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Robert Carriker
Gonzaga University

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ADMIRING ADVOCATE OF THE GREAT PLAINS
FATHER PIERRE-JEAN DE SMET, S. J.,
ON THE MIDDLE MISSOURI

ROBERT CARRIKER

The Great Plains fascinated Pierre-Jean De Smet. When describing his favorite haunts in the broad trans-Mississippi West, De Smet’s letters bulged with superlatives. He used only grand and eloquent adjectives to describe the celestial peaks of the Rocky Mountains, the spewing geysers in the Yellowstone basin, The Dalles of the Columbia River, and the freeform, contorted rock formations that sprawled across the White Cliffs of the upper Missouri River. It was the Great Plains, however, that received from Father De Smet not only some of his most dramatic prose, but also some of his most perceptive comments regarding the future direction of America. His numerous publications, moreover, and their frequent reprintings secured for De Smet an influential role in advertising the Middle Missouri during the early frontier movements into the Plains and mountainous Northwest and did much to lift the veil of mystery, for Europeans and Americans alike, surrounding the region.

Born in 1801 to a wealthy merchant family in the Flemish river city of Termonde, Pierre-Jean De Smet knew few restraints as a youth. Impulsive by nature, he surprised even himself when, at the age of twenty, he crossed the Atlantic Ocean to America without his father’s permission and entered the Society of Jesus, a Catholic order of religious men professing a special dedication to education and missionary work. Shortly after De Smet entered the order, the Jesuits—as the Society of Jesus is commonly known—established a new western headquarters near St. Louis, Missouri, and the young Belgian became part of that religious community. Here he completed his training in the Society and was ordained to the priesthood. In 1838 Pierre-Jean, now Father De Smet, received his first assignment as

Robert Carriker is professor of history at Gonzaga University. He has published several articles on Plains history and is the author of Fort Supply, Indian Territory: Frontier Outpost on the Southern Plains and a forthcoming biography of De Smet entitled Father Peter John De Smet: Jesuit in the West.

[GPQ 14 (Fall 1994): 243-56]
a missionary: to establish a mission for the Potawatomi Indians at Council Bluff, a well-known promontory on the Missouri River.2

FIRST IMPRESSIONS OF THE PLAINS

From the first, De Smet relished the Great Plains. “The soil all around seemed to be very rich,” the young priest observed from the upper deck of the steamboat Wilmington, adding that the woods were also “superb and the prairie smiling and beautiful.”3 To be sure, this commodious vantage point influenced De Smet’s initial observations; even so, no alternate form of transportation or subsequent hardship during the next three decades changed his opinion about the beauty and bounty of the Missouri River country. The mystery and potential of the Great Plains continued to mesmerize De Smet on eighteen succeeding journeys, during each of which he prowled the Plains with enthusiasm. Along the way he developed an appreciation for the uniqueness of the region’s flora, fauna, and geology. Leaning across the rail of a steamboat or sitting astride a horse, he took extensive notes about Plains plants, animals, terrain, and natural phenomena. Later he re-shaped his jottings about the character of the land and its inhabitants into long, detailed letters, many of which also appeared in the four books De Smet published about his missionary experiences.4 Thus De Smet’s letters not only entertained himself and his correspondents, they also educated thousands of Americans and Europeans about the region he interchangeably referred to either as the “middle Missouri country” or the “upper Missouri country.”

Prior to his first ascent of the Missouri River De Smet read descriptions of the Great Plains penned by Meriwether Lewis and William Clark. He also secured a copy of Washington Irving’s popular book about overland travel, Astoria.5 Still, no amount of preparation readied De Smet for the strange new environment in which he found himself at St. Joseph’s Mission once the Wilmington delivered him to Council Bluff. “It is not uncommon to meet bears in our neighborhood,” he informed his superior, and “Wolves come very often to our doors .... We are obliged to be continually on our guard against these bad neighbors, and so I never go out without a good knife, a tomahawk or a sword cane.” Snakes, field mice, horse-flies, mosquitoes and “prodigious,” eight-inch-long night moths also vexed De Smet at this location (Life, 1:16). In addition to recording the peculiarities of his warm and cold-blooded neighbors of the animal kingdom, De Smet compiled notes about the landscape in and around the mission. In this endeavor he received encouragement and assistance from a trio of scientists. During the spring of 1839 De Smet traveled up the Missouri River on mission business, principally seeking to negotiate a peace between the Potawatomiis near his mission and the Yankton Sioux who lived in a village at the confluence of the Vermillion and Missouri rivers. Much to his pleasure, he found on
board the St. Peter three explorer-scientists: Joseph N. Nicollet, Charles A. Geyer, and John Charles Fremont. Eagerly they inducted the youthful De Smet into their circle of scientific inquiry. Their infectious passion for observing and recording the curious natural world that flourished on the Great Plains impelled De Smet to seek to do the same. Daily, as the steamboat chugged drearily northward from Council Bluff, he received tutorials on Great Plains botany, zoology, and geology from these luminaries of frontier science. Nicollet even provided the priest with a set of scientific instruments so that in the future he could document his own observations.

