

The Limits of Northern Identity: An Assessment of W. L. Morton's Northern Vision

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"Winnipeg may have its Royal Ballet, but one goes to it through the arctic cold of Portage and Main."

W.L. Morton

As one of Canada's leading historians, W.L. Morton's contribution to the definition of Canada as a "northern" country cannot be overlooked. It is my intention to survey Morton's work on the West and the North in order to understand the significance of this contribution. He argued that Canadian history was formed around four interrelated factors; a northern character, a historical dependence, a monarchical government and a committed national destiny.¹

To Morton, Canada's northern character was part of a northern frontier that extended across the Western world and was formed by what have come to be known as the "staples" of a Northern economy. Accordingly, he wrote that

Canadian life to this day is marked by a northern quality, the strong seasonal rhythm which still governs even academic sessions; the wilderness venture now sublimated for most of us to the summer holiday or the autumn shoot; the greatest of joys, the return from the lonely savagery of the wilderness to the peace of home; the puritanical restraint which masks the psychological tensions set up by the contrast of wilderness roughness and home discipline. The line which marks off the frontier from the farmstead, the wilderness from the base land, the hinterland from the metropolis, runs through every Canadian psyche.²

Indeed, Morton suggested that the aim of Canadian political and economic development was "the civilization of the northern and arctic lands."³ In a later essay, he argued that the direct value of Canadian historiography was in its ability to come to terms with the other factors of our Northern character. The North, as a specific "climatic environment," influences all of Canadian historiography. As it establishes the limits to southern expansion, it forms a silent and powerful boundary to the traditional practices of politics and economic development that have animated the settlement of Canada. In short, the North is

Canada's Other and, to understand Canadian identity, we must establish the true character of the North. In Morton's words,

the development of the North, therefore, has its own characteristics, different in quality, scale and sociology from the historic development, agricultural and industrial, of southern regions. Population in the North will be concentrated; it will be made up mostly of transient residents; it will rest on dwindling resources. To some degree a northern community resembles a human outpost on the moon or Mars more than one in the south The character of the North, then, is firm, decisive, and different from that of the south.⁴

The "otherness" of the North in Canada is what forms the limits of Canadian experience. At the same time it represents the "permanent frontier"; the North "begins along the line of institutional breakdown: Its influence operates below that line not by breakdown, but by limitation."⁵

Morton succeeded in capturing an image of the Canadian North that remains in the minds of many Canadians. This is the harsh North, the cold and unforgiving North, the poetic North. Canada was, and is, a Northern country; our economics, politics and culture are conditioned by the presence of the North itself. Recognition of the North as part of historiography and culture creates a context for Canadian identity. Morton's contribution to the Northern discourse can be measured in terms of his challenge to future generations of academics to understand the limits that the North imposes on Canadian identity.⁶ But it must also be measured in terms of the limitations it imposes on the North itself, on how we come to define this important geographical area of Canada.

Regional analysis, or "area studies," can be understood as sites of power/knowledge relations. As Michel Foucault stated in an interview in 1972,

Once knowledge can be analyzed in terms of region, domain, implantation, displacement, transposition, one is able to capture the process by which knowledge functions as a form of power and disseminates the effects of power. There is an administration of knowledge, a politics of knowledge, relations of power which pass via knowledge and which, if one tries to transcribe them, lead one to consider forms of domination designated by such notions as field, region and territory.⁷

Foucault was suggesting that not only should we use geographical metaphors to establish the sites of power/knowledge relations but that we should also attempt to understand the definitions and effects of territorial occupation and administration as forms of discourse themselves.⁸ In this sense, nationalism, the preoccupation with geographical

certainty through mapping, and the creation of national discourses, must be understood as constituting sites of power/knowledge relations. Morton's work on the West as an autonomous political, social and historical region of Canada can be situated within Foucault's understanding of power/knowledge and resistance.

As all students of Canadian history know, Morton was responsible for identifying the Canadian West as a unique historical frontier, and an equally unique political and social frontier. It is in the context of the "northern frontier" that I find the work of W. L. Morton most fascinating and illuminating. Morton's discussion of the North was less consistent with his understanding of the role of an historian in Canada. Instead of understanding the North as a region, perhaps with its own autochthonous political and social reality, as had the West, Morton chose to accept the rhetoric of national northern greatness.

The Western Frontier?

Morton's early work clearly establishes the correctness and authenticity of a Western Canadian historical point of view and his later work, while not losing touch with this important perspective, ventures into the discussion of Canadian identity. In fact, the two are intimately related. For Morton, Canadian identity was always a careful balance of region and centre, of unity and diversity and these features were part of the Canadian West.

His interest in proving the relationship between place and political culture is, I believe, what formed his intellectual perspective on the West. In 1937 he wrote of the importance of the "Red River Parish" for the formation of a Western political culture in Canada. The parish, he argued, formed the basis for political and social cohesion in Manitoba:

The development of the parishes suggests that Manitoba was not merely the creation of the Dominion and Imperial Parliaments. It was in many respects autochthonous, the offspring of the fur trade, the missions, and the deep soil of the Red River Valley. The Dominion recognized rather than created. The legal forms it set up conformed to, and were informed by, the exigencies and practicalities of the Red River Settlement. The parish, which had moulded Red River Society, shaped also the outlines of the political organization of the new order.⁹

The emphasis should be placed on Morton's understanding that the province of Manitoba was "recognized rather than created" by the imperial government in Ottawa. This observation sets the tone for much of Morton's work, which attempted to situate the Canadian West within its own historical traditions and that, perhaps most importantly, evaluates the contribution of the West and its people to the definition

of Canada.

