

Alberta Culture

Is what happens to men politics and what happens to women culture?

We've marked our first hundred years as a *political* entity and our cultural production is exploding. Numbers of books by and about Albertans examine who we are. *Mavericks, Alberta Politics Uncovered, Against the Grain, Alberta: a State of Mind, The Battle of Alberta, Reconceiving the West Through Women's History* all attempt to explain our *cultural* identity.

What makes Alberta different? What makes Alberta unique? Why does the first of these questions sound like criticism and the second like flattery? The answer, my friends, is culture. In our culture, "different" is frowned on, but "unique" is rare and precious—one of a kind. To be born in Tokyo or Harare or Edmonton is going to make a huge difference to an individual, but whether we are Japanese, Zimbabwean or Albertan, we can go to our graves never knowing who we are or why we are that way. Obviously culture shapes us—language, customs, law, religion. The attitudes and values of the people around us influence, if not determine, our identity. Until we know the forces that operate in us, we cannot choose the kind of people we want to be.

Recently Alberta has been the focus of attention from national media. For example, *Maclean's* magazine has run two cover stories on our fabulous wealth, questioning whether the imbalance will destroy the Canadian economy. Rather than the view of us from outsiders, this magazine presents what thoughtful Albertans have to say about themselves. In this issue, Geo Takach (p. 23) debunks some of the myths about Albertans and shows who he thinks Albertans really are. Albertans purport to love the exquisite natural beauty of our fair province, but Jeff Gailus (p. 40) uncovers our government's true attitude toward the environment and

wilderness in our deplorable treatment of the grizzly bear.

Kevin Taft (p. 34), in an excerpt from a manuscript he wrote before he became a politician, examines the ubiquitous consumer culture from which none of us, not even the most conscious and caring, can escape—especially at this time of year. Now the leader of the official opposition in our legislature (16 Liberal MLAs to 62 Conservatives), Taft is a voice crying in the wilderness, as has always been the case with the opposition throughout our political history. Aritha van Herk (p. 28), one of our finest Alberta novelists, criticizes the province's lack of funding for the arts, and the lack of recognition for the importance of the arts. We have no Ministry of Culture—merely a Department of Community Development. At the same time, she shows the amazing richness and diversity of the arts here: witness, for example, the 165 titles listed in our New Alberta Books Guide (p. 55).

Over the eight years we've been publishing *Alberta Views*, I am always amazed by our Numbers section (p. 70) and how the facts put the lie to many stereotypes about Albertans. "Bible Belt Alberta"? No, actually church attendance is lower here than in other regions of Canada. Selfish Albertans? We have the country's highest rate of volunteerism. Albertans as rugged individualists? We're actually the most conformist voters of any province.

The old saw that what happens to men is politics and what happens to women is culture is clearly false. Culture happens to all of us. Without awareness of the cultural forces which shape us, we can't take the political action we must.



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