

BOOK REVIEW

Documenting the Grasslands (大草原を記録する)

Reviewed by Wm. Thomas Hill*

BOOK REVIEWED:

James E. Sherow. *The Grasslands of the United States: An Environmental History*. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, Inc., 2007.

James Sherow's *The Grasslands of the United States (GOTUS)* is a welcome addition to ABC-CLIO's "Nature and Human Societies Series." This series of reference books includes, *Northeast and Midwest United States* by John T. Cumbler, *United States West Coast* by Adam M. Sowards, and *Southern United States* by Donald E. Davis, et al. But it was the prospect of James Sherow, author of *Watering the Valley* and numerous articles on the issue, contributing to this series that initially brought it to my attention.

GOTUS is, as Sherow points out in his Acknowledgments, "a reference work." It is a five-chapter text, most of it being the first four chapters. Chapter 5 consists of Case Studies, followed by Documents, and then Important People, Events, and Concepts, and then Chronology, followed by a Selected Annotated Bibliography, and then finally a very fine Index for the volume.

I will first briefly review the first four chapters. I will then examine each of the Case Studies. After that I will take a brief look at the appendices, which include the Documents through the Selected Annotated Bibliography.

Every single review that I have looked at on this text has examined only the first four chapters. In a way this is understandable considering the amount of material available in the latter portion of this text. Chapter 1 is "The Emergence of Grassland Relationships Pre-1500 CE." This is a very fine, if somewhat basic,

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examination of the use and exploitation of the four major biomes of this period. Sherow examines the grasslands as an ecosystem, explaining his terms carefully in language that undergraduate students can follow easily and understand. He begins with a discussion of the “immigration of plants” rather than the immigration of peoples so that students are able to divorce themselves from the romantic notion that it is only human incursion that affects the cycles of nature. Plants and nature affect/disrupt these cycles too. Nature is forever in a dance of disruption. Robert O’Neill, for example, sees humans as an essential “keystone species” in this dance.

Sherow then goes into an almost painfully basic explanation of what grass is followed by a discussion of the Pleistocene changes that created the plains. This is followed by the climatic transformations that the plains went through over the intervening periods. In short, most students probably learned this in high school but it is important to be reminded because he begins to drop in human influence, which becomes more important to the discussion. His discussion of weather patterns and the availability of water explains much of the earliest human behavioral patterns.

Chapter 2, “The Unraveling of the Wild Grasslands,” moves abruptly on to the influence of Native American tribes on the grasslands. Furthermore much of this chapter deals with the struggle between the early, often fledgling interest, of the United States and Spain throughout the region. This chapter is filled with rich discussions of Sherow’s understanding of the soil and how it was affected by this clash of cultures. All of this movement of the Native American as well as the Spanish and Americans struggling to gain the upper hand was having an enormous impact on the soil and the wildlife of the region. He considers also the environmental impact of European diseases and new animals like sheep that had not been there before and then the railroad and how this changed how the land was used. Finally, under these tensions the economics of the grasslands was forced to change but this becomes more important in the next chapter.

Chapter 3 then is titled “The Urbanized and Domesticated Grasslands.” Here the focus is economic and political though it is mostly economics that drives the discussion. With the taming and farming of the grasslands, the question of who gets the water out of the ground and out of the Rockies becomes a major question. Environmental concerns clash with the more pragmatic concerns of the Chicago Board of Trade, for example. Sherow sort of glides over this, but he does make the point that these pressures existed. But to an even greater extent he points out the

sad downhill trend of Native American life as White influence began to dominate the region. He also discusses the errors they made along the way, errors in farming methods that brought on the Dust Bowl for example.

Chapter 4 is titled “The Most Endangered Ecosystem on Earth.” This chapter looks at the struggle to preserve the grasslands against the pressures of urbanization as well as farm and ranch use. Less than one tenth of one percent of wild grasslands is left. Environmentalists would like to preserve it. There have been calls to place more and more of it under the National Park Service. Economic need, however, drives even the most environmentally conscious farmers to look askance at the suggestion.

