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## Review Essay: Encyclopedia of the Great Plains

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## LITERARY TRADITIONS

The *Encyclopedia of the Great Plains* is a terrific soapbox for Plains historians, teachers, writers, and residents. I'm not referring only to its size—though standing on it would elevate one nicely for fervent speechmaking.

No, I mean it's the best advertisement I've seen lately for Great Plains reality. The nation's central region has been ignored, abused, misunderstood, and trampled. This collection represents the ardent efforts by the finest scholars in the country to analyze it with respect—even affection—and portray it without the romanticism that has colored too many views.

Even in the homesteading era, public interest in the Great Plains has never been higher, and information available to us just keeps

getting better. Scholars are delving into our geography and ecology; historians are rewriting the past; and writers of fiction, nonfiction, and poetry are recording their own versions of Plains experience. The competition to claim a Plains voice, to clarify misconceptions, and to establish an air of authority is becoming more intense.

"Whatever stories the wolves tell," writes Frances W. Kaye, "they do not tell to human ears." Kaye's introduction to my favorite chapter, "Literary Traditions," begins quite properly with sagas from the land's first inhabitants. On a quiet morning, you may hear the old hunting and gathering songs in the wind through the grass. But most were never written down, so they

are not part of the official record. Haunted by these gaps, Kaye deftly reviews what is known of the oral traditions of Indians and Mexicans, and sums up some of the most striking spiritual beliefs of nearly a dozen tribes.

Most of the earliest writings we have are the observations of explorers. I suspect that most were searching for products to sell, so their writings are more practical than poetic—a characteristic that still stamps many Plains writers. Recorded Plains fiction began with *The Prairie*, the perfect symbol for the elusiveness of truth on the Plains. Writing in Paris, James Fenimore Cooper had never been west of the Alleghenies; he created a best seller from ignorance, misinformation, and exaggeration, setting a pattern that is unfortunately persistent. Even when the truth is obvious, some folks prefer a fancy fiction.

Like most Americans—even we who consider ourselves literary—I am abysmally ignorant of the cultures sharing this continent with we immigrant whites. Of course, my excuse is that rarely are Americans taught to consider the entire continent as relevant to our lives, so we rarely find information about Indians, Mexicans, or Canadians in our schools or news. People whose information comes exclusively from popular TV news programs may know more about countries on the other side of the globe than about tribal people in the same state. This book, properly used, can go a long way toward remedying our ignorance about these civilizations.

For example, Canadian prairie fiction, says Kaye, was largely written by the people most ignored in American fiction: women and preachers. She briefly surveys fiction by Native peoples, along with Plains poetry and drama, before concluding that “the starkness of land and sky will encourage dreamers to write more of what we call Plains literature.”

Following the introduction, essays of a few hundred words on relevant topics are arranged with profiles of individual writers in an alphabetized list, each one signed by the contributor and followed by a few references so readers can pursue the subject. The simplest, clearest way

to show the breadth of the chapter is to list the essay subjects:

- Children's Literature
- Cowboy Poetry
- Dust Bowl Literature
- Immigrant Literature
- Literary Criticism
- Little Magazines
- Memoirs
- Mountie Stories
- Native American Literature
- Nature Writing
- Oral Traditions
- Poetry
- Publishing Houses
- Small Presses
- Travel Literature
- The Western

Several other topics—“Captivity Narratives,” “Literary Architecture,” “Personal Experience Narratives,” “Plains Indian Narratives,” and “Promotional Literature”—lead the reader to discussions in other chapters. “Captivity Narratives,” for example, are discussed in the “Gender” chapter. In the chapter on “Folkways,” we learn more about “Personal Experience Narratives,” though how they differ from “Memoirs” may remain a bit murky.

The need for careful explanations and meticulous cross-referencing must have caused many editorial headaches. Perhaps the first drafts of essays on “Little Magazines,” “Publishing Houses,” and “Small Presses” presented some overlap, since each was written by a different authority. Ruthless editing and persnickety attention to detail avoid repetition and provide clues to lead a reader to the information she needs. Each of these reports now provides material on a different aspect of Plains publishing, and may even help a reader refine a search.

These general accounts are augmented by essays on individuals: fifty-eight writers. Most such lists result from almost endless debate. How many Canadians? Hispanic Americans? Men? (Thirty-one, revealing what I counted first!) Numbers alone, however, are meaningless.

Any reviewer makes judgments focused through our own expertise and prejudices. If we are able to note an error or omission, we feel vindicated, having demonstrated that our opinions are worthy of notice. Therefore, I spent days reading, and reflecting while doing other things. Peeling potatoes for lunch, I would drop my knife and run upstairs shouting a name or fact I thought the editors might have missed. Again and again, if I couldn't find an entry in "Literary Traditions," I found a reference elsewhere. Finally, I concluded that the writers list is intelligently inclusive. Any reviewer could name writers who might have been included. But not being in the list doesn't mean a writer wasn't considered desirable. Often I found writers I thought worthy mentioned somewhere else in the volume.

