2013

Review of *Light on the Prairie: Solomon D. Butcher, Photographer of Nebraska’s Pioneer Days* By Nancy Plain

M. Melissa Wolfe
*Columbus Museum of Art*

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly


http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/2517

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.
readily argued that in the century since this time, no other photographs have become as ubiquitous in histories of the American West. And yet, in comparison, very little has been written on these photographs explicitly or on their maker. Nancy Plain’s *Light on the Prairie* joins a handful of other publications to remedy this omission.

Plain has an enviable gift for storytelling; conveying an empathetic sense of just who Butcher was and what his world was like is a remarkable strength of this book. Descriptive passages quietly transport readers to any number of singular, solitary moments that were, until our reading, muted by the distance of time. Such passages beautifully evoke the environment of the Plains, the communal world that settled there, and Butcher’s somewhat misfit character as its recorder. Plain’s story stays close to the participants, with ample quotes from and references to the actual settlers in Butcher’s photographs.

This very strength also contributes to the book’s limitations. *Light on the Prairie* would have benefited by a more critical analysis of the story of settlement it tells and the reason Butcher’s photographs are important to this story. Butcher would be no more notable than any other of the thousands of settlers in Custer County except for his photographs. They deserve, therefore, a more active role in the book than they receive—as nearly unremarked upon, unscrutinized illustrations. The vignettes of human content they capture—a child hugging his muddy dog, a family squinting into a gust of Nebraska grit, a row of flowers proudly displayed in a soddy window—are visual “descriptive passages” equal to Plain’s writing. Including a few select details would have greatly enriched the story. Plain’s narrative and many of Butcher’s photographs tell the story of the winners, of those pioneers whose names and histories we still know because they managed to remain through the drought of the 1890s. The photographs also show the rarely conveyed story of those who didn’t “win,” of those whose names are lost, whose tattered clothing and lack of implements and livestock reveal the cost of settlement even though they weren’t able to remain to tell their story. As evocative and honestly compelling as Plain’s story about Butcher is, it could

---


In 1886, Custer County photographer Solomon Butcher conceived a plan to create a photographic history of the pioneer era of the county. Though his dream never made him the fortune he had hoped, it did result, in 1913, in the deposit of more than 3,000 glass-plate negatives with the Nebraska State Historical Society. It can be

Published in 1915, Willa Cather’s third novel, The Song of the Lark, was groundbreaking in its portrayal of a talented, creative young woman who wanted to be an artist and subsequently devoted her life to the pursuit of her career, rather than marriage and motherhood. As an added bonus, she did not throw herself under a train or fling herself into an ocean. Instead, Cather’s heroine, the Swedish soprano Thea Kronborg, finds her artistic inspiration in the West and eventually triumphs on stage at the Metropolitan Opera House.

Many readers, however, among them Cather’s Houghton Mifflin editor, Ferris Greenslet, experienced a fundamental discord between the story of Thea’s struggle to fulfill her dreams and her eventual triumph. Readers engrossed by the story of Thea’s Colorado childhood and her artistic have been told more profoundly through closer attention to the photographs themselves and to the richer story of Butcher’s world.

M. Melissa Wolfe
Curator of American Art
Columbus Museum of Art
Columbus, Ohio


A Book on the Making of Lonesome Dove entrenches the epic deeply among Western history lovers. John Spong’s forty interviews with author Larry McMurtry and many of the cast and crew take you behind the scenes as you reexperience the life of American cowboys and westward expansion. Stunning film photography by Jeff Wilson, joined by exciting on-set stills by executive producer and screenwriter Bill Wittliff, bring readers a feast of visualization. A part of the Southwestern and Mexican Photograph Series of the Wittliff Collections in San Marcos, Texas, the book adds yet another chapter to the pioneer legend.

Despite often being considered a Texas story, much of Lonesome Dove’s action takes place across the Great Plains. Dust of the Kansas Plains swirls around the cattle herd, while scenes of early Ogallala, Nebraska, evidence early urban development. Buffalo roamed the continent, yet the story of their history and near extinction holds prominence in the Great Plains. The tenuous lives of the prairie pioneers, buffalo hunters, and farmers are clearly defined, as are the dangers of crossing rivers such as the Canadian, Platte, and Yellowstone. Angelica Huston’s Clara amazingly depicts the women who survived the isolated loneliness of the Great Plains frontier. Native Americans get the too-often bad press, but were decidedly a force to be contended with as they maintained claim to their rightful homelands.

Offering a new understanding and greater appreciation of casting and production problems,