Great Plains Bison
By Dan O’Brien

If a bison could write a history of the Great Plains from his own perspective, it would undoubtedly read very much as does Dan O’Brien’s Great Plains Bison. Part of the Discover the Great Plains series, published cooperatively by the Center for Great Plains Studies and the University of Nebraska Press (quite appropriately under the Bison Books imprint), this survey begins 13,000 years ago when the ancestors of today’s buffalo crossed the Bering Strait Land Bridge and ends with a list of Great Plains preserves and parks where part of today’s half-a-million bison live.

Half-a-million may sound like a lot of buffalo, and it is when compared to the fewer than one thousand that barely survived the intense hide-hunting of the late nineteenth century. Before the slaughter, estimates have suggested that up to one hundred million buffalo roamed the Plains, but O’Brien tells us that the current consensus estimates a little over a third of that number. But, he also reminds us, “We will never know the actual number of buffalo on the Great Plains before Euro-Americans came on the scene” (p. 12).

In just over one hundred pages, O’Brien takes us through the attitudes of the American Indian versus Euro-Americans towards the buffalo. While one group considered them relatives, the other essentially saw the bison as a hindrance to the advancement of white settlement. Get rid of the buffalo and you defeat the Indians, you clear the plains for
yeoman farmers, and you make a lot of money selling hides in the process. But that process was not a simplistic one, as O’Brien makes clear.

The result was not just the loss of the bison but of the entire Great Plains ecosystem, which had evolved over thousands of years but was destroyed in only a few decades. Seen through European eyes, the Great Plains was a wasteland, a wasteland that could be made into a garden. After a relatively brief interlude of open-range cattle ranching, the former realm of the buffalo was subjected to the tyrannies of the plow and of barbed wire. Farmers plowed up the plains and ranchers fenced it.

O’Brien’s lament is not only for the buffalo but for the Great Plains itself. Modern farming methods have resulted in the destruction of plant diversity, depletion of water resources through circle irrigation, poisoning of streams through fertilizer run-off, and the killing of insect pollinators through the excessive use of insecticides. He also points out the drawbacks of monoculture farming and the hybridization of seeds.

O’Brien is himself a buffalo rancher, running several hundred head on his ranch in southwestern South Dakota. The practicality required of such an occupation tempers his tendency to romanticize bison, but not to anthropomorphize them. Any good stockman will empathize with his livestock and try to treat them humanely. Thus, O’Brien’s anger at ranchers who subject their market bison to the indignity and cruelty of confinement in feedlots is not only understandable but laudable.

At just over one hundred pages, this engaging book hits the major points in the loss of both buffalo and the Great Plains. As with all such brief surveys there is an occasional lack of depth, but overall the subject is treated with appropriate respect and consideration. I do wish the book had received greater care in proofreading. It is the Smoky Hill, not the Smoke Hill, River, for instance, and Buffalo Jones’s ranch was in southwest, not northeast, Kansas. That aside, I am pleased to commend the author and to recommend his book.

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