

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

Spring 2003

Review of *Common and Contested Ground: A Human and Environmental History of the Northwestern Plains* By Theodore Binnema

James E. Sherow

Kansas State University, jsherow@k-state.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

Sherow, James E., "Review of *Common and Contested Ground: A Human and Environmental History of the Northwestern Plains* By Theodore Binnema" (2003). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 2390.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/2390>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

BOOK REVIEWS

Common and Contested Ground: A Human and Environmental History of the Northwestern Plains. By Theodore Binnema. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001. xvi + 263 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, index. \$29.95.

Theodore Binnema's engaging ethno-historical account of the peoples who once lived upon the Northwestern Plains is an excellent study in human relationships. Organized in a straightforward manner, its first two chapters explore the ecosystems of the Northwestern Plains and how hunters developed their techniques over thousands of years. Next, Binnema recreates the trade systems and routes in the protohistorical period and offers a sensitive analysis of the evidence for warfare on the Plains prior to the appearance of horses. Based upon careful research in the archives of the Hudson's Bay Company, he recreates the economic and social intricacies of the fur trade. Subsequent chapters explain how the arrival of horses and guns in the region changed patterns of warfare, trade, and social organizations. Binnema's perceptive depiction of the smallpox epidemic of 1781 makes clear how the disease radically altered internal social structures within bands and the associations bands had with each other and Euroamerican traders.

Binnema emphasizes the fluid structure of culture and its sometimes internecine affairs.

He avoids the use of terms such as "tribe" and prefers "band," which underscores kinship networks, and observes that bands maintained shifting coalitions or associations with each other in response to changing economics, demographics, and environments. This approach shows the influence of Arthur Ray's ethno-historical works.

Many environmental relationships are thoroughly explored. Where horses flourished, for example, a band such as the Blackfeet tended to have a distinct advantage over the Gros Ventres, who lived in a zone where horses thrived less well. Binnema pays little attention, however, to how large herds altered the Northwestern Plains biome and the ecological relationships among people. The work of Pekka Hämäläinen could have proven useful as a model here. Binnema's treatment of fluctuations in wildlife populations from 1700 to 1806 is slight. James Shaw, Head of Zoology at Oklahoma State University, has worked out an interesting model of how these historical changes can be traced.

Nonetheless, Binnema provides a fascinating historical account of a region and its peoples too long neglected and poorly understood. His work is a welcome and sophisticated study of the Northwestern Great Plains.

JAMES E. SHEROW
Department of History
Kansas State University