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‘The people must have plenty of good books’:

The Lady Tweedsmuir Prairie Library Scheme, 1936-1940

ABSTRACT

Between 1936 and 1940, the Lady Tweedsmuir Prairie Library Scheme sent approximately 40,000 books to readers in rural areas of the Western Canadian provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta. Founded and directed by Susan Buchan, Lady Tweedsmuir, the wife of the Governor General of Canada, after visiting Depression-ravaged Prairie communities, the Scheme received the support of philanthropic foundations in Canada and the United States, the Women’s Institute, women’s service organizations, and individual donors of books. While the Scheme is mentioned in passing in biographies and local histories, little is known about the scope and scale of its activities or how it was organised or operated. Using primary and archival sources in Canada and the United States, this paper explores the history of the Scheme and its role in the distribution of books, the promotion of literacy, and the creation of libraries in the Canadian West during the Great Depression.

In *John Buchan, by His Wife and Friends* (1947), Susan Buchan, Lady Tweedsmuir (1882-1977), described her first visit to Western Canada during her husband’s term as Governor General and her motivation for establishing what would become the Lady Tweedsmuir Prairie Library Scheme:

We first saw the southern Prairies in the tragic days when a long drought had made the land into a desert…The whole countryside appeared to be blowing away and there were drifts of grey dust over everything. Huge thistles grew and maleficent little gophers peeped out of their holes. The only feature of the place that was not depressing was the fortitude and optimism of the people. I enquired of some of the women what I could do for them, and they asked me to send them books. With John’s [Lord Tweedmuir’s] constant help and encouragement I started what was called the Lady Tweedsmuir Prairie Library Scheme, and with generous help from Canada, from England, and the Carnegie Trustees in New York, I managed to send out forty thousand books from Government House.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Aside from short references to the Lady Tweedsmuir Prairie Library Scheme in biographies, local histories, and, most recently, in a case study on Women’s Institute libraries in the third volume of the *History of the Book in Canada*, almost nothing is known about the Scheme’s organisation, activities, or scope.[[2]](#endnote-2) In the absence of the Scheme’s administrative files or archive, the only way to attempt to trace its history or to understand its work is through contemporary newspaper articles, Women’s Institute histories, archival fonds in Canada, and the Carnegie Corporation of New York records at Columbia University. Understanding the Scheme’s mission and activities also requires learning about its founder, as well as the history of Canada during the 1930s and the Great Depression.

Lady Tweedsmuir was born Susan Charlotte Grosvenor in London to Norman de l’Aigle Grosvenor and Caroline Grosvenor (nee Stuart-Wortley). A member of the extended Grosvenor family headed by the Duke of Westminster, she enjoyed a relatively unconventional upbringing given her class and background; she had an ‘un-Victorian run’ of the family library and her parents were friends with writers, artists, and public intellectuals like William Morris, Leslie Stephen, Edward Burne-Jones, Gertrude Bell, Charles Booth, and John Everett Millais.[[3]](#endnote-3) After Norman Grosvenor’s death in 1898, his widow moved the family to Dresden where Susan Grosvenor and her sister studied German, art, and music followed by a period in Florence and lessons in Italian, dance, and art history. Andrew Lownie, one of her husband’s biographers would later write that ‘the education Susan received was far superior to that of many of her background. She was a serious young girl more interested in reading than the social and outdoor life to which most of her contemporaries devoted their time’.[[4]](#endnote-4) She met her future husband, John Buchan, then practicing law and embarking on a career in publishing, in 1905 and they were married two years later in 1907.

While John Buchan was building a reputation as a novelist and man of letters and, from 1927 onwards, serving as Member of Parliament, Susan Buchan was raising their four children, a girl and three boys born between 1908 and 1918, running their London households, and working as a volunteer with a number charities and service organisations. Like her husband, the author of *Prester John* (1910), *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (1915), and *Greenmantle* (1916), she found personal and professional satisfaction as a writer, publishing two children’s books, a play, and several biographies, including one with Leonard and Virginia Woolf’s Hogarth Press, between 1929 and 1935.

