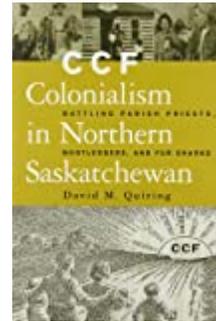


**David M. Quiring.** *CCF Colonialism in Northern Saskatchewan: Battling Parish Priests, Bootleggers, and Fur Sharks.* Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2004. xii + 356 pp. No price listed (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7748-0938-2; \$37.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7748-0939-9.



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## To Preserve and Modernize

In *CCF Colonialism in Northern Saskatchewan*, author David Quiring argues that Canadians have a rose-colored understanding of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) government elected in Saskatchewan in 1944. The government of Tommy Douglas, the “father of medicare,” is renowned for its innovative efforts in the fields of health care, social welfare, and labor rights. In *CCF Colonialism*, Quiring’s look at the CCF in northern Saskatchewan reveals a rather different legacy. There, the CCF was guilty of paternalism, neglect, and the imposition of a socialist ideology that hindered, rather than helped, the advancement of all northerners in general, and Aboriginal peoples in particular.

The small, scattered population base, the relatively small number of large companies, and the weakness of organized opposition facilitated a comprehensive attempt to put socialist ideology into practice. The CCF targeted the Hudson’s Bay Company, non-Aboriginal fur traders, and the Catholic Church in its efforts to stimulate the northern economy and wrest control of northern Saskatchewan from its exploiters. In the process it imposed a form of “state planning” that emphasized the

creation of co-operatives, maintaining Aboriginal dominance in agriculture, fishing, and trapping, and excluding non-Aboriginals from these sectors of the economy. In the process, CCF politicians and bureaucrats evinced a self-righteousness that brooked no questioning of their motives or reliance on collectivist solutions.

Quiring demonstrates quite convincingly that a fundamental contradiction underlay the CCF’s Aboriginal policy. On the one hand, the CCF sought to reserve “traditional” occupations, such as agriculture, fishing, and trapping, for Aboriginals. On the other, the party sought to modernize the Aboriginal way of life, with the ultimate goal of assimilating Aboriginal people into the mainstream economy and culture. *CCF Colonialism* effectively demonstrates that the party was caught in a classic catch-22, its own policies contributing to the sense of displacement and marginality its policies professed to address.

The reader cannot help noticing that the author appears caught in the same contradiction. In Quiring’s analysis, building roads and providing social services become part of the problem, leading to increased non-Aboriginal settlement, greater accessibility to alcohol,

and improved health, which results in marked population growth that severely taxes existing housing and sanitation services. At the same time, Quiring criticizes the CCF for not being more effective in modernizing the north, with its failure to allocate sufficient funding leading to a lack of infrastructure and consequent lack of development. In a work in which the author criticizes the CCF for ignoring the real wishes of northern Saskatchewan's native people, the voices of the Aboriginal and Metis people he interviewed remain muted for the most part. While it may be true that Aboriginal people "did not see the need for or want widespread modernization of their homeland," it is not clear that the majority opposed the kinds of modernization being implemented by the CCF (p. xii).

*CCF Colonialism* is exhaustively researched and argues fervently for a reassessment of the CCF legacy in Saskatchewan. Yet, a fuller engagement with the historiography would have heightened the importance of the author's findings. For example, the infamous Prince Albert box factory, which Quiring mentions in passing, has become a metaphor for the failure of socialist economic planning. As S. M. Lipset points out, however, it has been taken as a sign of "socialist incompetence," as much or more than as a sign of the failure of a pseudo-Soviet type of centralized planning.[1] The reader is left wondering to what extent CCF failures in northern Saskatchewan were the product of a blinkered adherence to socialist ideology, and to what extent the product of the kind of human weaknesses and foibles that characterize all human efforts, whatever their ideological underpinnings.

Quiring himself acknowledges that what happened in northern Saskatchewan between 1944 and 1964 may have had more to do with broader national and international trends in the economy than it had to do with CCF poli-

cies. Surprisingly, given his defence of market capitalism in the body of the book, he concludes: "Perhaps more socialism, not less, would have brought a happier ending to the story" (p. 257). To the author's credit, he acknowledges that many good things came out of CCF efforts—the CCF rejected clear cutting, created the first smoke jumper group in Canada, and trained Aboriginal people to fight fires (p. 170). I would take this acknowledgement a bit further, and suggest that it is possible to see the roots of the movement toward native self-government in the co-operatives the CCF imposed on the north and in the party's promotion of local initiative.

I must admit to some difficulty in perceiving Regina as the epicentre, and Prince Albert as the outpost, of a colonial empire. That said, David Quiring provides detailed and credible evidence that the Saskatchewan CCF saw in the north a kind of *tabula rasa* for testing its socialist theories and policies in a manner that was not possible in the south. *CCF Colonialism* does not succeed in fundamentally altering my perception of Tommy Douglas and the Saskatchewan CCF, but it does provide a fascinating look at the "conflicting authoritarian and facilitating roles" the CCF played in attempting to implement its policies (p. 162). While seemingly not the author's intent, *CCF Colonialism* has more to offer students of modernization theory and development studies in an international context than it has to offer students of the CCF in the Canadian context. It is the story of Aboriginal people caught in the "white" desire to preserve, while modernizing, that remains.

Note

[1]. S. M. Lipset, *Agrarian Socialism* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: California Paperback Edition, 1971), p. 390.

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