

## “Others Like Him”: The Alberta Pioneer in Popular Culture & Folk Poetry

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Article abstract

In the popular culture of Alberta, the pioneers of the province's historic era are commonly identified as cowboys. Pioneers are portrayed in a fashion that conforms closely to the pattern Bakhtin termed epic, that is, as static heroes whose grand deeds may serve as details but not as quotidian models. In Albertan folk poetry, however, “pioneers” means “homesteaders”, a group which lacks both the glamour and the epic status of the cowboy. This folk poetry cannot be said to speak in Bakhtin's novel mode, but it nevertheless offers a multivoiced account of the legacy of the first European exploiters of the northern prairies.

# **“OTHERS LIKE HIM”: THE ALBERTA PIONEER IN POPULAR CULTURE & FOLK POETRY<sup>1</sup>**

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Albertans are told that they live in a mythically charged place;<sup>2</sup> their self-conscious mythmaking is a tradition of boosterism that predates the province's entrance into confederation.<sup>3</sup> Out of many possible sources for fantastic and explanatory storytelling, the mythology further asserts that this heritage is pertinent to all Albertans, though the standards set by these putative forebears are beyond our current grasp.

This myth closely resembles the narrative mode termed “epic” by M. M. Bakhtin, in that it requires a distancing of the heroic founding acts from present day Albertans, and is the standard commodity of popular culture in the province produced by institutions connected to various levels of government and by private, commercial writers and artists. To this “epic” mode, Bakhtin counters that which he calls “novel”, in which dialogic forces produce a discourse of contemporaries who are not distanced from each other. The folk verse of Alberta is both epic and novelistic, supporting many aspects of the epic version of provincial history, but not without questioning its account severely.<sup>4</sup> I will first

1. Special thanks are due to T. B. Rogers, J. Svilpis, and R. Davis, the University of Calgary, for their insights and encouragement with this paper. Poems were originally encountered during research projects funded by Alberta Historical Resources Foundation (1985) and Raga Mala Performing Arts of Canada (1986).
2. Although E. W. Voegelin insists that “myth” be bound by the element of religion, her definition, “A story, presented as having actually occurred in a previous age, explaining the cosmological and supernatural traditions of a people, their gods, heroes, cultural traits, religious beliefs, etc.” (1949: 778), stripped of this element, describes the event I see occurring in Alberta. In a secular age, one might wish to stretch the sense of “religion” or shrink that of “cosmology”.
3. “Boosterism” is used by prairie historians to describe the institutionalized promotion of the economic growth of individual towns and cities. Nineteenth-century boosters presented the case for each of their “perfect prairie cities... only in terms of economic growth and material success” (Francis 1989: 116-17); culture was an “extravagance”, the consequence of prosperity, and history did not yet exist in western Canada.
4. Although most of the verse here comes from rural sources, the folk poets of Alberta are by no means all rural. Bibliographer Karen J. Clark has counted over a thousand poets prior to 1978 (Interview, August 1991). They include members of all occupations, trades, ethnic groups, and genders. Most of the poems examined here were taken from local histories, but many come from self-published volumes of poetry — whether gestetnered pages stapled at the corner or hardbound editions with dust jackets — and a few from books published by someone other than the author.

consider the myth presented in several genres of commercial and public sector culture and then look at the responses to that myth from local poets.

Bakhtin suggests that myth, in its "epic" mode, can restrict action as well as generate it, not simply by producing a narrowed, stereotyped set of responses, but by setting them in a rigidly demarcated time and by linking this unhistorical past to common behaviour in a manner that denies continuity. A "discourse of a contemporary about a contemporary addressed to contemporaries" Bakhtin calls the "novel" (Bakhtin 1981: 14). The past he insists upon is neither merely nor necessarily a real time, but is "valorized", and the "space between [the poet/audience and the subjects of the epic] is filled with national tradition" (*Ibid.*).

Bakhtin's "national past" is "a world of 'beginnings' and 'peak times' in the national history" (*Ibid.*: 13). If it seems peculiar that such a newly institutionalized region as Alberta should have already gone through "peak times", Bakhtin reminds us, "It is possible... to conceive of 'my time' as heroic, epic time, when it is seen as historically significant. The epic past [no matter how recent]... is walled off absolutely from all subsequent times, and above all from those times in which the singer and his listeners are located" (*Ibid.*: 14-16). Although Bakhtin's claim that "all the really good things (i.e., the 'first' things) occur *only* in the past" (*Ibid.*: 15) may be difficult to support completely as part of the mythology of a province which prides itself on its high tech achievement, also called "pioneering", we will find at least traces of this sense of irreproducible virtue in both the epic and novelistic forms of this myth.