On 27 March 1935 it was announced in Ottawa that George V had appointed John Buchan Governor General of Canada.[[5]](#endnote-5) He was raised to the peerage and created Baron Tweedsmuir of Elsfield, with Susan Buchan becoming Lady Tweedsmuir. Another of John Buchan’s biographers, Janet Adam Smith, wrote that Susan Buchan was not excited to start a new phase in her life. She had:

…thrown herself into the doings of Elsfield [the Buchan’s country home near Oxford from 1919], of the Oxfordshire Women’s Institutes, of the Oxford settlement at Risca in South Wales. She liked to work in a small group, where real contacts are possible; she never cared for crowds….they would be a week away from the children in England, and a week further away from Johnnie [her eldest son], now in the Colonial Service in Uganda…But it was [John Buchan’s] great chance, and she would not stand in his way.[[6]](#endnote-6)

The couple and their two youngest children left England on 25 October 1935 and landed in Quebec City on November 2 where Buchan, now Lord Tweedsmuir, was installed as Governor General and Commander-in-Chief of Canada.

Canada in 1935 was a country still reeling from the consequences of the 1929 Wall Street crash and the worldwide economic collapse that followed. Historian Michiel Horn has written that no western country except the United States suffered as greatly as Canada during the Great Depression.[[7]](#endnote-7) By the end of 1935, the national unemployment rate hovered around fifteen per cent, combined federal and provincial government relief payments were in excess of $50 million dollars a year, and exports of almost everything from fruit to whiskey, to flour to cattle, to wood pulp to aluminium were down by as much as fifty per cent from 1930 figures.[[8]](#endnote-8) In the Prairie Provinces of Manitoba, Alberta, and Saskatchewan, some crop prices were starting to recover from devastating lows seen a few years before, but a bushel of wheat was still only worth 61 cents compared to a dollar and five cents in 1929.[[9]](#endnote-9) The 1936 census would reveal that a staggering 14,000 prairie farms (the equivalent of three million acres) had simply been abandoned by their tenants or owners since 1931, while in 1937 it was estimated that two-thirds of Saskatchewan’s farming population was destitute. [[10]](#endnote-10) Dust storms, crop failures, labour unrest, and reverse migration were additional stresses tearing at the social fabric of Western Canada. There were also relatively few public libraries in the Prairies in the 1930s. The Dominion Bureau of Statistic’s 1939 *Survey of Libraries in Canada, 1936-1938* listed only twenty-six public libraries in Alberta, of which fifteen were classed as free; fifty-two public libraries in Saskatchewan, of which twenty-four were classed as free; and thirty-four public libraries in Manitoba, of which twenty-four, or almost 75 per cent, were run by volunteers belonging to the Women’s Institute, the international community service organisation founded by Adelaide Hoodless in Stoney Creek, Ontario, in 1897.[[11]](#endnote-11) Winnipeg, which at the time was the fourth largest city in Canada with a population of over 215,000, had just two public library branches.[[12]](#endnote-12)

On 6 August 1936, the Tweedsmuirs began a tour of Western Canada that took them from Ottawa to Victoria, British Columbia, with stops in Winnipeg, Saskatoon, Edmonton, Calgary, Lethbridge, Regina, Swift Current, Moose Jaw, and Vancouver, and it was during this time that Lady Tweedsmuir and her husband first saw the southern Prairies in ‘the tragic days’ as she recorded in her memoir.[[13]](#endnote-13) The journey and the plight of the men and women she met made a great impression on her as during the course of the tour she had discussions with Women’s Institute representatives in Manitoba and Alberta about sending books to readers in the remote areas of the West.[[14]](#endnote-14) By mid-September, shortly after she returned to Ottawa, she had also secured a donation of $500 from the Massey Foundation, a private Canadian philanthropy headed by Vincent Massey (1887-1967), then Canada’s High Commissioner to the United Kingdom and a future Governor General from 1952 to 1957.[[15]](#endnote-15) She wrote to Massey on 14 September 1936:

Thank you 1000 times for the kindness & promptness of helps. How marvellously good of you to give me that generous & marvellous contribution. I have written straight off to Calgary & Winnipeg and told them [the Women’s Institute] to get some boxes ready for the reception of books.... I shall buy each book myself & keep down the costs of this scheme as low as possible.[[16]](#endnote-16)

