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Bill Pritchard's Propaganda Tour of Alberta, Winter 1915-16

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ASSOCIATING THE HISTORY of Alberta and the Socialist Party of Canada (SPC) does not come easily. The history of Alberta is the history of ranching and farming, of William Aberhart and Social Credit, of oil wells and entrepreneurs. The Socialist Party, more often than not, has been deemed a British Columbia phenomenon, with a transitory and generally ineffective presence in scattered areas of the rest of the country. It is also generally assumed that the Socialist Party's influence was restricted to urban wage workers and workers in the bush camps and mines of Canada's hinterland regions. One of those regions was the Crow's Nest Pass area of southwestern Alberta where, as Warren Caragata points out, the Socialist Party "built up an impressive base" in the mining camps.¹ Industrial workers in the coalfields of Alberta, as in British Columbia, produced a radicalism that was, in Allen Seager's words, "deep-rooted, organized, and purposeful."² The main vehicle of this radicalism, the Socialist Party of Canada, also enjoyed significant support in Edmonton and Calgary.

Like the Socialist Party and Alberta, the Socialist Party, farmers, and small towns are rarely, if ever, associated. Yet the Socialist Party also had dedicated members and supporters in many areas of rural Alberta. This account by Bill Pritchard of his speaking tour of Alberta in the winter of 1915-16 provides an

¹Warren Caragata, *Alberta Labour: A Heritage Untold* (Toronto 1979), 35.

²Allen Seager, "Socialists and Workers: The Western Canadian Coal Miners, 1900-21," *Labour/Le Travail*, 16 (Fall 1985), 23.

Peter Campbell, "Bill Pritchard's Propaganda Tour of Alberta, Winter 1915-16," *Labour/Le Travail*, 37 (Spring 1996), 265-74.

important and insightful look at the impact of socialist ideas on a rural culture so often assumed to have had nothing to do with socialist ideas. While it would be presumptuous to argue that the Socialist Party created a 'socialist culture' in rural Alberta — for clearly many of the people who went to hear Pritchard speak were not socialists — it can be argued that rural Alberta in the winter of 1915-16 supported a political culture influenced by, and much more open to, socialist ideas than is generally recognized. Socialist Party of Canada organizers certainly took support in Alberta very seriously, and a great deal of attention was paid to rural Alberta in the early war years. Bill Pritchard's tour in the winter of 1915-16 followed extensive speaking tours of Alberta conducted by Socialist Party members John Reid and Tom Connor in October, November, and December 1915.³

The timing of these tours may be linked, at least in part, to the economic downturn affecting the mining industry. As Allen Seager points out, the Crow's Nest Pass mines were severely affected by the depression of 1913-15, which threw hundreds of miners out of work.⁴ Some of those miners took up farming in rural Alberta on either a part-time or full-time basis, where they became leading figures in existing SPC locals or were involved in organizing new ones. It would be a mistake, however, to believe that the Socialist Party's only support in rural Alberta came from former miners. It is significant that while the "most influential local ethnic groups" in the Crow's Nest Pass were the Italians, Poles, and Czechoslovaks,⁵ Pritchard recalls the Scandinavians and Germans, indicating both farm support and support from a broad range of non-Anglo-Saxons for the Socialist Party in Alberta.

Pritchard himself had been in Canada less than five years when he went to Alberta. Born in Salford, near Manchester, England, on 3 April 1888, Pritchard followed his parents, James and Priscilla, to Canada in May 1911. His father played a leading role in organizing the miners of Vancouver Island into the Western Federation of Miners, and was a member of the original Dominion Executive Committee (DEC) of the Socialist Party of Canada. By the time he arrived in Alberta, Bill Pritchard had worked as a labourer and an accountant with a plumbing, heating, and electrical firm. Late in 1914 Pritchard became editor of the Socialist Party's paper *The Western Clarion*, a position he held until 1917. Throughout this period he followed in his father's footsteps as an important member of the DEC of the party. While it is not clear why Pritchard was chosen to go to Alberta, his choice certainly underlines his rapid rise in the Socialist Party, his effectiveness as a speaker, and his ability to sell subscriptions to the *Clarion*. Subsequent events confirmed that the choice was a good one.

