is [the] oral tradition.” (Kroetsch 1983, 75)

[...] if you get to a small town when there is no public celebration in progress, I recommend two beers in the local beer parlor. It is customary that you order two glasses per person, on the sane theory that you can’t fly on one wing so why make the waiter walk across the floor twice? Thus, for thirty cents per person, you become members of the community; and the prairie beer parlor is as much *the* community centre as is any pub in Christendom. Here the real news is passed along – the news about those absent, that is – business deals are once again very nearly transacted,

friendships are made and daily renewed, the weather is forecast [...].
(Kroetsch 1968, 12)

The weather conditions especially come to the fore in Kroetsch's novel and influence the progress of the story. In the 1930s Western Canada was held captive by an unending drought, and the brutal invasion of the grasshoppers:

Stories of the Dirty Thirties – the name expresses the image – began with the weather. [...] The dust storms began in 1931. Hot dry winds blew steadily day after day in the month of June when, normally, soft rains are expected to assist crop germination. [...] On 1 July, the customary Dominion Day baseball tournaments [...] were disrupted by blowing dust [...]. The next two years were not as severe, but the summer of 1934 was even worse. [...] It was becoming apparent that, like the Sahara, the prairie desert was moving and growing. [...]

Heat, wind, and the absence of moisture were only part of the prairie tragedy. With the drought's ideal conditions, grasshoppers proliferated into a plague of biblical proportions. [...] by the end of the decade [...] they were a serious problem in several hundred thousand square miles – almost the entire western interior [...]. It is hard to separate tall tale from fact, but they were said to have consumed not only gardens and crops but also shrubs, the sweaty part of pitchfork handles, clothes on the line, and even shirts on their owners' backs. (Friesen 1987, 386-387)

In addition, occasional hailstorms destroyed the crops and made life so miserable that, as Kroetsch remembers in *Alberta*, it took his farming father a great sense of humour to cope with the disaster: "We got hailed out! I said to my father. He was distressed, but he wasn't, not really. That was a part of nature. [...] I couldn't understand his tolerance. [...] The first thing we did was make ice cream with the hail. That's an Alberta reaction." (as qtd. in van Herk 2010, n.p.) All this shows that climate problems are not just a recent phenomenon – neither historically nor as a topic of literature.

Johnnie Backstrom, originally conceived on one of Kroetsch's trips to Saskatchewan, is a roving, larger-than-life figure of gargantuan proportions, a trickster, a Canadian picaro, who relies on his "voice's exuberance, [his] hyperbolic exaggerations and [his] foolish wisdom." (Müller 2002, 109) Kroetsch remembers: "I crawled out of my sleeping bag and buck naked faced the rising sun and announced to the West that I had *returned*. [...] And [...] Backstrom was born." (Qtd. after Eso 2020, 19)⁹ Johnnie, an undertaker, horses around central western Alberta in a

9 Kroetsch repeatedly returned to the Canadian West during his American teaching years (1961 – to the mid-1970s) at Binghamton University, NY.

ramshackle old hearse, often acts morally irresponsibly; he is chaotic of personality, “a man consumed by high ambitions pretty well hung, and famed as a hells with women. [...] Thirty-three years of age, [n]early six-four in [his] stocking feet [...], a full grown man with [...] erection[s] in church.” (Kroetsch 2000, 8; 118) Kroetsch’s Social Credit undertaker holds campaign meetings in his funeral parlor and drinks himself into a coma in the pub, only to recover with the help of nine cups of coffee which he drinks while shaving (Kroetsch 2000, 18). Foremost, however, he represents an understanding of the world that is shaped by his roots in Western Canada, nowadays a region which “is recognized politically and economically as an entity” (Kaye/Thacker 1994, 178) in its own right.

For Kroetsch, this regional anchoring embodies a reading and telling of history that is diametrically set against eastern notions of narrative, which guide Doc Murdoch, Backstrom’s political opponent, who left Ontario to set up a practice in Notikeewin (cf. Leacock, 1937). Both have feelings and respect for each other, the one delivering life, the other burying the dead. “You spank them,” I said. “I plug them, Doc. Between us we cover the field.” (Kroetsch 2000, 56) Murdoch who brought Johnnie into the world, “his first delivery,” (22) serves as Johnnie’s surrogate father.

Whereas Backstrom is a bullshitter whose story evolves as a fabulous narration, Murdoch’s conduct is based on rational considerations, just like his speeches are prosaic, void of hyperbole. He challenges Johnnie at a rally from a fancy, elevated platform that distances him from the farmers who suffer from the drought and their mortgages, promising them a bright future. Johnnie can only top Murdoch’s pledges by promising the farmers the one thing they really want: Without thinking, he promises rain. In a different situation, under pressure, he clarifies to an “idiot stubble-jumper [...] I didn’t say I’d *make* it rain. I said it *would* rain. There is all the difference in the world. But try and explain to an ignoramus.” (Kroetsch 2000, 42) This careless reply dominates the rest of the campaign, finally assuring the undertaker’s election when, completely unforeseeably, right out of the blue, the rain does fall on Thursday. Saul Bellow’s *Henderson the Rain King* (1959), and, above all, James George Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* (1890), where the author treats the rainmaker as the reigning figure in mythology, echo in the background of Kroetsch’s text.

