

REDISCOVERING THE GREAT PLAINS: JOURNEYS BY DOG, CANOE, & HORSE

Norman Henderson, 2001. The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, Maryland. xv + 214 pp., 11 b/w illustrations. 2 maps. ISBN 0-8018-6688-X (alk. paper). CAN \$45.00 (US \$29.95). Available from the Nature Saskatchewan Bookshop.

Here we are more than a couple of centuries into this era of discovery and exploration, yet we can still enjoy well-written dispatches from a scientist afield. When the genre was new, publishers and booksellers did a brisk trade in volumes recounting the adventures of ethnographers, ornithologists, botanists, geologists, and explorers of every other kind who had freshly returned from expeditions in the New World, notes, drawings, specimens, and journals in hand. Reading this literature today in the early 21st century is a pleasure dampened only by our awareness of all that disappeared from the Americas during the intervening century. *Rediscovering the Great Plains: Journeys by Dog, Canoe, and Horse* is a book that takes us back to that classic genre with its rich landscape and cultural associations, but on the return trip our guide allows us to bring along our modern sensibilities, the cold comforts of our irony and regret in the face of all we have despoiled on the Northern Great Plains.

You will have to search far and wide to find a prairie guide with more knowledge, humour and humility than Norman Henderson. The education of a geographer and environmental scientist, and the temperament of a self-effacing naturalist-explorer make a blend in Henderson that wins your confidence from page one. I settled in for the trip expecting to enjoy every turn and side-track, and was never disappointed. The book, as Henderson avows in the

opening line of his preface, is “about horses, dogs, canoes, and above all, about the Great Plains both old and new.”

Using the Qu’Appelle Valley as his wandering transect, Henderson travels today’s plains the old way. He heads down valley three times—once by dog and travois, once by canoe, and once by horse and travois—travelling in the company of “a remarkable husky,” a “philosophical horse,” and the phantoms of a dozen other grassland travellers, naturalists, and explorers. Buffalo-bird-woman, a Hidatsa woman who lived by the Missouri River in the early Twentieth Century is there for the travois construction, Alexander Henry accompanies Henderson on his first fording of the Qu’Appelle, and Henry Youle Hind’s voice enters the narrative when Henderson’s pack-dog balks in the trail.

The parallels and transitions between the author’s experiences and those he relates from research come across seamlessly here because Henderson allows himself few illusions and is pointedly aware of all that separates his modern wanderings from earlier ones. The historical material deepens the narrative as we hear voices of and stories about Charles Darwin, Anthony Hendry, Konrad Lorenz, Tom Sukanen, Ghenghis Khan, Daniel Harmon and others.

Henderson’s chapter headings, in a respectful nod to a style used in the accounts

of Victorian wanderers, summarize the contents of each narrative parcel: “‘Gee Up!’—Of a Final Journey in the Great Valley and of Adventures with a Philosophical Horse.” The writing style throughout is direct, vigorous, and rich with metaphors and proper nouns. The book is a pleasure to read because, like the best writers of the personal essay, Henderson knows who he is (he admits he is “a white man marinated in Western science and thought”) and doesn’t shy away from an opportunity to make a joke at his own expense. He deftly interweaves wry moments with the dog, the horse, the canoe, and a skunk in a fridge with his scholarly reflections on other grassland cultures. The narrative contains vivid and at times bloodcurdling tales of the Scythians and Mongols of the Eurasian steppes, and of the Querandi of the South American Pampas—people who, like the Plains Indians of North America, came into their character and strength amid grass, wind, and open sky.

But there are also sharply observed moments from the author’s own travels: encounters with local people, reflections on the Qu’Appelle landscape, and notes on animals seen at trailside or across the gunwales. This book resonates with the best of modern landscape literature when Henderson allows his own experiences to deepen and enliven the ecological and historical knowledge he imparts. In one of my favourite passages, for example, the trembling aspen tree comes in for comments that range from the sensory to the botanical and from the cultural to the personal:

“Humble aspen! It is the commonest and also the most audible tree on the Plains.

Wisely the aspen sets its little rounded leaves at the end of long flattened stalks so they can swing freely in the lightest of breezes. This design limits the chance of being blown down in a prairie gale and is an arboreal parallel to the willingness of the prairie grasses to acquiesce to the sovereignty of the Plains wind. Aspen leaves murmur on, wistful and plaintive, when other trees fall silent, making this poplar as easy to identify by ear as by eye. Long ago in Europe the Romans were drawn by the whispering leaves to hold public meetings under black-scarred white boughs. At times I too have listened long to the leaves.”

This is a fine book made even finer by its beautiful maps and by the ink drawings of Robert Cook. Cook works in a classic style that suits a narrative so reminiscent of nineteenth century explorer literature. Although he is a British draughtsman and draws with that delight in the details of shadow and landscape that one associates with English pastoral illustration, his kinetic figure drawings and use of horizon call to mind the antic farm people dwarfed by big land and skies in the paintings of prairie artist, William Kurelek.

The drawings are delightful discoveries in their own right, but they corroborate the story-telling, natural history, historical reflection and cultural commentary that make *Rediscovering the Great Plains* a lively journey to a land familiar yet surprising at every bend in the trail.

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