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## Review of PrairyErth (a deep map).

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*PrairyErth (a deep map)*. By William Least Heat-Moon. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1991. 624 pp. \$24.95.

This is a splendid book, ambitiously and self-consciously American, at once contemporary and a throwback to the American Renaissance, calling up Thoreau's travels in Concord and inquiries into nature, as well as hints of Melville's metaphysical grapplings. Whereas in his first book, *Blue Highways*, William Least Heat-Moon moved up *across* American landscapes, here in *PrairyErth* he stays put: in Chase County, Kansas, close to the center of America, he sinks down his probes, immerses himself in reports and archives, and holds discourse with all manner of persons, animals, plants, and things.

Heat-Moon's choice of Chase County, in the Flint Hills, is perfect: this is a place of mysteries and stories, from the Nemaha Range buried in the county's "crystalline basement" to the events enacted on its surfaces, many of them linked to the expansion of the nation: fallout from the Kansas-Nebraska Act (for example, the murder of abolitionist Sam Wood) and the Santa Fe Trail (and later Railroad), the ejection of the Kaw tribe, the county's history of unsolved murders. Heat-Moon's references to Jefferson's grid are paralleled in his conceptual approach to Chase County—by quadrangle from Northeast to Southwest, each introduced by an extensive "Commonplace Book" of quotations—from Whitman to Bachelard—appropriate to his text.

His cast of characters is large and memorable, including eccentrics like Arthur Edward Stilwell, who dreamed of a railroad to China, and Woody Hockaday, originator of the "Hockaday National Roads" commencing mileage from his auto-supply store. Others in the cast still reside in Chase County: feminists Linda Thurston (once-proprietor of the Emma Chase Cafe) and Jane Koger, ranch-owner cowpoke (license place IMNXTC); Fidel Ybarra, a Hispanic laborer exploited in the building of the Santa Fe Railroad; environmentalists and preservationists advocating a Tallgrass Prairie National Park in Chase County, in opposition to the Kansas Grassroots Association; and a couple who literally rode the whirlwind. Heat-Moon wonders too about the local disregard of Salmon Chase, after whom the county is named.

Heat-Moon's final report, on the decline of the Kaw tribe, is eloquent, including an array of documentary accounts, interviews with survivors, and a moving meditation on an aboriginal chert point. He concludes with a ceremonial (and soothingly comic) retreat from Chase County, walking the Kaw Trail with his friend "Venerable."

For readers with time to be patient, this is more than a book. One senses that had it been possible, Heat-Moon would have included wood rat nests, signs and bills of lading, the smells of powder and osage. He encourages us to fold and study maps, fit ourselves into the creases; he

even offers one chapter in kit form, as well as a Tristramian page for our own textual musings. Heat-Moon takes risks, and sometimes he hits a clinker, but even his excesses are worthy, often echoing other efforts, from Longfellow to Dos Passos, to express the continent. There is a certain homey chutzpah in claiming to be Chase County's "secretary of under-life," especially as many of the county's inhabitants think of him as "that book guy," but Heat-Moon's humor as a "grousing neo-primitivist" serves him well. Although PrairieErth T-shirts are now in evidence in Chase County, it is not slogans that Heat-Moon offers, but hearty invitations to burrow within—giving us a "deep map" indeed.

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