For Morton, it follows that the experiences of Canadians will inform their historical appreciation and that the bias of the historian will be reflected in the images he or she conveys. In "Clio in Canada: The Interpretation of Canadian History," he argued that there had been three schools of Canadian history exemplified by the notions of French *survivance*, the dominance of Ontario and the subordination of the West. Moreover, he observed that the original themes of Canadian history, survival and self-government had been supplanted by the Laurentian thesis and the theory of the empire of the St. Lawrence. This thesis said more about the bias of the historian than it did about history. "The implications of the Laurentian thesis are, then," Morton explained, "a metropolitan economy, a political imperialism of the metropolitan area, and uniformity of the metropolitan culture throughout the hinterlands."¹⁰ While the Laurentian thesis is legitimate as a story, the teaching of it in the hinterlands will have devastating effects on the children:

Their experience after school will contradict the instruction of the history class, and develop in them that dichotomy which characterizes all hinterland Canadians, a nationalism cut athwart by a sense of sectional injustice.¹¹

The implications of the Laurentian thesis for the further study of Canadian history are that students and teachers will conflate economic metropolitanism with political imperialism, therefore denying any reality to an authentic "hinterland" political culture. In other words, they will be taught that Confederation was brought about to secure the future of the economic empire of the centre. The West, however, is so different from the centre that it must be treated separately; "The West must work out its own historical experience (a task well begun by Professor A. S. Morton and Major G. F. Stanley), and free itself, and find itself."¹²

Accordingly, Morton argued that the nationalism of the West lies in its environment, in the difference of its wealth of few but plentiful resources and also in its composite nationality, first exemplified by the Métis people of Manitoba and because of the continuing diversity of its peoples. Moreover, Morton pointed the direction for future Western historians and politicians when he observed that

When all of the "decisive" and subordinate areas have achieved survival and self-government, and have raised themselves to equality in Confederation, when Confederation is held together no longer by the "Protestant garrison" and protectionist imperialism, but by the consent of equals, when it ceases to be an instrument of domination and exploitation and becomes a means to cooperation and distributive justice, then there can be

a common interpretation of Canadian history and a common text-book in the schools, French as well as English, West as well as East.¹³

By advocating a return to the original themes of "survival and self-government," Morton shifted the focus of attention of historians to the task of revealing and explaining the autochthonous elements of a Western political experience in Canada.

The West was indeed a marginal society for Morton. His idea of marginality, however, went much further than the Laurentian thesis would allow. Rather than seeing the West simply as a subordinate part of the central Canadian empire, which always remained a convenient explanation for the lack of political voice and representation in Ottawa, Morton embraced marginality as a virtue. As he explained in 1946, the environment of the Canadian West is "ruthless and not to be denied. Adaptation is the price of survival."¹⁴ Therefore, it is possible to say that the settlement of the West was not, as it was in the East, a re-creation of Europe. The West, as a marginal society, has its own history and its own politics. The western historian faces the formidable task,

to explain, to diagnose, the *malaise* of the West in the environmental and cultural circumstances in which it finds itself with the passing of the period of settlement, the days of fantastic expansion which has given way to the days of loss of population and of representation in the federal parliament . . . in terms of *conscious adaptation* at the margin of a living culture to an environment not to be denied, but with which terms may be made. And as he traces the relative impress of hereditary culture and physical environment, he may foreshadow the equipoise of a civilization capable of self-perpetuation under the conditions of the West, of a culture capable of survival in an environment in which none has thriven before.¹⁵

In order to achieve this, the western historian must abandon any hope of employing Turner's frontier thesis of simply adapting to the environment, nor any hope of using the Toronto school's interpretation of the spread of economic domination. The history of the West will prove to be much more complex, "for it is in the study of a marginal area, the mud flats of civilization, where the primitive and the sophisticated mix and separate, neither prevailing in an endless conflict of shore and tide."¹⁶ With this prose, alluding to the formlessness of the "prairie ocean," Morton set the challenge to generations of Western historians to explain the impact of the environment on the relationships between East and West in Canada.¹⁷

In an essay on the differences between the settlement patterns of the Canadian and American Wests, Morton pointed to the significance of "site selection" in the determination of indigenous political and social choices. By site he means a position of comparative advantage for

production, exchange or transfer: "The settlement of a frontier site, for example, was the initial exploitation of a particular environment, by means of contemporary technology, for the needs of an immigrant culture."¹⁸ The settlement of the North American West was based on a competition for sites and the fur traders placed their posts at seasonal sites of nomadic bands—their economies became fused and the Natives became dependent—settlement of sites was the preoccupation of fur traders. As agriculture advanced, the significance of site changed, Native people were re-placed and squatter sites appeared by 1812, the most significant of which was the Selkirk settlement of banks of the "Red River of the North."

Homestead sites followed as the building of the railway ensued, and the site selection that had been practised by the Northwest and Hudson Bay companies was revived by the Montreal industrialists who saw the advance of midwestern US industrialism in Winnipeg coming from its proximity to St. Paul. As a result, the West became an object of competition as a site between the American industrial empire growing to the south and the imperial commercial empire that was gaining ground from the East. More to the point, as Morton argues, the creation of the Province of Manitoba in 1870 and the National Policy of tariff protection, immigration and railway construction disturbed the natural north-south flow and replaced the site of the West as a site for Canadian, and not continental, development. It was these events that formed what Morton later called "the bias of prairie politics."

