

Westward Bound: Sex, Violence, the Law, and the Making of a Settler Society

Lesley Erickson. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2011. 337 pp.

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Published by UBC Press for the Osgoode Society for Canadian Legal History, Lesley Erickson's *Westward Bound* is an impressively wide-ranging exploration of race, gender, law, and violence in Prairie Canada in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Through quantitative and qualitative analyses of files from lower and superior courts, alongside police records, Department of Indian Affairs papers, newspapers, novels, and other sources, Erickson seeks to demonstrate that criminal courts operated as key "contact zones... [and] sites for conflict resolution and identity construction" (41) that shaped settler society during a period of rapid change. More specifically, the book examines criminal cases—both sensational and representative—involving women either as accused or as victims in five selected judicial districts in Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba between 1886 and 1940. In so doing, it offers both an interrogation of what constituted acceptable behaviour for different groups of people, and a discussion of the ways in which these definitions were subject to regulation and contestation. As Erickson demonstrates, some people were able to mobilise cultural stereotypes in their favour, while those who refused such categorisations or fundamentally challenged the hierarchies of Prairie settler society were unable to make their claims heard. By examining the relationship between women and criminal law, both "on the books" and in practice, *Westward Bound* takes aim at powerful myths of the Canadian west as both a masculine space and a peaceful frontier, demonstrating instead that this was a diverse society in which women, men, and youths navigated and resisted definitions of identity, intimacy, violence, and the law in ways that were critical to the region's history.

Structured thematically, individual chapters tackle this broad argument through investigations of specific types of cases. After an opening discussion of settler colonialism, intimacy, violence, and the law, Erickson considers in turn the experiences of Aboriginal people when they encountered the legal system either as victims or as accused; the treatment of prostitution cases in police courts in the context of social reform movements; the relationship between farm labourers, sexual violence, and growing anxieties about immigration, masculinity, and class in the countryside; cases related to drugs, abortion, and seduction in interwar cities; discourses on incest and domestic violence, and the unstable boundaries between public and private that they reflected; and contested discussions of gender and capital punishment during several sensational murderess cases. Brought together, such diverse issues, and the prosecutorial patterns that emerge from them, reveal broad societal anxieties about hierarchy and difference in the context of colonialism, modernization, urbanisation, and nation-building.

It may be unsurprising to find that the law operated in order to shore up the values, forms, and hierarchies of patriarchal families and Anglo-Canadian social structures, but *Westward Bound*'s combination and juxtaposition of such a wide range of issues enables unexpected insights and new narratives to emerge. Erickson's detailed exploration of how people resisted or reworked the system—Aboriginal men using colonial stereotypes or settler murderesses mobilising chivalric values in order to receive more lenient sentences, for example—is particularly valuable for the ways in which it refutes the possibility of simplistic binaries or straightforward narratives, and rethinks the meanings of conformity and resistance to state and social power. However, this strength is also a challenge: *Westward Bound* ultimately sheds light on a complex and diverse, but sometimes overwhelmingly nuanced, history of the Canadian Prairies.

This book will be of interest for scholars concerned with colonial law, state, and society; gender, violence, rule, and resistance; and the operation of modernity and the liberal order in nation-building projects. While situated in the local and regional contexts in question, it makes reference to scholarship in a wide range of fields and geographical locations, although it will be up to others to flesh out these connections further. *Westward Bound* will be of particular value to those concerned with the relationship between intimacy and empire, as Erickson extends beyond this literature's typical focus on mixed-race conjugality, colonial childrearing, and familial affection as critical parts of colonial life. In her analysis, discussions of abortion, acceptable marital violence, and extramarital relationships were also critical parts of the family's central but contested place in settler society. Overall, this book can be a difficult read, with graphic discussions of domestic violence, but it is also a thought-provoking one, with the potential to contribute to our understanding of settler societies as complicated spaces of intimacy, power, contestation, and resistance, both in Prairie Canada and beyond.

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