Spring 2011

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

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Hokanson, Drake, "Review of Like No Other Place: The Sandhills of Nebraska photographs and text by David A. Owen" (2011). Great Plains Quarterly. 2672.
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Like No Other Place: The Sandhills of Nebraska. Photographs and text by David A. Owen. Chicago: Center for American Places, 2010. x + 147 pp. Map, photographs. $32.50.

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 narra-
tive 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, sto-
ties 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 pho-
tographs 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 con-
templative 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.

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