According to Morton, the politics of the prairie provinces and the other regions of Canada is different from a common sense and from an academic perspective. The explanation of the difference is often made in terms of sociological or economic factors but he wants to present historical factors.

The proposition implies, as the title is meant to indicate, that the difference between prairie and other Canadian politics is the result of an initial bias, which, by cumulative historical process—the process which takes account of sequence, conjuncture, and will, as well as of logic, category, and necessity—has resulted in traditions and attitudes even more distinctive than the original bias. In short, to pass from the abstract to the concrete, the submission is that in his aims Louis Riel was a more conventional politician than William Aberhart, but that both were prairie politicians.¹⁹

To determine the full extent of this bias, Morton identifies three distinct periods of Western history. The first was from 1870-1905, the colonial period, the second from, 1905-1925, the agrarian period, and the third, the utopian period, dated from 1925. In each of these periods the formation of Western Political consciousness rejected the idea that the

institutions of the West were simply transplanted Canadian institutions. 1869 saw the beginning of the resistance by the Métis to annexation of the Northwest by Canada, the development of agriculture in the period that followed allowed for the expression of a new aspect of Western politics exemplified by the Progressive movement. At the same time, the development of the agricultural frontier was the key to the development of the Canadian economy and also the key to the continuation of the bias of subordination of the West to the centre.²⁰ Finally, the utopian trend after 1930 was, and continues to be, I would argue, a response to the rejection of central Canadian political choices and the acceptance of the Social gospel, the social credit and the idea of institutional reform. Barry Cooper suggests, in his important work "Western Political Consciousness," that

considered together, the elements that constitute the bias of prairie politics amount to a sort of nationalism, "neither like the French nor the dominant—a 'garrison' nationality—like that of Ontario, but environmental and, because of the diversity of its people, composite." According to Morton, then, the West is both a creation of the Dominion and an emancipated colony of the old Canada. Unlike the Maritimes or British Columbia, which have always had genuine options to incorporation within Canada, the West has never existed outside its subordinate position. The reciprocal is also true: Canada could exist without the maritimes or British Columbia, but not without the West.²¹

Morton's ambition to create an "alternative" history for the West in Canada was complemented by his appreciation for the role of the historian in Canadian society. In three important essays, he was able to convey a sense of the historian's imagination. In both "Raw Country" and "Seeing an Unliterary Landscape" Morton presents the historian as artist. The degree to which a landscape or a country has not been interpreted by an artistic vision is the degree to which it can be referred to as "raw country" or "still in the order of nature."

As he was writing *Manitoba: A History*, he noticed that he was describing a landscape or a society that was raw, except, of course, for the Red River area. In doing descriptive history, he argued, one must be accurate and imaginative, to allow the place to enter the order of art. He explained that

the historian as artist, as well as a scientist, attempts to behold society, as he attempts to perceive landscape, with a vision comprehensive both of its elements and of its whole. To the degree that he succeeds, to the degree that his readers are moved to accept the integrity of his vision, he has transmuted "raw society" and "raw country" from raw material into literary material, from the stuff that statistics are made into the stuff that

works of art are made of.”²²

In embracing the imaginative aspect of historical writing, Morton was able to deepen his understanding of the effect of environment on political and social consciousness. He urged the historian “to write as an artist” but only after sifting through historical fact in a scientific manner. Above all, Morton wrote, “I believe he ought always to cultivate a sense of place and even an eye for country.”²³ In general, the West could be seen as “preeminently a landscape of abundance,” a remade landscape—remade by the plough and the farmer. In short, landscape changed as life changed:

Landscapes, however—or seascapes, or cityscapes—are not only material. They are also the landscapes of the mind, literary landscapes, for want of a better term. These are formed, not by the play of eye on meadow and forest, valley and mountain, but by books, pictures, television, music. They are cultural landscapes, formed by what the mind, not the seeing eye alone, takes in.”²⁴

By seeing “what I wished,” Morton was able to reconstruct the prairie landscape as a new literary landscape, one that reconciled the imagination of the historian with the landscape itself. The result was a Western history that avoided the “pavement mentality of city-bred historians.”

As he saw it, his work on the West was designed to reveal what he saw as the western landscape—the western people, the western towns.²⁵ In his rejection of the application of the Laurentian thesis to the West, Morton found the true nature of prairie society. The metropolitan/hinterland approach to understanding history in Canada tended to “minimize the importance of the hinterland.”²⁶ Morton wanted to set the record straight about the West’s involvement and contribution to Confederation, but he also looked for an answer to the question of Canadian unity. In so doing, he argued that

The fundamental dilemma of Canada and its history is that Canada possesses but does not enjoy unity, and exists as a unity only by the manifold compromises and flexibilities of a state formally federal and organically dual, and regional. Any unity can only be the result of a complex equation balancing unity and diversity, oneness and complexity, coherence and plurality. This is why nationalism is so difficult a term to define in the Canadian context; Canada in fact requires its own terminology.²⁷

According to Morton, the one Canadian thing is “distance.” Therefore, regional history in Canada is just as legitimate as national history—in fact they feed each other’s sense of identity.