Not content with mere conversation, the scholars took advantage of the steamboat’s frequent fuel-stops to go ashore and show De Smet how to gather “minerals, petrifications and rare and new plants.” To his amazement, many of the plants they accumulated were edible: “I gathered a great number of plants which I preserved in my herbal. We passed over several spots where there were only onions, round, and about as large as the marbles children use for play, but excellent for eating. In another place we gathered a great quantity of asparagus, as thick as a man’s thumb” (Life, 1:186). On another excursion De Smet dutifully followed Professor Geyer to the top of a hill where a little park of wild flowers awaited discovery. The path upward posed no problems for the athletic priest, but the descent, he wrote, turned out quite differently.

I followed him, thinking that I could go where he had gone, but almost the first step I took, the slippery earth gave way under my feet, and I made a third of the descent at railroad speed. . . . Hung up there 200 feet above the river, I did not find myself very well fixed for meditation or reflection. But I took careful measures and partly by jumping from rock to rock and crawling from shrub to shrub, and partly on my hind-quarters without regard to my breeches, . . . I reached terra firma in safety. (Life, 1:180-81)

On his return to Council Bluff a few weeks later De Smet enjoyed yet another experience of life on the Great Plains: a canoe trip down the willful Missouri River. Seated cross-legged between two experienced paddlers in a hollowed out tree ten feet in length, De Smet saw first-hand, and at eye-level, the sawyers, snags, and sandbars that clogged the swift-flowing river and gave character. Running the river exhilarated De Smet, and he repeatedly used the word “impetuous” to describe the single-mindedness of the current. “Judge how swift its course is,” he challenged readers of his letters; “in three days, sailing from four o’clock in the morning until sunset, we had passed over 120 leagues [360 miles]. Two nights only I slept in the open air, having no bed but my buffalo robe, and no pillow but my traveling-bag. Yet I can assure you that my slumbers were as peaceable and profound as I ever enjoyed in my life” (Life, 1:90).

A TRANSIENT PLAINSMAN

After spending nearly two years at Council Bluff, Father De Smet received a new assignment from his Jesuit superiors. Four times during the 1830s emissaries from the Flathead tribe of the Pacific Northwest came to St. Louis to ask the Catholic clergy for missionaries. Shortages of manpower and money undermined the good intentions of both the Bishop of St. Louis and the provincial of the Missouri Jesuits, so the request remained unhonored until 1840. In that year the superior of the Missouri Jesuits, deciding he could, in good conscience, no longer refuse the Indians, authorized Father De Smet to journey to the Flatheads’ Rocky Mountain homeland.

Personally ignorant of the way west, De Smet attached himself to a caravan of fur traders heading for the mountains in April 1840. After many exhausting weeks on the yet unnamed Oregon Trail, De Smet met a cadre of Flathead warriors at the Green River in present-southwestern Wyoming who took him to the tribe’s main village. He spent several weeks traveling with the Indians and several
more at the Three Forks of the Missouri before he left the Rocky Mountains in late August. He needed to return to St. Louis, he explained, before winter snows and freezing temperatures closed down the regular routes of travel back to Missouri. Accompanied by only a single companion, De Smet rode horseback across eastern Montana, followed the Yellowstone River to Fort Union, and from there hurried down the Missouri River to St. Louis. He repeated this round trip in 1841-42.

During the course of these journeys De Smet traveled across the Great Plains from two directions, east and west. What he observed made an indelible impression upon him, and he wrote exuberant letters recounting the experience to friends and family living in Europe. The breadth of the northern Great Plains, with its elongated horizon, parallel ridges, and lush vegetation, especially fascinated De Smet, filling him with a sense of awe that made him stare meekly at the blank sheets of paper in his lap. At such moments he inserted a paraphrased passage from Washington Irving's Astoria into his letters rather than attempt a feeble narrative of his own. At other times De Smet trusted to his own instincts and wrote boldly and simply about the scene unfolding before him.

