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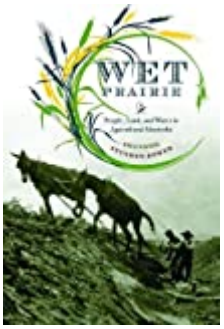

Shannon Stunden Bower. *Wet Prairie: People, Land, and Water in Agricultural Manitoba.* The Nature-History-Society Series. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2011. 232 pp. $94.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7748-1852-0.

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Commissioned by Robert M. Wilson (Syracuse University)

Liberally Drained

Just over a decade ago, wetlands were largely absent from historical-geographical scholarship. Ann Vileisisâs *Discovering the Unknown Landscape: A History of Americaâs Wetlands* (1997) was in many ways the first offshoot of a new vein of historical scholarship on soggy places. Scholars like David Biggs (*Quagmire: Nation-Building and Nature in the Mekong Delta* [2010]), Craig Colten (*An Unnatural Metropolis: Wresting New Orleans from Nature* [2005]), Nancy Langston (*Where Land and Water Meet: A Western Landscape Transformed* [2003]), and Robert M. Wilson (*Seeking Refuge: Birds and Landscapes of the Pacific Flyway* [2010]), to name a few, have since used wetland history to reveal the myriad, deep entanglements between nature and society in these often overlooked landscapes.

Shannon Stunden Bower joins this increasingly vibrant conversation with a book based on her dissertation in geography at the University of British Columbia. *Wet Prairie* tells the story of surface water management in the extensive swamps, bogs, and muskegs of Manitobaâs âsoup bowlâ from the 1870s through the late twentieth century. Five chapters elaborate on nineteenth-century drainage projects, province-dominion tensions over wetland development, conflicts around drainage and private property, binational wetland management, and the ups and downs of a watershed approach to drainage. In her introduction, Stunden Bower describes three âscholarly landmarksâ around which she organizes her research: state formation, liberalism, and the geographical mismatches between human and ecological boundaries.

Of these, her work on liberalism is by far the most compelling and thought provoking. Deploying the notion of âcolloquial liberalisms,â Stunden Bower shows how the vagaries of both a mobile resource–water–and a variable environment combined to produce competing vernacular understandings of liberal political philosophy. Farmers within a single watershed used notions of private property to argue both *for* and *against* collective responsibility around drainage projects. *Wet Prairie* nicely illustrates how both claims were the product of nonexperts applying a set of shared, albeit abstract, liberal principles in variable environmental and social cir-

cumstances. Stunden Bowerâs argument joins an important decades-old debate about the role of political liberalism in Canadian history, but it also offers insights valuable beyond Canada. Her notion of vernacular political philosophies conditioned by environmental concerns can be usefully applied almost anywhere that social struggles over natural resources take place and stands as a significant contribution to the field. Ultimately, this analysis gets used to convincingly argue that Canadaâs (and thus any nationâs) political history cannot fully be understood without paying attention to the environment. While this might be well-trodden territory for environmental historians and historical geographers, Stunden Bowerâs claim is so finely constructed that scholars outside these subfields will find it difficult to disagree with her.

*Wet Prairie*âs contributions to the literature on state formation and the environment, however, might not be as rewarding, especially for readers of H-HistGeog. The book works well to reinforce a key insight from scholarship on society and environment: that the social negotiation of environmental challenges is often an exercise in developing both state institutions and political subjects. Unfortunately, the claims along the way are not as eye-opening as Studen Bowerâs treatment of liberalism. One set of details in her argument focuses on jurisdictional squabbles between Manitoba and Ottawa. While solidly researched and a good discussion of competing state authority over environmental resources, it feels somewhat specialized. Another sub-argument reveals the ways drainage concerns brought together disparate cultural groups, both orienting them toward provincial government institutions and driving the formation of new social communities and administrative units. Though these insights will appeal to a broader range of scholars, they were also well established in Mark Fiegeâs *Irrigated Eden: The Making of an Agricultural Landscape in the American West* (1999). While state formation is indeed an important part of *Wet Prairie*, the book remains in fairly familiar territory.

Wet Prairie also astutely points out the inevitable frustrations and conflicts that arise when human boundaries get imposed on both mobile resources and far-reaching, changeable ecological boundaries. Stunden Bower gestures repeatedly at the geographical mismatches between watersheds and both Manitobaâs municipal units and historic drainage districts. She also examines the political, economic, and even cultural obstacles to implementing a watershed approach to drainage. Yet while *Wet Prairie* cites wonderful prior scholarship on the tensions between social and ecological borders (particularly when it comes to water), this discussion, like the bookâs treatment of state formation, does not move the literature in many surprising directions.

Finally, there are a few uneven sections of *Wet Prairie*. The chapter on Ducks Unlimited and binational wetlands conservation across Manitobaâs U.S. border could have been better situated in relation to the bookâs âscholarly landmarks.â While it is clear that the author did some excellent research and that the material is relevant, the chapterâs conclusions do not speak adequately to the bookâs larger conceptual frames. Meanwhile, detours into the history of political patronage, or comparative water-management practices in drier Alberta and Saskatchewan, feel like a distraction from the larger whole. In contrast, more material in the tail end of *Wet Prairie*âs first chapter on early drainage projects would have been welcome. Here, Stunden Bower shows how aboriginal reserves did not get inducted into the same social, political, and administrative processes that drainage concerns promoted among white communities. This is an excellent discussion of the ways racism percolated through Manitobaâs swampy history of state formation and could have been expanded.

Overall, *Wet Prairie* is a polished example of both the burgeoning field of Canadian environmental history (energetically present on Twitter around the #envhist hashtag) and the history of North American reclamation (though of the wet, rather than arid, variety). Stunden Bower demonstrates that U.S. hegemony over North American environmental historiography is thankfully waning. It is also a welcome addition to the growing global literature on wetland historical geography and environmental history. Carefully researched, well argued, and clearly written, Stunden Bowerâs first book is a valuable read for scholars in these fields. It could even serve as an important text for Canadian specialists outside environmental subfields. Graduate students will enjoy the book and find it a worthwhile assignment, but some uneven pacing and narration should probably keep it off undergraduate syllabi not focused on Canada (or even Manitoba).

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