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# John F. Conway, The Prairie Populist: George Hara Williams and the Untold Story of the CCF

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from the Canadian story because, he asserts, neither seriously considered extending equal rights to all human beings, he might have enriched his analysis of human rights in Canada by exploring how Charles Taylor, relying on Anderson and the seminal work of Jürgen Habermas, has illuminated how Grotius and Locke, among others, bequeathed the imaginative moral terrain on which rights that are prior to and untouchable by political structures – human rights – first became visible. It was on this protean terrain that the campaign for contemporary human rights has been waged. Nonetheless, Clément has rendered a great service to scholars and the general public in composing this account of the history of human rights in Canada for there is no doubt that human rights has been and remains at the centre of a deep transformation of the Canadian social order.

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John F. Conway, *The Prairie Populist: George Hara Williams and the Untold Story of the CCF* (Regina: University of Regina Press 2018)

MUCH HAS BEEN written about the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) in Canada. Surprisingly, however, little of the academic work has focused directly on where the CCF was most successful. Why did a socialist party emerge in Saskatchewan, and how did it become so deeply entrenched in an overwhelmingly agricultural province? Why did Saskatchewan become Canada's CCF province? Such questions have not been satisfactorily answered. In 1950 the political sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset, in his classic work *Agrarian Socialism* (Berkeley: University of California Press), began to examine this case of Saskatchewan exceptionalism. And now

John Conway, another political sociologist, has contributed greatly to what Lipset began so long ago. In this important book, Conway argues, as Lipset had earlier, that the CCF in Saskatchewan at its heart was a rural phenomenon. Its radicalism was rural; it was the farmers who turned to democratic socialism. And, John Conway shows that George Hara Williams was at the centre of what occurred.

George Williams was not a pioneer settler in Saskatchewan and was not a product of the wheat boom era of the early 1900s. Williams was a First World War veteran who acquired a half section of land in 1921 in the Semans district as a part of the soldier settlement program. The 1920s was a turning point in the history of the province: gone forever was the false optimism and boosterism of Clifford Sifton when it was said that wheat was king and that Saskatchewan held the key to Canada's future. During the 1920s the farm movement was radicalized, the wheat pool was organized, and various forms of independent political action were considered as farmers attempted to make a living under increasingly difficult circumstances. George Williams became involved in all aspects of this struggle and in 1929 was elected president of the United Farmers of Canada (Saskatchewan Section). The Great Depression followed; an already vulnerable wheat economy collapsed, devastating what was then an overwhelmingly rural province.

In 1932 George Williams played a major role in the creation of the Farmer-Labour Party, the forerunner of the Saskatchewan CCF. Williams was elected to the Saskatchewan Legislature in the 1934 provincial election, the riding that he would represent for the rest of his life. In 1935 he became the provincial leader of the CCF and, during the next five years, was the central figure in successfully establishing and building

the party throughout the province. In 1940 Williams enlisted in the Canadian army and was posted overseas. He was in England until 1944 and, although he remained a member of the Saskatchewan Legislature, was not a part of the CCF's final march to power. He returned to Saskatchewan shortly before the 1944 provincial election, was re-elected in his constituency, and appointed Minister of Agriculture in the first Douglas government. A short time later Williams suffered a stroke and died in September 1945 at age fifty. As John Conway reminds the reader throughout his book, George Williams was the most important figure in founding the Saskatchewan CCF but, unfairly and even tragically, has not received the credit he deserves. Williams never became a part of the folklore of the party as Tommy Douglas and M.J. Coldwell did.

