Walter Murray of Saskatchewan (1866-1945) 
Prairie Pioneer

D.R. MURRAY

Not all prairie pioneers journeyed west in Red River carts, nor were all pioneers prospective farmers. The construction of Canada's transcontinental railways unleashed an immigrant boom which transformed the Canadian West. Immigrants in their thousands poured into the prairie communities, especially in the first decade of the twentieth century, stimulating a sudden demand for education. Higher education in the form of universities had been thought of in the West before 1900. In 1889 the Legislature of the North West territories asked the Dominion Government for a university land grant, but it was not until after the creation of the provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan in 1905 that the actual establishment of state universities occurred in each province. The formation in 1907 of a state university in Saskatchewan brought Walter Murray to the province the following year as the first President of the fledgling institution. He regarded himself as a pioneer and he was - an intellectual pioneer who was the leader in moulding higher education in Saskatchewan.

Murray remained in Saskatchewan for the rest of his life serving the university as President during a tenure of nearly thirty years spanning World War I and the Great Depression. He was pre-eminent
in giving shape to the university, but his influence on the west extended well beyond higher education. Largely through his efforts research on western agricultural problems became a top priority in Saskatchewan with benefits apparent even today; he helped to enrich the cultural life of a young prairie society through his encouragement of art and music; and as a strong Presbyterian exponent of church unity, he played a key part in the creation of the United Church of Canada in 1925. No biography yet has been written about him, although he ranks in the forefront of twentieth century Canadian educators.¹

Who was this Maritimer who had been only too happy to stop pitching hay on his father’s New Brunswick farm in the 1880’s and embark on a career of scholarship which led ultimately to the Presidency of the University of Saskatchewan?

The pioneering drive of his Scots forebears and the traditions of Scottish Covenanters were deeply embedded in Walter Charles Murray. His great-grandfather, when in his sixties, had emigrated to New Brunswick in 1819, spending nine weeks on a leaky ship with his wife, eight children and five grandchildren. They came from Roxboroughshire in the Scottish Lowlands.

Walter wrote of his grandfather, “though naturally a kindly man, the conscientious observances of the practices of the strictest sect of Presbyterians gave him a reputation which touched with something of awe the respect the younger folk felt for him.”² The pioneering spirit continued as the family adapted to the immigrant life in New Brunswick. Walter’s grandfather wrested a lovely farm from the wilderness on high land a few miles from Gibbon mountain in what was called the English Settlement near Sussex, New Brunswick. Walter’s father was a pioneer country doctor who carried on his rural practice from the family farm. Both of Walter’s parents had worked hard for their own education and their devotion to learning was their richest legacy to the children. Five of the seven who survived graduated from university. Walter was the eldest and, academically, the most distinguished.

Walter Murray grew up in the English Settlement in the post Confederation period when the new nation of Canada was taking shape. He followed his mother both in religion and politics, emerging as a reformer and staunch Presbyterian. His earliest schooling was in the English Settlement. When he completed his primary education, he had to trudge eight miles daily to the continuation school at Collina. To qualify for admission to university, Walter Murray moved to Fredericton where he attended the Collegiate School. There he was caught up in the powerful spell cast by its renowned principal, George Parkin, who also left his mark on the Fredericton poets, Bliss Carman and C.G. Roberts. Carman was slightly ahead of Murray in school but they became close friends. Carman regularly stopped in Saskatoon in later years on his tours across the country and stayed with the Murrays.

Parkin tried to model the Collegiate School on the educational ideals of Edward Thring, the prominent English headmaster. Both men consciously trained elite groups of students. Parkin wanted to mould his students in preparation for success in university and leadership in society. Walter Murray was one of Parkin’s most brilliant pupils and through Parkin he inherited a devotion to Thring’s educational philosophy. Parkin had transplanted Thring’s ideas in New Brunswick and Murray helped to popularize them throughout the Maritimes and later in the Canadian prairies through the education courses he taught first in Dalhousie and subsequently at the University of Saskatchewan. Unlike Parkin, Murray did not found or influence a Canadian private school, but several generations of schoolteachers came under his influence, and, thus, they too indirectly absorbed the teaching of Edward Thring.³

After graduating from Parkin’s Collegiate School at the top of his class in 1883, Walter Murray moved on to the University of New Brunswick. Here his scholastic achievements continued as he amassed award after award. He headed his class in every year as an undergraduate and after graduating he won a coveted Gilchrist Scholarship which took him to the University of Edinburgh for postgraduate work in Philosophy.