³*Western Clarion*, December 1915.

⁴Seager, "Socialists and Workers," 27.

⁵Seager, "Socialists and Workers," 28.

Bill Pritchard recorded the following account in Los Angeles in October 1974.⁶ The transcription is literal; the punctuation reflects, as much as possible, the cadence of Pritchard's speech. All that is missing is the marvellous voice and accent of Bill Pritchard who, even at the age of 86, could still provide powerful affirmation of the eloquence of a man who must be considered one of the great speakers and debaters of Canadian history.

IN THE LAST DAYS of 1915 a request came to the DEC from the Alberta executive that I be sent to that province for a three months' propaganda tour. The DEC agreed, urging me to accept. I talked it over with my wife, since it meant leaving her with two small boys, the youngest only three months old.⁷ In this, as on many other occasions, my wife was sympathetic and cooperative. "If the Party thinks you should go Will, I think you should."

So I went first to Calgary, where I met the members of the local, and a vigorous and energetic local it was. I still remember some of those boys today: Alf Budden, who had himself made a similar winter trip of propaganda work among the farmers of the many rural areas of that province, an effective speaker and writer. Bill Scott, solid and serious. Jock Adie, Dick Burge,⁸ and many others. Budden was well known throughout the country, not only as a writer for the *Clarion*, but had written a book, *The Slave of the Farm*, an analysis of the farmer's position in this price system, as one also exploited, just as much as the wage worker, but through a different process. This brochure, by the way, was introduced as an exhibit in the famous state trial in Winnipeg in 1920.

Monday morning, very early, I got on the train on the newly opened CNR line to Hanna, and I shall never forget it. The train had just been made up, and no heat had been generated. For miles I sat there, huddled up on the seat, cold and shivering. During the whole of that three months' trip the temperature never went above 40 below.⁹ In Drumheller, later on this trip, I experienced 58 below. More on this later.

⁶I want to thank William Rab of Newton Highlands, Massachusetts, for generously sharing his memories of his friendship with Bill Pritchard and providing me with a copy of Pritchard's recording.

⁷Pritchard's son died less than a week after his return to Vancouver. The *Western Clarion* reported: "Com. W.A. Pritchard, Editor of the 'Western Clarion,' who arrived here on Tuesday evening, April 4th, 1916, lost his younger boy, George Leslie, early the following Saturday morning, April 8th."

⁸I am unsure of the spelling — it may have been Berge.

⁹Speaking strictly in terms of temperature, and given that Pritchard was in Alberta well into March 1916, he is clearly exaggerating the severity and longevity of the cold. On 27 January the *Calgary Herald*, in a front page article entitled "Calgary Coldest Spot on the Map," reported that the temperature had registered 35 degrees below zero at City Hall that morning. Pritchard is not far off, however, because with the wind chill factor it must have been every bit as cold he says it was, especially for a native of England who had spent the last four years

Here I think it appropriate to recount as many of the places that I visited. From Hanna to Richdale, the Flowerdale local, Mrs. J.R. Macdonald, secretary, a serious lady in her 30s I judged, and well versed in economics. Thence to a small town on the Saskatchewan border of which visit the only thing that escapes my mind is its name, as also that of the man scheduled to meet me. I arrived at the depot and no-one in sight. A blizzard was in progress. A young man of 27 years, I stood in that howling storm and accosted a Mounted Policeman. I gave the name of my contact and asked if he knew him. He answered in the affirmative. I then inquired as to where his place was.

He replied, "18 miles northeast."

"Well," I queried, "How can I get there?"

He looked down on me in astonishment and asked, "Young fellow, do you want to commit suicide?"

"No," I answered.

"Then don't try it," he said.