Lady Tweedsmuir’s second letter of 14 September was to Frederick P. Keppel (1875-1943), President of the Carnegie Corporation of New York, to ask for a grant of $1,500. Telling him that she was writing at Vincent Massey’s suggestion and noting that the Corporation had supported rural libraries in British Columbia as well as public and academic libraries in Canada and the United States, she outlined the scope and scale of her project:

I have just returned from the Prairie Provinces, which, as you know, are suffering from lack of crops owing to the drought. Their plight is pretty bad in some places, but the bad times have done nothing to impair their magnificent spirit and optimism.

One of their greatest needs is for books. The young people are not able to get away very much from the little prairie towns….I need not stress the point of how long the winter is on the farms, and how badly people want intellectual distraction. I have been asked repeatedly if I could get some books for the young and old in all three Prairie Provinces. In the endless Canadian winters, with the depression as their companion, books are a great assistance in keeping up their morale. What interested me was that they asked for books in this order: (1) Good biography. (2) Economics. (3) Fiction.[[17]](#endnote-17)

Lady Tweedsmuir assured Keppel that her project would have ‘no overhead charges, I would keep the costs down by buying every single book myself in the cheapest market…I would make myself responsible for the buying of the books, with His Excellency’s [Lord Tweedsmuir’s] help in choosing them’.[[18]](#endnote-18) In his reply of 21 September, Keppel told Lady Tweedsmuir that the Carnegie Corporation was waiting for the newly established Canadian Association for Adult Education to organise itself before funding any extension programs in Canada, and he suggested that she write to the Association’s director, E.A. Corbett, the former head of adult education at the University of Alberta, to enlist his support for her scheme.[[19]](#endnote-19) Undeterred, Lady Tweedsmuir wrote to Vincent Massey on 13 May 1937 to tell him, among other things, that she was working with Corbett on another Carnegie grant application. By that point, though, she had already sent books out to readers in the West. She told Massey: ‘I am getting more and more pathetic letters from the dried-out areas [of the Prairies], saying they have read their books to pieces and could I send them anything? Also I have been helping some schools on my own’. If the second grant application was successful, Lady Tweedsmuir believed that she would be able to ‘stiffen up the scheme tremendously with really good books, and make it a real venture in adult education’.[[20]](#endnote-20) Nine months later and quite unexpectedly, however, Keppel wrote to Lady Tweedsmuir on 29 November 1937 with news that the Carnegie Corporation was now prepared to fund her initiative with a grant of $1,500.[[21]](#endnote-21) In writing to thank him, Lady Tweedsmuir supplied the most detailed description of how the program operated at that point:

The scheme is called The Lady Tweedsmuir Prairie Libraries. It has now been running for a year, and I have sent, personally, over 9,000 books to the Prairie Provinces, and have been instrumental in getting another 5,000 sent there. I run the scheme personally, selecting the books myself. My husband is very good in helping me with counsel and donations of books. In each of the Prairie Provinces capable women act as distributors…

No books are kept for any one organisation; they are for the use of the whole community…The books are sent from community to community in boxes; the railways give free transportation; all the packing and secretarial work is done in this house [Rideau Hall], so that the scheme is not hampered by administrative expenses. I wish I could show you some of the letters I have had testifying to the value of the scheme in the remote areas of the Prairies.[[22]](#endnote-22)

It is not surprising that Lady Tweedsmuir involved the Women’s Institute in the Scheme. The organisation’s British wing was established in 1915 and by 1919 there were over 1,000 local Institutes in the United Kingdom.[[23]](#endnote-23) Lady Tweedsmuir had been active in the Oxfordshire branch and she became Canadian president in 1936 and hosted meetings of Ottawa area members at Government House. In many parts of rural Canada the Women’s Institute funded and managed many services and programs including hospitals, clinics, community halls, and local libraries. [[24]](#endnote-24) Lady Tweedsmuir also encouraged Women’s Institutes in Canada to compile their communities’ local histories and in 1940 the resulting series became known as ‘Tweedsmuir Histories’ in tribute to both Lord and Lady Tweedsmuir.[[25]](#endnote-25)