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Having established Morton's contribution to the definition of Western Canadian social, political and historical consciousness, we can now evaluate his understanding of the Canadian North as a symbol for Canadian identity.

Morton's North

In Canada, the regionalization of the North has been created largely by the ambitions of the Human Sciences. The definition of the Northern culture has involved the systematic mapping of a geographical space along with the identification of differential elements of life, labour and language within this space. I suggest that, in Canada, this follows from a general appreciation of the limits of the historical definition of our national identity as a northern people.²⁸

For example, in the work of William C. Wonders, a Canadian geographer who spent much of his academic career investigating the parameters of the North in Canada, we discover a general expression of these limits. In 1962, he addressed the Canadian Association of Geographers with a speech entitled "Our Northward Course." Echoing Morton's sentiments, he began by pointing out that

It is only natural that Canadians should be interested in the north. Geographically, we are both in it and of it. Nothing can change this. Indeed, without the north, we should lose much of our sense of identity as a people The entire history of the exploration and development of Canada has been set against a northern environment. . . . In large part its greater availability is the result of technological advance. This has ranged through every type of equipment from seismic recorders to ships. Better clothing, food and shelter, facilities specially designed for northern use in many cases, have improved the living and working conditions throughout the area, and in turn have led to more efficient activity and greater accuracy in the advancement of our knowledge.²⁹

Wonders continued, arguing that, in order to achieve a greater knowledge of our North, we must be careful to recognize the differences that exist there. We must end our "colonial" mentality and agree that the North "has a right to be developed as part of Canada and not for a part of Canada."³⁰ The message here is quite clear, the North in Canada is part of our cultural heritage and, as such, must be respected. Indeed, Wonders conjectured that "only through intelligent, applied planning can the increasing factual knowledge and technological advances be most effectively utilized in our further northward course."³¹

Wonders expressed the sentiments of a cultural nationalist who saw in the North an opportunity to capture the limits of Canadian culture. By including the North in the Canadian identity, we can solve two

problems: first, we can give voice to our Northern heritage from a variety of perspectives thus ensuring the survival of the Canadian imagination, and second, we can end the era of "colonialism" that was characterized by the inability to provide ethical dimensions for research and development in the North. In Wonders' view, the ethics of Northern development were a part of "intelligent, applied planning" and the replacing of mythology with scientific facts. With this, Wonders placed himself squarely within the traditions of the Western scientific leitmotif; progress is equal to the accumulation of knowledge, and, in turn, provides the focus for a national imagination.

The context of this national imagination was further explored by Jim Lotz, who drew the discussion of Northern development onto a different plane. In 1968, in commenting on "Social Science Research and Northern Development," Lotz described a "psychic split" that was beginning to show in the attempts to open the Canadian North to more sophisticated forms of inquiry. The advent of research in the North from the perspective of Social Science had begun to reveal some of the mythology that surrounded the culture of northern Native people. As Native northerners began to question the aims of the development of their land, "two ways of thought" began to clash. Lotz was able to capture the essence of this conflict in a description of the problems of Northern development:

the problems of northern development can be grouped under the following headings: *space* (How can a nation control, operate efficiently in, and develop a large land mass with a sparse population? How can the centre of power, where decisions are made, be related to the periphery where action is carried out?); *culture contact* (How can a high level of science and technology be introduced into an area which has only recently come into the stream of modern history?); and *resource endowment and development* (What constitutes a resource, and how can it be developed without insult to other potential resources and to the people?).³²

Lotz³³ was able to introduce the ethical dimension of Northern development by paying attention to the actual dynamics of Northern life. The effects of northern development are felt most acutely by the people who live there. This observation has led to the inclusion of social impact assessments in the determination of the viability of the various enterprises of Northern development. More importantly, this sentiment has brought the North into the view of the Social Sciences. Indeed, most research in the North today proceeds from social science perspectives. And Native northerners are now, for the first time, participating in the discussion of Canada's northward course.

This positive development has led to the expression of a Native

northern political culture, which is still in its formative stages. The political tension in the North now works on a number of levels; at the level of cultural identity, northern Native anthropology has proceeded to express the character of the Native societies; at the level of land claims, Northern economic development is now coming under the supervision and control of Native societies; at the level of sovereignty, political development has led to a discussion and recognition of aboriginal self-government; and, finally, at the level of global politics, Canadian North has moved from an object of American foreign policy to a player in the development of a Circumpolar political consciousness. In the end, the development of the North, in all respects, is slowly becoming the property of the North itself. More recent historical analyses of the North in Canada have been sympathetic to its decidedly colonial past and have, in some cases, celebrated its widely divergent "histories," both oral and written. The Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Inquiry allowed oral history to become an acceptable component of the Northern political economy. More recent historians have attempted to discover the variety of national, provincial and territorial Norths, the "forgotten" Norths.³⁴ This work is indebted to W. L. Morton for his creation of the regional history of the West. What is fascinating is how the North emerges in Morton's work.