De Smet’s prose could be bland or exuberant depending on his mood. He wrote in almost clinical fashion, for example, when describing the environmental changes that took place as one moved west from the banks of the middle Missouri River. He might, for example, focus his attention on the changes in the height, density, and depth of the nearby forests. In contrast, he could display great emotion when describing the Platte River and its environs.

**DE SMET’S PLATTE**

Father De Smet first viewed the Platte River in 1838 from the decks of the steamboat Wilmington as he progressed up the Missouri River to Council Bluff. He did not stop then, nor did he find the leisure to explore the Platte during his eighteen months residence at St. Joseph’s Mission. His first real opportunity to study the river came in May of 1840 during his journey with an American fur company caravan to the Green River fur trade rendezvous. De Smet knew full well that most westering frontiersmen referred to the river as the Platte—French for “flat”—following the precedent set by the Mallet brothers in 1739. Even so, he preferred to call it the Nebraska, asserting that a “Sioux” name was more appropriate than a French one for this watercourse. Actually, De Smet erred slightly in this judgment for the term is the Oto word nibraska and the Omaha word nibthacka, both related Siouan language words that mean “flat river” (Life, 1:203n, 275n). Acting as a fledgling natural scientist, De Smet decreed the Platte the chief tributary of the Missouri. Again, his assessment was in error.

De Smet’s haunting descriptions of the river, however, are remarkably accurate, even by today’s standards. In one of his most observant passages he described the hundreds of small islands that dotted the river, then noted: “If to this be added the undulations of the river, the waving of the verdure, the alternations of light and shade, the succession of these islands varying in form and beauty, and the purity of the atmosphere, some idea may be formed of the pleasing sensations which the traveler experiences on beholding a scene that seems to have started into existence fresh from the hands of the Creator” (Life, 4:1352).

In the spring of 1841 De Smet again returned to the Platte, this time as a member of the Bidwell-Bartleson emigrant party bound for Oregon and California. As before, he intercepted the Platte’s southern bank near present-day Grand Island in mid-May and for several hundred miles followed the river’s course. He never lost his enthusiasm for the serenity of the river. On three occasions De Smet quoted Washington Irving’s terse characterization of the Platte as “the most magnificent and most useless of rivers.” True, the river could extend out 2000 yards and be so shallow as to make it virtually unusable for
water craft, but it was because of this, not in spite of it, that De Smet considered the river without equal in the world. “Putting its defects aside,” he wrote, “nothing can be more pleasing than the perspective which it presents to the eye” (Life, 4:1351). In fact, he considered it the most picturesque of rivers:

Think of the big ponds that you have seen in the parks of European noblemen, dotted with little wooded islands; the Platte offers you these by thousands, and of all shapes. I have seen groups of these islands that one might easily take, from a distance, for fleets under sail, garlanded with verdure and festooned with flowers; and the rapid flow of the river past them made them seem to be flying over the water, this appearance of motion completing the charm of the illusion. (Life, 1:203-04)

DE SMET AND THE POWERFUL PLAINS WEATHER

The natural phenomena of the Great Plains intrigued De Smet. Few travelers in the upper Missouri country could resist commenting on the capricious weather systems that blew across the heartland, and De Smet was no exception. Sighting his first tornado during his 1841 travels across the Plains, he considered the experience sublime and promptly wrote a dramatic account:

A spiral abyss seemed to be suddenly formed in the air. The clouds followed each other
into it with such velocity that they attracted all objects around them, whilst such clouds as were too large and too far distant to feel its influence turned in an opposite direction. The noise we heard in the air was like that of a tempest. On beholding the conflict we fancied that all the winds had been let loose from the four points of the compass. It is very probable that if it had approached much nearer, the whole caravan would have made an ascension into the clouds; but the Power that confines the sea to its boundaries . . . watched over our preservation. The spiral column moved majestically toward the North, and alighted on the surface of the Platte. Then another scene was exhibited to our view. The water, agitated by its powerful action, began to spin round with a frightful noise, all the river boiled, and more quickly than a rainstorm falls from the clouds, it rose toward the whirl in the form of an immense cornucopia whose undulous movements were like the action of a serpent endeavoring to raise itself to the sky. The column appeared to measure a mile in height; and such was the violence of the winds which came down in a perpendicular direction that in the twinkling of an eye the trees were torn and uprooted and their boughs scattered in every direction. But what is violent does not last. After a few minutes the frightful visitation ceased. The column, not being able to sustain the weight at its base, was dissolved almost as quickly as it had been formed. Soon after the sun reappeared; all was calm and we pursued our journey.

