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Solomon D. Butcher: Photographing the American Dream.

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BOOK REVIEWS

Solomon D. Butcher: Photographing the American Dream. By John E. Carter. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985. Photographs, notes, 142 pp. \$28.95.

John E. Carter has collected Solomon D. Butcher's photographs of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century rural and small town Nebraska life in the most sharply detailed reproductions and the most generous format yet available. Cataloging the physical and social environment of farm families and ranchers, objects of work and leisure, the construction of prairie sod houses, the arrival of technology and urbane civilization on the frontier, Butcher's work provides an irreplaceable record of the establishment of white culture on the Plains.

Especially in Butcher's photographs of homesteaders, in which he sets up ironic juxtapositions between people and place, we see how the newness of the Plains was a source for white settlers of both promise and fear. In many of these images the human presence seems at once proud and determined yet tenuous and unlikely. Stiff in their best clothes, the three members of the Pollard family compete with their feeding horses for

the attention of the camera in the front yard of their homestead near Merna, Custer County, Nebraska (Plate 19, 1886); on "The George Ball Homestead," the women, their dresses all cut from the same polka-dotted cloth, squint uncomfortably for a formal family portrait in the mud (Plate 26, 1886). Clearly these figures' awkwardness and formality are partly functions of the photographer's unfamiliar presence and of the conventions of portraiture. Yet as many of the quotations Carter has selected from American fiction and travel narratives suggest, the pictured homesteaders often seem to feel as though they are holding out against the very space which attracted them to Nebraska. The ordered lines of family members and their household goods stretched across the photographs make the act of marking off that huge land and sky in some human way feel both essential and tense.

Carter's introduction provides helpful background information on Butcher's life and on the special demands of homesteading and of photography on the frontier. The introduction is especially suggestive for its discussions of the problems of coping with overwhelming space and horizontality and of the ways in which Butcher's photographs enact symbolic

dramas of history-making and empire-building. However, I wish that Carter had probed some of these issues more deeply and subtly. He doesn't deal directly with the irony of the itinerant Butcher's inability to succeed at the way of life that he immemorialized in his photographs, with the ambiguity of Butcher's commitment to photography, nor with the distinction between Butcher's sense of cultural mission and his desperate need to make a living. Even more important, Carter seems uncritical of either the Jeffersonian myth or Butcher's treatment of that myth.

Butcher's photographs walk a fine line between dramatizing the power of the Jeffersonian ideal and exposing the limits of that ideal, its raw edges. Like George Catlin before him and Wright Morris after him, Solomon Butcher seems aware of the importance of fixing visual images of a disappearing way of life on the Plains and of the imminent loss of an important source of American tradition and promise; and like theirs, his images remain poised between recovering moments when "America" seemed pure present and future and an awareness of those moments' status as irrecoverably past. Carter needs to address these tensions more fully in order to clarify and deepen the claim which his subtitle makes for Solomon Butcher as "photographer of the American dream."

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