Of course, there must be some degree of continuity to establish a national tradition in the time between the epic past and the present. Jacques Hamilton articulates a widely-held connection between the western environment and heroic behaviour, as well as a common hesitancy to affirm that connection:

Alberta is, in many ways, still uniquely a frontier. Ask any farmer. Ask any lineman slashing a narrow trail through the trees on the east slope of the Rockies. Ask, for that matter, any city dweller who stops their car on a rural road and steps out to let their eyes search the rimless prairie.

So the title "pioneer" is one that has to be used carefully in this province. And only time will tell if the few people whose stories follow are any more deserving of it than the bearded man in Peace River country carving a homestead out of virgin land and reading this page today by the light of a coal-oil lamp (Hamilton 1971b: 35).

Elsewhere, the same writer suggested that the appellation can be achieved, though to do so, one may have to enter the epic past the hard way: "And on headstone after headstone is carved the one-word epitaph that is the proudest any Albertan can earn: 'Pioneer'" (*Ibid.* 1971a: 37).

In the popular culture of Alberta, "cowboy" is nearly synonymous with "pioneer". This should not surprise; the image of the cowboy has been widely accepted as representative of rural lifeways throughout North America. In a

chapter of *People* entitled "Pioneers", Hamilton profiles seven individuals; two are cowboys, but not one is a farmer (*Ibid.*: 25). Harold Fryer's *Alberta: The Pioneer Years* (1984), which has gone through several issues, has fourteen chapters about adventurers, soldiers, bootleggers, and a wealthy American tourist on a North American hunting trip which might have been a German spy mission during the Thirties, but no farmers, and not even one working cowboy.

The epic heritors of the cowboy's spirit, whether they be cowboys, farmers, or oil speculators, partake of a number of valuable characteristics that according to myth entitle them to the prosperity which, relatively speaking, Alberta has known since its founding.<sup>5</sup> At the core of those qualities is honesty, which was perhaps best expressed in their trust in each other. A number of sources repeat the 1892 epitaph of H. F. ("Twelve-Foot") Davis, who helped to open up the Peace River area: "He Was Every Man's Friend/And Never Locked/His Cabin Door" (Cunningham 1985: 34). Pioneers are honest and true, and they are believed to be so first to themselves; both Twelve-Foot Davis and Pat Burns, whose brand, NL (for "Never Lock", referring to his ranch gates) exemplify this individuality based upon these qualities.

These ancestors earn their riches through determination, competence, and application. Hamilton sees such qualities and a sort of imagination peculiar to the pioneer as the connection between the agrarian past and the industrial future:

A lot of people were talking about oil in the 1890s, but not too many people were doing anything about it.

It took a stubborn old Waterton pioneer named Uncle Bill Aldridge to really give the oil business its beginnings in Alberta (Hamilton 1971c: 36).

This connection between the industrial present and the past is manifest in terms like Oil Patch and in the notion of the wildcatter.<sup>6</sup> To what degree Albertans truly imagine their continued prosperity secured by their own individuality and energy, inherited from their epic ancestors, cannot be assessed here, but the rhetoric of the epic presentation is certainly designed to inculcate that response.

5. Of course, in popular culture the signal trait of the cowboy is that he carries and uses a gun. In Alberta this is constantly found, in the Weadickville shoot-outs at the Calgary Stampede and the Marty Robbins-influenced ballads of the province's burgeoning country music industry. However, the folk poetry of Alberta rejects the notion that gunplay was prevalent in the province's early days. Gunplay is only rarely found, usually in verse considered to be "cowboy" and never in verse which uses such terms as "pioneer" in its titling.
6. The popularity of the term "Oil Patch", referring to all aspects of the Petroleum Industry, suggests that Albertans consider this industry to be continuous with the agricultural past of the province; use of such a colloquial term also represents an informality that is believed to characterize even the most wealthy oilmen. "Wildcatters", independent drillers, often more intuitive than educated, had a significant role in the industry's early days; they remain emblematic for the independence which many believe still exists in the Oil Patch.