(Life, 4:1352-53)

So profound was his experience that De Smet, perhaps attempting to give these events more permanent form, immediately set about transfiguring them into verse. The poem, “Hail Storm and Water Spout on the Platte,” is the outcome of that exercise. Previous to this edition of the Great Plains Quarterly, the poem appeared only once, in 1846. Originally written in French, The United States Catholic Magazine of Baltimore published it in translation. A prefatory note by the magazine’s editor suggests that De Smet left the poem with a friend in New York City, identified only by the initials C.C.P. De Smet’s long list of correspondents contains only one person with the same initials, Constantine C. Pise, a benefactor of the Jesuit Indian missions, who is almost certainly the translator.

HAIL STORM AND WATER SPOUT ON THE PLATTE
by Pierre-Jean De Smet, S. J.

It chances oft, e’en on the brightest day,
That clouds, in rolling on their hurried way,
Engender currents, in whose icy breath
The vapors freeze above;—while underneath,
The hope that smiles along the flowery plain
Would blasted be, did not kind heaven restrain
The bursting vengeance, and the storm command:
“Pass not the waters, or the desert land.”
Still on the Platte’s green banks and islets fair
Th’ effects terrific of the storm appear:
Too often does that frozen thunder-cloud
The loveliest vales in desolation shroud:
Frightful arena! where, with wasting power,
The furies rage unchained, and wither tree and flower.
With my own eyes, as raged the hail storm round,
I saw a savage pelted to the ground.
Happy the man who, in the desert’s gloom,
Can find a shelter! happy he, on whom Heaven looks with pity; that did I obtain;
For, though exposed upon the desolate plain,
Heaven did not fail to rescue me; the wrath Of the impending tempest changed its path,
Far driven to the north where, as I stood Fixed in suspense, upon the solitude It spent its fury; and meanwhile, the skies A scene sublime display before my eyes:
A vast abyss, as 'twere, of spiral shape,
From which, with thundering noise, black clouds escape
In struggling evolutions;—gulphs profound—
Like those tremendous whirlpools that abound
In certain seas, and in their eddies sweep
All things that float upon the boiling deep.
So do these winds engulp, with violent power,
All other offspring of their stormy hour.
The tempest spirit yells above my head;
The mutinous winds raise up their voices dread
Upon the river, whose tumultuous waves Are tossed in wild confusion; in the air
A thousand gleaming meteors appear.
But heaven was with me, in my dangerous plight:
The north wind yielding to the south wind's might
Was by its conqueror to the river driven,
On those vexed waters conflict fresh was given,
With furious alternations; then around
Was heard the mingled and uproarious sound
Of battling tempests, deeper, louder, far
Than the terrific thunder-peals of war.
There might be seen, on their aerial field,
Those giants of the storm now stretch, now yield,
Like snakes each other struggling to devour;
When lo! directed by that mighty Power
That rules the tempest, from their heaving caves,
Bursting, with sudden violence, the waves,
Like mediators, stand between the foes,
And mutual sacrifice for peace propose.
But what will not the favorable hour
Effect when aided by ambition's power?
These new-sprung majesties their proud fronts rear
Up to the clouds; but seem to approach so near
The empyrean, only to subject the air
To their own liquid empire: with a grand And grumbling noise, they issue their command,
When all that stunned the ear, or shocked the eye
Is driven, like magic, from the brightening sky.
Alas! though happy, very brief, their reign:
One peal of thunder breaks—and lo! their vain
And short-lived grandeur sinks precipitate
Into the Platte's deep stream; and where so late
Was seen their glory now appears their doom;
Their cradle is converted to their tomb.
At this dread crash, the north wind rallied strong;
The south wind fled with all his cloudy throng:
And then, mid smiling skies, the sunny day, Sweet flowers, and zephyrs calm, resumed their vernal sway.

PLAINS PHYSICAL GEOGRAPHY

Beginning in 1846 and continuing until the final few years immediately preceding his death in 1873, Father De Smet acted as treasurer of Saint Louis University and socius, or vice-administrator, of the Missouri Vice-Province of the Society of Jesus. In addition to these formal duties, he voluntarily and unofficially assumed the responsibilities of procurator for all of his order’s western Indian missions. In the course of this last occupation De Smet raised money for the missions, used the funds to buy necessary supplies such as clothing for the priests and farm implements for the Indians, and arranged for the delivery of materials to frontier outposts.