Regardless of how self-centred and boisterous Backstrom appears and how roaring he stages himself, under his loud, bragging surface Johnnie is a fragile, tender and loving person who cares for and tries to console his suffering fellow people, just like Kroetsch is generally very sensitive to the vulnerability of those in need. It is not accidental that Kroetsch has Backstrom’s closest friend commit suicide because the depression makes it impossible for him to support his family. Backstrom himself is vulnerable, not always sure of himself, trying to find the right words. Taking a closer look at him, Dennis Cooley has noticed Johnnie’s essential loneliness. “Though [...] there can be no denying Johnny’s [sic] loud and chest-thumping talk, if that is what it is, Kroetsch himself thinks Backstrom is reaching for something more.” (Cooley 2016, 245) Kroetsch has confirmed Cooley’s observation in an interview with Russell Brown:

“Well I think Backstrom’s outcry *is* against the silence. You know, who’s he talking to, did you ever wonder? I really think he’s talking to the silence, creating himself into it, whatever. [...] sometimes it’s just that terrible need to hear a voice, even if it is your own.” (Brown 1972, 15)

In a world where history survives in orally conveyed forms of narrative, such as tale and legend, the past becomes mythologized – hence Kroetsch’s occupation with voice. “[...] the actual plot line of [the novel] is entirely secondary to the storytelling act. Johnnie is defined, not by what he does, but by how he narrates his doings. Plot is voice [...]” (Lecker 1986, 41), and so Backstrom is always searching for his tongue. Inspired by Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of carnival, which focuses on communal interaction and provides temporary liberation from established rules and hierarchies, Kroetsch’s “handling of myth contributes [...] to the subversive retelling of a bad historical experience.” (Müller 2002, 110) Ultimately, *The Words of My Roaring* does not only entail numerous tall tales, the novel itself is a tall tale.

Conclusion: Narrativizing an Era of Crisis

In the two novels the reader is offered a dense fabric of life in Western Canada during a period of serious crisis, caused by economic inequality, an extreme climate, political instability and false promises by fundamentalist, self-proclaimed saviours with millenarian visions. In the case of Aberhart and his Social Credit belief system it

needed the stresses of the Depression and the reactions that they induced in order to gain wide popularity. [...] Through his radio sermons from the Calgary Prophetic Bible Institute, he had become the foremost popularizer of the theology of fire and brimstone dispensationalism. (Cook 2019, 47)

Both novels take the reader into a time when Social Credit in Canada, the *Partito Nazionale Fascista* in Italy and the *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei* in Germany determined politics. Whether Aberhart, Mussolini or Hitler, each of these party leaders rendered hopes to people in despair, each of them had exceptional rhetorical skills, and used the new mass medium, the radio, to voice himself.

Friesen’s remark that “Aberhart’s story would best be told in a gothic novel or a modern melodrama because life was a matter of blacks and whites rather than shadings and nuances” (Friesen 1987, 411) is enforced by Aritha van Herk’s claim that one

could read 100 history books about the rise of Social Credit and the election of William Aberhart 1935, but none will evoke the spirit of those times so well as [Robert Kroetsch’s] *The Words of My Roaring*. In that novel, Kroetsch captures the terrible effect of drought and defeat, and how the politicians

who promise the impossible offered the kind of hope that people needed so much they elected a chimera. (Van Herk 2010, n.p.)

Another work attesting to these judgments is Bruce Allen Powe's *The Aberhart Summer* (1983). Mostly set in 1935 against the foil of the Great Depression and the Dirty Thirties, the novel takes the reader to the city of Edmonton, occasionally also to the Albertan countryside. The text offers itself as a hybrid of realist political fiction merged with a mystery story. Originally published between *The Words of My Roaring* and *Fox*, and then released in a new edition in 2000, *The Aberhart Summer* is just another example of prairie fiction that underlines a continuing interest in a period that has left deep traces in the collective memory of the Canadian West. In contrast to the other two works, here the story of the Great Depression and the Dirty Thirties is told from hindsight. The narrator reflects on his own past which he sees through the lens of a veteran who has returned to his hometown after World War II. Thereby he "recreates the mood of a Depression-ravaged city" (Melnyk 2000, v), complementing Kroetsch's and Sweatman's novels with the help of an authentic voice that evokes a mental and emotional picture of the times. As George Melnyk proposes in his introduction, it is not just a memory of something long past. Instead, "[...] it is a revelation that continues to be played out in contemporary life. Its republication is a symbol of the ongoing political issues that have haunted Alberta since the summer of 1935, Aberhart's summer. These issues [...] won't go away." (Melnyk 2000, vii)

Much the same could be said about Sweatman's fictionalized contribution to an understanding of the political tensions and human irritations during the General Strike of 1919. Released in 1991, her novel and the author's identification with a protagonist who develops a utopian desire for community provokes the question, as to what extent the Winnipeg crisis of 1919 and the rise of socialist ideas in the Canadian West can be linked to the crisis of Manitoba socialism in the 1980s. It was then that Manitoba's Prime Minister (1969-1977) Edward Schreyer 'liberalized' the New Democratic Party. This helped at the polls, but weakened the party's sense of mission. *Fox* presents the past through the present.

In a similar vein it can be argued that Kroetsch's novel is not just a fictional treatment of events long past. Instead, similar to *The Aberhart Summer*, it addresses current issues that connect Alberta's (political) history to Canada's Dirty Thirties. Moreover, in view of current self-elevated "extreme stable geniuses"¹⁰ with their demagoguery, false gospels, and racialized fundamentalism, as well as a growing xenophobia with the exclusion of so-called others, the novels reach beyond Canadian territory and read like comments on many vital issues of our own time.

10 In May 2019 the President of the United States, Donald Trump, "told the assembled members of the media during one non-sequitur: 'I'm an extremely stable genius. OK?'" (Politico 2019, n.p.)

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