Commercial and government accounts privilege the cowboy image, with significant leavening from a more generalized turn-of-the-century culture at Heritage Park and Edmonton's Klondike Days, as well as some nods to the fur trade at Fort Edmonton, but farming is largely ignored. In contrast, in the folk poetry of Alberta, "pioneers" refers only to farmers. For this study, I chose poems in which the subject matter was unmistakable, in order to have a clear contrast between popular culture and folk presentations. Twenty-eight poems use the word "pioneer" in their titles; others use related terms such as "homesteader", "sodbuster", "settler", and "old timer". Titles such as "My Alberta Claim" and "Days of Pork and Beans" seem also to announce themselves as explorations of the topic, so they were included comfortably. I included three cowboy poems, two of which deal with the transition from ranching to farming in the southeastern area of the province, and one which by its title, "Lament of the Old Cowhand", suggests that its theme is old times; it proved to be in Bakhtin's epic mode. It is clear that the latter consider only farmers to have been pioneers, while the popular media feature cowboys in that role. Not only are the two groups, cowboys and farmers, distinct in folk verse, they are not always amicable.

The hostility between these groups, as in the movies, is generally directed from the cowboys to the farmers. Arthur Peake, who came to Alberta in the early 1880s (Smith 1987: 8), wrote "The Settlement" with a rancher's disdain for the encroaching homesteaders.

When you see a row of pickets  
with a single wire around  
You will know some Empire Builder  
Is fencing in his ground (Roen 1971: 189-190).

In "The Bullpound Roundup", he foreshadowed the failures that awaited the farmers in the arid Palliser Triangle:

For they'll homestead and pre-empt every acre free  
And soon on the range not a cow you'll see  
Then they'll plow and they'll harrow to the very last stroke  
When the farmer and the rancher will be both flat broke (*Ibid.*: 129).

In "The Lament of the Old Cowhand" from a "very old" issue of the Brooks *Bulletin*, an anonymous poet supported Bakhtin's notion that an impermeable history separated the heroic times from what, even in an "very old" newspaper, was seen as a degenerate modernity:

The range days are over, the old cowmen gone,  
Their era is past and their last roundup done.  
No more in Alberta will there e'er be again,  
Such beef herds, such freedom, such living, such men! (Howe 1971: 300-301).

But if the vernacular poets close their ranks around the farmer as pioneer, they nevertheless deal with many of the same issues contained in the popular notion of the pioneering Alberta cowboy. In many cases, the folk verses confirm the portrait created in more formal media, one finds a tension between the impression that Albertans re-enact or are formed by the pioneer myth and the sense that the pioneering generation — in many cases the parents of these writers — lived in a heroic past that cannot be emulated.

Ellen Malmas combines both themes with a hint of realism that perhaps deflates the epic distance that surrounds her heroes. Their heroism is signalled by the personification and coronation of their enemy; nevertheless, she identifies herself and her audience as among those who fought this regal foe.

We've seen the day, not so far away,  
Tho' bundled to twice our girth,  
We've frozen our nose, as well as our toes,  
And we struggled for all our worth

To keep King Winter from doing us harm!  
Why, it even froze the smoke!  
Full many a winter was spent on the farm,  
When living there wasn't a joke? (Malmas 1981: 193).

Distance is established, not only by the discussion of courageous endeavour ("with a blatant grin, he waded in, /Perhaps up to his neck in debt!") and further personification of an epic environment ("Where winds are high, and the blue of the sky/reaches down to meet the earth"), but also by social emblems of modernity, taken to demonstrate contemporary softness ("They never shirked, / Nor went to the shows of today!... No eight-hour day knew they!") (*Ibid.*). But this heroism is undercut by the lack of options:

And many a man, in those early days  
Would have left that untamed land!  
Had he had the price, he'd have left in a trice  
And gone back to his old home stand (*Ibid.*).

Perhaps her extensive knowledge of the pioneers enables Malmas to be confident that hers and succeeding generations will maintain what the pioneers won. Not all poets, as we shall see, are as sure of this:

And today this land, will always stand  
With the Nation's flaunted best,  
Where the wheatfields wave, by breezes fanned  
The best, thru' Canada's West (*Ibid.*).

The image of the blowing wheat signifies not only the pioneers' livelihood and obsession, it is the emblem of their accomplishments, as is made clear in a poem an editor of *The Delia Craigmyle Saga* clipped from a newspaper for inclusion in that local history.

Once where savage red men trod,  
O'er distant vale, and silent plain,  
Now stands a fertile land, of well turned sod;  
A wealth of golden grain.  
Their dreams came true,  
We'll keep that dream, that faith;  
From there it grew, Alberta our great heritage,  
A pride and pledge, well instilled in all,  
That we shall carry on, in history's page  
Beyond our duty's call! (Anonymous 1970: 927).