Ever ready to return to the West that so enchanted him and the Indians he felt so drawn to, De Smet used his position as procurator to make more than a dozen trips back and forth across the Great Plains. In August of 1848, for example, he spent twenty-five days meandering between the Niobrara, White Earth, and
Fig. 3. Father Pierre-Jean De Smet, S.J., in 1864. Photograph by Matthew Brady. Reproduced courtesy of Oregon Province Archives of the Society of Jesus, Gonzaga University.
Little Medicine rivers visiting Native peoples. He made several similar circuits during the 1850s and then almost annually from 1862 to 1870.

During the course of these excursions De Smet became intimate with the physical character of the Great Plains and energetically shared his knowledge with others in long letters. In June of 1864, for example, De Smet penned this passage on the changing seasons on the Great Plains for his European correspondents:

I have traversed these regions in all seasons of the year. I have seen the prairies in spring, covered with a rich and supple mantle of verdure, waving and bowing under every breeze; they were enameled with flowers, as varied in form as in color. . . . I have admired them after the burning summer sun had transformed the vivacious green into a grayish yellow and the supple plant had become hard, dry and crisp, waiting only for the match of a careless hunter or a spark from the lightning to become the prey of flames. . . . I have passed these places again after the fire had devastated them, leaving not the slightest trace of verdure. These plateaus, these prairies, these bluffs and hills then offered the image of a land of desolation, which it makes one sick to look at. Finally the snows of winter come and cover with a mournful shroud all this strange nature. This is its last and gloomiest transformation. . . . (Life, 4:1382-83)9

De Smet referred to the most northwestern portion of the Great Plains as the Yellowstone Desert, specifically the chain of broken hills paralleling the Yellowstone River as it runs from the confluence of the Bighorn River to Fort Union. The region's cactus-riddled, broken-up ravines earned no praise from De Smet, but its abundance of natural curiosities, including petrified tree trunks and mineralized rocks, furnished him an opportunity to emulate the erudition of Professor Geyer and his other explorer-scientist friends.

De Smet also posed questions about the origin of the Plains, asking himself and the readers of his letters why the Great Plains bore so few trees when evidence suggested that at an earlier time in history they had been heavily wooded. Formulating an answer, he first acknowledged the theories of scholars who speculated that the landscape's barrenness resulted from a combination of ancient forest fires and climatic changes that in concert drastically affected the fertility of the soil on the northern Plains. His own theory was that the desert-like condition resulted from some unrecorded ancient flood of biblical proportions. "I have examined different localities," he wrote, "and the enormous heaps of shells of the testaceous kind and of the genus muscula, which I found a few feet from the summits of the loftiest hills, and which were incorporated

The Bad Lands, in the portions which are traversed by the White River, are the most extraordinary of any I have met in my journeys through the wilderness. The action of the rains, snow and winds . . . renders it the theater of most singular scenery. Viewed at a distance, these lands exhibit the appearance of extensive villages and ancient castles, but under forms so extraordinary, and so capricious a style of architecture, that we might consider them as appertaining to some new world, or ages far remote. Here a majestic Gothic tower, surrounded with turrets, rise in noble grandeur, and there enormous and lofty columns seem reared to support the vault of heaven. . . . Cupolas of colossal proportions, and pyramids which recall the gigantic labors of ancient Egypt, rise around. The atmospheric agents work upon them with such effect that probably two consecutive years do not pass without reforming or destroying these strange constructions. (Life, 2:659-60)10
in alluvial earth and mingled with sand and water-worn pebbles, convince me that this portion of land has undergone changes as great as they are amazing” (Life, 2:659). Along with most of his contemporaries, De Smet never considered the possibility that a series of Ice Age glaciers scarred and shaped the Plains. Such a concept would have seemed far-fetched to many a professional scientist at the time, to say nothing of an amateur like De Smet.

DE SMET’S MISSOURI

Similarly, De Smet never linked the course of the Missouri River with the Ice Age. De Smet loved the Missouri River; he considered it the great artery of the Plains. It never made sense to him why Americans seemed neither to appreciate its beauty nor understand its utilitarian value. True, he would be the first to admit, the river could be monotonous. “The windings of the river present lovely views every moment,” De Smet wrote, “but the regular succession of bluffs and bottoms give such a sameness to the country that unless one were very familiar with the region he could never tell in which one of a dozen precisely similar spots he found himself” (Life, 1:181-82). But because it seemed to be always changing, De Smet never felt his research on the river was completely finished. He liked to spend his “leisure hours in reading and in taking notes upon the Missouri,” he informed his superior; “I examine, I draw upon my own fund of experience, I question the best-informed travelers, and then I write” (Life, 3:817). Finally, in 1864 De Smet finished his essay on the Missouri, a mini-dissertation taking readers on an imaginary descent of the second longest river in the United States. He noted every significant tributary, every landmark; he calculated the mileage between points of interest; and he made no apology for the dangers one encounters when traveling on the river. His discourse on the character of the Missouri, along with his thirty-two written references to steamboat and canoe travel on it, is considered by many historians to be among the finest of frontier travel narratives.

