Olive on Frehner and Brosnan, 'The Greater Plains: Rethinking a Region's Environmental Histories'

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Like the authors in this edited collection, I am from the Great Plains, and I too think and write about home with mixed emotion. The challenge in writing about an actual flyover zone is convincing readers that there really is a reason to physically or intellectually visit the area. Most people, academics included, do not ever think of Saskatchewan, the Dakotas, or Kansas. When they do, it is usually not with much curiosity or enthusiasm. The editors and authors of the book tackle this challenge by centering the work on connections and relationships—between people and their environment—inside the Great Plains and outside via pipelines, wind, and food systems. In this way, the book is not a turn inward to reflect on the Great Plains but an attempt to broaden our understanding and encourage us to reimagine a Greater Plains, a place unmoored from national, ecological, social, and cultural boundaries.

The collection is thus meant as a “rethinking” of the region beyond the well-worn frontier narratives that emphasize “degradation and exploitation” (p. xv). Because of its interdisciplinary nature, the book brings together authors who “do not generally cross paths at professional meetings,” such as archaeologists and geographers, to “tell a more fully integrated story of the Great Plains environment” (p. xx). In this way, The Greater Plains will appeal to social scientists and humanities scholars who will discover new approaches and perspectives on relatively well-known aspects of the region. Each chapter is written for a nonspecialist of the region but does require some knowledge of the geography and landscape of the massive area extending from Canada’s prairies southward to Texas.

The book’s essays center on the “interrelated themes of water, grasses, animals, and energy” (p. xv). And each is intended to explore the role of technology in human adaptations to the region as well as narratives of “persistence, preservation, and sustainability” (p. xv). However, instead of the book being neatly divided into these themes as its four parts, only animals and energy warrant “parts” with chapters. Instead, “grasses” and “water” are only woven into chapters throughout the book. It feels like a mismatch or missed opportunity to focus on these themes, but the collection still comes together nicely in its four parts and sixteen chapters. All authors reflect on at least two of the themes listed above, albeit there is little to offer in terms of water as a central subject of the collection (outside of Michael Weeks’s chapter 9).
The essays mostly acknowledge and integrate Indigenous history and perspectives. A few chapters place Indigenous knowledge and voices at the center of Plains history and the landscape (see chapters 2-6). Chapter 1 opens with colonization in 1541 and so appropriately begins the story of the Great Plains. It is a fitting beginning. If we want to imagine our collective future differently, we must have agreement on our collective history.

However, the book does not always adequately or explicitly capture this goal. I will use one chapter to illustrate my point (although there are others). Ryan Driskell Tate’s thought-provoking essay discusses cattle and ranching as though they are natural to the region. Tate’s story involves twentieth-century strip mining in Montana as an example of dislocation that is characteristic of the Great Plains. We know from previous chapters that the Great Plains was populated in the nineteenth century by ranchers who displaced Indigenous peoples. This cycle of dispossession returned in the twentieth century, as Tate notes, once the ranching frontier gave way to industrialized mining. My criticism is that the narrative invites us to pity displaced ranchers. But what about the displaced Indigenous people? He quotes a rancher as saying, “do not make the mistake of lumping us and the land all together as ‘overburden’ and dispense with us as nuisances” (p. 302). But isn’t that the story of bison and grasslands and Indigenous peoples? Isn’t that what ranchers (and, to be transparent, my family are settler farmers in Saskatchewan) did—dispose of all that as uncivilized nuisance? Tate concludes that “perhaps only loyalty to a place, even one cast off as ‘overburden,’ can bring ornery rugged individualists together to claim collective stewardship for the Great Plains ecology” (p. 315). This is fine and good, but I think Indigenous people and their ongoing kinship with bison directly challenge this point. The Greater Plains does not need rugged individuals, it does not need Edward Abbey’s desert solitaire (which Tate mentions), but instead it requires Amy Irvine’s cabal—“a group gathered around a panoramic vision. A group gathered to conspire, to resist.”[1] I do not think Tate would disagree. He knows that the fire that flames our collective stewardship was lit long ago—long before David ever fought Goliath.

In sum, the collected essays present fascinating perspectives on some previously overlooked aspects of the Great Plains. For example, Leila Monagan’s essay (chapter 2) on how the introduction of horses shaped women’s lives is revelatory. Much has been written about how horses shaped men’s ability to engage in battle, trade, and bison hunting. But I have never been presented with any reflection on female mobility across the Plains. As another example, Michael J. Lansing’s essay (chapter 11) on Wheaties is captivating. The impact of agriculture on the Plains is a well-studied area. However, Lansing’s article ties mass industrialized agricultural production of wheat on the Plains to broad social anxieties about nutrition. He eloquently illustrates a fundamental truth: “eating breakfast has a deep and complex history rooted on the Great Plains” (p. 247). A final example is Philip A. Wight’s essay (chapter 13) on pipelines; it offers a new perspective on energy politics by highlighting how something we cannot even see on the landscape is “arguably the most important mechanism for the production, transportation, and control of hydrocarbons” (p. 280). More than many other essays in the collection, Wight’s piece makes a direct outward link between the rurality of the Great Plains and urban metropolises by way of a “geography of mass consumption” (p. 279). Indeed, I may be forever connected to the Great Plains by way of birth, but I am literally connected today by way of pipelines and hydrocarbon.

There is no conclusion to the book. As readers, we are asked at the outset to imagine a “Greater” Plains where “human adaptation to changing environments advances our understanding beyond dust,
drought, and declension” (p. xv). The point is to engage with the four themes and the key concept of regionalism to illustrate how people “formed cultural relationships with the environment” to live, and sometimes thrive, on the Plains (p. xx). But no final chapter summarizes the main argument or returns to the four themes. The editors do not provide a final statement about human adaptation to the environment. And no one ever conclusively expresses any hope for a “greater” future. Instead, the last two chapters explore unrelated but enduring features of the region: overexploitation of resources and wind. In Jonathan Peyton and Matthew Dyce’s essay on oil, the reader is confronted, and then left with, the all-too familiar prairie possibility of boom-bust “shattered dreams” (p. 336). And in Julie Courtwright’s intriguing essay on wind, we are finally left with “mere air” as the salvation for the “identity-starved Great Plains” (p. 359). This ending is, perhaps intentionally, a bit unsettling. I put down the book with the same mixed emotion I had when I started.

Note


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