In his Introduction to *Alexander Begg's Red River Journal*,³⁵ Morton argued that the journal offers a first-hand account of the Red River "troubles of 1869." The resistance of the Métis to the transfer of Rupert's Land and the Northwest Territory to the Dominion of Canada was important to the question of French-English relations, and the role of Métis in the formation of the new West. In Morton's words,

involved also was the question as to whether the North-West was to be Canadian or American. . . . The Red River was the key to the North-West, the North-West to the future of the new Dominion. . . . The Red River was not a frontier, but an island of civilization in the wilderness.³⁶

Riel and his followers considered themselves to be British citizens but also as a "new nation"—this nationality was expressed in the corporate demands of the Métis. Moreover, members of what came to be known as the Canada First Movement were present at the Red River settlements and were advocating that the area be included in the new "northern nation" of Canada.³⁷ Morton always used the term North-West to describe the place of the rebellions. Indeed, most academics refer to the region as the North-West, the North-West Territories, or more correctly, Rupert's Land and the Northwest Territory.

Another example can be found in an essay Morton wrote in 1970 commemorating the "birth" of the West in the creation of the province

of Manitoba one hundred years earlier. In "The West and the Nation, 1870-1970,"³⁸ Morton argued that, "What happened in the Northwest in 1870 was a consequence of what had happened in Confederation. To see the former in full perspective, it is necessary to see the latter."³⁹ At Confederation, the Northwest "was an unclaimed empire," but an improvised empire. Duality had been the key to the settlement of Confederation, in order to satisfy French and English elements of Canadian society. With Confederation in the Northwest, however, duality gave way to assimilation; the French in the Northwest were to be assimilated. What is extremely interesting here, is that Morton uses the term Northwest up to page 20, at which time he begins to speak of the new Western nationalism in Canada:

It was in some such way that the West, to use the current term, was committed to plurality. That commitment means that socially the West is developing its own version of Canadian nationality as it has perhaps developed its own version of Canadian political institutions—positive, populist and provisionally a-political. If that is true, it follows that the west today from Ontario to the rockies has its own peculiar character, social and political. The West is at once a federal creation and also an emancipated colony of old Canada with its own kind of government and life. It may be that this is in a very real sense the most authentic expression of federal, or Canadian, nationality.⁴⁰

According to Morton, the West "became a third element in the political nationality of Canada," and has created a more authentic expression of the cultural composite that gives Canada its nationality. We can easily see that this area, as settled, takes on the elements of a new nationality, and even a Western political and social consciousness. There is no disagreement here with these observations. What is most interesting is what happens to the North in Morton's writing.

Morton's observations on the meaning of the North in Canada can be attributed to what Carl Berger called his "nationalist phase" as a Canadian historian. More specifically, these observations are principally found in three articles, written after he had identified the West as a special political and social region within Canada. What is surprising is that Morton does not attempt to afford the same status to the North. Instead, he wraps himself in a Northern flag, as it were, a characteristic gesture of Conservative intellectuals and politicians in the 1960s.

In "The North in Canadian History," Morton argued that Canada is fundamentally different as a country and a society from the United States, "and what makes the difference is the North, the fact that Canada is a northern country with a northern economy, a northern way of life and a northern destiny."⁴¹ Moreover, the settlement and exploration

of Canada is less the result of the voyages of Columbus than of "the extensions across the North Atlantic of what might be called the 'maritime frontier' of the northern peoples of Europe."⁴² As Morton explained, the Norsemen and the early settlers in Iceland and Greenland occupied their time with fishing, farming and hunting "very like the way early Canadians lived."⁴³ The voyages to Canada were sponsored by states hoping to expand their northern frontiers, and found favourable locales in which to settle in Canada;

The Canadian frontier is a northern frontier and it is an extension overseas of the northern frontier and northern economy of the north lands of Europe. It is no wonder Scots and Icelanders have played so large a part in Canadian life. They were, as northern people, at home here from the first. The softer rest of us have had to learn the hard way how to live and prosper in a hard land."⁴⁴

The softer rest of us must learn that "Canada is probably the toughest country in the world to develop, after Antarctica and Tibet. Siberia by contrast is easy." To save Canadian nationality and identity from the spectre of continentalism, we need to see ourselves as an integrated people—as a northern people—and to establish a separate space from the Americans:

I would not for the moment be political, but I must say it is important that Canadians should have, if not a vision, at least a notion, or conceit, of themselves as a northern people, that with Stefannson we should dare to call the Arctic friendly, that we should believe that we are called, not to people a last best West, but in the dour fashion of our northern forebears, to make something of a grim, but a challenging, a tough but a rewarding proposition, our north.⁴⁵

Morton's opinions about Canada's Northern character seem to be convenient rhetoric in response to the realization of the evils of the branch-plant economy. To recognize our future in the North is to affirm our northern heritage, our northern condition and our northern limitations. We also need to create new generations of northerners:

Finally there is the human factor. A northern country needs a northern people, people prepared to live in the North, on the terms the North imposes. Either that, or we must install in the North the essential furnishings of life here in the south, central heating, refrigeration, schools, hospitals and—dare I mention it?—television. I believe myself we shall always have to have a northern people, but that we shall have to reinforce them with southerners and that the southerners will have to have the material conditions of life which prevail down here on the United States border.⁴⁶

Certainly, Morton must have been aware of the "regionality" of the

North, separated for the most part by the 60th parallel. By 1960, Diefenbaker's New National Policy and Northern Vision, often one and the same, were in full swing. One must ask how the North is to be compared with the West. Is it not possible that the Canadian North could have shared with the West an autochthonous political and social settlement, the Red River settlement having been the centre of the new Northwest? From Morton's perspective it would seem that the North and the West have little in common. The other problem lies in Morton's pronouncement that Northernness underlies all of Canadian nationality. Surely not the Western version of that nationality as well? It almost seems that Morton has forgotten about his prairie roots for the sake of satisfying the demands of a national consciousness, albeit one expressed in vague and rhetorical language.