A PLAINS PRIEST’S TRAVELOGS

By vocation, De Smet lived the simple life of a priest and a missionary. By avocation, however, he aspired to be a great traveler and writer. In 1841 the American Jesuits issued a modest pamphlet entitled The Indian Missions in the United States of America under the Care of the Missouri Province of the Society of Jesus; two letters written by Father De Smet occupied twenty-six of its thirty-four pages. The publication ultimately proved to be a useful tool in raising funds for the Jesuit missions, and its success encouraged De Smet to continue his own writing with an eye to additional publications. His superiors encouraged this outlet of his talents, and ultimately De Smet wrote and published four books between 1843 and 1863.

The anticipated result of De Smet’s publications was an increase in monetary contributions to the Jesuits’ Western Indian missions. In his lifetime, it is estimated that De Smet successfully solicited approximately a quarter of a million eighteenth-century dollars, an
amount that would certainly be multiplied four times in today’s inflated currency. In addition, De Smet’s poignant narratives about the Indians made him the most widely known and read Catholic missionary of his day.

De Smet’s colorful descriptions of Western geography earned him notoriety and respect among a cadre of responsible Western political leaders. In 1853, for example, Isaac Stevens asked Father De Smet to accompany him on his survey for a proposed northern route for the transcontinental railroad. Revealing he had derived much pleasure and information from reading one of De Smet’s books, the newly appointed governor of Washington Territory added, “I understand that since its publication you have journeyed extensively in the western country, particularly between the Missouri and Yellowstone rivers. The object of my writing at this time, therefore, is to ask of you such additional information as you may be able to give me” (Life, 4:1568). Several years later, Governor William Gilpin of Colorado Territory wrote an effusive letter to the missionary crediting his writings with being the chief factor in developing the governor’s “inexpressible ambition to penetrate to a complete comprehension of this superlative portion of our country”. Explorer-scientist Joseph Nicollet, Superintendent of Indian Affairs Donald D. Mitchell, and road builder Captain John Mullan wrote similarly laudatory appreciations of De Smet’s published observations about the Plains landscape.

By contrast, it is ironic that at times De Smet’s writings received criticism, not accolades, from his priestly brothers. The Father General of the Society of Jesus, in fact, chastised De Smet on at least two occasions for writing about the West and the Indians with what he considered an enterprising vocabulary. “More than one person assures me that your relations [letters], published with so much éclat,” wrote Father John Roothaan, “are products of imagination and poetry.” Another time Roothaan took it upon himself simply to declare some of De Smet’s testimony about the West patently false. Even as late as 1867 it was widely believed among German Jesuits that the name “De Smet” was merely a nom de plume used by several Missouri Province Jesuits who wrote their composite experiences into letters and books (Life, 4:1530-31). The accusations of the German Jesuits are not true, though it can be said with certainty that De Smet did receive a portion of the information and anecdotes he used about the middle Missouri in some of his publications from frontiersmen such as Alexander Culbertson, E. T. Denig, Robert Meldrum, Zephyr Recontre, and C. E. Galpin.

An unanticipated result of De Smet’s literary efforts was their eventual translation into five languages and their becoming the vehicle by which thousands of Europeans and Americans, both Catholics and non-Catholics, were introduced to the mysterious American frontier. Many other explorers and overland travelers wrote about their experiences on the Great Plains, but few saw their words widely published. All of De Smet’s books went through at least five editions, and some were reprinted as many as eleven times. In the 1840s the Great Plains region was still little understood by the vast majority of the citizenry on the North American and European continents; De Smet’s books both triggered their curiosity and did much to lift the veil of mystery.

