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Review of *The Destruction of the Bison: An Environmental History, 1750-1920* By Andrew C. Isenberg

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BOOK REVIEWS

The Destruction of the Bison: An Environmental History, 1750-1920. By Andrew C. Isenberg. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000. Illustrations, maps, index. xii + 206 pp. \$24.95.

The transformation of the Great Plains through the introduction of new plants and animals and the restriction or near-eradication of native species is one of the great environmental events of the past two hundred years. In *The Destruction of the Bison*, Andrew C. Isenberg describes the nineteenth-century decline and near-extinction of one species and early twentieth-century attempts to regenerate and reintroduce it to its former habitat. Isenberg deals with cultural, ecological, and economic factors, stressing the “volatile” nature of the Plains and declaring that “the destruction of the bison was not merely the result of human agency, but the consequence of the interaction of human societies with a dynamic environment.”

The bison’s digestive system made efficient use of nutritious short grasses; its size discouraged predators. Under favorable conditions, the grassland may have supported as many as thirty million of these ruminants. By the early 1800s, American Indians on the margins of the Plains had acquired horses and moved into the bison’s range, bringing pressure on the herds both by hunting and competing for forage. Euro-Americans and the steam engine soon entered the equation, with riverboats bearing away hundreds of thousands of robes traded by Indians and, in the 1870s and ’80s, railroads carrying the hide hunters’ harvest of raw skins east. Having all but finished off the bison, white Americans adopted two distinct attitudes towards the remnant: a handful of easterners valorized the animal as a symbol of the nation’s virile, expansionist past, while western ranchers bred it as a tourist attraction and sold its meat.

Besides human factors—most conspicuously industrial capitalism, which enmeshed Indians in the robe trade decades before commercial tanners discovered a way to turn raw bison hides into leather—Isenberg pays attention to the Plains climate and to what evidence there is of disease among the bison herds. His sources are unexceptionable for the most part, although in the chapter about hide hunters he relies too freely on reminiscences and popular articles, one of which apparently asserted that a .50-calibre rifle could fire “slugs weighing up to one pound.” One ounce, give or take a tiny fraction, was more like it. Minor flaws aside, *The Destruction of the Bison* is certain to stimulate discussion of its author’s conclusions and likely to remain a standard work of environmental history for years to come.

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