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2019

### Book Review: The Prairie Populist: George Hara Williams and the Untold Story of the CCF. By J.F.

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*The Prairie Populist: George Hara Williams and the Untold Story of the CCF.* By J.F. Conway. Regina: University of Regina Press, 2018. xi + 324 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliographic notes, bibliography, index. \$34.95 CDN, \$29.95 USD paper.

A much-needed addition to the history of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), John Conway's political biography of George Hara Williams reestablishes him as a consequential man of the left. Though Conway frequently displays a mastery of the economic and political landscape of interwar Canada in the text, Conway's strength lies in his analysis of information derived from an unpublished manuscript by Williams' daughter, Muriel Wiens, and Friedrich Steininger's master's thesis on Williams and its application in reinterpreting relevant literature and archival materials. The resulting essay reveals both Williams' pivotal role as a strategist, organizer, and leader of the CCF during its embryonic stages as well as the interparty factionalism and personality conflicts that occurred within the party.

Conway begins his essay by outlining Williams' early life before delving into his transition into a dedicated socialist. Conway notes there is nothing to indicate that Williams' formative years spent in Manitoba, though punctuated by his family's financial struggles, would orient him toward either farming or radical politics, let alone both. After serving in the First World War, Williams homesteaded near Wadena, Saskatchewan and became active in the Farmers' Union of Canada. Conway frames Williams' evolution as a socialist against a broader examination of the Prairie provinces' socioeconomic and political milieu, providing the reader with a recurrent micro/macro perspective. I found this technique, though contextually useful, sometimes distracting, as were Conway's excessive use of acronyms when referring to the myriad of organizations introduced.

The bulk of Conway's work is devoted to Williams' efforts in unifying divergent labour, farmer, and socialist movements into a vibrant leftwing political force that could compete with a

complacent Liberal Party in both the provinces and Ottawa, the subsequent formation of the CCF, and Williams' ascendancy to its provincial and national leadership. Williams' skill as a strategist and organizer in fending off challenges from the Social Credit Party and, by his unyielding commitment of the CCF to socialism, in providing a real alternative to the Liberal Party accentuate Conway's central argument that Williams was indispensable to the CCF's survival and emergence as a viable political party. Conway concludes his study by examining Williams' demise after falling out with other party leaders over the CCF's war policies, his marginalization by peers following his premature death in 1945, and George Williams place in Anglo-Canadian history.

Conway's nuanced depiction of his subject, while not softening Williams' radicalism, highlights the pragmatism and selflessness that made him an effective organizer. Further, when tracing the CCF through its early electoral disappointments to its emergence as a provincial power, though clearly establishing the CCF's political success as a uniquely Saskatchewan phenomenon, Conway locates the cultural and political barriers it overcame within the wider northern Plains. Particularly, Conway's description of the numerous leftist and reformist movements competing for farmers' support were characteristic of other Depression era famer insurgencies in eastern Montana and the Dakotas as were the pervasive anti-communist sentiments that often stymied their effectiveness.

*The Prairie Populist* adds greatly to our understanding of the CCF and affirms George Williams' place among its most important figures. Though eight decades separate Williams' Great Plains from the present, the farmer's maxim of "go big or go broke" remains an unfortunate reality for many engaged in agriculture. Perhaps Williams' outreach to those

unfamiliar with, or inherently suspicious of, progressive policies and his navigation of reactionary responses can provide an example to present activists.

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