In "The Relevance of Canadian History," Morton's Presidential Address to the Canadian Historical Association, he continued many of these themes.⁴⁷ He argued that there was but one narrative line in Canadian history, not a French and English history, prior to and after 1760, but, a common Canadian history which had four "permanent factors." The first, and most important, of these was Canada's "northern character." The other three, "historical dependence, Monarchical government and a committed national destiny," are linked to the first. It is the North that puts the rest into context. In other words, it is the "site" of Canada in a global context. Canada's northern character and orientation is supplied by the latitude and the maritime frontier that extends from Europe, a frontier for exploitation and settlement. Indeed, as Morton observed, coastal and riverine settlement and the "foothold" of settlement in Canada took place in small fiords and eventually in the Laurentian trench. Accordingly, "the summer was a season of sowing, herding and gathering in, the winter a season of concentration in the house and byre, of relaxation or rationing according to the summer's yield."⁴⁸

The northern economy, "an extensive hunting and gathering economy," was led by the production of staples, the first of which, Harold Innis had told us, was fish. The real settlement of the Canadian land was, wrote Morton,

the outcome of the piecemeal ventures of Norse seamen-farmers probing the northern seas for new harbours and fisheries, new hay meadows and timber stands. The process is scantily documented. Government archives record it scarcely at all; it can now be understood and comprehended only by an understanding of the character of the northern frontier and economy, an understanding which is as bold an extension of the hints of the sagas as were the original voyages themselves.⁴⁹

A northern economy is a dependent one, made so by

its northern character, the limitation imposed by its situation and climate meant that in fact the new nation was to remain still dependent on other states, the United Kingdom and the United States, for capital, technology and defense.⁵⁰

Morton argued that Canada's dependency could be alleviated if we could, as a nation, move our attention to the North, to establish our independence through an understanding of our northern heritage; this is the "relevance of Canadian history." All we need to do is to develop ourselves, to develop our "power to conquer the North." Finally, Morton challenged the Canadian mind to "fathom the deep secrets of the north and to measure the hair's-breadth difference between disaster and success in northern development."⁵¹ We must recognize that this environment has produced a peaceful people.

Again, Morton argues that there exists an overriding sense of northern destiny, a sense of national pride that has its origins in the severity of our climate and in the "natural" political economy that climate engenders. In "The 'North' in Canadian Historiography,"⁵² he argued that any history of Canada must include a discussion of the influence that the North has had on the development of Canadian identity. The North for Morton is "a climatic environment" that does not allow for agricultural development. In other words,

The North has restricted the diversity, if not the abundance, of the Canadian farm in almost every corner of the country, and acted as a limitation, if not a prohibition. The North as defined, moreover, has created another definite feature of the Canadian landscape. As the agricultural frontier moved westward, it left an open flank to the north. This became a permanent frontier, an enduring demarcation line between wilderness and farmland, between North and south. Ragged, flexible, moving far north in the far northwest, it is nevertheless an impenetrable as well as a permanent frontier. It may be vaulted; it cannot be removed.⁵³

Culture and institutions will be similar to southern ones, but will never be "like those that history has evolved in more favourable regions."

The North forced the European to live among the Indian, and the most remarkable and significant result of this was inter-marriage, and the birth of the Métis, the first Western culture in Canada. It is interesting how Morton makes his way back to the West through his analysis of the North. Moreover, just as the West was ignored by historians in the early stages of Canadian development,

The convention of Canadian life is to ignore the North as we ignore the

winter climate in our history, our literature, and so far as we physically may our daily lives. We ignore the North, its coldness, its emptiness, its menace, and its promise—why? Because it is too terrible; it is a terror only some of us, those who live “down North”, have exorcised and tamed.⁵⁴

The North has imposed limits on growth, on movement, on what it is possible to achieve. The conditions of the North are unforgiving, they make us dependent on “one’s fellows, cooperative skills, on communal capital.” Such dependencies lessen as we move south, but in the end they remain the central feature of the Canadian identity. Morton stresses that the North *is* the Other to all of Canada; it is not simply a region like the West, it is the limitation to our culture.

What has it meant? Has it meant more than a cold climate? How indeed can something which is after all only a freezing emptiness, an arctic void, a blizzard-swept desert, a silent space, dark as the other side of the moon half of each year, mean anything at all? The first thing to be grasped is that even a vacuum has meaning. Even if the North were as empty as our rhetoric makes it, it would still exert an influence. Ours after all is the age in which the negative has become as active as the positive.⁵⁵

At this point, Morton’s allusions to nihilism seem a bit far-fetched. More importantly, however, he has travelled very far from his days as the “Western historian” in Canada, and has replaced his enthusiasm for discovering the reality of the Western historical experience with the task of creating a context for Canada’s political and social identity in its northern character. He ended his exhortations to Canadian historians with a challenge: “I conclude, therefore, with a paradox: The ultimate and comprehensive meaning of Canadian history is to be found where there has been no Canadian history, in the North.”⁵⁶

Conclusion: The Limits of Northern Identity

W. L. Morton’s contributions to the definition of the North in Canada were formulated at times of extreme national anxiety. Indeed, Morton was able to move freely from an explanation of the causes of Western Canadian alienation to a discussion of Canadian nationalism. For him, they were not that far apart at all. The essential elements of Western Canadian historical experience were found to be enduring intellectual forms that could be easily transplanted, as it were, to the national scene. The importance of environment and composite nationality, the role of site selection in settlement patterns, the use of land, the influence of climate and weather, the presence of indigenous political and social institutions; all these things were what made the West unique as a region within Canada. Instead of subscribing to the Laur-entian thesis of Canadian history, which placed the West in a state of

continual political and cultural subordination, he “invented” a Western Canadian story, the results of which are sustained by the public and private media, and that have helped the West and Western provinces gain a foothold in national government and politics. The story, however, is just that, and is always considered alongside others.