Clearly this unknown author perceived a continuity between the generations. The final verse evinces a powerful confidence in ritual to ensure the transmission of the qualities considered necessary to keep up this great work:

Rise in reverence, to those now gone,  
Who died with stalwart heart,  
That we may see the dawn of modern ways  
Their finished art!  
Lest we forget, and this be all in vain,  
Let there prevail these same traditions  
Down through the age,  
That those we leave behind us  
May do great things, again, for Alberta, our heritage!  
Beyond their duty's call (*Ibid.*).

Agnes Copithorne's feelings about the past and the present of rural Alberta are more ambivalent. In "Abandoned Farmstead", the poet visits the location of a farmer's struggle, which may have ended in failure, never producing a more comfortable successor to this "broken house/with no more tears to shed" (Copithorne 1986: 16). She feels so little continuity between that experience and her life that she cannot even find a souvenir in the place. "Homestead Re-Visited", on the other hand, discusses her return to her own childhood home, where she is able to plug into a past, one which draws her into a fetal position: "I hug my knees/rock and remember" (*Ibid.*: 17). Copithorne's past is not so distant that she cannot call it forth. Whether or not she will be able to perform as well as the epic heroes is another matter.

The poem suggests not. Her experience of her father comes back to her, not at the abandoned house, which "sags... black and soulless" (*Ibid.*), but at her father's forge, a suitably mythic, male, and parental site. Her childish position is

reinforced when she does not look up to the forge, but down to the ground, to recall the many and various feet that have entered the shop. She listens to their steps, feels the breath of the forge, but cannot see her father, only the “sparks from the forge” which symbolize his work, sharpening “plowshares/to slice the prairie sod” (*Ibid.*) and making shoes for large work horses. The importance of the synecdoche is reflected in her use of it as the book’s title. When she leaves the smithy, she experiences another mythic phenomenon, one appropriate to the Hephaestean locale:

Out of the twilight  
came a thousand crows  
with wings and voices like  
a vast black shattering of glass.  
Then as by an order they wheel,  
coming to roost in the poplars,  
claws hooked on branches  
heads buried under wings,  
silent as ancient sins (*Ibid.*).

Copithorne is perhaps more introspective than many folk poets, who are only beginning to write, as she does, in free verse. The notion that there might be sins abroad in pioneer Alberta is not bruited about in either popular or folk versions of the province’s history.

The sense that the first generation was essentially different from those that have followed prevails in this verse. For every poem like Gladys Smith’s “The Farmer and His Wife”, which claims equality between the quotidian and the historic (in which we are reminded that even astronauts need “food raised by a farmer’s hands” [Smith 1975: 398-399]) there are more in which the distance between now and then cannot be crossed. Consider “The homesteader’s gone, but the youth of today/Still owe him a debt they can never repay” (McCracken 1981: 129), from Tom McCracken’s “The Old Timer”, reprinted in more than one local history. Or the even more stereotypical “never again shall we see his like — /he stands without a peer” (Morrow 1989: 16). If Copithorne’s memories seem a weak thread of continuity, insufficient to found action upon, they are better than forgetting entirely, as is predicted in “A Tribute to Lawson Scott”:

And his dreams of his team and binder  
and his stook rows turned by his sweat,  
will disappear in the twilight  
and soon we will forget.

Will there be others like him  
who will follow up on the quest,  
with the power to witch the wheat lands  
that lie in the far northwest? (Anonymous 1981: 226).



The pioneer in this anonymous poem is truly larger than life. Though we see him at work in the first two stanzas ("he joyed in the job he was doing"), throughout most of the 28 quatrains, he is visualizing the past and future, either in sleep or standing on a hill at sunset (*Ibid.*: 215-226). Ultimately he accepts the inevitability of oblivion, which arises from his own efforts:

For the rut of the homestead wagon  
once cut in the open plain,  
has been swallowed up by the furrow  
and will never be seen again (*Ibid.*: 226).

Cotrina Graham Smith creates epic distance by asking, "What men were these?" (1980: 11) Part of her answer is that they were not unionized. "No protest march, no sit down strikes for them/No handouts, giving nothing in return" (*Ibid.*). Even when the pioneers did unionize, according to Merton Shillinglaw, their unions and activities were qualitatively different from those we know.

Hasting Coulee members of the U.F.A.  
In pioneer years they held their sway  
Holding meetings Grim and Gay,  
Working to make their farming pay

Many other kind of unions now are here  
And their strikes fill our hearts with fear  
The old timer's way was clear  
Bringing both work and pleasure near (Shillinglaw 1977: 215).