Edinburgh remained a cultural and educational mecca for Scots families who had emigrated to the Canadian Maritimes. Walter Murray was one of a number of his generation who went to Edinburgh for postgraduate study, although most of his friends studied either theology or medicine. One of them was Robert Falconer who became the President of the University of Toronto the year before Murray went to Saskatchewan. Fifty years later, Falconer wrote of the Edinburgh he had known as a student. He remembered that he had been there “at the height of the Victorian Age. The spirit of the period was confident, its mind clear, its character stable. We did not realize we were standing on the verge of a new world.”⁴ Murray shared Falconer’s sentiments and both men returned to Canada each destined to become the President of a Canadian state university.

Before Murray left the Maritimes to pioneer in Western Canada, he
put in a seventeen year apprenticeship in university teaching, first at his old Alma Mater, the University of New Brunswick, and then at Dalhousie. He had returned from Edinburgh to New Brunswick in 1891 to take up the Alumni Chair of Philosophy and Political Economy. He held it only for a year, but during that time he participated in a new venture for the university, extension lectures in St. John. Murray took the concept of university extension work west with him to Saskatchewan where it was to form a vital part of the prairie university's mission.

His stay at U.N.B. was short because in 1892, at the age of 26, he was offered and accepted the George Munro chair of philosophy at Dalhousie, the leading university of the Maritimes. Here for sixteen years he shouldered a heavy teaching load consisting normally of six undergraduate courses per year plus graduate supervision. For most of his time at Dalhousie he taught all the philosophy courses offered. He was one of the creators of the university's education department and he taught an education course every year. In addition to his education courses, Murray was a prolific writer of articles on education, most of which appeared in *The Educational Review*, a monthly review published in St. John, New Brunswick, with a readership of educators throughout the Maritime provinces.

Murray's duties at Dalhousie went well beyond his teaching. He carried equally heavy administrative responsibilities. For ten years he functioned as University Librarian, working valiantly to build an adequate library with private donations as the only source of funds. He served as Secretary of Senate in his last three years and he was constantly sitting on University committees doing everything from preparing the calendar to negotiating the terms of the new Rhodes Scholarships with his old schoolteacher, George Parkin, who had become Secretary of the Rhodes Trust. The Dalhousie Senate had good reason to pay tribute to Murray's "distinction to find work which seemed to be no one's particular concern and to do it himself."

Murray was also a pioneer in bridging the gap between town and gown in Halifax. In 1905 he ran and was elected a city alderman, a position he held for the full three year term. His most notable accomplishment as an alderman was to bring in a scheme of municipal pensions for civic employees. For this he was complimented by friends and opponents alike. One of his aldermanic colleagues, at a testimonial dinner held to honour him after his appointment as President of the University of Saskatchewan, lavished praise on him for the pensions. "The day would come, too, when broken down teachers, worn-out firemen and city officials, as they went down to get their pensions would thank God that Murray had been on the Council."

Murray's achievements in Halifax were many-sided; academic, civic, scholarly, religious, even athletic for, true to his background, he was an excellent curler and President of the Halifax Curling Club. He was an elder at St. Matthew's, one of the oldest Protestant churches in Canada, and by 1904 he had taken up the cause of church union as his own. No layman in the Presbyterian Church was a more fervent missionary for the cause of church union than Walter Murray. He worked steadfastly for twenty-one years to achieve it. Such was his commitment both in Halifax and in the West that he must rank as one of the fathers of the United Church of Canada.

Why, given his deep loyalties to the Maritimes and its people, and his active involvement in all aspects of Halifax and Dalhousie society, would he choose to move west to a university that in 1908 was only a name? The answer was twofold. Saskatchewan offered him a rare opportunity to create a university from scratch, to try out the ideas which had slowly been coming to fruition during his Halifax years. In Dalhousie and Halifax a reformer like Murray continually found himself blocked by tradition and by people who were content to accept things as they were. Saskatchewan presented new hope, an alternative to the frustrations of the Maritimes.

