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AMERICAN PIONEER LANDSCAPES: AN INTRODUCTION

The concept of landscape is inseparable from the history and life of the Great Plains region. The idea encompasses the character of the physical environment in relation to the social, economic, and cultural changes mankind has wrought upon the land.

In the past twenty-five years, and in several apparently disparate disciplines, there has been a convergence of interest in the concept of landscape as geographers, historians, art historians, literary critics, anthropologists, and folklorists have worked to produce a much broader understanding of how landscapes are imagined, represented, created, and viewed by different cultures. Geographers in particular have studied the ways in which human groups have etched their distinctive cultures upon the surface of the land. Other scholars have broadened and enriched the concept to include the ways in which images of newly settled lands are formed in the minds of people and in which landscape preferences are transplanted by culture groups from one region to another.

The five essays in this issue were originally presented at the American Pioneer Landscapes symposium sponsored by the Center for Great Plains Studies, April 29 to May 1, 1981. Each treats the ways in which human

groups modify the landscape and stamp the surface of the earth with the marks of their culture. Our own culture, for example, will leave remains of tract housing, irrigation canals, windbreaks, roads, fences, and gravel pits as records of our technology and values.

David Lowenthal, the author of the first essay, has been a major contributor to the study of cultural landscapes. An American by birth and training who teaches at University College London, Lowenthal has stressed in his earlier writings the importance of taste in the process of landscape formation. Here he suggests that pioneering was an ambivalent business. Plains pioneers are frequently portrayed as the tamers of nature, but it is far from clear that they saw themselves in that light. Moreover, society was often highly critical of those who went out to conquer the wilderness.

The American pioneer was frequently seen as incompetent by contemporary easterners. In the seventeenth century, visitors from England were appalled at the lack of tidy woodland clearance. Lowenthal shows how eighteenth-century American commentators claimed that the westering pioneer was shiftless and lazy in his task of subduing the wilderness. On the plains, however, there was little

woodland to clear and partly for this reason the pioneers were depicted as heroes at an early stage. Settlers on the plains, like most pioneers, did not use the land intensively at first. Much ground was given over to grazing, and land in crops could be rested frequently to restore fertility. In the pioneer world, where land was plentiful and labor scarce, the settler preferred to take what the environment gave rather than to attempt to subdue nature. At the same time the plains pioneer yearned to create some familiar landscape features that had been a part of the man-made environments of Europe and eastern America.

John Opie, who teaches environmental history at Duquesne University, examines the heroic mythology that has emerged concerning the achievement of the pioneers in the past. Opie suggests that there are parallels in the way historians, such as Frederick Jackson Turner, and the painter Thomas Hart Benton produced archetypal pioneer landscapes and peopled them with American myths and heroes.

In hunting societies and in societies that practice limited agriculture, the environment is a god-given setting in which the rhythms of life unfold. Richard White, a historian at Michigan State University who specializes in Plains Indians, shows that the Pawnees did not make distinctions between practical and sacred activities and viewed the ecological niches that they utilized as linked holy places. Other Indian groups had similar beliefs about their world. The Pawnees' perception of the environment as the setting for life, rather than as a place of work, did not preclude the possibility of their inducing environmental change. They did so, as White shows, by overgrazing. Because they perceived the environment as a divine constant, they had difficulty in comprehending the fact

that group action could cause ecological change.

In his essay, John Hudson, professor of geography at Northwestern University, traces the brief history of railroad communities. Themselves distinctive plains artifacts, the towns reflect past facets of our culture. The remnants of many of these towns, now obsolete, lie on the land in a state of decay not sufficiently advanced to attract the interest of industrial archeologists.

The final essay in this issue is by John R. Milton, a literary historian and critic at the University of South Dakota. He shows how the sense of emptiness felt by pioneers is reflected in literary representations, for example, of the Great Plains as a sea of grass. In her *My Ántonia*, Willa Cather wrote, "There seemed to be nothing to see; no fences, no creeks or trees, no hills or fields. . . . there was nothing but land; not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made" (p. 7). Cather understood intuitively the idea of cultural landscapes and identified one of the most important elements in plains pioneer life—the need to create a landscape that contained familiar forms.

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