

Clavelle, Karen Anne. *Imagine the Prairies. The Garden in Post-Depression Prairie Fiction*. Thesis (PhD [English]), University of Manitoba. Ann Arbor: ProQuest/UMI, 2005. (Publication No. NR08776)

Abstract

This dissertation opens the question of the literary construction of the Canadian prairies as garden as it appears in representative twentieth-century post-depression prairie fiction. My thesis derives from the observation that the particular time period of the depression has generated an impression of the Canadian prairies predicated on an indifferent if not malevolently aggressive environment during “the dirty thirties” despite the noticeable ambiguity in descriptions of both prairie space and the characters who inhabit that space. My approach defines the prairie garden’s connection to the Garden of Eden and other mythical gardens.

In this document I trace the beginnings of the construction of the prairies as garden through the literary traditions beginning with Homer (c. 850 BCE), through Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance. I find its continuance in the early eighteenth-century in the writing of Henry Kelsey (1690); in nineteenth-century settlement literature of Canada; and in the mid-twentieth-century writing I am concentrating on---works by Sinclair Ross, Wallace Stegner, Margaret Laurence, W.O. Mitchell, and Robert Kroetsch. The books I examine construct the prairie as wilderness and as blighted garden, but also as a place of productivity and hope. Critics have come to understand prairie as a place where, as Northrop Frye argues in *The Bush Garden*, there can be no Wordsworthian unity of individual mind and nature. Robert Kroetsch’s *The Words of My Roaring* dreams a veritable prairie Eden, in the wake of Ross’s *As For Me and My House*, Stegner’s *Wolf Willow*, and Laurence’s *The Stone Angel*. In each of the novels, alongside the blight caused by largely by drought, there is fertility and even at times, abundance.

The gardens in the books I examine are varied: in *As For Me and My House* and *The Stone Angel*, the treatment is largely one of sensibility and imagination. Abundance and fertility, both attributes of the Garden of Eden, exist less in physical space than in emotion and imagination in the central characters of Ross and Laurence. In *Wolf Willow*, *Who Has Seen the Wind*, and *The Words of my Roaring*, the gardens are no less imagined: in addition to sites of hope, they are also sites of creation, recreation and reinvention, and recovery.