All I could do was to go back to the depot and enquire as to the next train back to Hanna, and was told it was late and would be along in two hours. So, being short of cash, since it was only through collections taken at the meetings that I could finance the trip, I sat in the lobby of the shiplap siding hotel alongside a steaming radiator and waited. Back to the depot, where I learned that the train was still two hours late. Thus, for that day and night, and the following day and night, I sat besides the fizzling radiator, turning myself round occasionally, like a chicken on a spit, to try to keep relatively warm on both sides. So two days later the train came through. Getting back to Hanna, without benefit of bed, and getting only intermittent sleep, I found myself just a trifle numb.

But what happened next must await its telling at a later place in this narrative, for I want to proceed with a list of places. So far as I can recall, on some I may be vague, for this is close to 60 years ago, that I visited, and these may not be in the order of my itinerary. But here they are — Alhambra, Erskine, Ferguson Flats, Sundial, Eckville, Markerville, Flowerdale, Silver Leaf, Travers, Craigmyle, Castor, Botha, Camrose, Stettler, Hanna, Edmonton where I stayed for eight days holding big meetings in the city's largest theatre on successive Sunday evenings. Leduc, Red Deer, Innisfail, Wimborne, a small town whose name escapes me, but the meeting was memorable.¹⁰ The mining town of Drumheller, mines five miles out, where the meeting was cancelled, temperature 58 below. Delbridge¹¹ and

in Vancouver. Indeed, the *Herald* noted that heavy snowfalls had occurred in Alberta, and "according to the weather forecast there does not appear to be any immediate prospect of a let-up in the cold snap."

¹⁰The small town may have been Baraca, Dowker, or Caroline, all locations with SPC members.

¹¹In all probability Pritchard means Delburne — the spelling is from the *Western Clarion* — where the Socialist Party had members, if not a functioning local.

Lethbridge, thence to Fernie and Rossland in British Columbia. I arrived back in British Columbia in the beginning of April 1916.

In all of these meetings, except in Calgary and Edmonton, and the small town of Castor, either the halls of the United Farmers or the schoolhouse were used. Invariably the farmer at whose place I stayed would be two to four miles from the schoolhouse. In these evening schoolhouse meetings the pattern was to hold a social with refreshments, with the finest coffee I ever tasted, as brewed by the Scandinavians and Germans, followed by the lecture, and closed with a dance. Often the distance from one point to another was covered by sleigh. The charcoal heater had not yet appeared, and the only way to start the journey was having the farm housewife heat a few small boulders in the oven, and then wrapping these in burlap. For a short time these would keep one's feet fairly warm, but on a long trip, and most of them were long, I often arrived at the next port of call frozen and unable to speak, and would head for the local livery stable to thaw out.

During one trip I suffered a frostbite on the heel. The farmer's wife on this occasion, as I entered the warm kitchen, warned against rushing to the well-heated stove. I told her that I thought I had a frostbite on my left heel, whereupon she pushed me unceremoniously into a chair, took off my shoe, the newspaper in which my foot was wrapped, together with the three socks, grabbed a coal oil lamp, emptied the vessel into a bowl, and dunked my foot into the coal oil.

In all of the farm districts I visited I was surprised to see the quality and size of some of the libraries in the homes, fairly extensive and containing most of the socialist classics, and many other scientific works. In one home, among the huge collection, I found a copy of Thorold Rogers' *Six Centuries of Work and Wages*.¹² I recall vividly George Paton of Delbridge,¹³ and Sandy Fraser —the place is so vague to me as to name — who found coal close to the surface, and had driven a slope down to the seam. So he farmed, and also sold coal to his neighbours. He and Paton had both mined in the Crow's Nest Pass, though in Alberta they were many miles apart. Two brothers who ran a store in Castor when I was there also had mined in the Pass.