The books that Lady Tweedsmuir distributed through her scheme came from a variety of sources. The five thousand that she described in her letter to Frederick P. Keppel were donated by the Imperial Order of the Daughters of the Empire in late May 1937, while additional gifts of second-hand books were received from the Women’s Canadian Club of Toronto, church groups, and Women’s Institute branches in Ontario, Quebec, and the Maritime provinces. [[26]](#endnote-26) On 1 April 1938 the *Globe and Mail* reported Lady Tweedsmuir’s address to a group of Baptist churchwomen in Ottawa:

‘People on the prairies like the same sort of books we all like—the sort of books that are hardest to give away, also fiction and detective stories to take one’s mind off one’s worries,’ she said. Sympathy in this scheme has been far-reaching, her Excellency said. It would not have been possible to reach the total of more than 15,000 books if it had been not for the cooperation of organizations and private donors.[[27]](#endnote-27)

At the same time, Lady Tweedsmuir told Keppel that she was interested in obtaining financial donations because ‘...for the scheme to have its fullest value, I should send out books of history, economics, etc. I am getting requests for these. The books people send me are apt to be mostly fiction’.[[28]](#endnote-28) An article in the *Toronto Daily Star* on 23 December 1938 gave a contemporary description of how books were processed at Government House. Readers were told that:

Assisted by two secretaries, she [Lady Tweedsmuir] scans the daily arrivals of books and magazines, sorts them, checks them, and lists them to be sent off to out-of-the-way western districts in connection with her prairie library project. The work is part of her daily routine...

Children’s books are lined up on one table, modern fiction on another, technical and scientific textbooks are together on another, while a fourth is set aside for classics and religious works.

On a shelf at the end of the room are gathered together the ‘problem’ books. Too old, of too small print or too technical to be of employment to the average reader, they wait until some special request for them turns up. In another corner of the room a small table is stacked high with magazines, paper-backed novelettes and mystery yarns.[[29]](#endnote-29)

FIGURE 2

After sorting in Ottawa, books were shipped to distribution centres in Saskatoon, Winnipeg, Edmonton, and Trochu, Alberta, free railway transportation having been arranged by the Women’s Institute in the fall of 1936.[[30]](#endnote-30) In Saskatchewan, the sorting and distribution of books was managed by Homemaker’s Clubs and the Department of Women’s Work within the University of Saskatchewan’s College of Agriculture and by the Women’s Institute in Alberta and Manitoba. In its report for 1937-1938, the University of Saskatchewan’s Department of Women’s Work described how it had:

…acted as the agent of Her Excellency the Lady Tweedsmuir in distributing books under The Prairie Library Scheme. To date 64 book parcels have been distributed. One-third

of the volumes in each parcel have been non-fiction. In sending out the boxes the groups

receiving them have been asked to arrange an exchange with a neighbouring community. A number of exchange groups have been arranged. In addition, recommendations from the Director of the Department have resulted in larger collections of books being sent to

six town libraries through which books may be distributed to surrounding smaller

communities. It is felt that this method of handling the books will provide some training

for the Regional Libraries which we hope eventually to see established in the Province.[[31]](#endnote-31)

In Alberta, boxes of twenty-five to thirty books were made up by volunteers and sent for the price of transportation to Women’s Institute branches where they could be kept for two to three months.[[32]](#endnote-32) The Manitoba Women’s Institute arranged for books to be distributed in boxes of ten and maintained schedules for transportation and rotation throughout the province. By August 1938 the Scheme had distributed 5,000 books in Manitoba and one hundred and one parcels (which had grown to include sixteen to twenty-one books) were in circulation.[[33]](#endnote-33) At the same time, Lady Tweedsmuir encouraged the creation of a circulating loan collection of handicrafts for Manitoba Women’s Institute members to allow them to see examples of high-quality work and to aid them in their own crafting efforts. This collection, established in 1937, travelled throughout the province until 1951.[[34]](#endnote-34) Lady Tweedsmuir’s organisational abilities did not only extend to the Prairies. In 1938 she was asked to help rural libraries in New Brunswick and a collection of books was subsequently sent to that province to be administered by the Friends of the Rural Library Association on behalf of library patrons in Albert, Kent, and Westmoreland counties.[[35]](#endnote-35)