But if the vernacular verse proposes the essential difference of the pioneering generations, it does not often cite the heroes of the official version of that difference. These poems almost never discuss such prominent figures as Pat Burns, George Lane, and James Loughheed, who garner a large share of attention in the commercial media. Of course, the life cycles of many Albertans reproduce in miniature the financial success of these culture heroes; the white middle class standard of living in the province, as throughout North America, rural and urban, is certainly more luxurious than that of the forebearers. Consequently, the issue of the relationships among ideals, actual behaviour, and achievement remain pertinent to the folk poets, though they seem to be more vexing here than to the more formal mythifiers.

Consider the matter of individualism. In "A Homesteader's Reflections", Peter Galster supports the idea that in an earlier time people were freer to act as individuals, first by noting the development of traffic regulations after the introduction of the automobile:

No bridges or railroads were there to cross,  
No traffic cops to stop you and tell you that he's boss.  
No stop signs or red lights, no limit to speed.  
It was up to you to drive safe and just maintain your seat (Galster 1968: 74).

It is difficult to suppose that the author truly disapproves of speed limits and other traffic regulations, though Albertans have notoriously objected loudly, if not unanimously, to seat belt legislation. The border between individualism and libertarianism is often indistinct. Galster materializes his doubts about the trade-off of the safety necessary for convenience exchanged for individual freedom in the standard symbol of that freedom, the birds "in the heavenly blue sky" who are now "flying objects controlled by man, /That takes away the freedom of the feathered clan" (*Ibid.*).

It has been suggested that farmers were less aloof from government assistance and cooperative endeavour generally than ranchers because of the nature of their interactions with the outside economy (Bennett 1969: 309-311; Voisey 1988: 172-173). Certainly folk poets do not prize individualism to the extent that the epic version of pioneer life does. Gladys Smith points out that even space travellers are dependent upon farmers, though Clarence G. Crawford in "Pioneer Farmer" declares that the farmer's work produces food for those "who didn't share the dream" (Crawford 1989: 843) — hardly a cooperative view. Neighbours are important in the agricultural milieu, and among the poems that praise local individuals (another subset of the vernacular verse), a very common citation is for neighbourliness. Henry Tisdale, called "our poet laureate" by settlers in the DeBolt area, wrote of his difficulties finding a suitable area to homestead near Grande Prairie in "Across the Smoky": "A stranger, speaking kindly" (Tisdale 1978: 183), directs him to cross the Smoky River. "We can find good land for you" (*Ibid.*). "We" will even help the poet build his cabin, an offer he rejects for unspecified reasons (perhaps he had spent time in cattle country and was shy amidst all of this communality), though he tells the helpful stranger, "I like your spirit" (*Ibid.*). He crosses the river and finds a plot and hopes to remain there.

Often, as I sit at evenings,  
From my heart this prayer I give:  
"Make me worthy of my neighbours,  
And the land in which I live" (*Ibid.*).

Tisdale stands between individualism and community. He is clearly so deeply touched by the kindness with which he's been treated that it will be some kind of motive force, though he's not specific about how. One imagines that as his experience of community became more extensive, the "I" of his poem would more often become the "we" of his neighbours.

However, first person does not guarantee that the poet speaks in Bakhtin's novel mode. Helen Standing, in "Pioneers", identifies herself among the pioneers. Her short poem has a sense of relentless movement, gained largely by the chronological catalog of what "we" did, after "we" converged on the "virgin soils" (Standing 1978: 16). She assists this movement by beginning at an earlier stage in the process than most, realizing in her first verse that the mere journey to the ocean, let alone the crossing, was a significant achievement for many of these people.

By horse-drawn cart and then by train  
We came to our native shore  
To cross the turbulent ocean  
A new country to explore (*Ibid.*).

Her poem insists that their accomplishment was unique. "We tamed the wild and rolling plains, /We, the dauntless pioneers" (*Ibid.*).

How they tamed the West was by hard work, about which Alberta poets have much to say. Some of these poems present a view of working lives of the pioneers which coincides easily with the epic posture of popular culture. Their work was not like ours because it was more difficult, because they were opening a new world, which can only be done once, and to a certain degree, perhaps, because it was quaint and used tools that now seem outlandish. Clarence G. Crawford's vision is certainly heroic:

We see these farms that sweat and toil,  
Carved from the wilderness,  
Each head of wheat, each blade of grass,  
Proclaim their ruggedness! (Crawford 1989: 843).

