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The Big Empty: The Great Plains in the Twentieth Century

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Wiltse waxes Jeffersonian about the virtues of small farmers. It seems that all that made that year livable were the two kittens the family adopted in an attempt to control the abundance of rodents on the property. All else was hard work, drafty rooms, and disappointment. Nevertheless, Wiltse is such a skillful writer and social critic that reading of his constant trials is not burdensome but interesting. In the end, Wiltse abandoned the farm for a job in Washington, D.C. What happened to his parents' attempts at agriculture we never find out. Both were dead before the decade ended. *Prosperity Far Distant* is the story of an interlude, one that did not produce fruit. For an academic reader, imagining the perils of ending up in a similar situation, the book is a thought-provoking page-turner.

The Big Empty: The Great Plains in the Twentieth Century, by R. Douglas Hurt. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2011. xi, 315 pp. Maps, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$29.95 paper.

Reviewer Amahia Mallea is assistant professor of history at Drake University. Her research and writing have focused on the environmental history of the Missouri River Valley and the Great Plains.

People belong to the Great Plains more than the Great Plains belongs to people. The venerable historian of agriculture and the region, R. Douglas Hurt, has written a mostly beautiful synthesis of the high plains in which he argues that, as Willa Cather wrote in 1913, "the great fact was the land itself" (*O Pioneers!* [1913], 5). Filled with facts, data, and summaries of scholarship, *The Big Empty* holds readers' interest with well-chosen quotes from primary sources.

Hurt begins with a map outlining the Great Plains, a region ringed by cities but "empty" in the middle. His attention to oft-neglected cities is important (especially now that the demographic weight is urban). To achieve the central emptiness on the map, however, he labels only cities at the edges. If population matters, why not include Grand Island, Rapid City, and Minot? Also, the Canadian cities, representing millions, are on the map but left out of the book—as is the quarter of the region above the 49th parallel. Including work on Canada or the northern borderlands by historians like Sterling Evans would help answer the question for readers whether land, people, or policy makes the "big empty" or if the plains are solely an American creation. In sum, the meaning of the title is vague but invites discussion.

The book follows the arc of American history—organized by subject and chronologically, with overlapping chapters—but still Hurt shows the region to be unique. There are similarities to Iowa's history,

but the differences usually fall back on aridity, climate, and geography. Readers may be surprised by the failed attempts to adapt the environment with tree planting and forestry on the ill-suited prairie. Significant is the attention given to the usually neglected subjects of race and ethnicity. The diverse social groups—including Native American tribes, Germans, Mennonites, African Americans, and farmers of northern and eastern European origin—did not all find fairness or achieve parity. However, Hurt shows a fertile ground for the civil rights movement; the groundbreaking *Brown v. Board of Education* decision arose out of Topeka, and the lunch counter sit-in movement started on the southern plains in Wichita and Oklahoma City. Throughout the century, Latinos were an important part of labor shifts in industrial agriculture, like sugar beets and meatpacking.

Politics and political leaders receive a lot of attention, which puts the focus on states (not bioregions, for example). Hurt identifies a plains pragmatism that is less ideological or partisan than the American norm. Yet there is radicalism; Populists, isolationists, and the Non-Partisan League all put a unique stamp on the region and American politics. The political and cultural characteristics reflect the land: the people are resilient yet vulnerable, self-reliant though “pragmatic” enough to take federal aid beginning in the 1930s; and they put faith in technological adaptations to overcome environmental limitations but assumed new risks.

The tension between centralization and decentralization is exhibited by a corporate farm and livestock economy amidst an independent-minded rural population that is alienated from basic services. The complex relationship between hope (a booming war economy) and despair (drought and recession) highlights that people do not control their destiny on the plains. Because the economy is extractive and therefore boom and bust, because financing continues to come from outside, and because the region suffers from brain drain, Hurt argues that “the economy remained colonial” at the end of the century (209). Irrigated farmland, meatpacking, CAFOs, and energy production (including the recent fracking boom) all depend on limited water resources like the Ogallala Aquifer, which makes the current manifestation of the plains tenuous.

I respect the parameters of *The Big Empty* but note that by excluding the nineteenth century the story of the plains is less contested, more uniform, and unable to show circularity. (Contrast Elliott West’s *The Contested Plains: Indians, Goldseekers, and the Rush to Colorado* [1998].) Hurt’s book begins with plow agriculture as the norm, which follows a largely Anglo population and has the advantage of keeping agricul-

ture at the center, but misses the fact the plains has had other functions besides row crops. There is no mention of bison, the Poppers' "buffalo commons," Ted Turner's ranches, or the Land Institute. Prairie preserves and restoration are not connected back to climate, nomadism, grazing, or bison but compared to the "visible historical footprint" of more recent government shelterbelts (115).

Hurt contributed to the making of Ken Burns's documentary *The Dust Bowl*, which debuted shortly after the book was published. The plains have come to be known only by the "dirty thirties," and Burns replicated that narrow view by failing to engage all of the academic work that places the plains in a wider economic and ecological context. Hurt's *Big Empty* is a much better representation of the Great Plains. I only wish that Hurt would have engaged the historiographical debates and considered whether the region forces a redefinition of the American narrative.

Overall, this is a fine addition to the literature on the plains. Hurt justifies identifying the Great Plains as a region while also showing it to be "amorphous" (xi). I especially like the land-as-base perspective and the attention to social diversity.

Gudrun's Kitchen: Recipes from a Norwegian Family, by Ingeborg Hydle Baugh, Irene O. Sandvold, Edward O. Sandvold, and Quinn E. Sandvold. Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2011. vii, 260 pp. Illustrations, recipes, sources for Norwegian cooking implements and foods, glossary, index. \$22.95 paper.

Reviewer Jill Nussel is a lecturer in history at Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne. Her research and writing have focused on using ethnic cookbooks to gain a fuller understanding of ethnic communities.

Occasionally, historians are so busy looking at the big picture with big concepts that we forget that history is made of individuals. Our American story is made up of women and men who came from disparate backgrounds and forged a nation doing everyday things. *Gudrun's Kitchen: Recipes from a Norwegian Family* is a heartwarming recollection, written by members of her family, of Gudrun Thue Sandvold's childhood in Norway and her forging of a fulfilling life in the United States.

Sandvold's story unfolds as an adventure story set in the global historical context of the first half of the twentieth century. We first meet little Gudrun in part one, "The Gudrun Chronicles," as the youngest of 11 children born in 1902. Gudrun spent an idyllic childhood on the family farm in Aheim, Norway, a coastal area of glaciers,