Morton’s discussion of the North, however, was less consistent with his understanding of the role of an historian in Canada. Instead of understanding the North as a region, perhaps with its own autochthonous political and social reality, as had the West, Morton succumbed to the sometimes vacuous rhetoric of national northern greatness that still reverberates around Parliament Hill. Instead of seeing the North as a region, Morton saw it as an attitude that enveloped all of Canada. On the one hand, by challenging future generations of historians, he was able to begin the first chapter of a new story. On the other, he succeeded in multiplying stereotypical northern images of Canada and seemed to abandon the intellectual rigour that characterized his work on Western Canada.

In the end, I argue, the West and the North are very close to being the same thing in Canada, politically conscious hinterland “regions of regions.”⁵⁷ Morton pointed us in the right direction. This is why, as one of Canada’s leading historians, W. L. Morton’s contribution to the definition of Canada as a “northern” country cannot be overlooked.

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Endnotes

1. W. L. Morton, “The Relevance of Canadian History” in *Contexts of Canada’s Past*. Ed. A. B. McKillop (Toronto: Macmillan, 1980): 163. Reprinted from Canadian Historical Association *Annual Report* (1960): 1-21.
2. *Ibid.*, 167.
3. *Ibid.*, 166.
4. W. L. Morton, “The North in Canadian Historiography” in *Contexts of Canada’s Past*: 229-39, 230-1. Reprinted from *Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada*, Series IV, Vol. VIII (1970): 31-40.
5. *Ibid.*, 235.

6. Morton argued that there were four main historiographical positions in Canada. First was the extension of French culture and Catholicism, second was the "victorious spread of British institutions," third was the "Laurentian thesis," and the fourth was the concept of the "metropolis, general and local." All were influenced or "limited" by the Otherness of the North. *Ibid.*, 238.
7. Michel Foucault, "Questions on Geography," in *Power/Knowledge*, ed. Colin Gordon, trans. Gordon, *et al.* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980): 69.
8. This is a theme I wish to explore further with regard to "territories" traditionally occupied by aboriginal peoples in Canada, the United States, Australia and New Zealand through a consideration of the current dialogue about treaties and land claims.
9. W. L. Morton, "The Red River Parish: Its Place in the Development of Manitoba" in *Manitoba Essays*, ed. R. C. Lodge (Toronto: Macmillan, 1937): 89-105. Essays written in commemoration of the 60th anniversary of the University of Manitoba, 105.
10. W. L. Morton, "Clio in Canada: The Interpretation of Canadian History," *University of Toronto Quarterly*, Vol. 15 (1945-46), 227-34. 227.
11. *Ibid.*, 231-32.
12. *Ibid.*, 232.
13. *Ibid.*, 233-34.
14. W. L. Morton, "Marginal," in *Contexts of Canada's Past: Selected Essays of W. L. Morton*, ed. with an Introduction by A. B. McKillop (Toronto: Macmillan, 1980): 41-47. Reprinted from *The Manitoba Arts Review* Vol. 5 (Spring 1946): 26-31, 41.
15. *Ibid.*, 44.
16. *Ibid.*, 42.
17. Morton's major work on the Progressive Party underlined his respect for the history of Western Canadian political traditions. W. L. Morton, *The Progressive Party in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1950), Chapter One "The Background of the Progressive Movement, 1896-1911." In 1896 the West was as "empty as it had been in the days of the fur trade," 3. He defines the West in n. 1: "The term, 'the West' is used in reference to the provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta; when British Columbia is included, the context will make the inclusion apparent. When the three provinces are specifically indicated, the term, 'continental West,' will be used" 3.
18. W. L. Morton, "The Significance of Site in the Settlement of the American and Canadian Wests" *Agricultural History*, Vol. XXV (July, 1951): 97-104, 97.
19. W. L. Morton, "The Bias of Prairie Politics" in *Historical Essays on the*