Tom McCracken elevates the pioneer's work and reinforces his uniqueness: "Only the pioneer knows what it means/To live on black coffee, and bacon and beans,... In spite of disaster he struggled alone" (McCracken 1981: 129). The pioneer experience was epic because it was a solitary struggle. Therefore, says McCracken, we ought to "honour his toil", which with his "patience to wait" and "faith in the good virgin soil" (*Ibid.*) creates his heroic status.

In a number of poems we find catalogues of the work activities of the pioneers, often of striking clarity and accuracy. In many cases, perhaps the majority, these catalogues are in poems by and/or about women, and the description of women's work in them often seems somewhat more complete than the descriptions of men's responsibilities. Thus Ella Jane Jewell, in "The Pioneers" (another widely circulated poem), devotes 13 lines to the process (somewhat idealized and inaccurately described) of finding a homestead, 11 lines to the men's jobs of building a dwelling and breaking the sod "to produce a little

wheat", 20 lines to such various farm wife's realities as "no luxuries", "long hours", bearing children without doctors (though with "Dad to lend a hand"), washing with lye soap, sewing, cooking, and "back breaking trips... to carry water", and 12 lines about "teachers in our district" (Jewell [1972?]: 9). The last eight lines of the poem tell us that "The pioneers are gone now" (*Ibid.*), and generalize about their accomplishments. It is not to our purpose to speculate whether this imbalance was intentionally created to even up a gender score or was simply the result of an author's understandable tendency to dwell on aspects of the subjects she knows best.

Such attention to the quotidian could have either an epic or novelistic effect, depending upon whether the author chooses to stress continuity between the work worlds, old and new, or the uniqueness of that of the pioneers. In all of these I have examined, divergence rather than continuity is expressed. One common technique for this is the accumulation of items until the pioneer workload appears mythic. The anonymous author of "Grandmother's Day" in 18 lines cites 21 daily jobs, plus "some chores", done by the eponymous hero, who "Then opened the organ and began to play/ 'When You Get to the End of a Perfect Day'" (Anonymous 1967: 24).

"Are You An Old Timer?" a poem of 44 quatrains which seems to be frequently recited at reunions in the provinces, joins realistic and romantic, daily and extraordinary, play and work elements in a context that is unmistakably epic in character, even though it is addressed to living members of the audience. The reciter asks dozens of such questions of the audience as

Now I ask you all do you recall  
Cooking bannock or rabbit stew,  
Then slept all night by a campfire bright  
Mosquitoes chewed upon you.

Did you hear every sound from your bed on the ground  
As you listened for some stealthy tread,  
Were ready to fight a redman in the night  
That had come for the top of your head (Anonymous 1977: x-xiii).

Though most of the verses deal with work life, including such reality-evoking specifics as "Have you worked with horses your taxes to pay/Building corduroy roads for a few cents a day", the effect of the whole, including the more extravagant verses, and especially the constant repetition of the term "old timer" as an honorific ("you're an old timer and how!... You're an old timer I can tell by your smile... To that term old timer you may still qualify") (*Ibid.*) is to differentiate "old timers" from other people. The amassing of realistic and romantic detail establishes the belief that work was the life of the pioneers and that work and those lives existed in a different kind of world. The bond that would link living members of the group makes them distinct from the rest of society.

Certain kinds of details, however, manage to emerge from the context a poet tries to create, and the poet may force us, perhaps unintentionally, to see our own lives as not so different from those of the pioneers. In "A Day in the Life of the Pioneer Housewife", Ruby Bergstrom may well have been attempting to create a mythic portrait of her ancestors. In 37 couplets, she follows the wife from rising to sleep. But even if few of her urban readers — perhaps not even all of her rural readers in an age of dairies and milking machines — will have milked cows or tasted (or have a taste for) warm milk, when she writes, "Warm and fresh from the udder, the milk hit the pail/With a splash and a spraying" (Bergstrom 1981: 354), the immediacy of the description takes it out of epic time. Similarly, when the wife first rises, she goes downstairs to make coffee, and finds "Her husband with forethought had left kindling to dry" (*Ibid.*), which is not a chore contemporaries are required to do, but the touch of emotion and the specificity make the poem contemporary. These are people the reader might know.

