

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and
Social Sciences

Great Plains Studies, Center for

Fall 2012

REVIEW ESSAY: AN ATLAS TO BE READ FROM COVER TO COVER

Harm J. de Blij
Michigan State University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsresearch>



Part of the [American Studies Commons](#), and the [Geography Commons](#)

de Blij, Harm J., "REVIEW ESSAY: AN ATLAS TO BE READ FROM COVER TO COVER" (2012). *Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and Social Sciences*. 1233.

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsresearch/1233>

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 Research: A Journal of Natural and Social Sciences by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

REVIEW ESSAY

Atlas of the Great Plains. By Stephen J. Lavin, Fred M. Shelley, and J. Clark Archer. Foreword by David J. Wishart. Introduction by John C. Hudson. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2011. xvi + 335 pp. Maps, illustrations, bibliography. \$39.95 cloth.

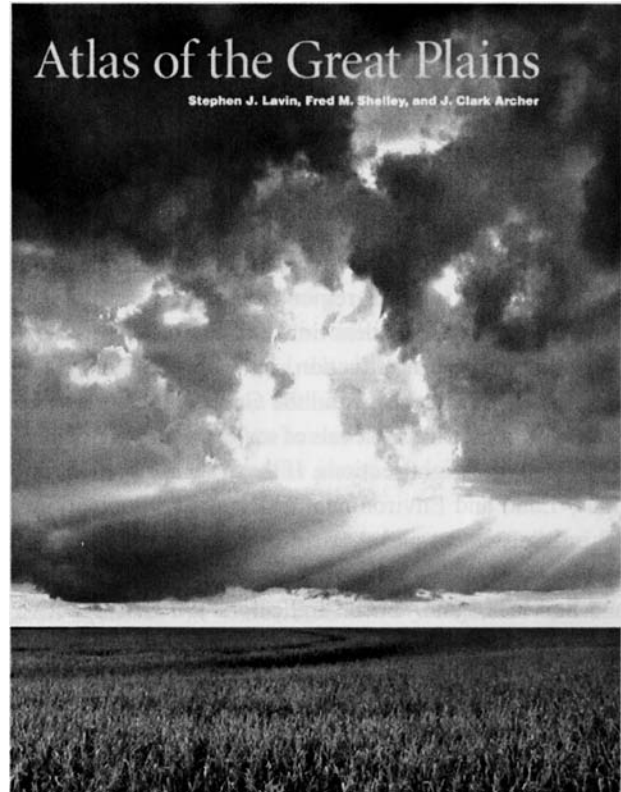
AN ATLAS TO BE READ FROM COVER TO COVER

In New York earlier this year I found myself embroiled in a vigorous dinner-party debate over the supposedly declining prospects of printed books, journals, and newspapers. The majority view was that “electronic media” would consign such “products” to the dustbin of history; and as to maps and atlases, surely these would likewise disappear. Certainly the current National Geographic *Atlas of the World* would be the Society’s last. Why would anyone need an unwieldy atlas when you can bring up any map on any topic at any scale on your computer screen?

This magnificent, magisterial, sumptuous volume would have silenced even the most ardent advocate of the demise of yet another intellectual symbol of Western civilization. It is an atlas, but it is far more than an assemblage of maps. It is a book, but the narrative is far more than an effective guide to the cartography. It is also unique, even daring in its conception.

Atlases tend to cover familiar geographic ground: the world, or a continent, occasionally a region (such as Western Europe), often a country (many countries still publish “national” atlases), sometimes a subunit such as a province or a state. In the United States, several state atlases form excellent examples of the last: veritable coffee-table, multicolor, glossy promotion pieces for the states they represent.

But comparatively few atlases focus on a geographic concept. This is a risky proposition: gone is the safety of an insular continent, an assembly of contiguous countries, or the political boundary of a state or province. The regional concept of a Great Plains evokes countless interpretations. Give a hundred informed North Americans each an outline map of the continent and ask them all to draw their conception of the Great Plains region, and you will get one hundred different interpretations. Most would probably be aware that the Great Plains region extends from Texas into Canada. All would know that some states lie entirely within the Great Plains and that others are bisected by the region’s boundary, no matter where it is perceived to lie. That, however, is where the



Cover of the *Atlas of the Great Plains*, University of Nebraska Press, 2011.

consensus ends. In his introduction, John C. Hudson presents a map showing fifty published versions of the Great Plains boundary (2). Take the outer limits, and the Great Plains extends from Mexico to the Northwest Territories and from eastern Oregon to western Wisconsin. Thus the Great Plains Reference Map, the framework for the entire enterprise, is of special interest (18). Who would know that Fort Worth lies within the Great Plains, but Dallas lies outside? Or that Cheyenne is in, but Laramie is out?

