

## Report

# *I Guess You Had To Be There: The Making of Battle River Railway – The Movie*

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It's time for the Wheat Board and others who have been standing in the way to realize that this train is barrelling down a prairie track. You're much better to get on it than to lie on the tracks because this is going ahead.

—Prime Minister Stephen Harper, October 2011

**ABSTRACT** *This note provides context for a video presentation made at the 2011 Canadian Communication Association meetings in Fredericton, New Brunswick. The video presentation recounted the efforts of a group of Alberta grain farmers who established a cooperative short line railroad in order to sustain alternative grain handling practices in their communities. The note considers the relative merits of textual and visual presentation.*

**KEYWORDS** *Video; Trains; Grain elevators; Canadian Prairies*

**RÉSUMÉ** *Cette note fournit le contexte pour une présentation vidéo réalisée à la conférence 2011 d'Association canadienne de communication à Fredericton, au Nouveau-Brunswick. La présentation vidéo raconte les efforts d'un groupe de producteurs de céréales de l'Alberta qui ont établi un chemin de fer coopératif afin de soutenir manutention du grain dans leurs communautés. La note examine les mérites relatifs de la présentation textuelle et visuelle.*

**MOTS CLÉS** *Vidéo; Les trains; Les silos à grains; Les prairies canadiennes*

**I**t is very interesting, in a cruel, tear-the-wings-off-a-fly sort-of-way, that the Prime Minister decided to use this particular language to characterize the situation of prairie farmers as his government proceeded with dismantling the Canadian Wheat Board (CWB) early in the winter of 2012. The metaphor of a runaway train, out of control and dangerous, perfectly captures the demeanor of a government undertaking such a defiantly undemocratic action. In a Fall 2011 plebiscite conducted by the CWB, 62% of farmers voted in favour of keeping the Board's single-desk monopsony on the marketing of wheat, and 51% for retaining the single desk in barley (Canadian Wheat Board, 2011). Claiming a democratic mandate on account of its plurality in the 2011

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general election, the government deemed the CWB plebiscite irrelevant, even though the Canadian Wheat Board Act (1985) required the government to secure the consent of farmers before contemplating changes to the Board's marketing structure. It was on these grounds that a Federal Court ruling in December 2011 found the legislation to be illegal, and the Minister of Agriculture to have acted in contempt of the rule of law in tabling it (Waldie, 2011). No matter; the train just kept "barreling down the track," a real runaway.

The end of the Canadian Wheat Board will make profit-taking much easier for the handful of transnational agribusiness conglomerates that now stand ready to fill the gap left by the Board's demise. It will also make survival much more difficult for the small and medium-sized farm operations for whom the costs and risks of marketing a complex commodity on a volatile global market might prove too much to bear. Among the collateral damage will be shortline railroads and producer car associations, which have been trying to maintain decentralized and cooperative alternatives to the centralization of grain-handling that has swept the Prairies in recent years. The small Prairie towns whose economic and social viability relies on these operations might not fare so well either. That there are not that many "Prairie tracks" left, and that there will likely be fewer once the Wheat Board is gone, is what makes the Prime Minister's metaphor an especially cruel one. The question, for me at least, is how to get anybody in urban Canada to care.

This is exactly what I found myself talking about with Ken Eshpeter, a farmer from Daysland, Alberta (pop. 800), when he called me to discuss the government's announcement that it was going after the Wheat Board, just minutes before I was to make my presentation at the 2011 conference of the Canada Communication Association, in Fredericton, New Brunswick. Ken is among a group of farmers in south-central Alberta who established a producer car association and commandeered an old grain elevator in Forestburg, Alberta, where they load grain themselves instead of hauling it to the Cargill high throughput terminal at Camrose. When CN Rail decided to abandon the line that ran to their elevator (and through a number of other small communities with producer car loading sites along the way), Ken and his neighbours organized themselves, purchased the line and a locomotive, and now operate Alberta's first and only cooperatively-owned shortline railroad on a grain-dependent branchline. It is this story of the Battle River Railway that I had told in a recent article, and which I was presenting at the CCA conference, part of a larger project about the social and political implications of the demise of the Prairie grain elevator (Barney, 2011).

If you are already bored after reading those last few sentences you will have a sense of what I am up against. Whenever I talk about this project with my friends in the city, eyes glaze over in short order. I have learned to make good sport of describing it to prospective graduate students and then watching them nervously look up at the name on the door as they wonder if maybe they have mistakenly wandered into the wrong office. Recently, in a column in a major urban Canadian daily, my project was listed as one among several that loosely deployed the word "technology" in a cynical attempt to milk grant money from the pockets of Canadian taxpayers (Abley, 2012). And let's face it: a bunch of middle-aged white guys engaged in the environmentally-

suspect practice of industrial agriculture on land settled by expropriating its indigenous inhabitants is not the sort of thing the critical media and cultural studies crowd usually pulls for.

So, in giving my presentation at the conference, I thought maybe it would be a good idea to show a few pictures. I had a bunch of photographs I had taken of elevators, town sites, farmers, trains, and meetings in barns and community centres, and some video of a ride I took in the locomotive along the Battle River Railway as it hauled a train of cars filled with barley through the snow drifts to the junction at Camrose. I asked my research assistant, John Watson, to edit this footage together with the stills, punctuated by some quotations from the people I had interviewed in the field. He put it together beautifully, and we timed the transitions to coincide with corresponding moments in the 20-minute paper I would present, a sort of narrative that culminated in the successful establishment of the railway. It ran on the screen behind me as I read the paper, without me looking at it or referring to it directly at any time.

To say it was the most successful presentation I have ever made would be an understatement. The room was strangely quiet as I spoke. When I finished, I looked up and saw at least one person wiping her eyes. I have never had so many people approach me after a talk to ask about it. Many wanted to know how I had managed to time the video to coincide so precisely with the text, but most wanted to know more about the people and places I had talked about—or, more to the point, which I had shown to them—and about what would happen to them next.

It would be very gratifying to presume that the affective response people had to the presentation could be credited to something I said, but it was pretty clear to me that something else altogether was happening. What reached people in a way I never could was something in the combined viscosity of the words of the farmers (whose eloquence in communicating their experience and situation is nothing short of astonishing), the images of their places, the determined movement of the train across the frozen prairie (moving images whose jittery graininess confirmed that I was actually there) and, especially, the recurring photographs of those inscrutable structures, the wooden country grain elevators, built with a consistent architectural language but no two exactly the same—container technologies, to be sure, but containers of what, who can say? It was, in the end, a silent film that moved people. Still, it would be wrong to reduce this to a trite formulation along the lines of the “importance of visuals” or the “power of images”; for I am convinced that my experience in this instance had nothing to do with any universal law of conference presentations, and everything to do with something very specific about the aesthetics of prairies, trains, and grain elevators, something that remains entirely a mystery to me.

## Note

1. Stephen Harper, as quoted in Galloway, 2011.

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