

Preface to the North Dakota edition

Elwyn B. Robinson and the Themes of North Dakota

RAVE REVIEWS greeted Elwyn B. Robinson's *History of North Dakota* when it appeared in 1966. To describe the book reviewers used terms such as "astonishingly comprehensive," "absorbing account," "well documented," "balanced," and "fascinating." More important, historians recognized the two features that set Robinson's history apart from most other state histories: breadth and interpretation. Writing in *Arizona and the West*, Robert G. Athearn, professor of history at the University of Colorado, observed, "This latest state history is all the more valuable because the author has not limited himself entirely to local history, but has ignored artificial geographic boundaries and has integrated his story with national development." Robinson did indeed place North Dakota in the larger context; the fur trade moves westwardly along the Great Lakes into the Red River Valley and northwardly along the Missouri into western North Dakota. The North Dakota fur trade is but a part of a continental movement. The bossism of Alexander McKenzie and the reform zeal of the early twentieth century become reflections of the national political mood. North Dakota's plight during the 1930s mirrors the nationwide dilemma of the Great Depression. Robinson realized that North Dakota did not develop in a vacuum.

"The title of Elwyn Robinson's book is a gross understatement," Hiram Drache of Concordia College (Moorhead, MN) wrote in the *Journal of American History*. "It is anthropology, geography, sociology, economics, ethnology, political science, nature study, and theology interwoven into one well-compiled volume." Robinson's history possessed breadth not only in context but also in content. Believing that geography is a powerful

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historical force. throughout the volume he is painstakingly careful to deal with the state and its people in the natural setting. Too, Robinson accepts the premise that people are more than political and economic beings. Most of the state histories that appeared prior to Robinson's placed primary emphasis upon political and economic institutions and developments. As Drache points out, Robinson looked at North Dakota's people in the broadest possible way. He was uniquely comfortable whether he was writing about the grasslands, church life, wheat varieties, the arts, education, or political parties.

Interpretation underpinned the breadth of Robinson's work. In the *American Historical Review* Arthur J. Larsen of the University of Minnesota, Duluth, saw this: "His recurrent theme is that of the influence of geography in the state's development." Larsen concludes that the history "helps us to understand the dilemma of the Plains states." Herbert S. Schell, professor of history at the University of South Dakota and the author of a history of that state in 1961, told readers of *Minnesota History*: "In this absorbing account, the author makes geography the major key to an understanding of North Dakota's development. From its location on the northern edge of the Great Plains spring five themes which dominate the entire North Dakota story: remoteness, dependence, economic disadvantage, the 'Too-Much Mistake,' and the need for adaptation to environment. Within this frame of reference, Professor Robinson tells a fascinating story."

To Robinson, history had to have meaning. History without interpretation was useless. His History of North Dakota was written within the context of place. He was essentially a geographic determinist. North Dakota's past was the way it was because of location.

Robinson's history had breadth, but more important to him, it had interpretation. Perhaps John Schlebecker of the Smithsonian Institution said it best in the *Journal of Economic History*: "This history could well be used as a model for other state histories. Practitioners of this art have produced some excellent work of late, but this is, I think, the best so far." This was a model history in the 1960s; it remains a model history in the 1990s.

Elwyn Burns Robinson was not a likely person to have undertaken the formidable task of researching and writing a history of North Dakota. He was born on October 13, 1905, in Ohio on a Geauga County farm not far from Cleveland. Nine years later the Robinson family moved to Chagrin Falls, just outside of Cleveland, where his father opened a photographic studio. (Elwyn carried on a life-long love affair with photography.) He attended Oberlin College, not far from home, and although he took some European history

courses, he had more interest in sports than American history. He was a marksman, played tennis and handball, and earned a letter in football. He was an English major.

After graduation from Oberlin College in 1929, he became principal and English teacher at the small high school in New Lyme, Ohio. After school hours, he coached basketball, track, and baseball. In 1930 he took an English teaching position at the Old Trail School in an Akron suburb. A voracious reader, Robinson devoted his spare time to Mark Sullivan's *Our Times: The United States, 1900-1925*. Sullivan had a knack for bringing American history to life with his interesting anecdotes and emphasis upon social and personal history. The Sullivan multi-volume work had a profound and lasting influence on Robinson. He appreciated "people history" and decided to pursue graduate study in American history at Ohio's Western Reserve University. By 1932 he completed his thesis, "John W. Forney and the Philadelphia Press," which he wrote under the direction of Arthur C. Cole who was preparing a volume in the *History of American Life*. Like Mark Sullivan, Professor Cole turned Robinson's historical direction toward the social and literary side of American development and convinced his student to continue in the history of journalism with the dissertation topic, "The Public Press of Philadelphia During the Civil War."

