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Review Essay: Encyclopedia of the Great Plains

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PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

The last few years have witnessed a remarkable trend among university presses: one by one, they have published encyclopedias detailing the history, cultures, and geographies of the city, state, or region in which they are located.

The latest of the local encyclopedias is the University of Nebraska Press's *Encyclopedia of the Great Plains*. This work was long in the making: the idea for the encyclopedia emerged out of the University of Nebraska's Center for Great Plains Studies in the late 1980s.

Somewhere along the way, the editors of the *Encyclopedia of the Great Plains* decided to organize the entries not alphabetically but

thematically. This thematic organization has its virtues, especially for readers interested in particular subjects. As editor David Wishart explains, the thematic chapters provide "an interpretive function which is lacking in purely alphabetical works." Yet the thematic organization removes much possibility for experiencing one of the unique pleasures of leafing through an encyclopedia: being surprised by an interesting entry that lies right next to the entry one sought. Readers who look up "Drought" in the *Encyclopedia of the Great Plains* will not have their curiosities piqued by an unanticipated encounter with nearby entries on such diverse

subjects as “Dodge City,” “Dull Knife,” or “Dude Ranching”—they will have to search through three different sections to find those entries. Nor will readers looking for “Drought” find it in the “Physical Environment” section—they must look instead in the “Water” chapter. What the thematic organization thus gains in “interpretive function” it sacrifices in serendipity, accessibility, and ease of use.

Each chapter begins with a long interpretive essay. Bret Wallach, a cultural geographer at the University of Oklahoma, introduces the “Physical Environment” chapter with a five-page overview that covers Great Plains topography, geology, climate, hydrology, biogeography, and soils. Just below the surface of the essay is the long-standing question of whether the Great Plains is best characterized by stability or unpredictable change. Wallach is comfortable with subjects that lend themselves more readily to an emphasis on stability: his subsections on topography and geology have an air of confidence and authority. That authority evaporates when he turns to a discussion of climate, however: Wallach all but throws up his hands in despair, writing that “it is difficult to provide a coherent description of the climate of the Plains.” As Wallach points out, part of that incoherence stems from the dramatic differences in temperature between southern Alberta (120 frost-free days per year) and Abilene (230 days). But most of the incoherence results from the unpredictability of precipitation, which Wallach calls the “most important” aspect of the region’s climate. In his discussion of precipitation, he tries to impose as much coherence as he can by dividing the Great Plains by isohyets, which break the region into narrow strips running north and south. The easternmost strip’s average annual precipitation is 24 inches, 20 inches in the Central Plains, and 16 inches closest to the Rocky Mountains. Yet such averages are as misleading as they are informative. Belle Fourche, South Dakota, for instance, has an average annual precipitation of almost 17 inches. Between 1931 and 1998, however, annual precipitation in Belle Fourche was within 25 percent of the average only about

half of the time, ranging from over 29 inches in 1995 to 7.6 inches in 1934.

Among the sixty-nine entries in “Physical Environment,” only a handful—“Blizzards,” “Chinooks,” “Dust Bowl,” “Grasshoppers,” “Thunderstorms,” “Tornadoes,” and “Climate” itself—emphasize the unpredictability of the Plains environment. An appreciation for the stochastic quality of the Plains environment is notably missing from the entry on bison. Recent scholarship on the bison has shown that the population of the species was, at no more than thirty million, much smaller than previously imagined. That population was also far more susceptible to environmental pressures such as drought than was once thought. The historic bison population was likely prone to considerable fluctuation. Its great decline in the nineteenth century was not the only time the species flirted with extinction. Between 6000 and 2500 BCE and again between 500 and 1300 CE, bison remains were largely absent from Paleoindian kill sites, indicating steep declines in the density of the species. The entries in the “Physical Environment” chapter make nods toward this kind of environmental turbulence, but envelop these points within an overall emphasis on durability and stability.

Wallach alludes again to that kind of timeless stability when he concludes his essay by writing, “Unique to the continent in always open and endless vistas, the Plains is a place to teach us how it feels to be free.” That’s a sentiment that will likely appeal to the provincial pride of some readers. Yet a greater appreciation for the unpredictability of the Plains environment in this chapter might have taught a more meaningful and, one might daresay, substantive lesson: that the Great Plains environment upon which many people depend is dynamic. As the near-extinction of the bison and the disaster of the Dust Bowl demonstrated, our ability to sustain ourselves upon this unpredictable environment is tenuous.

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