

Great Plains Bison

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vides insightful suggestions about how and why certain persons or entities wield the power not only to preserve battlefields but also to interpret those sites for the public at large. With so many Civil War memory studies populating academic discourse recently, Smith has commendably added battlefield preservation policy as yet another concept influenced by Americans' contentious relationship with the war's legacy.

Great Plains Bison, by Dan O'Brien. Discover the Great Plains Series. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017. xiii, 150 pp. Illustrations, maps, appendix, bibliography, index. \$14.95 paperback.

Reviewer Gregory J. Dehler is a history instructor at Front Range Community College. He is the author of *The Most Defiant Devil: William Temple Hornaday and His Controversial Crusade to Save American Wildlife* (2013).

The decline of the American bison, more commonly referred to as the buffalo, is a well-known story. At one point as many as 30 million buffalo thundered across the Great Plains and beyond, but by 1890 only a handful of wild animals remained in its vast former range. Dan O'Brien does not introduce any new research on this historical drama but brings a fresh perspective as a South Dakota buffalo rancher. His love and appreciation of the animal and its natural habitat come through the pages of *Great Plains Bison*. As part of the University of Nebraska Press's Discover the Great Plains series, this slim volume of just over 100 pages is an introduction designed to be a quick-reading historical and ecological overview of the bioregion's keystone species.

Even though tens of millions of buffalo ranged through the Great Plains, the region always seemed vacant to successive waves of white settlers. According to the prevailing mindset, elimination of the buffalo was a prerequisite to settlement and development. But without the buffalo, the flora and fauna of the region were likewise destroyed, with disastrous ecological consequences. Cattle ranches were the first to fill the void, but the inhospitable Great Plains, with its blizzards and droughts, ended that experiment. Throughout the twentieth century chemical-intensive industrial agriculture expanded to almost every available acre, replacing the native environment with a regime of imported crops and animals that were protected by artificial fertilizers, herbicides, and pesticides, and supported by government policies and subsidies.

O'Brien's strongest chapters are the ones on agriculture, land use and transformation, and ranching, which are clearly the subjects the author knows the best. He shares several personal, almost spiritual, observations from his career as a buffalo rancher, which are the most thought-provoking and valuable aspects of the book. His closing chapter calls for greater respect for the buffalo and the environment.

He practices what he preaches. O'Brien's ranch follows a free-range, sustainable approach, unlike the mass herding typical of the cattle industry. As he summarizes his view, "A buffalo that does not move at least a few miles per day is not a buffalo" (99). To some extent, *Great Plains Bison* reads as an extended explanation of why he treats his herd the way he does. (Readers can access his personal website at www.wildideabuffalo.com for more information.)

The chapters on Native Americans and the conservation of the buffalo are a little weaker, with several minor errors, such as referring to the 1848 Free Soil Party as a coalition of Democrats and Republicans (the latter did not yet exist as a political party) and stating that the American Bison Society supplied the animals for the Wichita Bison Preserve, the nation's first (it was the New York Zoological Society). Both are topics with an expansive literature and historiography that are underrepresented in the bibliography.

For those with little knowledge of the history of the buffalo or the Great Plains, O'Brien provides a handy introduction to the subject, although without reference notes and with only a small, somewhat dated bibliography, readers might struggle to find where to go from here if they wish to read more. Readers already familiar with the buffalo may also find value in O'Brien's telling of the story.

Homesteading the Plains: Toward a New History, by Richard Edwards, Jacob K. Friefeld, and Rebecca S. Wingo. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017. vi, 294 pp. Illustrations, maps, tables, graphs, charts, appendixes, notes, bibliography, index. \$45.00 hardcover.

Reviewer Paula M. Nelson is professor of history emeritus at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville. She is the author of *After the West Was Won: Homesteaders and Town-Builders in Western South Dakota, 1900–1917* (1986) and *The Prairie Winnows Out Its Own: The West River Country of South Dakota in the Years of Depression and Dust* (1996).

In 1873 D. John Johnson, his wife, Kristina, and their two children left Dalarna, Sweden, and emigrated to Minnesota. After working awhile elsewhere, they took up a homestead in Winfield Township, Renville County, earned their patent, and, by 1888, owned 400 acres of land. John and Kristina were my great-grandparents. I am one of their many descendants, and we are all part of the 46 million or more Americans who today descend from homesteading families. The authors of *Homesteading the Plains* provide that surprisingly large 46 million figure (1). They also challenge many negative academic assumptions about the impact and importance of homesteading for American history, as-