Conceptual regions, being mental constructs, tend to have smooth, sweeping outlines, as is the case with every one of Hudson’s fifty, and with the map of the Great Plains region originally drawn by the doyen of American Great Plains geographers, David J. Wishart

(12). But the regional boundary on the Reference Map is jagged, reflecting one of the challenges the atlas makers confronted: the problem of data. The atlas is replete with thematic maps, and county data were crucial in constructing these. So the regional boundary's angular appearance reflects an inescapable quantitative imperative as image is translated into reality. As such, it delimits a region that includes the southern half of Saskatchewan and adjacent corners of Alberta and Manitoba, the eastern sectors of Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, and New Mexico, all of North and South Dakota, Nebraska, and Kansas, and most of western Oklahoma and Texas. It is a vast region but, as the jacket blurb asserts, it is "a region that has been understudied and overlooked."

The magnificent *Atlas of the Great Plains* will do much to change this. If you think of an atlas as a place to look something up, think again. This is an atlas to be read from cover to cover. It constitutes a comprehensive prospectus of a vibrant region geographic diversity of which will surprise readers time and again.

Following the introduction, in which boundary and data issues are addressed and the Great Plains Reference Map is presented at two levels of scale, the atlas is topically divided into eight sections. If these sections seem routine ("Land and Environment," "History," "Population," "Rural Settlement and Agriculture," "Urban Settlement and Economy," "Politics and Government," "Recreation and Services," and "Social Indicators"), their respective components are anything but. More than 300 maps, aptly described in Wishart's foreword as "not only significant analytically but also works of art" (xiii), depict items such as tornado tracks, the diffusion of horses among Native American tribes, population ancestries, the diffusion of irrigation, the Wal-Mart invasion, political-party allegiance, symphony orchestras (paired with rodeos!), and crime rates. Many of these topics presented difficult cartographic challenges: how to show FM radio stations and their range? Or hospital accessibility? Or water loss (and gain) in aquifers?

Importantly, although more than 300 map pages are listed in the table of contents, this atlas contains about double that number of individual maps. For example, under the rubric of "Population," the table of contents lists 24 maps, but many of these consist of sets of two or even four, showing historical or other comparative details. In fact, the "Population" rubric contains 61 discrete maps in addition to several diagrams. The *Atlas of the Great Plains* is a veritable mine of information, and there is more to it even than the front matter promises.

In some especially inventive maps, for example one showing daily newspaper circulation (239), the Great Plains region is set in its wider spatial context. Regional newspapers published in the Great Plains are also read beyond its borders, and some newspapers published outside the region have significant readership within. These maps display the region's entire external periphery, not only in complete coverage of the states and provinces within the Great Plains, but also of neighboring states from Minnesota to Louisiana. By reflecting the region's influences beyond its borders as well as external forces radiating inward, such maps yield valuable insights.

Readers will detect some variation in the effectiveness of the coverage under the eight major rubrics. Dramatic scenery may not, by some definitions, be one of the attributes of the Great Plains, but the series of maps and instructive text describing the region's physiography are superb, notably those of elevation, topography, drainage, ecology, and aquifers. The map of ecological provinces (31) is one of those set in wider regional context, showing nearly 30 ecologies of which a dozen have a presence within the Great Plains border. The troubling fate of the High Plains Aquifer is dramatically depicted on a map that will give all readers pause (32). If the section on climate lacks the Köppen regionalization that can be so effective in conveying prevailing regimes and misses an opportunity to depict air-mass synoptics in this infamous funnel between tundra and tropics, it is nevertheless enhanced by vivid displays of two of the Great Plains region's major environmental challenges: tornadoes and hailstorms (43).

Lucid and efficient narrative and splendid maps make Great Plains history come alive in unexpected ways. So much has happened in this vast expanse—*Atlas* coverage ends before the end of the nineteenth century—that this is of necessity a selective presentation, but there is a wealth of information. Maps of the diffusion of horses among Native American peoples (50), the fragments of reservation (52), the tragic decline and adulteration of the American Bison (55 and 56), the drama of exploration (60–64), and the advent of military forts and trading posts, railroads, and the beginnings of modern settlement are chronicled on maps one does not find in the usual atlas. The "Population" rubric follows logically, and in these nearly fifty pages authors and cartographers excel. Guided by engaging text, readers will trace two centuries of changes in regional population density, changing patterns of ethnicity, demographics,

and European ancestries (the last on 120 and 121) that will hold some surprises for many.