In a number of ways, Conway's book adds to our knowledge of the history of the Saskatchewan CCF and corrects some previously held versions of the story. In most accounts Williams has been depicted as a dedicated but rather inflexible socialist who played an important role in establishing the CCF but was unable to lead it to power. Thus, in the 1938 provincial election under Williams' leadership, the CCF won only ten seats. Disappointment set in, and the momentum was lost. By 1939 the CCF was divided and appeared to be in state of decline. Then the party was rescued and united by the political genius and oratorical skills of Tommy Douglas. Williams was shoved aside, and the CCF was rebuilt and in 1944 was led to power by Douglas and his supporters, including M.J. Coldwell, Clarence Fines, Carlyle King and others. Conway convincingly disputes much of this conventional wisdom, and in the process he bravely does what few within the Saskatchewan CCF or NDP have ever done: he criticizes "Saint Tommy."

Conway clearly shows that it was George Williams, more than anyone else, who built the rural base of the CCF in the 1930s which was so essential to the victory in 1944 and to all that followed. As party leader after 1934, he faced daunting challenges. Thirty cent wheat and blowing dust produced despair across the province. The CCF had no money; Williams could not afford to pay his own candidate's deposit for the 1934 election. The party and Williams were attacked from the left and right, by Communists, Social Creditors, and Liberals. The Social Credit challenge in 1938, in the aftermath of its massive victory in Alberta, was especially serious. Conway explains how Williams skillfully weaved and maneuvered in dealing with political opponents, held the party together and through it all maintained a consistent policy. It was a considerable achievement, contrary to what Williams' critics said then and later. Perhaps the CCF was not yet on the brink of power in 1939 in Saskatchewan, but it was stronger there than in any part of Canada. The tide came in for the party during World War II, but it was only in Saskatchewan, where, as Conway demonstrates, George Williams had done much of the heavy lifting in the 1930s that it won power.

The discussion of Williams' views on war, pacifism, democracy, and fascism is one of the most interesting aspects of the book. His disagreement with many CCF leaders, J.S. Woodsworth in particular, over war and Canadian foreign policy is well known. In most previous accounts Williams comes out second best in this clash with the idealistic and revered Woodsworth. Conway, however, focuses on Williams' experiences and perspective, and a different picture emerges. George Williams was a member of the Canadian armed forces in both World Wars. We do not learn a lot in this book about the details of his war time

experiences, but somethings are clear. Williams believed that democratic socialism could only be achieved in a free society, and in certain cases military force was required to ensure that freedom would prevail. From an early point, he saw fascism and Hitler's Germany as a threat to socialism, and when war broke out in 1939, he immediately decided on a personal military role. After more than four years in England, Williams received a medical discharge and arrived back in Saskatchewan in time for the 1944 election campaign. Two weeks before voting day and a week before D-Day, he delivered a province-wide radio broadcast in support of the CCF. Conway quotes at length from this remarkable speech. Williams spoke of liberty, of building a new world, of his desire for safety and security for all, and of the cooperative principle of "each for all." He referred to the sacrifices that were being made to defeat fascism and defend democracy and reported that left-wing ideas were widely held among average soldiers. The speech showed a deep understanding of his audience: people who had built a farm movement, experienced the worst of the Great Depression, and now were in the midst of a war that in one way or another had greatly affected their lives. Williams' words reflected the views of Saskatchewan people. From the perspective of June 1944, the intellectual pacifism of J.S. Woodsworth and Carlyle King was out of date and out of touch. One is reminded of Clement Atlee, soon to be prime minister of Britain, who also had experienced the horrors of World War I and was at the centre of the struggle against Nazi Germany. As the war came to an end, Atlee, like Williams, was quietly confident that ordinary soldiers and their families would vote socialist.

