

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**R. Douglas Hurt.** *The Big Empty: The Great Plains in the Twentieth Century.* Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2011. 344 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8165-2970-4; \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8165-2972-8.



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At the dawn of the American century the Great Plains was synonymous with openness, opportunity, and hope. It was also a terrain whose tempestuous economic, legal, and social climate brought many a settler to ruin. For all of its extremity and paradox, Great Plains history has received numerous flyover treatments based on presumptions that the region is devoid of historical agents, historical events, and historical change. R. Douglas Hurt presents a complex, dynamic, and nuanced history of the Plains and its people in *The Big Empty: The Great Plains in the Twentieth Century*. His synthesis of the scholarly literature on the Great Plains is augmented by original research to create a kaleidoscopic view of a place most perceive as colorless and flat. The analysis is set within a loose twentieth-century chronology in which, much like the landscape itself, one thing blends into another across time and space (p. xiii). Intersecting currents of the Plains environmental, economic, political, and social histories flow through this spacious field of inquiry, allowing Hurt to develop meaningful generalizations about the history of Plains that respect the variations in historical patterns across time and location.

The geographic parameters pose interesting questions at the outset, as illustrated by a scribbly map in the preface tracing multiple authoritative renditions of

where the border lies between what is and is not the Great Plains. Another map renders a useable and reliable regional location that includes portions of Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta. Hurt ultimately establishes the general parameters of his study at the political boundary of North and South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, and Oklahoma before angling downward to Dallas and San Antonio, then stretching northward through Roswell, New Mexico to Albuquerque and then along the foothills of the Rocky Mountains through Denver, Colorado, Cheyenne, Wyoming, and Billings and Great Falls, Montana (p. xii). Excising the provinces seems a missed opportunity to move the cartographic imagination beyond a United States-centric narrative in which place is defined by the state, instead of the ecosystem.

Within these narrowed borders Hurt develops a layered history of a multiethnic Plains where gender, religion, race, class, occupation, political outlook, citizenship status, and the flow of money influenced when, where, and how one lived in the region. Most sought their chance to make their living on the land whether through farming, ranching, mining, drilling, or in the business and industries that supported such enterprises. At various points in the twentieth century homesteaders (male and female), German-speaking immigrants (Chris-