During the 1850s, when the United States felt the last bellicose strains of Manifest Destiny and the effects of the Mexican War, the westward movement took on a new urgency. Even as the fallout from the Compromise of 1850 polluted the political atmosphere in eastern America, so too the strained dynamics of unfinished revolutions clouded European politics in France, Austria, Italy and Prussia. As a result, the American frontier appealed to large groups of Europeans as never before. De Smet fed their appetite for a new life when he wrote in one of his letters:

Nature seems to have lavished its gifts on this region [of the Great Plains]; and without being a prophet, I can predict a future
far unlike the past for this desert. . . . These plains, naturally so rich and verdant, seem to invite the husbandman to run the furrow, and promise an ample reward to the slightest toil. Heavy forests await the woodsman, and rocks the stonecutter. The sound of the axe and hammer will echo in this wilderness; broad farms, with orchard and vineyard, alive with domestic animals and poultry, will cover these desert plains to provide for thick-coming cities, which will rise as if by enchantment with dome and tower, church and college, school and house, hospital and asylum (Life, 2:647-48).

Father De Smet saw great potential for ambitious pioneers in the upper Missouri region and strongly encouraged Europeans to relocate to America. During his numerous travels over the Plains, he often found himself thinking of how best to use God’s bounty. “Europe’s thousands of poor, who cry for bread and wander without shelter or hope, often occur to my thoughts. ‘Unhappy poor,’ I often cry, ‘why are ye not here? Your industry and toil would end your sorrows. Here you might rear a smiling home, and reap in plenty the fruit of your toil’” (Life, 2:647). Echoing the spirit of Manifest Destiny, he predicted: “This great territory will hold an immense population, destined to form several great and flourishing states” (Life, 2:645-46).

DE SMET’S VIEWS OF PLAINS INDIANS

But what to do with the Indians? This was, indeed, a thorny question for De Smet, an Indian missionary. The Mexican War unleashed a militant spirit in Americans, De Smet lamented, a pugnacity that boded ill for the Indians. He felt the “American Republic soaring, with the rapidity of the eagle’s flight, towards the plenitude of power.” The American territorial ambition realized in the recent war, he felt, was “nothing less than extending her dominion from the Atlantic to the Pacific, so as to embrace the commerce of the whole world.” But now, De Smet asked, “Will not the President of the Republic, like some of his predecessors, pluck some plumes from the Indian eagle, once the emblem of their greatness and power, to place them in the crown composed of the trophies of his administration?” Must all bend to America’s scepter, including the Indian nations, he asked rhetorically, knowing full well the affirmative answer. If white pioneers from Europe and America occupied the land, then what would become of the Native peoples? This, said De Smet, “is indeed a thorny question, awakening gloomy ideas in the observer’s mind, if he has followed the encroaching policy of the States in regard to the Indians” (Life, 2:644).

For De Smet the solution to the “Indian Question” lay in three ingredients: time, isolation, and missionaries. First of all, the Indians needed a respite from their constant contact with whites. Ideally, De Smet hoped to delay direct relations between the races for twenty years. Next, he proposed that during this twenty-year hiatus Indians should be isolated on a reservation. Humanity and justice demanded it for them; it was also the Indians’ only remaining hope for future well-being. There was so much land in the middle and upper Missouri country with so many natural advantages, De Smet thought, that both white pioneers and Native Americans in separate locations could share the bounty. He projected this “separate but equal” arrangement to last preferably for three generations, but at least for two decades. To De Smet the reservation was a place where Indian people would be free to enjoy the best of their culture while they came to terms with the fruits of Euro-American civilization at their own pace. Given a choice, De Smet preferred a few large reservations for many tribes rather than many small reservations for individual tribes. But size was not the critical consideration; establishing a haven for Native people was his paramount concern.

Finally, De Smet believed that missionaries, protected by the federal government, should be the only white people allowed to live among the Indians on these reservations.
De Smet wished to instruct Native peoples in the tenets of the Catholic faith. He would trade food for their souls. In his estimation, the missionaries could also assist Indians with education and agricultural assistance, food for mind and body. At the same time missionaries would deflect the most vile aspects of white society, especially liquor, away from the Indians. Eventually the exemplary life and good intentions of the missionaries would lead the Indians to adopt Western civilization. Leaving the Indian field to missionaries could be controversial, De Smet admitted, but his basic guiding principle was that missionaries saved Indians’ souls while neither frontiersmen nor soldiers even tried. It never occurred to De Smet that in bringing Euro-American civilization to the Native peoples he tacitly encouraged the destruction of their cultures, cultures that he himself greatly admired. The “Indian question” was, indeed, complex, and though De Smet devoted the major portion of his life to finding solutions to it, he died in 1873 without ever discovering an infallible answer.