Murray was a lifelong advocate of Maritime college union just as he was a fervent supporter of church union. In an article he wrote for *The Dalhousie Gazette* in 1903, he traced the failures of the Maritime College union movements, blaming them primarily on sectarianism. Murray believed the Maritimes had lost the opportunity to create a great university by the persistent inability to discover a means of joining the existing colleges. He concluded:

"We are the victims of the blunders of the past, and we have neither the courage, energy, nor patriotism to remodel a system of higher education that is admitted by many, even of the defenders of the status quo, to be a serious hindrance to the industrial and commercial, as well as the intellectual development of the Maritime Provinces. It is discouraging to find intelligent men trying to justify this state of affairs by an argument, long ago refuted by act and argument, that a large university must necessarily destroy the character and Christian faith of its students."

It was out of his Maritime frustrations that Murray began to develop his vision of a state university, a vision he was to carry west
with him in 1908. When he was asked by the newly formed Board of Governors of the University of Saskatchewan in May, 1908, whether he was interested in the Presidency, he leaped at the opportunity. Within two days of the invitation reaching him, he replied in a remarkable handwritten letter, virtually setting out a blueprint of what the University of Saskatchewan would become. When he wrote this letter, he had not yet had the chance to examine the state universities of the American Mid-West, nor had he analysed the resources or potential of the Canadian prairies. His ideas emerged out of his Maritime experience and his years of study in the philosophy of education.

Murray’s vision of the University of Saskatchewan was “a large University with Faculties of Arts, Science, Engineering, Agriculture, Education, Law, Medicine and probably Dentistry and Commerce.” The state universities of the Canadian West would have to be places where the traditional Arts and newer Sciences co-existed with the emerging professional faculties. Murray’s major innovation was the inclusion of agriculture. No other university in Canada then had a college or school of agriculture as an integral part of it. His letter highlighted agriculture with a rather incongruous naval metaphor; “the College or School of Agriculture must be regarded as the sheet anchor of the University.” Because of the overwhelming dominance of agriculture in the economy of Saskatchewan, Murray perceived that the university with agriculture at its centre could identify itself more closely with the needs of the population than was the case in any of the Eastern Canadian universities.

Yet he was too much a humanist to contemplate a university which was solely utilitarian. If Saskatchewan was to be a genuine university it must have strong humanities departments. The relationship between the two had to be complementary. He wrote to the Board:

“I believe that the College of Agriculture, while distinct from other Faculties and probably more isolated and independent, should yet be within the University, receiving from the liberal studies a humanizing influence and giving to the whole life of the University a sense of the close relationship between the daily life of the people and the pursuits of the scholar and the scientist.”

Only two of the Board of Governors were university graduates themselves, but they were attracted by Murray’s ideas of what Saskatchewan could be. Murray also came highly recommended by his old friend, Robert Falconer, the new President of the University of Toronto. Murray was formally hired in August, 1908, and told to begin immediately to create Saskatchewan’s university. Even as he rode west on the train to take up his new post, Murray contemplated the role of a state university:

“A state university cannot confine itself to the realization of one idea but must serve the many-sided life of the community. It must keep in close touch with present needs and yet must be true to the best university traditions.”

His first major task was, in company with the rest of the Board members, to determine the site of the new university. Murray looked at the problem solely through the academic eyes of a man committed to building a state university. What location would enable the university to serve the whole province best? As he went around the province examining various sites and then on a trip to inspect the American state universities, Murray developed five criteria, all stemming from his central belief that the university must be located so as to serve the whole province.

The university had to have an ample site with good soil. It had to be easy of access, in direct communication with all parts of the province and ideally at the centre of population. It had to be either in or close to a large town or city. It ought to be at the seat of government because this would help ensure continuing financial support from the politicians. The university located at the capital could give greater service to the state and it would have access to facilities such as provincial libraries, museums and laboratories. Lastly, the university should be placed at the point of greatest strategic value, by which he meant it should be close to its supply of students and at the hub of the province’s professional, commercial and political life. He elaborated his views on the connection between the state university’s location and its philosophy after examining the American state universities in the autumn of 1908:

“Today the University is regarded as the great instrument of the State for the discovery of the truths of science and of history and for the application of science to the problems that arise in agriculture, industries, commerce, government and social life. To be of the greatest service, the University must be placed where it is easy of access and in close touch with the life of the province.”

There was only one place in Saskatchewan which fulfilled Murray’s criteria, the capital, Regina. Yet Saskatoon was the site chosen by the Board of Governors when they made their decision early in April, 1909. Murray failed to sway the Board over an issue which had such political importance for the new province. The choice of the university site ranked next to the location of the provincial capital as a bone of
political rivalry. The Board composed of politically acute men could not fail to see this. They were undoubtedly influenced in their decision by the decentralization philosophy of Premier Walter Scott and Liberal government.