In three poems in his self-published volume, *Rhymes of a Homesteader* — "Homesteading", "Days of Pork and Beans", and "The Settlers" — Patrick J. O'Toole produces portraits of the pioneer era in which daily work is placed in the background, but real, often specific, people are brought to centre stage. What O'Toole remembers above all is that these were his "old batching days" (1947: 7), and most of the joys and sorrows speak more of the single state than of heroic toil. "The Settlers" is a moniker poem, accomplishing nothing more than telling in rhythm and rhyme who came from where. "Days of Pork and Beans" comes closest of the three to providing a heroic vision of "the long hard days" (*Ibid.*: 25), but it focuses on one pioneer named John, who left the area when he married. The narrator imagines John now dreaming of "the times he lit out for Meringo/With his team of dappled greys" (*Ibid.*).

In "Homesteading", bachelor dances and even the Northern Lights get more attention than ploughing (*Ibid.*: 7). Ultimately O'Toole subverts his carefree portrait of bachelorhood with his sadness at a letter from an old girlfriend which makes him ask, "What did you ever do/To get dumped in a hole like this?" (*Ibid.*). The poem ends with the decidedly unheroic detail that he is cleaning his undershirt, "Then having a fit of the blues" (*Ibid.*).

Did the pioneers accept this work as a noble duty? Michael Kozak's eastern European pioneers "helped to mold Canada into the very finest nation", in which they found "freedom, from servitude and toil" (Kozak 1980: viii), but not right away. Their "role" here is described as "serf-like", and presumably the only reason they remained was that "very few could go back" (*Ibid.*: viii). W. W. Dalglish, in "Seventy Years of Change", also treats non-Anglo immigrants, with a surprising frankness. He idealizes the first wave of immigrants, the Anglo-Saxons, for both of the epic qualities of determination and invention.

They were too tough to lay down and die,  
 They figured out something else to try.  
 "If the rains won't come," they said with a grin,  
 "We'll dig some ditches, and fetch water in" (Dalgleish 1976: 227-229).

But eventually a chore comes up that these sturdy heroes cannot bear to do, in this case, hoeing sugar beets, and so the "big shots" (not an epic trope!) decide, "We'll fetch in some Central Europeans, /They can survive on bread and beans" (*Ibid.*: 228). The author acknowledges, "There's some 'Archie Bunker' in each of us. /We treated these people like beasts, or 'wuss'" (*Ibid.*: 229). Gradually, he notes these people became neighbours, "so now we fraternized" (*Ibid.*). The same things occur with the Japanese during the war and then the Dutch, both of which groups are also assimilated. The last six verses of the poem are a paean to the luxury of the modern world, and Dalgleish seems to suggest that industrialization, not immigration, was the answer to the unpleasantness of hard work. In any event, he does not appear to value work for itself at all.

Doris (Schram) Hawk's "Prairie Land", which begins as a variant of the usually acerbic parody "Saskatchewan", sings the praises of the work of the pioneers and of the result of their efforts, prosperity, which she carefully notes occurs with the transmission of the land to the pioneers' sons, whose careers she follows. Interestingly, in the sons' era, "Farming was bigger and faster, /When progress became the new master" (Hawk 1974: 22); although the verse could be taken to signify that the first generation became the master of progress, mostly likely her intention is to further distance the first era of farming, when there was none.

The pioneers' second and third houses become symbols of prosperity and success, and the old homestead then is a site of curiosity or embarrassment or is a marker of first steps. This transition is regularly seen in the poems. In "To The Pioneers of Acadia Valley", which Mrs. M. Murphy wrote for the Acadia Valley Pioneer Reunion Dinner in the mid-fifties, the transition from one domicile to another is seen to represent comparably fantastic changes in the land itself: "The little shack is a mansion grand. /The prairie is changed to a wonder land" (Murphy 1981: 20). Even the more introspective "A Tribute to Lawson Scott" is impressed by this change.

Now a modern home on the highway,  
 On the spot where his shanty stood,  
 Is a symbol to all that follow  
 That the way of the west was good (Anonymous 1981: 226).

Ferguson James's "The Bullpound Pioneer", another introspective poem, presents a pioneer, alone and musing on the future. But James's hero does not question whether the future will hold the prosperity he worked for, nor whether

his descendants will be worthy or capable of carrying out his legacy, nor even whether his own place in history will be remembered. After a six line stanza ruminating on his hardships, he forecasts “beautiful dwellings”, as well as “golden grain” swaying “in the summer rain”, and livestock, but also a train, “a bustling town”, an oilfield, and over it all, “the air ships float in the sky so clear/ O’er the homes of the Bullpound Pioneer” (James n.d.: 35). There have been times of unbounded confidence, both in agriculture and in western economy.