In 1935 with his dissertation almost completed, Robinson accepted a position at the University of North Dakota. Teaching jobs were indeed scarce in the midst of the Great Depression, and, although he knew very little about North Dakota, he jumped at the opportunity of full-time employment. (He received his Ph.D. the following year.) At the University of North Dakota he joined the three-person Department of American History which Orin G. Libby chaired. (Because Libby had denounced the university's president, in 1920 he had lost the three European historians to a new Department of European History.) In Libby, Robinson found a serious scholar whom Frederick Jackson Turner had trained at the University of Wisconsin. Libby had revitalized the State Historical Society in North Dakota, had written about the state's "colonial period," and had collected and edited scores of documents on North Dakota's early years. North Dakota was Libby's domain, and Robinson busied himself teaching five courses each semester and preparing a series of five articles on the history of Pennsylvania journalism for the *Pennsylvania Magazine of History*. The pieces appeared between 1937 and 1941.

Although the young professor had reviewed three books on Minnesota history by 1943, he did not indicate an interest in North Dakota history until after Libby's retirement in 1944. In 1947 he began preparing forty fifteen-

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minute radio biographical sketches on North Dakota personalities for KFJM, the university's radio station. Recordings of his "Heroes of Dakota" played on stations across the state. In 1948 the University of North Dakota turned his scripts into book form and distributed them to schools and libraries. Soon he began to teach a course on North Dakota's history and encouraged graduate students to pursue North Dakota topics for their seminar papers and theses. The Ohioan had developed a keen interest in his adopted state.

The "Heroes of Dakota" started Robinson's quest for an understanding of North Dakota's past. In 1958 as part of the University of North Dakota's seventy-fifth anniversary celebration, he shared the results of almost ten years of research with the public. In an address entitled "The Themes of North Dakota History" he laid out the context for his study of the state. He explained that "as thoughtful people we are always seeking to understand the world around us. One way is the observation of patterns, of the recurrence of somewhat similar events. Recurrence may reveal relationships or truths.... Historical themes are patterns of many events." He continued, "That is what I am attempting to do, to relate the events of North Dakota history to a handful of themes." Robinson enunciated six themes: remoteness, dependence, radicalism, a position of economic disadvantage, the Too-Much Mistake, and adjustment.

He held that all six themes sprang from geographic facts: the state's location in the continental center, the cool and subhumid climate, and the differences in climate between the state's eastern and western regions. "The influence of these facts," Robinson maintained, "is seen in every aspect of North Dakota history."

Robinson defined remoteness as "the influence of the great distance between North Dakota and the chief centers of population, industry, finance, culture, and political decision in the nation and in the Western World." He pointed out that the horse came late to the Native People and that the waves of white people (the explorers, the fur traders, ranchers, and farmers) arrived late in North Dakota. "More fundamental," he concluded, "remoteness has always meant high transportation costs for North Dakota, and so it is one of the chief reasons for the lack of manufacturing in the state."

Perhaps because it was so obvious, Robinson devoted only one paragraph of his lengthy address to remoteness. Remoteness, however, created the second theme: dependence. He explained that dependence "stands for North Dakota's status as a colonial hinterland." Remoteness helped make and keep the state as a colonial hinterland, and as a hinterland North Dakota always had been dependent upon outside finance, trade, and manufacturing. This

dependence led to a “real degree of their control.”

Robinson presented three primary examples of dependence and outside control. Colonial status began, he argued, with the Indian trade. The Native People became dependent upon the goods which the white traders could provide. Access to fur markets was in the hands of the white traders. According to Robinson, “Need placed them under the control of the traders.”

White settlers became far more dependent than Native People on the factories of the East. Wheat had to reach distant markets. That access to markets was controlled by “the owners and managers of the railroads, the flour mills, the lines of elevators, the grain exchanges, and the banks which furnished credit for the whole complex operation.” To Robinson, the railroads were “the key.” The powerful transcontinentals, the Great Northern and the Northern Pacific, controlled the economic and political lives of North Dakotans. North Dakota became a colony of the Twin Cities and a hostage of the corporate decisions that were made there. North Dakotans had little control over their destinies.

