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Review of *Light on the Prairie: Solomon D. Butcher, Photographer of Nebraska's Pioneer Days* By Nancy Plain

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readily argued that in the century since this time, no other photographs have become as ubiquitous in histories of the American West. And yet, in comparison, very little has been written on these photographs explicitly or on their maker. Nancy Plain's *Light on the Prairie* joins a handful of other publications to remedy this omission.

Plain has an enviable gift for storytelling; conveying an empathetic sense of just who Butcher was and what his world was like is a remarkable strength of this book. Descriptive passages quietly transport readers to any number of singular, solitary moments that were, until our reading, muted by the distance of time. Such passages beautifully evoke the environment of the Plains, the communal world that settled there, and Butcher's somewhat misfit character as its recorder. Plain's story stays close to the participants, with ample quotes from and references to the actual settlers in Butcher's photographs.

This very strength also contributes to the book's limitations. *Light on the Prairie* would have benefited by a more critical analysis of the story of settlement it tells and the reason Butcher's photographs are important to this story. Butcher would be no more notable than any other of the thousands of settlers in Custer County except for his photographs. They deserve, therefore, a more active role in the book than they receive—as nearly unremarked upon, unscrutinized illustrations. The vignettes of human content they capture—a child hugging his muddy dog, a family squinting into a gust of Nebraska grit, a row of flowers proudly displayed in a soddy window—are visual “descriptive passages” equal to Plain's writing. Including a few select details would have greatly enriched the story. Plain's narrative and many of Butcher's photographs tell the story of the winners, of those pioneers whose names and histories we still know because they managed to remain through the drought of the 1890s. The photographs also show the rarely conveyed story of those who didn't “win,” of those whose names are lost, whose tattered clothing and lack of implements and livestock reveal the cost of settlement even though they weren't able to remain to tell their story. As evocative and honestly compelling as Plain's story about Butcher is, it could

Light on the Prairie: Solomon D. Butcher, Photographer of Nebraska's Pioneer Days. By Nancy Plain. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012. xi + 113 pp. Photographs, notes, bibliography. \$16.95 paper.

In 1886, Custer County photographer Solomon Butcher conceived a plan to create a photographic history of the pioneer era of the county. Though his dream never made him the fortune he had hoped, it did result, in 1913, in the deposit of more than 3,000 glass-plate negatives with the Nebraska State Historical Society. It can be

have been told more profoundly through closer attention to the photographs themselves and to the richer story of Butcher's world.

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