But picking up where I left off with my trip back to Hanna I'll try to hit the high spots of this eventful lecture tour. The members at Hanna were at a loss as to where I had been and what had happened. So I explained that I had been compelled to spend two days and two nights waiting for a train that was delayed for only two hours. Well, I was given a quick meal, told that the meeting at a point north of Hanna had to be cancelled and I must leave at once for the next point to try to avoid that cancellation. So, without bed or sleep, I was bundled off again into the fine, clear, Albertan champagne atmosphere for a ride of some 40-odd miles, only to find on arrival that the meeting had been scheduled for the previous evening. The

¹²I cannot explain why Pritchard remembers this particular book as being significant.

¹³Paton actually lived in Delburne. The spelling of his name, which Pritchard pronounces 'Patton,' comes from the *Western Clarion*.

man in charge, efficient and undaunted, had recourse to the telephone. In these rural areas people would call each other by a series of short-long-short or other variations, but if one would ring a long unbroken one that would call everybody. As the neighbours all responded he announced the meeting for that afternoon, just a few hours later. A big and attentive audience resulted, after which I was put to bed, had a good sleep for the first time in three nights, and next morning off for my next appointment.

So much comes to mind of this interesting but exhausting tour, but I must confine myself to a few of the high spots, of which there were many. As I moved northward toward Edmonton I held meetings in school houses or farmers' halls, one in which the subject was the materialist conception of history, was given in a crowded school on a bitterly cold night. And what amazed me was the big crowd for that district and its general interest and enthusiasm. Many questions were put.

At all these meetings I was able to sell quite an amount of literature and take subs for the *Clarion*. I noticed at this meeting a serious young man who seemed to show great interest. At the end of the meeting, when coffee and refreshments were served, and the young folks allowed their dance time, he came to my little seat made for juveniles and introduced himself. Again my memory does not hold the name, but he disclosed that he had ridden several miles on horseback to get to the meeting, that he was a travelling lay preacher who covered this vast area by the same mode of travel, and that he was interested in my point of view. We engaged in a long, friendly, but serious discussion, his theological conceptions as opposed to my materialist ones. He thanked me, and said he had learned a little anyway that was different, and we shook hands, and bade each other goodbye as day broke. Then back to the farmer's house for breakfast, and almost immediately off again for another 30-40 mile trek through what I had come to call Britain's Siberia.

When I got back to Vancouver a piece of mail awaited me. It was from the young lay preacher. A short note of greeting and a two-column article, written by him for the area's news sheet. I give only his opening words as I recall them: "Those people of this district who did not attend the socialist meeting last night denied themselves an intellectual treat. As one side of a conceivable argument it was a masterpiece, shedding light upon some of the dark spots of history."

At another meeting, coffee, etc., dancing, and the meeting, I had a discussion with a local school teacher. She was Catholic, interested in what she called social problems. We sat side by side in the little schoolhouse seats, and offered our divergent views with warm conviction. I must have become sleepy after an hour or so. Here was a time when I had not only not been to bed for two nights, but had not even had a chance to nap in a chair, and was later ribbed by these hearty farmers, who claimed I had gone to sleep with my head on the schoolteacher's shoulder.

"So, what softer pillow around here could a fellow find," I retorted.

Another incident at another place further north. I was deposited by my last contact, after another 40 mile trek, at a farmhouse, made welcome by the family,

