Great Plains Quarterly

Spring 2011

Review of *Like No Other Place: The Sandhills of Nebraska* photographs and text by David A. Owen

Drake Hokanson
Winona State University

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

Part of the American Studies Commons, Cultural History Commons, and the United States History Commons

Hokanson, Drake, "Review of *Like No Other Place: The Sandhills of Nebraska* photographs and text by David A. Owen" (2011). Great Plains Quarterly, 2672.
http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/2672

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.
Our collective understanding of place benefits greatly from the work of careful observers/interpreters/writers/photographers who ultimately blend narrative and photographs into an explication of the nature of a region, a county, a town, a neighborhood, or a highway into a book of substance. Such books can bring us far more than straight geography, journalism, sociology, anthropology, or history can
alone. Done right, the very cut of the wind and timbre of voices come through, making the place not only clear, but real.

*Like No Other Place* combines Owen's narrative about time, people, and place in the Nebraska Sandhills with his black-and-white photographs of the people and the land they inhabit. The text details his lengthy stays in the region, his exploration of Mari Sandoz's memory in the landscape, the hard facts of geography and economics that drive life in the region, a sweet dash of local cowboy poetry, stories of long-time ranch families and the strong people here, spring cattle branding, church potluck dinners, blizzards, school teachers, and finally the story of Owen's own exhibition of his Sandhills photographs in microscopic Ellsworth, Nebraska.

The black-and-white photographs are set large on the page and show us the land, the people, still life settings of places of human use, the scattered ranches in the Sandhills, and the abiding sky. As in any good book that illuminates place through words, Owen's photographs are not mere illustrations or servants to the text; they set their own course through this rolling sea of grass.

Owen begins his journey to the Sandhills with a desire to find in America "one of the truest places," and few could argue with his selection. Key to the depth of this work is that Owen, who hails from Connecticut, crafts a book that neither an author/photographer from Connecticut nor one from the Nebraska Sandhills alone could have created. Owen's strength rises from his eastern sensibilities and the fresh perspective his lengthy Sandhills sojourn creates. He is the insider from outside, a Connecticut Yankee in the court of Arthur, Nebraska.

Both the text and photographs are unadorned, straightforward, and unselfconscious, much like the region's inhabitants. The spareness of the Sandhills comes through via both images and words, but the camera never quite confronts the astonishing fact of so much wind-combed grass and sky. How does a photographer bring 20,000 square miles into a single frame?

Owen's analysis of the nature of the Sandhills is cogent and appropriate for a volume well suited as an introduction to a place. Readers may want more of Native American lives here and a stronger foundation of natural history. These may be beyond Owen's intent but would better fill out the complex story of what most think is a simple landscape. His rendering of the region and of those who make their lives here, done both in words and photographs, is crafted with clear affection for a place seldom visited and little understood by outsiders.

Owen's careful work has resulted in a contemplative book that invites us to go feel the Sandhills wind for ourselves; it renders a very real, vivid, and personal sense of one of the truest places in the nation.

DRAKE HOKANSON
Department of Mass Communication
Winona State University