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Jones, David C. *Empire of Dust: Settling and Abandoning the Prairie Dry Belt*. Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2002. Pp. xx + 316; illus. CDN$29.95 (paper). ISBN: 1552380858.

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When I first read *Empire of Dust* in the late 1980s, I found it absolutely enthralling. The book has now gone through five printings, and for me its charm has not faded. It is thoroughly sound history — well researched and well argued — and at the same time tells a riveting story. Very few historians have achieved this near-perfect marriage of scholarly analysis and popular writing.

Empire of Dust is "a life-sized saga of frothy boosterism, lightening expansion, and utter miscalculation — of drought, destitution, and depopulation" (3). It details the settlement and abandonment of the dry belt of southwestern Saskatchewan and especially southeastern Alberta, a vast triangular, desert-like "empire" stretching from Swift Current in the east to Hanna in the north and Lethbridge in the west. Until the early 1900s, the dry belt was the domain of big cattle ranchers who insisted (rightly, as it turned out) that the region was unfit for farming. Propagandist John Macoun and the Canadian Pacific Railway argued otherwise, and the railway set up experimental farms to "prove" the region's fertility.

Encouraged by such evidence, Frank Oliver opened the dry belt to homesteaders after becoming minister of the interior in 1905. His department pronounced the south country a veritable promised land, as did land and mortgage companies, local boards of trade and newspapers, and even the esteemed poet, Rudyard Kipling. Agricultural experts, including the famed American dry-farming guru, H.W. Campbell, promised that proper moisture conservation methods would positively guarantee against a crop failure.

Such propaganda spawned a frenzied land rush into the dry lands starting in 1909. Thousands lined up at land offices to obtain their piece of paradise, blithely unaware of the desiccating winds, searing summer heat, grass fires, dry wells, and sometimes deadly winters that awaited them on the land. In spite of these adversities, existing dry-belt towns exploded in size, and new hamlets cropped up like bad weeds. One new community was the present-day ghost town of Carlstadt, situated on the Canadian Pacific Railway main line, about 15 km west of Suffield. Incorporated as a village in 1911, by early 1914 Carlstadt (renamed Alderson during the war) boasted five hotels and had been dubbed the "star of the prairies" (67).

The town suffered fires and drought in 1914, but the enormous bumper crops of 1915-16 breathed life into the entire south country and seemed to vindicate the boomers' faith in the dry belt. In 1916, the dry areas produced three quarters of the province's wheat and had a population of almost 102,000, up from 4,400 in 1901 (88). Expecting more of the same, railways wormed their way throughout the south. But then disaster struck. A decade of drought, aggravated by plagues of insects and vermin, gripped the dry lands starting in 1917. In 1919-20, a mere 9,000 bushels of wheat left Alderson's elevators compared to 679,000 in 1915-16 (101). Throughout southern Alberta, only 1.4 bushels per acre were harvested in 1919 compared to 35 bushels in 1915 (108).

Widespread destitution ensued. By 1920, large numbers of dry-belt families were on relief. For many the only alternative was to leave. A literal exodus began. Jones concludes that up to a quarter of all townships in southeastern Alberta lost more than half of their population from 1921 to 1926, a rate of abandonment "even the Great Depression never equalled" (117). The three Alberta dry-belt census divisions lost almost 17,000 people in those years (211).

Remaining dry-belt farmers helped to elect, in 1921, a United Farmers of Alberta (UFA) government, hoping that it would protect the dried-out farmer. The new administration appointed commissions to investigate the calamity enveloping the south, and it distributed hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of food, livestock feed, and fuel. By 1923, however, it tottered under an onerous debt load and turned off the taps. Before then, government officials and farmers looked to irrigation to save the parched south country. Several new irrigation projects were undertaken, but they proved too costly to the users. Desperate, in 1921 some dried-out farmers paid a professional rainmaker, Charles Hatfield, to open the heavens. Alas, his magic failed them.

The agricultural experts also failed them. Farmers had followed their advice to leave a loose soil surface to prevent evaporation, but that practice created dust storms that would rival those of the Dirty Thirties. Diversification, another cure-all of the experts, proved expensive and unprofitable for many farmers. Upset with the experts, farmers were incensed with financial institutions in the arid districts. The banks charged illegally high interest rates, and mortgage companies seemed eager to foreclose. But like their customers, these institutions were hard hit by the effects of drought. Dry-belt banks ended up loaning more than they received in deposits, and the mortgage companies had to deal with the UFA government's semi-moratorium, passed in 1922-23.

Schools were also sideswiped by the dry-land disaster. Since school taxes were hard to collect, many schools shut their doors or operated only part of the school year. Eventually, hard-up local school boards were replaced by government officials, and large school districts were established to produce cost efficiencies.

In sketching these developments, Jones never loses sight of the human tragedy. The dashed hopes and despair of those affected by the environmental calamity clearly comes out. With sensitivity, he brings to life many intriguing personalities such as Charlotte Cotter, the somewhat eccentric postmistress of Alderson, who represented the "polite and cultured element" (230) and always seemed to know what everyone in town did.

Convincingly, Jones argues that the dry belt was the province's "heartland," a region that greatly impacted the whole province. In its heyday years, southern Alberta consumed a huge chunk of the province's private and government investment; and in its long, agonizing decay, it almost sucked dry the province's financial resources. In addition, the debt legislation passed to address the collapse of southern agriculture revamped credit relationships throughout Alberta, and the exodus from the South gave rise to a province-wide move toward large school divisions (241-42).

Brilliantly penned, fascinating, packed with acute insights, amply illustrated with photographs and maps, solidly grounded in historical evidence, and containing useful tables of statistical data, there is little to criticize about *Empire of Dust*. If the reviewer must offer one small criticism, it is that Jones is perhaps a little too hard on the "so-called dry farming experts," those "false prophets" whose "piffling pedantry" convinced farmers that dry-land farming was failsafe if it were done properly (134-35). Jones is right to say that the experts should have listened to the complaints of farmers who had tried their methods, but their own research and experience suggested that those methods *did* work, and it took a few years for the futility of their techniques to be fully demonstrated in the driest areas.

Despite this tiny quibble, *Empire of Dust* remains the reviewer's favourite book on Canadian prairie history. The latest edition contains a new preface that weaves a link between past and present by outlining the farm crisis that has gripped southern Alberta over the past two decades. As Jones suggests, a new empire of dust may be crumbling before our very eyes.