Murray briefly contemplated resigning as President after being defeated on the location of the university, but he was talked into staying on. It was the only key part of his state university philosophy he was unable to implement, but it forced him into a lifelong struggle to prevent any other universities from being built in the province. Murray believed that for a state university to succeed in Saskatchewan it must have a monopoly. The greatest threat to the monopoly would come from the provincial capital which had been denied the provincial university. Once Murray had reluctantly accepted the decision to place the university at Saskatoon, he fought a determined battle to prevent Regina undermining it.

The idea of the university serving the state is the central key to Murray's philosophy of what a state university should be. He defined this in his first annual report as President:

"What is the sphere of the university? Its watchword is service - service of the state in the things that make for happiness and virtue as well as in the things that make for wealth. No form of that service is too mean or too exalted for the university."13

Later, in 1922, he refined his definition of a state university in a paper he read to the Royal Society of Canada. In doing so, he elaborated his own thesis of the origin of the Canadian state university.14

He argued that Canadian universities had evolved through stages. The survival of each stage still remained, rather like glacial deposits, visible to the traveller who journeyed across Canada from East to West. The highest state of evolution of Canadian universities, the state university, had reached fruition in the West, so the journey from East to West across historical time was also for Walter Murray a journey of educational progress. He believed that evolution from one state to the next had been the result of conflict. "It is a story of the struggle between Church and State for control; a struggle forced upon the State by sectarian strife."15

Murray believed the process of evolution had passed through five distinct states, each linked to major political change. First came the French period ending with the American Revolution. The influx of Loyalists from the thirteen colonies led to the second state, that of "The King's Colleges," which the Loyalists had established "for the preservation of the British connection and the Established Church of England." The third period, lasting from the 1820's to the 1860's, he termed, "a period of strife - strife against the rule of the few in the State and against exclusiveness in religion and education." Amidst this strife, sectarian colleges emerged in reaction to the exclusive claims of the Established Church. Murray saw the creation of sectarian colleges and later their democratic control as the educational parallel to the political struggle to attain responsible government. The fourth period, marked by college union in Nova Scotia, Ontario and Manitoba, corresponded to the political confederation of British North America. The last stage, in which state universities developed in Canada, occurred at a time of "national expansion" and "... national consciousness developing a sense of pride and responsibility in the opening of the West and in Dominion participation in Imperial affairs."16

At each stage Murray noted a close relationship between political and educational change. The arrival of the Loyalists, the protests of the radicals in the nineteenth century, the coming of responsible government, Confederation and the emergence of a new national consciousness each represented major political change for Murray and he identified each of these with a corresponding educational change. His conclusion was that "the universities, no less than the political institutions of the nation, reflect the spirit of the people."17

Each stage also had reflected a different element in Canada's educational heritage. The Seminary at Quebec naturally had its origins in France and the belief that education was founded on religion. The King's Colleges, designed to train gentlemen, derived from the Oxford model. The Scottish influence surfaced with the sectarian colleges and brought a more democratic educational outlook along with an emphasis on learning as opposed to training. The attempt to unite colleges in Canada drew its inspiration from the University of London. The fifth, and for Murray the ultimate stage, the state university, was in his eyes a Canadian development which, however, owed much to American example.

This almost Darwinian view of the evolution of Canadian universities was not challenged when he presented it, although today it seems dated. But for Walter Murray it was the historical underpinning for the masterwork of university development, the state university, of which naturally for him the University of Saskatchewan was the finest example. Yet his 1922 paper to the Royal Society contained more than his thesis of the historical evolution of the Canadian state university. He included a definition of the state university which drew on his
experience at Saskatchewan. It remains even today an eloquent testimony of what a state university should be:

"[The State University] does not ignore the necessity of training, or the desirability of residence, yet it is open to all sects and occupations, and it makes the advancement of learning and the application of science to the service of man a fundamental aim. Moreover, since it receives its support from the people it must be subject to their control and carry to them what they need but cannot receive within its walls. Such a university, instituted, supported, and controlled by the state, is in duty bound to the State to train its young men and women for good and useful citizenship, to engage in research and the application of science to the needs of man, and to extend the sphere of its usefulness far beyond the narrow limits of its campus. Teaching, Research, and Extension are the three forms of its service. Its purpose is not to combat the religious or other interests of the people, but to cooperate with them. As it cares for the different phases of public well-being, it increases in usefulness and merits the support which the people graciously give."18