- Prairie Provinces* ed. D. Swainson (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1970): 289-300, 289. Reprinted from *Transactions of the Royal Society*, Vol. XLIX, Series III, Section Two (June, 1955): 57-66.
20. Here Morton stops using "Northwest" and starts using "West." The bias to the Northwest could be said to have begun in 1898 with the Yukon gold rush and the establishment of a separate northern territory and showed things to come: "The reform movement of the first quarter century in the Prairie West was, in short, tinged with millenarianism," 298. So too was the settlement of the North.
 21. Barry Cooper, "Western Political Consciousness" in *Canadian Political Thought: Contemporary Perspectives*. Ed. Stephen Brooks (Toronto: Irwin, 1984): 213-238, 229. Cooper quotes Morton's essay "Clio in Canada" in *Contexts of Canada's Past op. cit.*, 107. It is interesting to note that since writing this essay, Cooper has come to the conclusion that Canada can do without Quebec as well.
 22. W. L. Morton, "Raw Country" *Red River Valley Historian* (Summer, 1974): 3-8, 8. Morton argued that ". . .we live not only in the actual and physical world, be it here or there, but not less in a world of vision, associative, allusive and symbolic, a world of infinite variety and ever unfolding intimacy, a world which though local is also universal and though temporal is also timeless. It is in short, the world of art" 3.
 23. *Ibid.*, 4. For another perspective on the importance of landscape see W. L. Morton, "Seeing an Unliterary Landscape," in *Contexts of Canada's Past: Selected Essays of W. L. Morton* (15-25) edited with an Introduction by A. B. McKillop (Toronto: Macmillan, 1980). Reprinted from *Mosaic: A Journal for the Comparative Study of Literature and Ideas* Vol. III, No. 3 (Manitoba Centennial Issue, 1970): 1-10.
 24. W. L. Morton, "Seeing an Unliterary Landscape": 17.
 25. As he explained, "Impersonally and objectively, the process was, of course, the ancient human game of possessing by naming and describing. Nothing, no country, can be really owned except under familiar name or satisfying phrase. To be apprehended by the mind and personal, it requires not only the worn comfort of a used tool or a broken in shoe; it requires also assimilation to the mind, ear, eye and tongue by accepted, or acceptable, description in word, or line, or colour. (Is it perhaps the plight of the existentialist and the alienated that they are such because they cannot, indeed we cannot, possess the world of the scientific revelation by describing it in terms mere humans can accept?)" *Ibid.*, 24.
 26. W. L. Morton, "Canadian History and Historians" (26-38) in *Contexts, op. cit.*: 35. Reprinted from *Queen's Quarterly* Vol. LXXX (Winter, 1973): 616-19 and *Acadiensis* Vol. II (Spring, 1973): 100-107.
 27. *Ibid.*
 28. See my essay "Re-searching the North in Canada: An Introduction to the

Canadian Northern Discourse" *Journal of Canadian Studies* Vol. 26, No. 2 (Summer, 1991): 108-119.

29. William C. Wonders, "Our Northward Course," Presidential Address to the Canadian Association of Geographers, Hamilton, Ontario (10 pp): 2-4.
30. *Ibid.*, 9.
31. *Ibid.*, 10.
32. Jim Lotz, "Social Science Research and Northern Development," *Arctic*, Vol. 21, No. 4 (1968): 291-3, 293.
33. Some may argue that Wonders and Lotz are dated sources for any discussion of the North. My point for their inclusion is to situate them "in Morton's time," as it were, and within the problematic rhetoric of the "northward course" of the Canadian empire that surrounded the celebration of Confederation in 1967. Lotz and Wonders remain respected spokesmen for the North as it emerged from this period. Indeed, so is Morton.
34. I am referring here to work of Ken Coates and William Morrison, whose names have appeared frequently in this journal, and who have encouraged the study of the North in Canada among a new generation of students.
35. *Alexander Begg's Red River Journal*, ed. with an introduction by W. L. Morton (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1956).
36. *Ibid.*, 2-3.
37. *Ibid.*, 19-23.
38. W. L. Morton, "The West and the Nation, 1870-1970" in *Prairie Perspectives*. Eds. A. W. Rasporich and H. C. Klassen (Toronto: Holt, Rhinehart, Winston, 1970), 8-24.
39. *Ibid.*, 8.
40. *Ibid.*, 20.
41. W. L. Morton, "The North in Canadian History" in *Canada's Changing North*. Ed. William Wonders (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1971): 86-88, 88. Reprinted from *North* Vol. VII, No. 1 (Jan.-Feb., 1960): 26-29.
42. *Ibid.*, 86.
43. *Ibid.*, 87.
44. *Ibid.*
45. *Ibid.*, 88.
46. *Ibid.*
47. W. L. Morton, "The Relevance of Canadian History" from *The Canadian Identity* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1961), second edition (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971). Presidential address read before the Canadian Historical Association, Queen's University, June 11, 1960: 88-114.

48. *Ibid.*, 90.
49. *Ibid.*, 92.
50. *Ibid.*, 99.
51. *Ibid.*, 108. Morton added that while the northern economy is clear and distinct, not so definite is the "northern outlook of Canadian arts and letters": "the mere reflection in art of northern scenery, or northern life, important though that is, is not what is meant. What is meant is the existence in Canadian art and literature of distinctive qualities engendered by the experience of northern life. These are a tendency to the heroic and the epic, to the art which deals with violence. . . . That is the art of the hinterland" 109.
52. W. L. Morton, "The 'North' in Canadian Historiography," 229-239.
53. *Ibid.*, 233. "The North will admit of an extreme form of nomadic living: witness the Eskimo. It admits also of what may be termed an extreme form of urban life: witness, say, Schefferville in northern Quebec. . . . Life is possible in the North, but ever and always on the conditions imposed by it" 229.
54. *Ibid.*, 237.
55. *Ibid.*
56. *Ibid.*, 239.
57. By this I mean that the term "region" itself requires more significant analysis with regard to its inclusion in the Canadian public political discourse. As part of the current political and social decentralization occurring in this country, it may be that we are beginning to empty the term of any meaning it was thought to have had.