which was a large one. I was given a hearty supper, and then told to get ready to go to the meeting. This was to be in a school some three miles or so away. As I said, this was a big family, and all were going. Several grownups, down to a baby, not much more than a year old. The packing of the vast amount of gear, refreshments, etc., took time, but left little space for passengers. The farmer and his wife, and I assumed one or two of the younger children, were up front, and the rest just behind. But I knew where the baby was, on top of the load, warm and serene, so well wrapped she looked like a cocoon. I was to ride on the runners at the rear, holding on to the back of the sleigh. Off we went, running smoothly for a mile or better to the sound of the sleigh bells. Approximately a mile from the schoolhouse — I could see the lights as I peered over the top of the load — the horses suddenly hit a drift. Anyone who has experienced this knows how frantic horses can become, and started to rear and plunge. The farmer had a little trouble coaxing, soothing the frightened animals before they settled, pulled them out of the drift, back to good, level snow, and off we went again. But, no sooner were we hitting a good pace when suddenly the horses again began to rear and plunge. It was but momentary, however, and the sleigh was soon righted, and off we went again. But during that brief moment the sleigh heaved, and rocked like a boat in a stormy sea, during which time I sensed that something had shot over my head and out into the snow. I dropped off the runners and went back to investigate. And there was the cocoon-like baby, warm, serene, and asleep. I picked up the little bundle, could see the sleigh fast disappearing into the distance, could still hear the jingling of the sleigh bells, and perhaps some three-quarters of a mile away the lights of the school house. Anyone who has been out in the snow on the Canadian prairie, temperature below 40 below, clad in an abundance of heavy clothing, might appreciate my predicament. The farmer and the rest of the family evidently were unaware of what had happened. Back I trudged, and finally, almost exhausted, I arrived at the schoolhouse, where a crowd of people were excitedly rushing about. They were frantic, wondering, where was the baby? And where the lecturer? But greeted with jubilation I was taken inside and warmed up with a draught of hot coffee, and that meeting then got underway.

After several more meetings I arrived in the evening one day at the little town of Castor, met there by the two boys who had quit mining in the Crow's Nest Pass, and who were now running the store. They were party members. Soon they had supper ready. We discussed affairs for a little while, and then I was informed the meeting would be held in the picture theatre, that they had been able only to rent this hall on the understanding that the picture show would be held first, and the meeting could start around 11 p.m. I heaved a sigh of relief, told the boys that I had not been in bed for two nights in succession and could do with some rest. So I laid down on a couch and went off into slumber land. Awake, and off to the meeting just prior to 11 p.m., and the area around the hall was crowded with sleighs and cutters, people coming in from all around. It was cold, very cold, and people were

anxious to get inside. But, the picture finished, the owner, with an eye to business, evidently noted the big crowd around the entrance, decided to run the picture again. Of course the majority went in, and I had to wait, the meeting at long last being called at 1 a.m. I spoke for quite some time to an interested and enthusiastic packed house, questions and discussions following the talk. And at last went back with my host to catch a little more shut eye. This was close to 2:30 a.m., and I had to catch a train that morning at 5:30. The cold was intense, so I huddled in the depot, awaiting the train to take me to Botha, not too many miles west, if I remember aright. The train, made up a short distance east of Castor, was a veritable ice box. I shivered all the way to Botha, still early in the morning, and still extremely cold.

So with my big bundle of literature in one hand, and my suitcase in the other, I got off and onto the platform. A good many people also got off there, being met by friends or relatives and quickly driven away. No-one seemed to be looking for me. When at last all the other passengers were gone, I espied a man at the end of the platform who may have been walking up and down among the crowd. He was a big man in a fur coat and cap, and as he approached he glanced at me and appeared to be passing by, when I hailed him.

"Looking for someone," I asked.

In a deep basso profundo that seemed to come from his boots, he said: "I'm looking for a man named Pritchard."

"My name is Pritchard," said I.

"From Vancouver," rumbled the query.

"Yes," I answered.

"Are you the fellow who writes those editorials in the *Clarion*?"

"Yes, most of them."

He looked me up and down, all of my five feet seven. He was a good six-footer, and then uttered one of the most eloquent expletives I have ever heard.

"Good God," the booming voice rolled out.

"Comrade," I said, "I am frozen, have had little sleep, and would like to get warm, have something to eat and get some sleep before the meeting. I hope your place is not three or four miles away like most of the places I have visited."

"Just half a mile down the road," he said, helping me to my feet, and off we went.

I wish there were time to tell of that meeting held at night, and the warm welcome this comrade gave me, etc., etc. Much could be said of the many other meetings I held during this trip, but I must forbear. Yet I cannot omit commenting on a meeting in the little town of Leduc, some seventeen miles south of Edmonton.

