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## Review of *Of Bison and Man* by Harold P. Danz

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**Of Bison and Man.** Harold P. Danz. Niwot: University Press of Colorado, 1997. vii+231pp. Illustrations, bibliography, index. \$32.50 cloth (ISBN 0-87081-454-0).

Because plains bison have come to symbolize open spaces and freedom to Americans, as well as past ecological insensitivity, stories about them have widespread appeal. Harold Danz's contribution to this large and growing literature is an overview, a brief treatment of the animal's evolution, demise, and eventual recovery. Mr. Danz brings a varied background to his writing: long-time service with the National Park Service, a PhD, and the first executive directorship of the American Bison Association (ABA). This experience produces an unusual book, one that mixes detached analysis with enthusiastic promotion. The promotion sections, in my opinion, are the most successful.

The first half of the text relates basic facts of bison biology, nomenclature, population, and predators. None of this material is original, and it is presented in a flat manner reminiscent of a mediocre high-school text. The best parts of this section are the frequent quotations from nineteenth-century journals, and where the author lets down his scholarly guard. He asserts, for example, that the bison symbolizes the untamed West better than the bear, deer, or wolf because it "does not slink in shadows and darkness [but] . . . courageously occupies the land!" (p. 13)

The passions largely hidden in the first half of the book are loosed in the second where the discussion turns to the commercial production of bison. Mr. Danz is pragmatic on this point, claiming that to preserve the animals, "the best thing we can do is eat them" (p. x). He begins with an informative chapter on early attempts to protect bison by placing them on ranches and federal reserves. This is followed by the heart of the book, an

insightful twenty-five-page account of the problems and potentials of bison ranching today. Final chapters look at the animals kept on public lands and on issues for the future.

A census conducted by the ABA in 1992 revealed 125,600 bison in the United States, a remarkable recovery from the low point of 500-600 animals at the turn of the century. Just as remarkable, perhaps, is that 109,000 of these animals were in private herds and that 10,800 were slaughtered in 1992 for meat. The growing market for bison meat is interesting, and the author describes it well. Producers have lower veterinary bills compared with cattle and a product that is low in calories, fat, and cholesterol, but also seems to be nonallergenic. Countering these advantages are problems of small-scale facilities at every phase of production, a lack of research to support the nutritional claims needed to qualify for the marketing standards set by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and a lack of information sharing among individualistic ranchers.

For readers wanting a comprehensive, yet thoroughly readable account of the plains bison, the standard still remains David A. Dary's *The Buffalo Book: The Full Saga of the American Animal* (Chicago: Sage Books, 1989). The Danz book fails to rival Dary on any historical subjects, and is superior only in its discussions of current marketing and census issues. Had the entire text been devoted to these latter themes, it would have been a much more valuable addition to the literature. **James R. Shortridge**, *Department of Geography, University of Kansas*.