



Jennifer Brower. *Lost Tracks: Buffalo National Park, 1909-1939.* Edmonton: AU Press, 2008. vii + 184 pp. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-897425-10-7.



Reviewed by Jonathan Clapperton (University of Saskatchewan)

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Commissioned by Stephanie Bangarth (King's University College, UWO)

Canada's "Forgotten Park": Reevaluating Game Conservation and Government Bureaucracy

The history of Canada's national park system and game conservation has often been told in heroic terms that applaud the work of a few farsighted individuals. Jennifer Brower tells us, in *Lost Tracks*, that this appraisal is especially noticeable concerning the revival of the bison. Brower, along with many of her contemporaries, has not been so easily swayed by the benevolent story of park preservation. Historians in both Canada and the United States have, for more than two decades now, criticized the haphazard, profit-driven, and exclusionary histories of park and wildlife conservation. Brower's study fits snugly within this body of discourse.

Using Buffalo National Park as a case study, Brower's MA thesis turned monograph examines the story of Canada's "Forgotten Park," just south of Wainwright, Alberta. This story revolves around the Canadian government's creation, in 1908, of Buffalo National Reserve (later Buffalo National Park), the park's initial success at breeding the bison, and then its slow decline and fall in 1939. While there were some sentimental reasons for Canada's bison-rescuing endeavor, Brower argues,

it cannot be considered a preservationist effort. Instead, she continues, influenced by Alan MacEachern's assertion that national parks are cultural constructions, "Buffalo National Park was an artefact defined and shaped by the cultural, political, and economic climate of the early twentieth-century Canada. These forces influenced the establishment and directed the management of this park, and ultimately played the biggest role in its demise" (p. 2). This climate included a conservationist and scientific atmosphere that saw no contradiction in marketing, "using," or modifying nature; a Canadian government that expected its parks to be economically self-sufficient; and a bureaucratic regime that consistently delayed making decisions and those it made were shortsighted. Ultimately, Brower concludes, the park simply did not have adequate funding and its turn to profit making spelled its demise.

To demonstrate her argument, Brower first provides, in chapter 1, a brief introduction on the human and natural history of the area that would become Buffalo National Park, including the numerous agriculture assess-

ments of the land as marginal. She points out that the area, however, was situated in a borderland between the Blackfoot and the Cree and heavily populated with bison. She then moves on, in chapter 2, to provide more background by exploring the conservation movement in Canada, its ties to the United States, and its impact on Rocky Mountains (later Banff) Park. Brower points out that though profit motives drove game conservation within other parks, the bison were, originally, different. A genuine desire did exist to protect this animal, but, after an initial surge of enthusiasm to purchase the bison from American Michel Pablo in 1907, the political will to maintain the park slowly crumbled in the face of numerous crises.

Brower turns her full attention to Buffalo National Park in chapter 3 and describes how park administration managed the herd. Inexperienced and reliant on agricultural knowledge, park staff treated the bison like cattle. This proved, at first glance, immensely successful as bison numbers increased rapidly. Unfortunately, this growth was too fast and, not even a decade after the park opened, the bison stretched the area's ecological viability. The remainder of Brower's book, from chapters 3 to 5, critically analyzes the many failed attempts to deal with an overpopulated, expensive park. To turn a profit, the bison were sold to market or were put on display much like other animals in Rocky Mountains Park. As neither of these attempts succeeded for any length of time, many bison were sent to Wood Buffalo National Park to mix with the wood bison, though this, too, did not solve the problem. In fact, they infected the wood bison with tuberculosis and some experts today have even called for a total cull of that population. Perhaps the most interesting story Brower brings to light is in chapter 5, when the park attempted to create a marketable "cattalo" by crossbreeding cattle and bison. Though other attempts to do the same have been recorded as far back as 1750, this was one of the first times that the culture of scientific improvement combined with insular government bureaucracy. Unsurprisingly, though the animals did crossbreed, the government was not satisfied with the results, especially since the male offspring were infertile.

In the end, Brower concludes, attempts to solve the problem of bison overpopulation always came too little, too late. Buffalo National Park was an example of bureaucratic inefficiency and ignorance. While the government had the resolve to initiate the park and the bison saving effort, it lacked the will to see these efforts through. By 1939, the bison, along with the other

game added to the park, were so infected by tuberculosis, among other ailments, that they all had to be slaughtered, and the park land turned over to the Department of National Defence.

Lost Tracks is a thoughtful and provocative work even if it could have been lengthened. It is well researched, though largely from the "top-down," focused as it is on government policy and government discourse. Consequently, Brower shows an intimate knowledge of, and no doubt frustration with, the bureaucratic process. Anyone interested in the history of Canadian park policy or the history of the bison will find this work helpful, and chapters 3 to 5 will make for interesting tutorial discussions if used in the classroom. But either application will require supplementary reading. I had hoped that Brower would have elaborated on some key issues that were either glanced over or never mentioned. While Brower notes that the Great Depression heavily affected the park, there is hardly any discussion of this impact. Curiously, in other parks, make-work projects allowed for park development, not park downfall. Where does Buffalo National Park fit into this?

Another area that I hoped Brower would have developed, and one that is often absent in many other park histories in both Canada and the United States, is the role of Aboriginal people. First Nation individuals from the nearby Hobbema reserve played, at least sometimes, a role in the park. For example, the film *The Last Frontier* (1955) was filmed there, in which many Hobbema residents were cast. In fact, I was surprised that the use of the park and the bison in the movie industry went completely unmentioned. Four films, or parts thereof, were shot in Buffalo National Park and each brought a considerable amount of income to the park as well as to the nearby town of Wainwright. I think this aspect of the park's history would make a great project for anyone so inclined.

Finally, Brower continually describes the bison as losing their "integrity" or their "wildness" through a variety of factors, especially commodification. But she never explains what is meant by this concept. How does one measure the bison's integrity? Had not this particular herd—bought from a rancher and already treated like cattle—already lost its "wildness" and been commodified from the start? Overall, though, Brower's work adds to the recent historiography which exposes a side of Canadian park and conservation policy that is frequently overlooked, and this is where her work makes the greatest contribution.

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