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Review of *900 Miles from Nowhere: Voices from the Homestead Frontier*. By Steven R. Kinsella

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900 Miles from Nowhere: Voices from the Homestead Frontier. By Steven R. Kinsella. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2006. xi + 194 pp. Map, photographs, notes. \$29.95.

Steven R. Kinsella's work is an uneasy admixture. On the one hand it is fresh, because it goes to the grassroots, sampling the writings of settlers up and down the Plains. On the other it's stale, stereotypical. The documents, stirring as individual pieces, are arranged into categories and schema as predictable as they are questionable.

Plains pioneers were, the title says, 900 miles from nowhere. They were "sturdy and determined people" who battled a "harsh, inhospitable landscape," a place of "loneliness and homesickness." The "constant roar" of the wind "drove some settlers mad" on a day-to-day basis, while the "troublesome Great Plains climate" punctuated their miserable lives with tornadoes and dust storms. Most of the homesteaders failed, except for the hardy few who "had the will, the fortitude, and the means to endure what the Great Plains were capable of handing out." When, in the middle of the chapter entitled "The West Is No Place for Faint Hearts," a Norwegian homesteader is so bold as to say life on the Plains is much better than in the old country, Kinsella is quick to explain that this was because conditions were so oppressive in Norway—ignoring the homesteader's own descriptions of material prosperity and a rich social life in Dakota Territory.

Kinsella has cast a broad net, retrieving primary documents from repositories up and down the Plains. This is the strength of his book, and also its weakness. Pulling in the net, he decides which documents to keep and which to throw back. The ones he keeps he arranges in conventional fashion. What might have been a reinterpretation of the pioneer experience instead becomes a reiteration of it.

So the book is no better than the sum of its parts, that is, the primary documents reproduced; fortunately, many of these are stirring. From Fillmore County, Nebraska, Uriah W. Oblinger, who is homesteading with two other

bachelors, writes with appealing self-deprecation about their homemaking: "I have realized this winter more than ever before that it is not good for man to be alone," he mourns. When a homesteader named Alice in eastern Colorado describes her relationship with her hired man, the effect is hilarious: "I have decided not to marry," she concludes.

What if a researcher as assiduous as Kinsella were to delve into the primary materials with an intent not to confirm the conventional schema but rather to interrogate them? Such a researcher might ask, was pioneer life really lonely, or was it a time of egalitarian conviviality? The researcher might ask, when homesteaders sold out and left their claims, was this a matter of failure, or of profit? Most of all, the researcher might ask, are the Great Plains really a hostile environment? Just what the heck is an "inhospitable landscape"? This is another way of asking, were the settlers of the Plains dupes, or did they know something?

It is unfortunate the book ends with the misleading homily: "some aspects of the Great Plains will never change." The state of nature on the Plains, as elsewhere, is not stability, but transition. Kinsella had it right in the sentence immediately preceding when he said, "this is a place where you are constantly tested and never really in control." It is time, indeed, to cease controlling the narrative of the pioneer past, let the pioneers speak unconstrained by categories, and revel in the complexity of their experience.

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