The Prairie Library Scheme attracted attention from librarians in the United States and Great Britain. The *Library Review*, a Scottish publication,described the Scheme as a ‘development that has struck the imagination of folks in the old country’, while Lady Tweedsmuir was invited to speak via broadcast radio to the American Library Association’s annual conference in Kansas City, Missouri, in 1938. [[36]](#endnote-36) She told the gathered librarians that she was ‘a great believer in bringing good literature to the doors of those who cannot easily obtain it for themselves’ and that she was ‘struck by the excellence of the taste and the interest in technical and historical subjects displayed by those to whom my libraries are sent’.[[37]](#endnote-37) Lady Tweedsmuir’s connections in England also took note of her work. Her childhood friend and publisher Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) expressed a small amount of amazement, writing to Lady Tweedsmuir on 2 June 1938 to tell her that:

I owe all the education I ever had to my father’s library, and so perhaps endow libraries with more divinity than I should. But this one is far more my care than yours—who have all Canada to provide for 170,000 books! the thought staggers me, and makes me doubt if we ought either to buy more books or write them. Who can read 170,000? And who has written them?[[38]](#endnote-38)

A notable benefactor was Queen Mary (1867-1953), the widow of George V and the mother of Edward VIII and George VI. In a 1937 article ‘Women and the Empire’ in *United Empire*, the journal of the Royal Empire Society, Margaret Baxter told readers that Queen Mary had given:

…over 100 volumes to the collection of books with which Lady Tweedsmuir, wife of the Governor-General of Canada, is establishing libraries in those parts of the Dominion. Nearly 3,000 books have already been distributed, and the scheme is receiving further support from individuals and institutions in many parts of Canada and this country. Each book carries a small card with the inscription: ‘This book is the gift of Her Majesty Queen Mary to the Lady Tweedsmuir Prairie Library Scheme’. Her Majesty’s gift is the result of a discussion she had with Lady Tweedsmuir on the scheme during the latter’s visit recently to London.[[39]](#endnote-39)

In a draft of a letter dated 5 June 1937 from Lady Tweedsmuir to Queen Mary in the John Buchan fonds at Queen’s University in Kingston, Ontario, Lady Tweedsmuir told Queen Mary that she had ‘received letters from the most distressed parts of the dried-out areas in Southern Saskatchewan, asking for books to take their minds off the difficult conditions with which they are living. The gratitude of these remote and impoverished little groups of people, when they have received some books, is heart-felt and sincere’.[[40]](#endnote-40) Additional letters from Lady Tweedsmuir to Queen Mary in the John Buchan fonds indicate that the Queen sent more books in April 1938 and March 1939, most of which Lady Tweedsmuir designated as prizes for children in Prairie schools.[[41]](#endnote-41)

What could readers expect to find in a box of Lady Tweedsmuir Prairie Library books? In addition to whatever non-fiction was included, the *Toronto Daily Star* reported that the men and women on the prairies received very recently published works of fiction including bestsellers like Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind* (1936), *And So Victoria* by Vaughan Wilkins (1937), *The Good Companions* by J.B. Priestly (1929), Pearl S. Buck’s *The Good Earth* (1931), and *Peking Picnic* by Ann Bridge (1932), along with classics like *The Dark Forest* by Hugh Walpole (1916), Myrtle Reed’s *Lavender and Old Lace* (1905), and *The Scarlet Pimpernel* by Baroness Orczy (1905).[[42]](#endnote-42) The newspaper noted, however, that the greatest demand was for children’s books and the Bible. On 6 April 1939 the *Globe and Mail* reported that Lady Tweedsmuir asked the Protestant Women’s Federation of Toronto for ‘a shower of Bibles’ in order to meet the demand from Western readers.[[43]](#endnote-43)

By 1938, two years after the Scheme was established, Lady Tweedsmuir reported that she had distributed 18,000 books and spent $323.90 of the $1,500 received from the Carnegie Corporation in 1937. In a progress report to the Carnegie Corporation, she explained that while all the monies would be spent within two years, she had kept expenditures purposefully low:

…because I only spent money on books I considered very worthwhile, to leaven the dry patches of the books contributed! I have spent a little money on handicraft books, which I find are a great need in the Prairie provinces, Manitoba especially…I have also sent political and economic journals to Manitoba and Saskatchewan. I have also bought up-to-date books on economics, science and art for all three Provinces.[[44]](#endnote-44)

Lady Tweedsmuir’s correspondence with the Carnegie Corporation also indicates that she saw the Prairie Library Scheme as finite and that she had no intention that it should continue after she and Lord Tweedsmuir were to return to England at the conclusion of his term in 1940. On 14 September 1939, just four days after Canada declared war on Germany, Lady Tweedsmuir wrote to Frederick P. Keppel to ask for another grant. She explained, ‘My husband and I are in our last year here, and I shall have to close the Prairie Libraries down a little while before I go away, and I am most anxious to make one last effort to send out some really good books’. The war, rather than the economic or agricultural depression was now the main cause of isolation, fatigue, and want in the West. ‘I do not think the people ever wanted good literature more than they do now. Husbands, brothers and sons of so many women have gone overseas, and they are so lonely in these isolated places, and, as you know, the books that one is given, (though in many cases very excellent) are rather apt to be the light type of novel and not at all of a more serious types’.[[45]](#endnote-45) In November 1939 she also told the Women’s Canadian Club of Toronto that ‘War or no war, the work of sending books to the outlying parts of Canada must go on. The people must have plenty of good books’.[[46]](#endnote-46) Lady Tweedsmuir’s appeal was successful and Keppel authorized a grant of $1,500 from his discretionary funds on 2 February 1940.[[47]](#endnote-47)

Just four days after the second Carnegie Corporation grant was approved, on 6 February 1940 Lord Tweedsmuir suffered a stroke in his bathroom at Government House and fell and struck his head on the side of the bath. He underwent emergency surgery in Ottawa and seemed to improve, but his condition worsened and he died on 11 February after being rushed to the Montreal Neurological Institute. Lord Tweedsmuir’s death abruptly and suddenly ended the work of the Prairie Library Scheme and Lady Tweedsmuir returned to England five weeks later on 18 March 1940. In the absence of the Scheme’s archive or administrative files, it is not known what work, if any, she did with the Scheme between Lord Tweedsmuir’s death and her return to England or if she managed to spend the second Carnegie Corporaion grant. In covering her departure, *The* *Times* reported that:

In a farewell broadcast last night [Lady Tweedsmuir] said that she could not leave Canada without thanking the people of the Dominion who had shown her so much kindness and given her so much help. She singled out for special thanks all the people who had assisted in her prairie libraries’ scheme by personal services and contributions of 40,000 books, distributed since 1936.[[48]](#endnote-48)

