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Review of *The Buffalo Hunters* By Charles M. Robinson III

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Bison history captures the American imagination. Robinson capitalizes on this interest here with an entertaining narrative about buffalo hunters. The book begins with a synopsis of Native American bison hunting practices both before and after the acquisition of the horse, an animal whose impact dramatically
transformed and increased indigenous dependence on the buffalo. The author moves on to
address the role Native Americans played in supplying bison beef to British-Canadian fur
companies and buffalo robes to their American counterparts. The story then quickly
moves on to Euro-American sport hunting which reached its heyday with the completion
of the transcontinental railroad. Buffalo Bill Cody and his associates such as Grand Duke
Alexis and George Armstrong Custer dominate this discussion which initiates the book’s
primary focus: white hunters.

Robinson notes that bison hunting became exceptionally lucrative after the discovery of
a process to convert buffalo hides into industrial grade leather in 1870. He provides anec-
dotes about various hide hunters, most notably J. Wright Mooar, and a few statistics of re-
ported bison kills and hide shipments to document the extermination of the southern herd.
He then moves on to describe Native American resistance to commercial buffalo-hide
hunters and the growth of hide towns like Dodge City, Kansas, and Fort Griffin, Texas.
The final chapter compares the extermination of the northern herd in the 1880s with
that of the southern herd. The author justifies the brevity of his attention to the northern
situation by explaining that the area contained fewer bison and these more quickly vanished.

Three themes pervade this work. First, buff-
falo hunters—both native and white—did both “great and terrible deeds” ranging from coura-
geous work to over-harvesting. Second, eco-
nomics dictated the importance of bison
hunting. Native Americans wasted bison prod-
ucts until they witnessed a scarcity and then
fought to preserve their resource base. White
hunters flocked to the Plains only after in-
creasing hide prices lured them. Robinson
explains, “With the development of industrial-
grade buffalo leather, the fate of the animal
was sealed.” Third, the army supported buff-
falo hunting “in an effort to control the Indians.” Military outposts even supplied free
ammunition and powder to the Indians for this purpose.

Buffalo Hunters may disappoint some bison
history researchers due to its brevity, scant
original research, cursory discussion of bison
hunting during the fur trade era, and insuffi-
cient use of statistics. However, the colorful
narrative and numerous uncommon support-
ing illustrations make this book a delightful
read. Many academics could add to their li-
brary with this balanced anecdotal interpreta-
tion. Moreover, Robinson gives the general
readership valuable insight into human ecol-
ogy and the development of the United States.
This book enhances western Americana lit-
erature.

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