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## International Influences On The Great Plains: An Introduction

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# INTERNATIONAL INFLUENCES ON THE GREAT PLAINS AN INTRODUCTION

The Great Plains, the vast interior of the North American continent, is completely landlocked. Its rivers, deep or braided, drain into the Gulf of Mexico, the Great Lakes, or Hudson Bay; yet isolated as the land be, it has been globally connected at least since the first European contacts in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The three papers in this issue of *Great Plains Quarterly* look at a few of the international connections of this region.

Paul Schach is currently translating Prince Maximilian's diary of his voyage to America and up the Missouri in the years 1832-34. Maximilian, the younger son of the ruling family of a small German principality, was a product of both the eighteenth-century age of enlightenment and of the nineteenth-century age of specialization and education. His exploration of the Great Plains has been largely relegated to a footnote accompanying the superb drawings and watercolors of Karl Bodmer, the Swiss artist whom he had hired to illustrate the expedition. Yet, as Schach shows, the prince himself was worth far more than a footnote. This article gives an overview of Maximilian's life and explorations and sets aright, both explicitly and implicitly, the fables that have

grown up about Maximilian and, ironically, have portrayed him as richer and more advanced in rank but also less educated and less competent than he actually was.

In his article Schach establishes the factual outline of Maximilian's accomplishments on the Great Plains without speculating as to why Maximilian has been misinterpreted. But if we look at what Henry Nash Smith has called the myths and symbols of the American West, we can perhaps begin to discern why Americans have been slow to recognize the prince's importance. As Schach points out, the greatest obstacle to American understanding of Maximilian is simply that he wrote in German. Bodmer's pictures, facing no language barrier, are far more accessible. But beyond that, the myth of the West has taught us to seek our frontier heroes among the Daniel Boones and Davy Crocketts—men born on the frontier and schooled in the woods. American ingenuity, mother wit, and frontier equality are supposed to be the winning combination. That a university-educated prince who spoke English with a German accent instead of a down-home drawl could have been one of our greatest explorers does not fit the pattern

we have drawn for ourselves. Maximilian was also critical of American treatment of Indians, an attitude that, although shared by some Americans, was not part of the frontier myth. Historians, like other investigators, work inside the paradigms that seem most likely to yield significant results. As the New Western History remolds our myths, it perhaps makes us more able to appreciate the role of men like Prince Maximilian of Wied.

The myth of the American West tends to be quite literal about what West it means—that of the United States. Yet the North American Great Plains are occupied by two countries, the United States and Canada. Sometimes the myths of the two Wests coincide; sometimes they are significantly different. Ann Barnard looks at their two regional literatures and at the roles of women in those literatures. Because the Canadian prairies, the “Last Best West,” received their European-stock settlers after the fabled close of the American frontier and because Canadian literature came to its maturity nearly a century after American literature, the American Plains had developed its classic literature by the 1920s; the Canadian Plains, except for Sinclair Ross’s great 1941 novel *As for Me and My House*, had to wait until the 1960s and 1970s. The half-century gap spans enormous changes in women’s rights and social positions, so the women in Canadian prairie novels are more autonomous than those in American plains novels, but the change is one of time rather than nationality. Barnard shows that whatever the changes, the myths of women on the Plains are similar on either side of the 49th parallel, and that the female protagonists of the novels she discusses are engaged in reworking the relationships between women and men, regardless of the politics in which they find themselves.

Don D. Walker also writes of the shaping of myths and the shaping of literature by myths, focusing on the effects of history and geography on the literatures of Australia and the western United States. Maximilian and Bodmer were only one of the many teams of Euro-

pean or Euro-American explorers who crisscrossed what is now the United States in the nineteenth century or before. Australia, though about the same size as the United States, has never been thoroughly explored and occupied by Europeans or Euro-Australians. Though even the most forbidding areas of both continents were explored, occupied, and storied by their aboriginal inhabitants long before any Europeans came to their shores, the history of European familiarity with the land has been very different in Australia than in the United States. Except for isolated areas, the “frontier” as a discrete geographic line had vanished in the United States by 1890, an event that Frederick Jackson Turner seized upon to symbolize the end of the frontier. In Australia, however, that “frontier line” has never disappeared nor, given the desert nature of the center of the continent, is it likely to disappear unless inhabitants discover or invent completely different land use patterns from any that humans have ever known.

Thus, in creating a written literature of place, writers in the U.S. dealt with a West that was explored, mapped, and increasingly crossed by railroads and interstate highways, dotted with ranches, towns, and cities. The interior of Australia, however, remains a landscape of the mind, to be invented and reinvented by writers. History, as Walker defines it, does not exist for central Australia, but it is ubiquitous in the western United States. Thus time and place take on entirely different connotations for the two areas, and the two regions produce markedly different literatures.

The Great Plains of North America, as these writers show, is not landlocked in terms of the influences and resonances of other lands. What we apprehend and what our historians, novelists, and poets have chosen to write about is influenced both by our global community and by the myths and symbols that shape what we think we want to know about the land and its peoples.

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