

Book Reviews

The Destruction of the Bison: An Environmental History, by Andrew C. Isenberg. Studies in Environment and History. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. xii, 206 pp. Illustrations, maps, tables, index. \$24.95 cloth.

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The most infamous case of environmental misbehavior in nineteenth-century America was that which led to the near extinction of the plains bison. The popular perception is of white hunters who slaughtered the shaggies with powerful rifles, sent the hides off by rail to market, and left most of the meat to rot. The so-called "great hunt" of the 1870s and 1880s was indeed an appalling instance of the profit motive at its most voracious. But as recent scholarship has shown, the bison's close call with oblivion was not quite so straightforward. By the time the hide hunters cranked up their operations, the bison already had suffered massive losses, perhaps as much as half of their peak population early in the century. The effect of this new work has been to turn what has been essentially a morality tale into a study of the many forces—economic, cultural, technological, and environmental—transforming the West.

Andrew C. Isenberg's *The Destruction of the Bison* is the most complete examination thus far of this most revealing episode. He builds on the good work of others, although he does not acknowledge those contributions as much as he might, and he adds significant insights of his own. For a book of modest length, its scope is considerable. Isenberg begins with the arrival of the horse and the development on the plains of a culture of horseback nomads. He carries the story through the early programs to save the few surviving bison and reestablish them in protected enclaves in their homeland.

Isenberg begins with an ecological survey of the center of the book's action, the plains grasslands. His summary is a fine one, and necessary, since this great American steppe was an actor in its own right. It sustained the vast herds of close to thirty million bison around 1800; its bounty revolutionized native lifeways by supporting the horse culture; its unpredictability and vulnerability limited and sometimes threatened all who took advantage of its generosity. By the middle of the eighteenth century, some tribes had acquired enough horses

out of the Spanish southwest to commit themselves to a nomadic life. Others chose to continue as village dwellers along rivers on the eastern edges of the plains. The nomadic life first offered huge advantages—the military edge common to all horseback raiders preying on sedentary agriculturalists, relative protection from diseases that ravaged villagers, and the chance to forge new long-distance trade connections and to exploit some resources much more aggressively. The most obvious of those resources was the bison. An animal that always had been important became supremely so, both as a rich means of subsistence and as a source of lucrative trade in robes made by women from the hides of animals hunted by men.

Isenberg traces many of the ramifications this transition had for tribal structure and arrangements, gender roles and family structure, and diplomatic relations among groups contending for what was now valuable territory. One of the most pressing and difficult questions concerns how native hunters joined in their new commercial relations. Indians always had traded, of course, but now they were participants in an international capitalist market run by principles of commodification. Their engagement surely was gradual, taken by various routes and with many cultural sidetrips. In a chapter on "The Ascendancy of the Market," Isenberg takes on this question more fully than anyone yet has, but his intriguing work is just as much a reminder that much waits to be done on this crucial and complicated stage of Native American history.

Whatever route they took into this new life, plains Indians soon found themselves caught up in environmental, economic, and social changes that rapidly undermined their independence. The heaviest blow came as bison populations declined rapidly, in large part, although not entirely, through their own overhunting. Diseases the plains Indians had avoided in part through nomadism were carried more effectively onto the plains by overland travelers. Pressures of an expanding white society accelerated the pace of warfare, both with whites and among themselves.

The great slaughter by white hide hunters was a further engagement of the plains into a world market, this time unrestrained by any concern for survival of the hunters, who could simply move on to other places and roles when the bison ran out. Isenberg's telling of this unpleasant story is less original but still nicely detailed and narrated. Once the herds shrank below any thoughts of profitability, the animals could be rescued and protected as symbols of a vanishing American wild. The full story, the author observes, is rather a reminder of "both the futility of riches and the fragility of nature" (122).

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