Sherow discusses the problems of depopulation of the grasslands as smaller farms become part of large operations. As cities become larger they need more of the water that would otherwise go to sustaining the vast farmlands. The Ogallala Aquifer, which underlies much of the central plains will, by most accounts, be gone in less than a hundred years and there is not enough adequate surface water to sustain future crops. Thus, with the growing needs of the cities some alternate solutions must be found to sustain irrigation systems.

Modern methods of farming have created serious environmental problems especially from the use of pesticides. Sherow examines these problems as well as some of the alternative agricultural programs that are being developed to correct some of these problems.

Chapter 5 consists of three Case Studies. The first, by Jared Orsi, is “State Making (And Making It Back at All): Following Zebulon Pike Across the Plains in 1806.” Actually the last part of this long title would have been adequate. The study follows Pike from St. Louis passed the Grand Osage village where Pike attempts to impress upon the Native Americans that it is the United States that is in control of the plains and not the Spanish crown. Both Spain and the United States were struggling to make it clear to the Native Americans that they were the ones that the Native American needed to pay homage to. In terms of lasting impression however, the Spanish drove their own cattle for food and leather goods. Pike and his band of adventurers had to depend on the Native Americans for their survival.

Pike then encountered a Pawnee war party that surrounded him and robbed him. After leaving the Pawnee, Pike followed the Spanish (who were looking for Pike and his followers to arrest them) down to the Arkansas River and then westward and up the south Platte west of Pike’s Peak. While he does touch upon

the rest of the journey including Pike's contact with other tribes, his primary focus is to examine Pike's image of the plains as a barren place. His suffering in meeting his needs on the plains added to his view of the plains as a useless desert.

The second Case Study is by Margaret Aline Bickers and is titled "Wetlands of the American Grasslands." Generally we don't think of the wetlands because our main highways don't take us by them. But they are there. If you fly by small fixed-wing aircraft you can see it much better in the low rolling hills and hollows of the plains where the aquifer rises closest to the surface. Most people who know about these isolated places think of them as useless mosquito infested areas, but as Bickers points out, these are highly important as flyways for hundreds of species of migrating birds as well as other animals that are indigenous to these areas.

Rather than being useless impediments to farming and ranching, Bickers would like the reader to see these areas as essential to the delicate ecological balance of the entire plains. Farmers have been eager to pump the water of these areas out so as to extend their farms in areas that they are required to pay taxes on even if nothing grows there. The reason they have to pay taxes on it is that wetlands are not the same from year to year. A marsh may appear in one location once every five years or maybe once and then never again. Bickers discusses the history of these wetlands with an eye to their preservation.

The final Case Study by James E. Sherow is "John Wesley Powell and the Rocky Mountain West." Powell saw the important relationship that existed between the Rocky Mountains and the Great Plains. He particularly saw the problems that were going to arise with water management. He was a tireless geology professor and explorer who—besides working on water management—strove to see to it that wild animals were protected from over-hunting.

There were several inconsistencies however in Powell's work. For example, he misunderstood the Native American practice of controlled burning in the forests. Also, he thought that strip mining was just fine. He saw no need for the conservation of the forests. He felt that the number of trees was unlimited and thus lumber companies should be able to cut all they want.

The Documents section, which follows Sherow's article is forty-five pages of reports, letters, acts, and legal decisions from 1541 to the present. These documents give a powerful portrait of how the plains have been and are viewed both by those who live there and by those who would like to have a say in how the land is used.

Of course any attempt to come up with a comprehensive list of “Important People, Events, and Concepts” is going to exclude items that individual readers will be convinced were imperative and beyond leaving out; but, this seventy-five page glossary does a heroic job. It was entertainingly written and I agreed with most of what he included. I was surprised to find Lady Bird Johnson in there though.

I enjoy Chronologies. Sherow’s “Chronology” starts in ca. 10,000 and arrives at 2003 in less than sixteen pages. I would not have included *Dances with Wolves*, but. . . . His “Selected Annotated Bibliography” is also sixteen pages and quite readable.

Overall the text is quite readable. I have only one quibble and that is with the title of the book. *The Grasslands of the United States: An Environmental History* makes it sound like a textbook, which it most definitely is not. It is a reference book, which belongs in any undergraduate library. In fact it would not be too difficult for most high school students. But the way the book is divided, it would not be satisfactory as a textbook.