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Review of *Prairie Fire: A Great Plains History* by Julie Courtwright

Ted Binnema

*University of Northern British Columbia*

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The scholarly literature on the history of fire has proliferated over the last generation or so, but until now we have lacked a general history of prairie fire. Julie Courtwright fills this gap. She explains that she hopes “to open a wider discussion of prairie fire and to foster recognition of its environmental and social influence on the Great Plains, thereby broadening the larger history of fire and of the American West.” That statement of purpose hints at the intended contributions of the book; Courtwright does not offer many interpretations and arguments that will surprise those familiar with the scholarly literature, but
she does offer a very useful survey (founded on considerable primary research) in a form engaging and readable enough to appeal to undergraduate students and the curious public.

_Prairie Fire_ is more a cultural and social than an environmental history of fire. Courtwright explains that the grasslands of the Great Plains were historically shaped by fire, but she does not explore that fact in much detail. Most of the book deals with the significance of fire for the human societies that have occupied the Great Plains from prehistory to the present. She explains, for example, that Aboriginal peoples used fire to manage the environment, to facilitate hunting, warfare, and communication, and simply to have fun. Subsequently, explorers, surveyors, settlers, and others similarly perceived fire with a mix of dread, amazement, and exhilaration. Courtwright also devotes considerable space to fire suppression efforts—including the degree to which the communal efforts to prevent and fight wildfire influenced western society. By incorporating art, music, and literature as sources, and anecdotes as examples, she reveals how important prairie fire has been to the culture and society of the Great Plains over the years.

It is refreshing to see Courtwright include the entire Great Plains in her purview. Although Kansas (particularly the Flint Hills) figures most prominently, and the tallgrass more than the shortgrass prairie, Courtwright’s book draws upon primary evidence and secondary literature from throughout the Great Plains, from portions in Canada to those in Texas.

_Prairie Fire_ is a fine historical survey—useful as a starting point for new research, as a one-stop survey for scholars, as a supplemental text in senior undergraduate courses in Great Plains history, or as a book to be read for interest and pleasure by an intelligent and inquisitive public.

TED BINNEMA
Department of History
University of Northern British Columbia

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