Review of *The Texas Red River Country: The Official Survey of the Headwaters, 1876* Edited by T. Lindsay Baker

John Allen

*University of Connecticut, Storrs*

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsresearch](http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsresearch)  
Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/otherinternationalandareastudiescommons)

[http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsresearch/443](http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsresearch/443)

This slim volume contains a reprint of Lt. E. H. Ruffner’s 1876 official survey of the sources of the Red River of Texas, along with civilian draftsman C. A. Hunnius’s journal and maps, and the ornithological notes of Lt. C. A. H. McCauley. The book is a great deal more than its size or the seemingly obscure nature of its subject matter would indicate. At the beginning of the Ruffner survey, the Red River was one of the few major American rivers still unsurveyed to its sources—an incredible affair in light of Thomas Jefferson’s noting in 1803 that locating the sources of the Red and Missouri river tributaries of the Mississippi was the most critical goal of western exploration during his administration. Jefferson had sought unsuccessfully to pursue a Red River survey at the same time that Lewis and Clark were dispatched to locate the head of the Missouri and “whatever river heading with that” flowed westward to the Pacific. But what Lewis and Clark had done to great fanfare for the Missouri in 1804-06, no explorer throughout the ensuing nearly three-quarters of a century had done for the Red River of Texas. For this reason alone, the little-known survey of Lt. Ruffner
represents the ending of an era of exploration begun with the opening of the
nineteenth century and is more than worthy of being brought before the
public.

Of equal importance is the fact that the Ruffner survey was undertaken
at a critical juncture in the environmental history of the Southern Plains. The
buffalo were gone, or nearly so—swept away by a decade and more of
rapacious hide hunting. The Comanche, who had long ruled the Red’s upper
reaches, were finally quelled and removed to reservations. And the herds of
Euro-American livestock ranchers were not yet a part of the environment of
the central Texas Panhandle. The Ruffner survey, then, captured the regional
environment at a crucial moment, before it would be changed irretrievably
by commercial livestock raising and a fixed rather than nomadic human
population. And unlike other government explorers of the post-Civil War
era, Ruffner and his civilian topographer Hunnius wrote with flair. Here is
Ruffner on the unexpected canyonlands of the upper Red: “so washed and
twisted shapen as to marvel the eye with its intricacy and daze it with its
brilliancy.” The German-born Hunnius agreed: “the grandest sight I [have]
had in this great United States . . . made a hasty sketch, but one can not do
justice to this magnificent scenery.” In addition to their landscape evalua­
tions, Ruffner and his companions wrote agreeably on botany, geology,
ornithology, meteorology. And Hunnius’s maps and sketches, if not as de­
tailed and skilled as those of others attached to military surveys, provide a
first-hand look at the landscape from both vertical and horizontal perspec­
tives.

Add an evocative foreword by Dan Flores and a splendid introduction
by editor T. Lindsay Baker to the mix of the narrative report by Ruffner, the
daily log of Hunnius, the scientific attachments for birds, plants, and reptiles,
and the maps of the “detail atlas,” and the end result is a most satisfying
work indeed. John L. Allen, Department of Geography, University of Con­
nnecticut, Storrs.