Met by an enthusiastic and well-posted socialist, secretary of the local, I was soon in a comradely discussion with him prior to the meeting, which he chaired. Leduc was the typical small prairie town, with its three elevators, standing out against the one-storey architecture, not what it has since become through the discovery of oil in that area, with its consequent expansion. The meeting was a

good one, with a full attendance, and at its close my contact said his instructions were to take care of me through the night, which was welcome news to me, for I still lacked rest and sleep.

"Where," I asked, "is your place?"

"A few miles west of here," he replied.

So off we went, I bundled up in my prairie clothes, on a bright and chilly night of 40 plus degrees below. We had travelled what I thought was already several miles, and observed the road was not so definite as in the first few miles.

So I enquired, "Is it much further?"

"No," was the response, "just a few more miles."

I now noticed that the road was becoming less distinct, almost an exaggerated cow trail, when at last it seemed to disappear entirely, and we swung into a gate, the type usual in these farming areas.

And he sprang out of the cutter saying, "Well, here we are."

The several miles had turned out to be some seventeen, but I was glad, for the farmhouse was close by, and I could get warm. While he attended to the horse, and did a few chores, I was welcomed by his charming wife, a lady I judged to be in her 30s. She proved to be quite a scholar, with a good knowledge of the socialist case. She had come to Leduc from London, England, to become a farm wife. She admitted to a degree of loneliness, but did so in a charming manner, stating that her duties kept her occupied in the day time, and anyway she had the company of her husband in the evenings, which was spent in reading and discussions. At this she indicated a well-stocked and fairly large bookcase, and I stepped over to look. Apart from scientific works on a variety of subjects, I was astonished to see, in this isolated spot seventeen miles west of Leduc — the road ended at the farm gate — one of the best socialist libraries I had ever seen in a home. Thus, she said, she conquered her loneliness.¹⁴

In the seventeen years since she passed through Leduc on her way from London, she had been back to that little evidence of civilization only once. Edmonton, which lay some twenty miles to the northeast, she had never visited, though often at nights she would gaze out of the window to view the reflection of that city's lights on the sky. Such is typical of a prairie farm wife's life, though I had met many who lived close to a community hall or schoolhouse to be able to allay their loneliness at a social, dance, or meeting. But for me, that night was one of the most satisfying of the whole trip.

¹⁴For a fuller understanding of the lives of prairie women in this period see Linda Rasmussen *et al*, eds., *A Harvest Yet to Reap: A History of Prairie Women* (Toronto 1976); Eliane Leslau Silverman, *The Last Best West: Women on the Alberta Frontier, 1880-1930* (Montreal 1984); and Susan Jackel, ed., *A Flannel Shirt and Liberty: British Emigrant Gentlewomen in the Canadian West, 1880-1914* (Vancouver 1982).

AT THIS POINT Pritchard goes on to briefly record that he went south to hold several more meetings, and thence to Calgary. Then he went to one or two places further south, and wound up the tour with stops in Fernie and Rossland, BC, returning to Vancouver in the first week of April. Within days his youngest son was dead. Had it all been worth it? Perhaps Pritchard's fond recollection of his talk with the farm wife who lived west of Leduc is a romanticized account, in part inspired by his desire to believe that a well-stocked socialist library and evenings spent debating the materialist conception of history were sufficient compensation for all the loneliness, pain, and struggle. Perhaps this account also flows from Pritchard's realization that his own wife, too often neglected because of his socialist activities, and eventually unable to deal with it, had lived a lonely existence for much of her life as well. Yet something very genuine remains in Pritchard's recollection of the farm wife, and in this, and his other memories of the propaganda tour, one finds the story of a very vibrant rural culture of various hues, one of them most certainly red. More than that, however, Pritchard provides a means to explore more fully the gender politics of the left, the appeal of socialist ideas to rural Canadians, and the personal cost of fighting for socialism in a capitalist society.