His definition revealed another important purpose fulfilled by the state university. For Murray it was the means, indeed for him the only means, by which Western Canada could overcome the passions of sectarian rivalry that had plagued higher education in the Maritimes. His caustic assessment of the effects of sectarianism on Nova Scotian education denoted a recurring theme in his analysis of the history of Canadian higher education. Referring to the sectarian strife that had led to the formation of degree granting colleges by Baptists, Methodists, Congregationalists and Catholics, he wrote, "this epidemic of sectarianism has blighted university education for a century in a province with a capacity to emulate old Scotland."19

Murray's success in building the University of Saskatchewan as the province's state university rested on the combination of the three pillars of service he had included in his definition of the state university; teaching, research and extension. Of these extension was especially important in the early days of the university as a means of strengthening the bonds between the university and the rural people of the province. Once the decision had been made to include a Faculty of Agriculture in the university and to place agriculture at the forefront of the university's activity, the Provincial Department of Agriculture transferred to the university its very popular extension branch. Both Murray and members of his faculty devoted a great deal of their time to extension work. Six years after his appointment and five years after the university opened, one quarter of the total provincial population was directly influenced by courses, lectures, demonstrations and exhibits provided by the extension department. Murray himself wrote in 1914 that "through its extension department in agriculture the university reaches every part of the province and not only makes the people realize that the university is touching their daily life, but prevents the agricultural interests from becoming separated from the other interests of the province."20

Murray did not see the state university as a utopian institution, free from all defects. For him the greatest dangers came from without not from within and, of these, political interference was the most serious. His fear of political intrusion is evident from his first annual report - "the State University is exposed to the rapacity of the party spoilsman"21 - to his last published article, characteristically written about the University of Saskatchewan. Writing in 1941, and looking back on an academic career spanning fifty years, he still believed that "the greatest menace to a state university is political patronage."22

To Saskatchewan Walter Murray brought a true pioneering spirit. He had served a long apprenticeship at one of Canada's leading universities. Between 1863 and the end of the century, Dalhousie had transformed itself into a remarkable and distinguished university with an international reputation. Borne upon and contributing to this strong current of progressive innovation in academic life, Murray came to the raw Saskatchewan prairie, newly formed into a province, with firm ideas on the nature of the university he had been chosen to build.

The University of Saskatchewan during the years of his Presidency came to embody many of these ideas and in turn was the model for his own image of the state university. His ideal university belonged to the people who were ultimately responsible for it, it was open to all and it served the whole community. The state university could not remain apart from the society in which it existed. He wrote in 1928 that "the university is the state in miniature. All the interests of the larger world without are reflected within the university."23 The university had to respond to these interests, and its response took the form of service through teaching, research and extension.

NOTES

1The author along with his father is currently working on a biography. He is not a relation of W.C. Murray. Dr. Jean Murray before her death kindly granted permission to the author to use and quote from her father's papers. For accounts of Saskatchewan during Murray's years, see A.S. Morton, Saskatchewan: The Making of a University (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1959); W.P. Thompson, The University of Saskatchewan: A Personal
Knowles of Galt (1868-1944)

IAN CAMPBELL

On my shelves in Edinburgh are five novels from Guelph area bought as curiosities, read with frank amusement, but now seeming more and more important not as literature (for they are poor enough) but as indicators of the complex state of Canadian-Scottish feeling at the turn of the century.

Robert Edward Knowles (1868-1946) was an Ontario man, a graduate of Manitoba College and Queen's, who made his name for long and famous ministry at Knox Church in Galt. He also wrote for the Toronto press, and published seven successful novels, beginning with his biggest success, St. Cuthbert's in 1905. There followed The Undertow (1906), The Dawn at Shanty Bay (1907), The Web of Time (1908), The Attic Guest (1909), The Handicap (1910), and The Singer of Kootenay (1911). My own collection is complete up to 1909, and I will be writing only of the first five of these.

Knowles was a prolific novelist, and also a successful one. We are not writing of a local minister whose books had a local sale, and were quickly forgotten. St. Cuthbert's went through seven editions in 14 months, and by 1909 it had gone through ten. By 1909, too, The Undertow was in its third edition. These are substantial $1.50 novels, except for the slimmer (but most successful) Dawn at Shanty Bay, but for his dollar the purchaser received a highly decorated edition with drawings on every page.