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Review of *Wild Animals and Settlers on the Great Plains* by Eugene D. Fleharty

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Wild Animals and Settlers on the Great Plains. Eugene D. Fleharty. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995. xvii+316 pp. Illustrations, maps, bibliography, and index. \$27.95 cloth (ISBN 0-8061-2709-0).

Wild Animals and Settlers on the Great Plains is an informative but flawed book. As an example of environmental history written by a biologist unacquainted with the fundamentals of doing history, it fails to offer any theory (or theories) of history governing the time and place under scrutiny. What it does provide is a huge amount of information drawn from diaries, letters, and newspapers in an inadequately edited form. Lacking primary quantitative data, Eugene Fleharty, a zoologist at Fort Hays State University in Hays, Kansas, painstakingly provides a great deal of qualitative, albeit anecdotal, information about Euro-American settlement in Kansas and its effect on the native animal population. (Another problem is the title of the book, which purports to deal with the Great Plains but only examines Kansas. Fleharty explains that his state is representative, but I wonder if the impact on wildlife habitat of cattle ranches and cotton farms in Texas is the same as the wheat and sunflower fields of North Dakota, to say nothing of Canada.)

Fleharty's compilation of diary entries and journalistic accounts is informative, reasonably well organized (except for the overkill in excerpts in most every chapter), and often fascinating. But it also becomes tedious and begs deeper questions about settlers of largely European descent in an alien landscape. Perhaps conditioned by his scientific training, he stops short of interpreting in detail the intricacies of the settlers' attempt to recreate a humid-to-subhumid forest ecosystem (their European natural heritage) in a subhumid-to-semi-arid grassland in the New World. At one point in the preface he makes mention of how their commitment to crops and livestock promoted an "adversarial" relationship with nature, yet fails to explain the cultural history, mores, and power struggles that conditioned and created such a commitment. He also omits virtually all mention of native peoples and their relationships to the settlers, invaders in their eyes. An analysis of these interactions could be done from a socio-biological/anthropological perspective or from a historical and socio-economic perspective, or both. The latter might examine the relationship between these two peoples as a values-driven conflict between technologically and spiritually disparate cultures. The former might emphasize the carrying capacity of the land under two different kinds of technology and social structure and make inferences about the drive to dominance in each culture.

Combining these two approaches might yield insight into the role of biological change within the historical period since the advent of agriculture and writing. For Fleharty, humans are viewed mostly, and implicitly, in terms of the nineteenth-century mentality of the settlers themselves: as largely apart from nature, even though they began to alter their habits as more and more wildlife was destroyed. They are largely represented as unconscious of their effects on the environment, rather than as people making choices about species and habitats with some emerging understanding of their consequences, yet making them nonetheless because of a set of values and traditions that supported those choices and not others. What is lacking here is a hermeneutic approach, a way of interpreting texts that brings the current social, political, and cultural assumptions of a given culture into play and interprets them in light of present knowledge. (One could object to this criticism as hostile to the book's intent, which is perhaps simply to offer a compilation of historical accounts of wildlife. Even so, the nature of such an effort should be given in a subtitle at least, and much of the commentary in the preface, introduction, and epilogue dispensed with if the book is solely an editorial compilation.)

Crucial questions are being begged here: Are humans part of nature? If so, what part? What synergistic, cybernetic relationships govern their interactions with nature? And if humans are perceived as merely another part of nature, just omnivores with tremendous appetites, how do we account for their need to create value systems, to extend morals to the natural world to deal with their extraordinary power over it? These are not easy questions for anyone—theologians, philosophers, historians, *or* biologists—but they need to be acknowledged and addressed.

As a "naive" historian, Fleharty does offer a short analysis of changes in the prairie ecosystem wrought by settlement, briefly in the preface and at greater length in the epilogue. In the preface he gives a thumbnail sketch of the transition from hunting and gathering to agriculture, characterizing this change as promoting an adversarial relationship instead of one "in harmony" with nature. The activities of primitive societies, he says, "have little effect on the integrity and stability of the entire ecosystem" (p. xi). Such an analysis supports conventional wisdom but ignores certain key anthropological and biological issues. Primitive hunters in the New World probably hunted proboscideans (ancient elephants and relatives) to extinction. Native peoples set many more prairie fires, mostly for hunting, than lightning did and so altered the grassland. And Euro-Americans began to alter their ways as they began to extirpate ever more wildlife.

In the epilogue, Fleharty offers a cursory analysis of the social and ecological forces causing a decrease in native animal populations and points to changes that allowed some populations of small mammals to increase. The decrease, he explains, was due to five main causes: cheap land, which, if abused, could always be forsaken for more elsewhere; the inability of settlers to conceive of the possibility that such huge numbers of mammals and birds, mounting in the millions for most species, could ever be exhausted; the impact of agriculture, which produced direct competition for wildlife habitat; the impact of recreational and commercial hunting and fishing, as well as pest control, and its supplementary effect in eradicating wildlife; and changes in riparian habitat brought on by dam-building and other water-conservation methods occasioned by drought. These changes diminished habitat for water birds as spring scouring floods were curbed and riparian woodlands flourished.

The book is intelligently organized: an introduction; then "History, Ecology, and Impressions," the only central chapter containing more of Fleharty's writing than excerpts; followed by "Hunting and Fishing for Food, Market, and Recreation," "Pleasures and Fascinations," "Nuisances, Hazards, and Dangers," and "Concerns for Wildlife"; and concluding with the epilogue. Each chapter delivers intriguing, insightful glimpses into the relationship of the pioneers to native wildlife, as well as offering much good writing (however dated), good humor, and even some good advice, given their state of knowledge, on how to control insects, pests, or human predation. This preponderance of data, however, is no greater help to the reader than more limited excerpts would be; nor does it help establish the researcher's credibility, as it might in science. One is left wondering why Fleharty is so hesitant to tackle the knotty issues and do the difficult analyses.

In his epilogue, Fleharty notes that during settlement small mammals increased, while grazing mammals declined. He lists the house mouse, the Norway rat, spotted skunks, barn swallows, barn owls, and house sparrows as the beneficiaries but does not comment on the effects or desirability of these species. In addition, he notes the progression from extirpation and near-extirpation to more and more restrictive wildlife laws and then to reintroduction of some species by the state. A strict tallying of pluses and minuses, however, is also naive history and, while putatively valueless, is in fact a casual nod to the status quo.

The classic examination of similar relationships is William Cronon's *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England*

(1983), perhaps the definitive treatment in environmental history of the complexities of settlement and its ecological consequences, the one against which most others must be measured. And it does so without demonizing the colonists or glorifying the natives. Both groups had profound effects on the land and had to cope with the consequences.

Fleaharty has an adequate grasp of the biological facts, but the book would have benefitted greatly from the collaboration of a historical human geographer or an environmental historian, preferably the latter. **Charles A. Flowerday**, *Conservation and Survey Division, University of Nebraska-Lincoln*.