Government, too, contributed to the dependent condition. In the Louisiana Purchase, the coming of military posts, and the years of territorial status, Robinson felt that “North Dakota was the plaything of outside forces.” In later years dependence upon the federal government took the shape of massive aid during the Great Depression, highway construction, Missouri Basin development, rural electrification, and farm/conservation programs.

Robinson held that dependence gave rise to agrarian radicalism, the struggle against colonial status and the outside exploitation that went with it. According to Robinson, this struggle began with Indian resistance to white encroachment and continued down to the 1950s with the cooperative movement. He used three primary examples of agrarian radicalism: The Farmers’ Alliance, the Nonpartisan League, and the many leading residents who took up causes against outside exploitation.

The Farmers’ Alliance and Independent Party of the 1880s and early 1890s sought protection for the state against “the encroachments of concentrated capital.” The two principal targets were railroads and grain-elevator abuses. The Alliance and its political arm, the Independent Party, failed in their mission but stand as symbols of agrarian radicalism. The Nonpartisan League (NPL), however, succeeded. Organized in 1915, the NPL espoused a program of state ownership a bank, mill and elevator, creamery, hail insurance, home building association. In the election of 1918 the NPL captured all three branches of government and enacted its program of “state socialism.” Its radicalism captured national attention until 1921-1922 when it crumbled and

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lost control of the government's machinery. Robinson presented a long list of individual groups and leaders who waged campaigns against exploitation. For examples, agricultural-college chemist Edwin F. Ladd crusaded for wheat grades based on protein content; the Fargo Chamber of Commerce led the fight for lower freight rates; editor George Winship of the *Grand Forks Herald* organized the movement against bossism and for honest government. William D. Walker, the Episcopal bishop, gave voice to radicalism when he called bankers "human vampires." The list was long and convincing.

By the position of economic disadvantage Robinson meant "the wide fluctuations in North Dakota's income and to the lower-than-average per capita income that North Dakota as an agricultural state has generally received in good times and bad alike." He believed that this economic disadvantage resulted from the subhumid character of the country and the dominance of agriculture in the economy. His analysis of crop yields, commodity prices, and per capita income concluded that "the theme of economic disadvantage runs through the North Dakota story." Only once (1947) had the state's per capita personal income risen above the national average.

Robinson coined the term, the "Too-Much Mistake," as his name for "too many farms, too many miles of railroads and roads, too many towns, banks, schools, colleges, churches, and governmental institutions, and more people than opportunities—numbers of all that history shows have been far beyond the ability of the state to maintain." He maintained that the Too-Much Mistake resulted essentially from three conditions. First, the white settlers who first came to and controlled the state were not familiar with the subhumid grasslands. They arrived from the Canadian and American easts where rainfall was plentiful and places thickly populated. They incorrectly viewed North Dakota as being the same as the places they had left. Second, the Homestead Act provided for farms of 160 acres—adequate in the East but far from adequate in a subhumid state such as North Dakota. Third, the optimism and boosterism of the 1880s (a time of above average rainfall) led to an unbridled exuberance for building both public and private enterprises.

To Robinson, the real proof that the Too-Much Mistake was a "real mistake" rested with the evidence of "too little use, of too heavy cost per capita-needs pressing too hard upon limited income, and, most irrefutably, in the record of retrenchment and abandonment."

Adjustment, the last theme, "means both the painful cutting back of the oversupply of the Too-Much Mistake and the slow forging of more suitable ways of living in a subhumid grassland." In the late 1950s, the UND professor was struck by how slowly North Dakota had moved to deal with the Too-

Much Mistake. Other than the consolidation of some public schools and the failures of some private enterprises (especially banks in the 1920s and early 1930s) little “progress” had been made.

The subhumid grassland, however, had forced adjustment. Native People who came from the woodlands of the East changed their ways of living on the Plains. Farmers adjusted their practices, enlarged their farms, employed conservation methods, and attempted diversification. Robinson seemed to lament the fact that “for many people the adjustment has been simply to leave the state.”

In presenting “the Themes of North Dakota History,” Professor Robinson constructed the framework for serious study of the state’s past. The six themes provided a context for his history of North Dakota and for a generation of historians who have continued to research and write about the state.

Elwyn Burns Robinson retired from the University of North Dakota in 1974 with the school’s highest rank—University Professor. That distinction reflected the excellence of his scholarship, his skill in the classroom, and his dedicated service in many capacities within the university, the state, and the profession. Until his death in 1988 he continued to reflect upon and write about the Great Plains experience.

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