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Dan Flores

Texas Tech University

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Natural History of the Black Hills and Badlands.

By Sven G. Froiland. Augustana College: Center for Western Studies, 1990. Bibliography, selected additional reading, appendices. xii + 225 pp. \$18.95 cloth, \$10.95 paper.

This book is a revised edition of a volume that in original form did not include the present section on the South Dakota Badlands, here written by Ronald Weedon, a biologist at Chadron State College. Also added to this revised version is a treatise on the environmental situation of the Black Hills as of 1990. This essay, as well as essays on the topography, geology, biology, and history of the Black Hills, is by biologist Sven Froiland of Augustana College. The book also features long pages of quoted material from various kinds of technical sources (soil profiles, checklists of mammals and birds) and some eclectic appendices (Indian reservations, endangered plants, regional butterflies, list of elevations). There are a large number of useful, if not very aesthetic, photographs, maps, and charts, although a map that is made much of in the text nowhere appears in the paperback I received from the publisher. *Natural History of the Black Hills and Badlands* is, in short, quite a compendium of information about these two Northern Plains landforms.

This is a book that falls into a uniquely American literary niche. As environmental examination of place, the niche was first explored in classic early American works by John Lawson and Mark Catesby. Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* occupied it, as did some of the early nineteenth-century western guidebooks written by American geographer William Darby. The layout and general style of presentation recommend *Natural History of the Black Hills and Badlands* as the sort of volume that today appears in bookstores angling for the summer tourist trade, a kind of guidebook for visiting Sierra Clubbers. Indeed, I can't help but wonder if the tacked-on Badlands essay doesn't owe its appearance to the creation of Badlands National Park in 1978.

Yet, despite its focus on place, *Natural History of the Black Hills and Badlands* by no stretch of the imagination belongs on the limb of nature writing that sprouted with William Bartram's *Travels* and today includes, say, William Least Heat Moon's *Prairyerth*, Charles Bowden's *Blue Desert*, Wendell Berry's volumes on his home country of Kentucky. These latter are fine modern examples of scientifically informed writing about nature in special places, but in these cases the writing is elegant, poetic, rises to the status of literature. Biologists Froiland and Weedon, on the other hand, are the literary heirs of Catesby, not Bartram. They are informative but almost totally artless.

Its clunking stylistic qualities notwithstanding, I found *Natural History of the Black Hills and Badlands* a valuable environmental addition to the Great Plains bookshelf. As unintegrated as one of those yearly state almanacs, like them it nevertheless presents a valuable and diverse range of information on two relatively little known but striking western landforms. As geological, biological, and (less capably) historical reference, it works very nicely. For that unique joy of reading immersion, however, this book only barely outperforms your shopping list. Too bad.

DAN FLORES
Department of History
Texas Tech University