Most people will use this book efficiently, in the way it is designed to be used: to look up a topic and follow the references to additional information in other sources. The book's completeness makes this approach worthwhile. But I also encourage readers to browse, though the book's size, weight, and small print may make it awkward to take to bed. "Literary Architecture," I mumbled. "What in the world is that?" Diane Quantic's explanatory essay broadened my perspective on the idea of place in Plains writing.

Strangers who think the Plains are flat and simplistic often get lost on the rolling prairies. In that spirit, I didn't always find a writer quite where I expected, but the index usually led me to a reference. Kathleen Norris isn't profiled, but is included with nature writers and credited for coining the phrase "spiritual geography." Diane Glancy and Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, two Indian writers I respect, are mentioned in "Small Presses." Loren Eiseley is not in "Literary Traditions," but is the only writer profiled in the "Physical Environment" chapter. Some writers aren't indexed, but are mentioned in an appropriate section. Dan O'Brien, a South Dakota falconer who writes fiction and nonfiction, appears among nature writers. A little patient browsing can disclose considerable information even about obscure writers and topics.

Plains women were required to "multitask" long before someone invented that frigid term, so many of these women are known for several types of writing, or for writing as well as for other contributions to the culture. Laura Ingalls Wilder, for example, is not only profiled in "Literary Traditions," but is discussed in chapters on "Folkways" and "Images and Icons."

In some cases, however, I searched in vain for material I expected to find. There is no citation for the winter count painted by Lakota historian Amos Bad Heart Bull, described by Helen Blish and buried in 1947 with Bad Heart Bull's sister. The document's fate is a potent symbol of the different ways Indians and whites view creation and documentation, and thus of the differences persisting today. Checking the "Native Americans" chapter, though, I was impressed by the amount of information provided. Disappointingly, the *Encyclopedia* designates the Lakota people as Sioux in indexes, though the chapter does explain that like most other Indian people today, they prefer tribal band names.

Charles Badger Clark, South Dakota's first poet laureate, was not included as a "cowboy poet" though the term was probably first applied to him, and his work remains among its finest examples. Horsemwomen who write have explained to me that "cowboy" is a verb describing their work, but no women are listed with the modern cowboy poets. Rhoda Sivell, a Canadian, and Peggy Simpson Curry might have been cited as the writing ancestors of today's Thelma Poirier, Canadian, and Americans Yvonne Hollenbeck and Elizabeth Ebert, all worthy of mention.

The most significant omissions I discovered, however, were those of scholar and writer John R. Milton and *The South Dakota Review*. I was an undergraduate at the University of South Dakota when he founded the *Review*. Ironically, his was one of the earliest and most eloquent voices insisting that Great Plains culture was worthy of study. He'd be delighted with the *Encyclopedia*.

Sometimes I found the handling of a reference significant in other ways. Nationally

known Ian Frazier, for example, is not among the Great Plains writers profiled, though several scholars mention his work. One says that his *Great Plains* offers “a sense of both consequence and urgency for getting the details right.” Since I’ve seen some ill effects from Frazier’s misinformation, and since blending fact and fiction seems to be gaining in popularity, I wish that statement had been stronger—but it’s there for the reader alert to its meaning.

I found a few jarring terms and phrases—“gendered alternatives,” “revisited”—but most of the contributors resisted the use of the kind of jargon that will, in years to come, date their writing as a product of The Age of Therapy.

Though my MA in American Literature is decades old, I recall professors who sneered at the idea of a Great Plains culture. They weren’t encouraging to women scholars, either, which is not really a different story. I abandoned PhD studies to return to the Northern Great Plains to teach, write, and ranch. Since then, I’ve read everything I could find about this place where I live and work. So I expected the *Encyclopedia* to confirm some of my beliefs and challenge others—and it did. Despite a few fragments of information that may have been missed, this

is already proving to be one of my most useful reference works.

The volume is weighty proof that the Plains should not be regarded as the “cultural wasteland” some folks still think it is. Even when we thought the literature of our European ancestors should dictate our standards of excellence, people on the Plains tried to be culturally aware. Now that we have finally learned to respect the culture of those who first and continuously inhabit a particular place, and have learned not to judge by European or metropolitan standards alone, our experience as readers is much richer. Kaye predicts that Plains dwellers of the future will have a stronger bent toward community and a more “multicultural point of view.” Already, I can see the future being shaped by this collection.

Too bad it can’t be required reading in every real estate office selling ranchettes on the Great Plains, and in every small town looking for more residents. Newcomers who chose to move to the Plains after a little required reading in the *Encyclopedia* would be better prepared to appreciate its lyricism and beauty as well as to face some of its harsh truths.

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