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Great Plains Quarterly

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Spring 2012

Review of *The Big Empty: The Great Plains in the Twentieth Century* by R. Douglas Hurt

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Andrews, Thomas G., "Review of *The Big Empty: The Great Plains in the Twentieth Century* by R. Douglas Hurt" (2012). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 2776.

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*The Big Empty: The Great Plains in the Twentieth Century*. By R. Douglas Hurt. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2011. xv + 315 pp. Maps, photographs, notes, bibliography, index. \$65.00 cloth, \$29.95 paper.

*The Big Empty: The Great Plains in the Twentieth Century* endeavors to synthesize a history that is as almost as vast and challenging as the region itself. Not surprisingly, R. Douglas Hurt succeeds most fully when addressing his specialty, agricultural history. Less masterful but still effective are the book's sections concerning energy development, Plains Indians, Latinos, and political economy. *The Big Empty* has little to say, by contrast, about shifting perceptions of the Plains, the decline of railroads, and the rise of federal highways, while Hurt's insistence on the fundamental stasis of the Plains environment seems to contradict the many cases of environmental change he analyzes.

Hurt opens *The Big Empty* by describing it as "a small book about a big country." The bigness of the country Hurt examines is undeniable; the book's smallness, by contrast, remains open to question, since the body extends to some 260 pages. Impatient readers should treat as flyover the first three chapters, which sandwich "The Ethnic and Racial Divide" between chapters addressing "The Age of Optimism" and "The Age of Uncertainty."

Only with chapter 4, exploring the tumultuous watershed decade of the 1930s, does *The Big Empty* gain momentum. Hurt's deep understanding of World War II's impact on the region suffuses chapter 5; thereafter, *The Big Empty* offers a steady stream of insights. After a strong final chapter, "The Politics of Race and Agriculture," an overstuffed and anticlimactic epilogue scurries through several topics neglected earlier (ideas of the Plains in American culture, tourism) before recapitulating points already earned in the body of the book.

Hurt's incisive treatment of the connections between "water mining" above the Ogallala Aquifer, the emergence of feedlots and meatpacking plants, rising populations of Latino workers, and social conflict deserves wide reading, as does

his nuanced explication of the contradictory mix of deep dependence on the federal government and fervent antigovernment sentiment that has permeated the Plains' political economy since the New Deal. Apart from poor editing (the identification of Joseph McCarthy as a Democrat represents the most shocking of many errors), *The Big Empty's* most puzzling problem is a pervasive inconsistency between Hurt's attention to groundwater irrigation and agricultural pollution and his insistence that despite "considerable economic, social, and political change" across the twentieth century, "the environment remained essentially the same."

Last, but hardly least, *The Big Empty* suffers from its utter inattention to Canada. Incorporating the history of the Canadian Plains *per se* into an already sweeping interpretation would have required a different book, but Hurt's analysis would have benefited on several occasions from greater attention to cross-national comparisons (of agrarian politics and First Nations policy, for instance) or transnational forces (the rise of the Texas-Alberta petroleum axis and the impact of metropolitan growth in Winnipeg on its U.S. hinterlands, for instance).

Hurt's admirable efforts to integrate the disparate strands of the Plains since the 1930s nonetheless merit notice. The modern Plains strikes Hurt and other observers as noticeably "empty." Yet perhaps the most important contribution of *The Big Empty* is the success with which it fills in our knowledge of recent Plains history.

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