Of course, there are poetic accounts of farming history which deny that prosperity ever came. Some echo Palliser’s conclusion, that the land could not support agriculture. “My Alberta Claim”, credited to Sam Brooks and Tony Beigler of the Grassy Lake district, but in fact another variant of “Starving to Death on My Government Claim”, speaks of hail, dust storms, uncomfortable sod shanties, and insignificant harvests (Brooks 1981: 411-413). But more would agree with Agnes Copithorne: “This land holds on in a spinning world/a place to trust in a time not to be trusted” (Copithorne 1986: 3).

Arthur Peake, who could write from the point of view of the farmer, though he more often preferred to pose as the angry cattleman, sees the problem to be both natural and human. The wind that blows on Cactus Ridge is never said to have lifted the soil, but its constant presence is more than simply an affective component in the poem. It symbolizes the difficulty of farming in the Palliser Triangle, a difficulty which allows the “Famous Government” to betray the farmers caught overextended. In “Adieu”, as in “Bullpound Roundup”, he regrets the coming of the homesteaders.

For all the grazing in the West  
           This used to be the very best  
 The settlers here have proved it’s curse  
           It yearly goes from bad to worse  
 But if the seasons do turn wet,  
           Perhaps they’ll make a living yet (Roen 1971: 247).

One of the most thorough accounts of the failure of agricultural property, in which we see a separation between the average farmer and the business successes of Alberta, is Neil Forbes’s “On The Road”. To a land fraught with environmental difficulties, Forbes suggests that homesteaders brought excessive expectations for their future: “came the railroad grade, what a change it made/We had visions of wealth from afar” (Forbes 1984: 110). They were then beset with the burden of supporting the self-serving “progressive” notions of town boosters:

Then came the villages, and how they did pillage us  
 Of taxes to run their schools  
 Preached Higher Education and Consolidation  
 Seemed afraid the kids would be fools  
 If they walked a few miles on the road (*Ibid.*: 110).

The farmers' fragile economy was further stressed by World War One, bankers, and usury. If the epic vision of the past creates a distance between now and then, Forbes looks with loathing upon those who will come after his generation, not weaker descendants of the heroic stock, but a "mob that will follow/When we're all turned out on the Road" (*Ibid.*).

Although commentary on the social causes of western failure may be acerbic and accurate, many poets turn away from such detail and speak, as does Reg Breen in his poignant, "A Homesteader's Broken Dream", of "the elements" (1968: 411-413). Harry Dodwell ("The Homesteaders") notes ironically that when "harvest came, the bills rolled in, he's called a farmer now" (1974: 254), but the dynamic of his poem comes from the wellsprings of western humour, as the homesteader imagines that soon he'll eat "prime beef" instead of turnip greens and rabbit stew. When he is forced to settle for his original menu, he finds the ecology of his region has suffered from his intrusion, so "He may have to live on turnip greens without the rabbit stew" (*Ibid.*).

Bakhtin's "novel" does not describe the folk poetry of Alberta quite so well as his "epic" fits the popular culture, though we find significant elements of the mode present in the verse. That the novel mode is only germinal in Alberta folk verse should not surprise; Bakhtin was speaking primarily of the work of sophisticated writers, though he indicated that the roots of his novel mode were to be found in folklore (1981: 21). The informal level of provincial culture cannot be said to deny the official version; both modes of the story are present, in constant conflict, though occasionally reconciled, especially insofar as humour is a mechanism for deflecting unpleasant messages. Against the folk laughter Bakhtin prized, which looks closely at a subject to deconstruct its hierarchical position (*Ibid.*: 23), Alberta has often preferred the "constructive" institution of the booster, which, as Voisey and Artibise have demonstrated, provided bonds among people in the developing prairie culture (Voisey 1988: 61, 238, 240; Artibise 1985: 408-434). The promulgation of the epic mode of popular historiography can be seen as the continuing development of the booster tradition.

Regardless of the boosters, the popular writers, and the Calgary Stampede, Alberta folk poets clearly know that their ancestors were farmers, not cowboys, even if it has become difficult to distinguish one from the other in an era when both do much of their work from pickup trucks, when both wear baseball caps as often as Resistols or Stetsons, and jeans and cowboy boots are common work wear throughout the region. The folk verse continually interacts with the formal version of the nature of the pioneers, considering their industrious characters, their individuality and communality, their difficult and successful — or not — lives. This verse presents a dialectical picture of unanswered questions and unclear contentions. The pioneers both were and were not what the boosters said they were. This contradiction is present in the art of their descendants.