

THE FLAT PRAIRIE

FREDERICK PHILIP GROVE

THE exceedingly slight slope with which the prairie south of Winnipeg drains, in a northeast direction, to the Red River is hardly perceptible; in truth, it amounts to less than a foot in a mile. To the casual glance, this prairie seems flat as a table top. No native irregularity, whether of soil accumulation or plant growth, breaks its monotony. Whatever relieves the sky-line is man's work. The only native growth is the long, slender prairie grass which, in a summer breeze, gives the surface of the soil the appearance of a sheet of watered silk.

Once the buffalo roamed here, supplying the eye with contours to rest on; he has been replaced by the scattered homes of man. A phenomenon characteristic of this prairie, though not restricted to it, lends it some interest: the great frequency of mirages. Often a distant strip of land is lifted above the horizon like a low-flung cloud; a town or a group of farmsteads, ordinarily invisible behind the intervening shoulder of the world, stands up clearly against the whitish sky which only overhead shades off into a pale blue. The strip of featureless air between the mirage and the solid earth below is of that silvery, polished whiteness which we see otherwise only in the distant mirror of a smooth sheet of unruffled water.

On this prairie, near things often seem distant—a hay-stack no more than a quarter of a mile away looms gigantic as though separated from the eye by two or three miles. Far things, especially such as in themselves loom high—the huge storage granaries along the railways, for instance—seem near as though seen through the wrong end of the telescope. In certain states of the atmosphere, on the other hand, the layered air works like a huge lens: roofs five, six miles away show details of construction as though magnified by the glass.

Far to the west, a low, swinging line indicates the series of hills which, so geologists tell us, once formed the shore of the lake whose bottom has become the flat prairie. Occasionally, though rarely—mostly prior to one of the major storms of the summer season—these hills, too, seem lifted and drawn nearer, but without that silvery strip underneath which is characteristic of the mirage on unbroken prairie.

A traveller might go in an east-west direction for a hundred miles without finding the slightest change in the essentials of the landscape. Two railway lines branch from the international trunk lines which run roughly north-south from Winnipeg. Both turn west in almost straight lines, a matter of twenty or thirty miles apart, till, at the foot of the hills in the west, they join in a connecting loop. Both are strung with towns at intervals of ten or twelve miles. From a distance, all these towns look alike, their salient features consisting in the tall, spire-like grain elevators which dominate western landscapes everywhere; below them cluster a few stores, a few dozen dwellings, and such groups or lines of trees as the aesthetic sense of their inhabitants has impelled them to plant.

But if such a traveller chose to go from north to south, he would be arrested at regular intervals by enormous ditches, all running parallel to each other and sloping at a rate exceeding that of the prairie towards the river which bounds this steppe of the prairie in the east. To those who live in this district, these ditches are of importance not only because they are the only means which enables them to grow crops by carrying away the water which once flooded the prairie in spring for months at a stretch; but also because they often determine the distance which a settler has to travel when he wishes to go from one point to another not in exactly the same latitude. When full, they can be crossed only at such points where bridges are provided, which is, on an average, once in four miles. Two people may be neighbours, their yards separated by nothing but a ditch; yet they may have to travel four miles to get from one farm to the other.

These man-made diggings impress the beholder who comes from a distance, so that his perceptions are not dulled by familiarity, like the prehistoric remains of a drainage system devised by some mightier race gone to its accountings; so completely has the prairie grass obliterated the traces of tools used in their excavation.

Altogether it is a landscape which, in spite of the ever encroaching settlements of man, seems best to be appreciated by a low soaring flight, as that of the marsh-hawk so commonly seen in the open seasons. Wild life is little abundant. Gophers—even they are rare—field mice, an occasional rabbit, meadow-larks, blackbirds—especially the red-wing—and ground sparrows, in addition to hawks and burrowing owls, pretty well exhaust the native share of the vertebrate orders. Insects are represented by a few butterflies and enormous numbers of beetles and crickets, subterranean kinds, and clouds upon clouds of mosquitoes in spring and early summer.

Birds that are recent immigrants congregate about the towns and such occasional farmsteads as are surrounded by wind-breaks of trees.

Owing to the peculiar difficulties of drainage with which the farmer has to contend, man remains distinctly an interloper; for the floods which come down from the western hills in the thaw-up, though tamed, have not been done away with by the ditches; and in places these ditches have furnished the soil for willow-thickets which are choking them up. It is true that, where the water once used to stand for months, it now stands only for weeks, at least in those elusive seasons which farmers call normal; but these weeks come toward the end of April and often the beginning of May when seeding operations are in full swing elsewhere; and the land, being the lowest, except in the far north, of the prairie provinces, seems to attract early frosts which hinder the due maturing of the grains when seeding was delayed by the flood in spring.

Such as live here—brought by those accidents of choice which determine location in a new country: the nearness to the western metropolis, the possibility of breaking large tracts of land without the previous labour of clearing away stumps or stones, the vicinity of friends or relations, or lastly a predilection for this peculiar, melancholy landscape, bred into the blood by some atavism or some inherited sentimental tendency—are developing what is so far exceedingly rare on this cosmopolitan continent with its ever fluctuating population, namely a distinct local character and mentality.

If they have lived here for some time, a decade or longer, and have stayed on in the face of all the inevitable and unforeseen discouragements and difficulties, so that the landscape has had time to enforce in them a reaction to its own character, they seem slow, deliberate, earth-bound. In their features lingers something wistful; in their speech, something hesitating, groping, almost deprecatory and apologetic; in their silence, something almost eloquent.

It is a landscape where, to him who surrenders himself, the sense of life as a whole seems always present, birth and death being mere incidents in the flow of an outwardly somewhat debilitated stream of vitality. It is not surprising, then, that, physical facts notwithstanding, the difference in the mood produced by night and day, or by summer and winter, seems less pronounced than it is elsewhere. The average day, true enough, is hot in summer; and the night is cold. But the discomfort caused by the heat does not seem essentially different from the discomfort caused by the cold; the

effect of both partakes of the effect of a lid placed over slow ebullition. Perhaps the time of day best fitted to bring out the characteristic impression of the landscape is neither noon nor midnight but the first grey dawn of day, especially a dull day; or the first dim dusk of night, that dusk in which horizons become blurred and the height of human buildings seems diminished. And similarly the time of year most in harmony with the scene is neither summer nor winter; but rather the first few days of spring, while the snow still lies in dirty patches and, from the heights to the west, the floods send down their first invading trickles which follow the imperceptible hollows of the ground; or the first drear approach of November days, with indurating winds and desolate flurries of snow in the air.

The prevailing silence—for, apart from man's dwellings, not even the wind finds anything to play its tunes on—is accentuated rather than disturbed by the sibilant hum, in early summer, of the myriads of mosquitoes that haunt the air, bred in stagnant pools, or the shrill notes, in the early autumn, of the myriads of black crickets that literally cover the soil. That silence, like the flat landscape itself, has something haunted about it, something almost furtive.