The farm movement was pivotal to George Williams' career, and I have one criticism of Conway's treatment of it. If Williams was the most important

Saskatchewan farm leader during the 1920s and 1930s, A.J. McPhail, the first president of the Saskatchewan Wheat Pool, who died unexpectedly in 1931, was a close second. McPhail was brilliant, unimpeachable, and widely respected. As Wheat Pool president in the 1920s, he frequently disagreed with Williams, generally taking a more moderate position on various issues. In several places in the book, right wing opponents to Williams in the farm movement are referred to, and the argument is made that they were defeated and that Williams' socialist views prevailed. Although he is not singled out, Conway no doubt would brand McPhail, a former Progressive and a critic of some of the left as "divisive influences" within the Wheat Pool, as a right winger. This is misleading. It ignores the fact that many of these so-called right wing opponents supported the CCF under Williams in the 1930s and contributed greatly to the CCF victory in 1944 and political domination of the province in the generation that followed. Certainly there were divisions within the farm movement. There were bitter quarrels, related to both policies and personalities. However, the quarrels were largely family quarrels. George Williams and A.J. McPhail agreed more than they disagreed. Both dedicated their lives to the interests of Saskatchewan farmers; both understood the realities of the wheat economy of the 1920s; both strongly supported the Wheat Pool and cooperative principles; both were anti-capitalists; both believed ultimately in independent political action; both held progressive views of the post-1919 world. Admittedly there were some irreconcilables among farmers on both ends of the political spectrum. George Edwards, a former close associate of McPhail, campaigned for Jimmy Gardiner and the Liberal Party in the 1934 provincial election, while some Communist supporters of Williams in the internecine battles of

the 1920s dismissed him and the CCF as social fascists by 1933. However, the decision of the United Farmers of Canada (Saskatchewan Section) to enter politics in 1931, the creation of the Farmer-Labour Party in 1932, and the growth of the CCF during the 1930s was not so much a victory of left over right as it was the incorporation of a very broad segment of the farm community into the CCF. The CCF cut a wide swath in rural Saskatchewan and would continue to do so for some time, which explains much of Saskatchewan's political history between 1944 and the 1970s. George Williams had much to do with making that possible. He was indeed a "socialist agrarian populist." The term is not a clumsy construct, as Conway somewhat apologetically suggests; it is an apt description.

John Conway should be congratulated on the publication of this excellent book. *The Prairie Populist: George Hara Williams and the Untold Story of the CCF* is a major contribution to Saskatchewan's political history and to the history of the CCF. It is indispensable to any study of the CCF in Saskatchewan and in Canada.

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Christabelle Sethna and Steve Hewitt,  
***Just Watch Us: RCMP Surveillance of the Women's Liberation Movement in Cold War Canada*** (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press 2018)

IN *JUST WATCH US*, Christabelle Sethna and Steve Hewitt examine why and how the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) monitored and investigated persons and groups belonging to the women's liberation movement in Canada during a fifteen-year period beginning in the late 1960s. Concerned that feminism had close ties to communism and the New Left, the intelligence branch

of the RCMP targeted women's organizations perceived as challenging traditional societal norms that empowered the Anglo-Canadian, middle-class white male status quo. The authors argue that the RCMP watched and investigated the women's liberation movement through a "red-tinged prism," ignorantly associating second-wave feminists with the spread and provocations of the so-called Red Menace. (18) Feminism *per se* did not concern the RCMP's security service. The RCMP was largely blind to the radical and just demands of the women's movement. Instead, a preoccupation with leftist organizations and causes fueled increased surveillance efforts aimed at rooting out "real and imagined" communists in Canada. (21) This resulted in widespread harassment and repression of individuals and groups tied to the New Left, ultimately alienating and marginalizing women who belonged to social movements perceived as counter to the national interest.

Sethna and Hewitt contend that the RCMP intelligence branch employed a binary communist/anti-communist frame to assess security threats, resulting in mass surveillance of leftist organizations and social movements. In December 1963, a federal cabinet directive defined a subversive as "a person whose loyalty to Canada and our system of government is diluted by loyalty to any communist, fascist, or other legal or illegal political organizations whose purpose is inimical to the processes of Parliamentary Democracy." (35–36) This broad definition enabled the RCMP to target Canadian citizens, increasing, rather than decreasing, surveillance. Anxieties about communism prompted an aggressive stance toward people and groups positioned on the left of the political spectrum, thus explaining the targeted surveillance of the women's liberation movement.