After Lady Tweedsmuir’s departure from Canada, Prairie Library Scheme books were scattered in different directions. In Manitoba, books were turned over to the provincial agriculture ministry’s extension service and it is likely that many became part of travelling and open shelf libraries operated by the department before being distributed to the various regional public libraries set up in the province in the 1940s and 1950s.[[49]](#endnote-49) In Alberta, as in Manitoba, Prairie Library Scheme books were distributed to newly formed public libraries in that province in the 1950s. The public library in Rimbey, Alberta, a town 112 kilometres southwest of Edmonton, notes on its web site that Lady Tweedsmuir books formed a portion of the library’s original collection when it opened in 1953.[[50]](#endnote-50) It is not known what happened to Lady Tweedsmuir Prairie Library Books in Saskatchewan, but it is easy to speculate that they circulated locally until they were discarded or were distributed to public libraries in that province. Prairie Library Scheme books were apparently not marked with any kind of stamp, label, or inscription, so identifying extant volumes is practically impossible. While the books donated by Queen Mary bore a bookplate, efforts to locate any of these volumes in a public or academic library’s special or general collections have not met with success. According to the Royal Archives at Windsor, only Queen Mary’s family correspondence was kept following her death in 1953, frustrating attempts to learn anything more about the books donated by her.[[51]](#endnote-51) It is also unclear how many books were distributed by the Scheme over four years. While 40,000 books was the number given by *The Times* in March 1940 and by Lady Tweedsmuir in her memoir of her husband, the numbers as recorded in various contemporary publications and by Lady Tweedsmuir herself varied greatly. In November 1937 it was reported that the Scheme had distributed 9,000 books; by April 1938 that figure had grown to 15,000.[[52]](#endnote-52) In June 1938 Lady Tweedsmuir told the Carnegie Corporation that she had sent out 18,000 books, while the *Toronto Daily Star* increased that figure to 25,000 in December of that year.[[53]](#endnote-53) It is also unclear how or where Lady Tweedsmuir obtained most of her books and whether they were purchased or donated. In a letter of 14 September 1939 to Frederick P. Keppel, Lady Tweedsmuir wrote that she had ‘depended largely on a supply of books from England and Scotland, and I am afraid this supply will be cut off now [because of the war]’.[[54]](#endnote-54) Given that Lady Tweedsmuir told Robert M. Lester that she had spent very little money towards buying books, should it be assumed that most of the books received and distributed by the Scheme were donations from unrecorded sources in the United Kingdom and, from a lesser extent, in Canada and the United States? In the absence of the Scheme’s records, the number of books actually distributed will likely never been known, nor will the channels by which Lady Tweedsmuir obtained the books she sent to the West. Despite these unanswered questions, it is clear that the Lady Tweedsmuir Prairie Library Scheme filled an obvious and important need for books and stimulating reading materials on the Prairies in the late 1930s and into the early 1940s. Initiatives like the Scheme, along with others including travelling, open shelf, cooperative, and Women’s Institute libraries that existed on the Prairies during the same time, demonstrated the existence of a greatly underserved community of readers and showed a need for increased library services, infrastructure, and funding. After the Second World War, the numbers of public libraries on the Prairies were greatly increased by provincial governments that passed strengthened public library legislation in all three provinces.[[55]](#endnote-55) By 2010, fifty years after the end of the Lady Tweedsmuir Prairie Library Scheme, the government of Alberta claimed that 99.6% of the population of that province had access to public library services, the Winnipeg Public Library boasted twenty branches in 2011 compared to two in 1939, and readers in Saskatchewan have been served by ten regional library systems and a coordinating provincial library since 1996.[[56]](#endnote-56) Within the context of the history of the Great Depression in Canada, the Lady Tweedsmuir Prairie Library Scheme is an example of a voluntary project run by women that attempted to alleviate some of the suffering caused by the economic and environmental collapse in Western Canada. Lady Tweedsmuir, who died in 1977, almost forty years after she left Canada, deserves to be recognized and celebrated for her work in the distribution of books and the promotion of reading and literacy in the Canadian West and for the investment she made in library services in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta. No disinterested figurehead or honorary patron, she found great personal reward and satisfaction in the Scheme and its mission to help women, men, and children who desired stimulation and distraction through books and reading. In December 1938, she told the *Globe and Mail* that: ‘It is interesting being a vicarious librarian. One learns to look critically at books and judge them according to individual tastes. What appeals to you may not appeal to another and it is a serious task when you have so many people depending on you’.[[57]](#endnote-57)

1. NOTES

   †A version of this paper was given at the Canadian Library Association annual conference in Halifax, Nova Scotia, on 27 May 2011. The author is grateful to the Rt Hon. the Lord Tweedsmuir for permission to quote from the unpublished correspondence of his grandmother, the rights to which belong to the Estate of Susan, Lady Tweedsmuir, ©2012, as well as to the Master and Fellows of Massey College for permission to quote from the Vincent Massey Personal Records and to the Chair of the Massey Foundation for permission to access the Massey Foundation Fonds.

   Lady Tweedsmuir*, John Buchan by his wife and friends* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1947) 227-228. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
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3. J. Adam Smith, *John Buchan* (London: Hart-Davis, 1965) 161-162. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. A. Lownie, *John Buchan: The Presbyterian cavalier* (Toronto: McArthur & Company, 2002), 94. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. ‘Mr. John Buchan’s appointment’, *The Times*, 28 March 1935, 14. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Adam Smith, *John Buchan*, 370. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
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