

traders would abandon the Snake River country and Americans would never settle there. Part of the Oregon Country might be lost but the country north of the Columbia would remain firmly in British and HBC control. This strategy, Reid argues, had its ironic flaws. On one hand it was remarkably successful. The HBC did drive American trappers and traders out of the business. Instead, the Snake River Expedition itself provided some of the geographical information that American settlers needed. Furthermore, rather than retreat from Oregon to trap and trade elsewhere, many trappers settled in Oregon's Willamette Valley. Thus, ironically, "the mountain men, driven from their mountains, frequently became the original settlers; when they did not, they were often the ones who guided the settlers" (203). The Oregon country was lost not because the

strategy had been poorly executed, but because the logic behind the policy was flawed.

*Patterns of Vengeance* and *Contested Empire* are valuable additions to the historiography of the fur trade. Anyone interested in the operation of indigenous law, or in violence during the fur trade, should read *Patterns of Vengeance*. *Contested Empire* moves well beyond legal history to offer fascinating reassessments of the Snake River Expedition and Peter Skene Ogden, topics of great interest to historians of British Columbia. More generally, both books show that, when driven by new and important questions, scholars still tease valuable insights out of familiar documents. We are fortunate that this noted legal historian has turned his gaze to these intriguing questions.

*The War on Weeds in the Prairie West:  
An Environmental History*

Clinton L. Evans

Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2002. xvii, 309 pp. Illus. (some col.).  
\$29.95 paper.

TINA LOO

*Simon Fraser University*

AS CAROLYN MERCHANT points out, domination is a useful concept for understanding relationships among people and between people and the environment. Readers could ask for no better elaboration of this claim than Clinton L. Evans's *The War on Weeds in the Prairie West*. Exemplifying environmental history's interdisciplinarity, the book is informed by

everything from postmodern theory to botany, and it raises important questions about how we do history and how we understand our relationship to nature.

Evans begins by arguing that historians need to be more attentive to the role of the environment in shaping human activity. While the natural world certainly was a material and imaginative obstacle to what people

did and what they thought they could do, Evans insists it was also an agent of change, actively responding to human and non-human incursions and assaults and “displaying patterns of ‘learned behaviour’” (xiii). For instance, the plants that Evans studies competed for resources with other plants, provoked changes in agricultural practice, grew shorter and thicker stems after repeated mowing or grazing, and developed resistance to herbicides. Given this, Evans argues that, in order to make sense of the past, historians must “confront their anthropocentric biases” (viii) and broaden their concept of agency to include both “human and non-human sources of causation” (xiii).

Lest readers of *BC Studies* get the wrong idea, *The War on Weeds* is not a manifesto for plants’ rights; rather, it is an argument about the changing relationship between a particular group of plants and people over a century and a half. From 1800 to 1945 Canadian farmers and the country’s agricultural establishment developed a deeply adversarial relationship with weeds. Their attitudes and practices stood in marked contrast and were, in many instances, a direct repudiation of those they had learned in Britain. A distinctive “blindly oppositional” culture of weeds first emerged in Ontario and gained its fullest and most vitriolic expression in the Prairie west. There, it manifested itself in draconian legislation – noxious weed laws that by the 1940s “rivalled various war measures acts” (110) in terms of the emergency powers they granted the state – vast and costly government bureaucracies devoted to weed inspection and education; and, by the mid-twentieth century, a higher proportion of herbicide use than anywhere else in the world (186).

Evans argues that this North American culture of weeds was rooted in the particular environmental, social, and

economic circumstances of farming in Ontario and the Prairie west, which made it difficult, if not impossible, to practise the techniques of “good husbandry” that had been developed in Britain over the course of 500 years. As he shows, the exigencies of frontier farming in Ontario meant that the bulk of farm labour was expended clearing trees rather than weeds. Moreover, stump-ridden fields precluded any ploughing before sowing or row-cropping, and the high cost of labour meant that hiring hands to weed was beyond the means of most farmers. Thus left to establish themselves unchallenged, Ontario’s weeds also benefited from the necessity of cultivating a cash crop and the absence of markets for other produce – factors that worked against effective summer fallowing and crop rotation. All told, environmental and economic circumstances in Ontario favoured the cultivation of weeds as much as, or perhaps even more than, they did wheat.

The situation on the Prairies proved to be even more favourable to “weed-friendly farming” (78): there, the absence of forest cover and the presence of the railway facilitated the spread of weeds, as did the National Policy, which lent state sanction to wheat monoculture. At the same time, the importance of Prairie commercial agriculture to both regional and national prosperity heightened the weedy threat. But, as committed as they were, both government weed inspectors and farm instructors realized that legislation and education alone could not win the war: the enemy would only be repelled with the active co-operation of ordinary farmers. Thus, despite the findings of their own research into the benefits of crop rotation, government bureaucrats chose not to call attention to farmers’ own complicity in creating the weed problem

and, instead, kept their sights firmly set on eradicating these “arch-enemies of Canadian agriculture” (132). In so doing, the state allowed weed-friendly agricultural practices to go unchallenged. Indeed, as Evans shows, not only did the state policy facilitate the kind of poor husbandry that had created the weed problem in the first place but, in its support of herbicide development and use, it also actively sanctioned a practice that was environmentally questionable.

Like all good books, *The War on Weeds* raises more questions than it answers – in this case, questions about science and capitalism. I would have liked Evans to draw out his argument about the role of science and scientific experts in shaping agricultural practice – as well as policy – a little more fully, linking it to the interdisciplinary literature on the history of ecology. How did the experts’ emphasis on eradicating and then managing weeds square with the ecological notion of the “balance of nature” that emphasized the interconnectedness of organisms and the important place and role each played in an ecosystem? Second, although Evans identifies the demands of commercial agriculture as one of the reasons why weeds flourished on farms in Ontario and the Prairie west, he does not engage with the larger debate in environmental history about the relationship between capitalism and environmental change and degradation. It’s not that capitalism is responsible for weeds (!) but simply that market-driven farming, along with all the other factors Evans discusses, exacerbated the weed problem by favouring monoculture. In addition, the importance of

commercial farming also shaped how people defined and addressed the weedy threat. It is hard to imagine that state resources would have been devoted to fighting weeds to the extent they were had farming not been so central to Canada’s economic health.

These small concerns aside, *The War on Weeds* stands as a key contribution to the environmental history of North America and, in particular, to our understanding of the relationship between people and the environment. Postmodern theory has led many scholars to ask questions about the utility of classifying the world in terms of “nature” and “culture.” While some scholars argue that the boundary between the natural and the cultural is arbitrary, Clinton L. Evans makes the case that the notion of such a boundary is not useful at all. Weeds are both cultural and natural, and they are best understood as cultural artifacts, being as much the products of human imagination and practice as they are of photosynthesis (16). To insist that they are more the result of culture than they are of nature is to be anthropocentric and to deny their status as independent historical agents. Conversely, to insist that weeds are simply plants whose biology predisposes them to flourish in certain kinds of environments is to deny the links between the cultural and the natural – a denial that allowed farmers to douse their fields with herbicide without changing how they farmed. If the war on weeds tells us anything, it is that solutions to environmental problems will only come when we dispense with the nature/culture dichotomy.