CONCLUSION

In more than three decades of travel in and across the Great Plains, Father Pierre-Jean De Smet attained a knowledge and understanding of the region’s features that only a few other men of his day possessed. Fewer still published their observations, and among those even fewer could match De Smet’s expressiveness or popularity with readers. Sheer volume of material, however, does not distinguish Father De Smet as an interpreter of the Great Plains region. His advocacy for it does. As a champion for the Great Plains, De Smet reached massive audiences in both Europe and America with his eloquent, memorable texts.

From De Smet’s first observations of the Great Plains at his mission on Council Bluff, he correctly gauged the coming interests of European settlers. He described the sheer enormity of the Plains, its flora and fauna, and its changing weather, as he crisscrossed it frequently. De Smet was especially taken with Plains rivers—the Platte and the Missouri—as he sought to convey their grandeur to his audience. And with the coming invasion, De Smet advocated a Jeffersonian approach to relationships with the West’s Native peoples. Fr. Pierre-Jean De Smet remained enamored of the Great Plains throughout his life.

NOTES

1. Ignatius Loyola founded the Society of Jesus at the University of Paris. The papacy formally recognized the order four years later, in 1540, and by the time of Ignatius’ death in 1556 it had grown to nearly 1000 members. By 1770 the society consisted of about 23,000 members in 42 provinces, 669 colleges, and 274 mission stations around the world. Alarmed by their rapid growth, Pope Clement XIV suppressed the Jesuits in 1773, a ban that remained in place until 1814. The restoration of the American Jesuits, however, began as early as 1805 in Maryland.

2. The United States Army located Fort Atkinson on the Council Bluff in 1819. For many years it was the army’s most westerly outpost. Ironically, it closed in 1827 because it was too remote from white settlements. Today the location is near the town of Fort Calhoun, Nebraska, approximately fifteen miles north of Omaha. See Virgil Ney, Fort on the Prairie: Fort Atkinson on the Council Bluff, 1819-1827 (Washington, D.C.: Command Publications, 1978).


5. Nicholas Biddle’s narrative History of the Expedition Under the Command of Captains Meriwether Lewis and William Clark was published in Philadelphia in 1814. Washington Irving issued Astoria in 1836. De Smet referred several times to the Lewis and Clark expedition in his letters, and he also quoted directly from Astoria. In addition, De Smet made several oblique references to


8. The master index to De Smet’s voluminous correspondence is in the Jesuit Museum and Archive at Florissant, Missouri.


11. Gilbert J. Garraghan, S.J., read widely on the subject of nineteenth-century travel while preparing his history of the Missouri Province of the Society of Jesus, and he concludes that De Smet pictured Missouri River navigation with “a pen as sympathetic as it is true to fact.” Gilbert J. Garraghan, S.J. *Jesuits of the Middle United States*, 5 vols. (New York: America Press, 1938), 3: 82. Hiram M. Chittenden, the author of several important works on Western river navigation, in addition to being the editor of the De Smet papers, came to the same conclusion. Chittenden and Richardson, *Life and Letters of De Smet* (note 3 above), 1: 161 and 3: 867.


14. Isaac Stevens wrote a letter to Andrew Jackson Donelson in 1853 in which he claims that the only reliable sources of information about the Plains and Rockies are “Lewis and Clark’s Travels; Irving’s Astoria and Rocky Mountains; Travels by the Missionary De Smet; Niccollet and Pope; Governor Simpson’s Journey around the World and some information not yet published obtained from Dr. Evans on his geological survey of these regions.” Quoted in Hazard Stevens, *The Life of Isaac Stevens*, 2 vols. (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1901), 1: 292.


16. Roothaan to De Smet, 14 April 1851, quoted in ibid., 3: 427.


18. The numerous editions of De Smet’s works are catalogued in Phyllis R. Abbott, “Publicizing the Missions” (master’s thesis, Gonzaga University, 1952). For example, De Smet’s narrative of his journey of 1851, when he ventured up the Missouri River as far as Fort Union by steamboat and then traveled overland to Fort Laramie for an Indian council, was written in six parts, each appearing three times in France, twice as magazine articles, and once as a book published in 1853. Later this volume was republished in English under the title of *Western Missions and Missionaries*, fully ten years after the original articles appeared in print.


20. De Smet was one of the best traveled frontiersmen of his day and one of the few who could say that he had stood at both the source and mouth of the West’s two great rivers, the Missouri and the Columbia. The only other person to write of a similar accomplishment was W. A. Ferris, *Life in the Rocky Mountains: A Diary of Wanderings on the Sources of the Rivers Missouri, Columbia and Colorado from February, 1830, to November, 1835*, ed. Paul C. Phillips (Denver: Old West Publishing Company, 1940).