In this era of modernization and globalization, it can be difficult to render “Rural Settlement and Agriculture” as a fascinating topic, and in truth this is not the atlas’s most arresting section. While comprehensive on the large issues (wheat cultivation, as the authors say, for many people is synonymous with the Great Plains) and presenting some revealing cartography on the historic expansion of farmland and the spread of irrigation, there is little here about soil types and the particular difficulties Great Plains environments present to farmers. I was surprised to find a section on “miscellaneous crops” without any reference to my favorite: the wine grape. Every state in the Great Plains has a wine industry, and the Texas wine industry in particular has achieved national recognition. This would have been a good way to enliven these pages.

“Urban Settlement and Economy,” the next section, is a treasure trove of information, starting with three memorable illustrations (two of them maps) and eight pages of productive text. A map of metropolitan and micropolitan areas reveals the inaccuracy of a Great Plains conceptualized as a vast, sparsely populated rural area (158), but the regional border superimposed on a “North America at Night” satellite image confirms that the region’s major metropolitan areas are located on its fringes (159). And the map showing businesses and institutions using “Great Plains” in their names displays an interesting geographic asymmetry. This section naturally focuses on industry and employment, and pie charts dated a half-century apart reveal a quite momentous economic transformation. Also featured under this rubric are income variations, retail giants, and energy production, all depicted on more than 40 (rather than 22 listed) maps. Again the atlas delivers far more than its table of contents promises.

The final three sections of the *Atlas of the Great Plains* constitute in many ways the volume’s apogee. Another stereotype of this region is that its politics are overwhelmingly conservative and dominantly Republican, but 16 maps of U.S. presidential elections in the Great Plains states (1860–2008) and 14 maps of national legislative elections in the United States and Canada (1870–2000) indicate otherwise.

No atlas of the Great Plains region would be complete without some reference to football, but the first four maps under the rubric of “Recreation and Services” address symphony orchestras, rodeos, historic landmarks of national import, and powwows. Football, baseball, and basketball get their cartographic due, but only after women’s

NCAA sports teams are mapped (250). This section ends with three fascinating maps showing the Great Plains birthplaces of selected artists, performers, and writers. Prepare, again, to be surprised.

Yet the section that will undoubtedly provoke more discussion than any other is titled “Social Indicators,” with a range of mapped topics as broad as it is contentious. Great Plains states do not rank high on the ladder of public school teacher salaries, a circumstance with serious social consequences (277). Canadian sectors of the Great Plains region display far higher rates of robbery and vehicle theft than the “lower” Great Plains. Prisoner incarceration rates in the Canadian sector are much lower than in the U.S. sector. (Is there a lesson here?) Violent crime rates in the U.S. Great Plains are much higher in the south than in the north. The three maps and an accompanying chart on capital punishment and its spatial manifestations will provoke much debate. So, undoubtedly, will the five maps that follow the series on religious adherence: abortions, infant mortality, births to teenage mothers, and the distribution of poverty for the general population and separately for those under age 18. Especially effective narrative explains what the maps display, but there remains plenty of scope for discussion and alternative assessment.

And that is just one of the many dimensions of this spectacular achievement. This is an atlas that educates and informs, but it also is admirably objective and does not conceal flaws past or present, from the fates of Native American peoples to issues of abortion and capital punishment. Even as the *Atlas of the Great Plains* erases faulty and dated stereotypes about this region, it also focuses on real and current problems and their spatial manifestations.

Preparing for this review I began by scanning the volume and stopping to read several especially interesting maps, finding myself riveted and, it seemed, on a journey of discovery. It has often been said about books, but perhaps never about an atlas, “I could not put it down once I had opened it.” Nor has any atlas ever enhanced my knowledge of any region as greatly as this one has. There can be no doubt about it: no region, certainly in North America and perhaps in the world, is as well served as is the Great Plains region by this monumental work. Its nearly 30-page bibliography is an invaluable resource all by itself. Still, any atlas is an exercise in emphasis, and opinions may differ as to the balance of content in the *Atlas of the Great Plains*: gender contrasts (for example in the employment section) would have added significantly

to the mix and could have strengthened the population section. Given the length and detail of the narrative section, consideration might have been given to the inclusion of an index.

But these are minor caveats. This matchless work should serve as a textbook for college and university courses on the Great Plains region not only in institutions within the Great Plains, but, one hopes, elsewhere in North America as well. It will undoubtedly serve as a template for other projects of this kind elsewhere on the continent. The acknowledgments section forms a reminder of the numerous contributors and talents required to ensure the success of a massive publishing project of this kind, and I congratulate the University of Nebraska

Press not only on its superb production, but specifically on its choice of the glossy, opaque paper without which the maps (often on back-to-back pages) could not have looked the way they do.

I only wish I'd had a copy of this volume that argumentative evening in New York.

HARM J. DE BLIJ

John A. Hannah Professor of Geography
Michigan State University

Professor de Blij is the author of more than 30 books, including the recently revised Why Geography Matters: More than Ever (Oxford University Press, 2012).