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Prairies and Plains: The Reference Literature of a Region

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Book Reviews and Notices

Prairies and Plains: The Reference Literature of a Region, edited by Robert Balay. Chicago: KWS Publishers, 2009. xxiv, 422 pp. Indexes. \$125 cloth.

Reviewer Molly P. Rozum is associate professor of history at Doane College in Crete, Nebraska. Her dissertation (University of North Carolina, 2001) was "Grasslands Grown: A Twentieth-Century Sense of Place on North America's Northern Prairies and Plains."

A scraggly cottonwood tree, framed in sky, fringed in green, invites scholars and collections librarians to peruse this reference book on the grasslands. Robert Balay, a Kansas native and head of reference at Yale University, assembled these bibliographies, indexes, dictionaries, encyclopedias, and Web sites for ten states and three provinces — 1,270 records in all — as a way to "pay homage" to the region and to bring attention to the place for those who, as he does, recall it "with affection," but also for the edification of others who "scoff," considering the grasslands "featureless" (xvii). Organized into general works, humanities, social sciences, history (the largest section), science and technology, health and medicine, agriculture, and military science, each entry is amply annotated and evaluated for research effectiveness. Eighteen boxes list directories for resources such as museums, arts and humanities councils, agriculture and manufacturing statistics, historical societies, and geological survey data.

All regional libraries, including those in Iowa, which is *not* included in the prairies-plains as defined by Balay, would do well to place this book on the shelf. The literature cited often includes Iowa, depending on the choices of individual editors and authors, and resource boxes will help identify comparable Iowa institutions. It is peculiar that Balay, who wants the volume to be a lever for a "regional consciousness" beyond the too circumscribed studies of individual states and provinces, decided to exclude Iowa, a state with a historic prairie relationship (xx). Nonetheless, the same attentive interest that allowed a cottonwood tree to invite readers in the feature-full complexity of North America's grasslands infuses this uniquely conceived reference book.