

These unusual combinations will not be to everyone's liking. Klein generally writes well, sometimes wittily, and he has a knack for explaining complex disciplinary arcana to nonspecialists. Nonetheless, there is a rather thick patina of philosophical and "postmodern chic" vocabulary to deal with. If "subaltern studies," "algorithms," "warranted assertibility," or the concept of "colligation" are not your cup of tea, parts of this book may be heavy going. There is also no particular thesis or conclusion. Klein is not much interested in taking sides in the comedy/tragedy argument, or choosing between scientific objectivity and postmodern relativism. On one level, he writes oddly old-fashioned descriptive history. In any case, *Frontiers* is not light bedtime reading. Still, serious students of both the western frontier and American historiography will surely want to work their way through it. Klein's breadth of knowledge, interdisciplinary comparisons, and wealth of suggestive ideas and connections are all compensating strengths that well reward serious reading. While not likely destined to become a classic, *Frontiers of Historical Imagination* is an ambitious, original, and important book.

Plain Pictures: Images of the American Prairie, by Joni L. Kinsey. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press for the University of Iowa Museum of Art, 1996. xx, 236 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$34.95 paper.

REVIEWED BY LEA ROSSON DELONG, DES MOINES ART CENTER AND IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY

Plain Pictures is an exhaustive study of a single landscape: the American prairie or, interchangeably, the plains. Tracing this subject from its first appearance in American art to the present is also the study of human culture in the region, and Joni L. Kinsey accomplishes both tasks. Especially interesting is her gauging of attitudes towards this landscape. Although the landscape itself is considerably altered, attitudes towards it have changed even more; in contrast to early perceptions of the region as the Great American Desert, it later came to be seen as the breadbasket of the world.

When European and American artists first began to depict the prairies (the earliest paintings are from the 1830s), the landscape could not be fitted into the current compositional formulas that derived from French classicists Nicholas Poussin and Claude-Lorrain. Europe itself had only in the seventeenth century accepted landscape as a serious subject matter, and the American prairies were unlike

anything in the European experience. The levelness, consistency, and lack of forms on which to rest the eye prevented any kind of "composition" in the traditional sense, even by the most adventurous artist. The closest that artists could come to a viewable composition for a plains scene, Kinsey explains, is the "prospect" picture, one seen from and including an elevation (however slight). Such images also might allude to the economic or developmental prospects.

Considering that people were crossing the prairies by the early decades of the nineteenth century, it is remarkable how few visual images exist. Considering also that literary classics such as James Fenimore Cooper's *The Prairie* were offering definitive descriptions of the region by 1827, it is even more troubling that art neglected prairie subjects. Nearly all prairie pictures before the twentieth century include buffalo, Indians, travelers, or pioneers but do not depict the land alone; there are almost no "pure landscapes." The reasons for this lack cannot be exactly determined now, but Kinsey's extensive research (including literature of many types, explorers' and travelers' journals, government and railroad reports and surveys) leads her to conclude reasonably that it was the prairie's overwhelming flatness and lack of visual event that daunted its early depictees.

The settlement and cultivation of the plains in the second half of the nineteenth century and into the early twentieth is traced in painting and photography. Most of the paintings have a pastoral quality in comparison to the photographs, which suggest a much grimmer existence, with their sandy, stark homesteads and dugouts. Kinsey's inclusion of photography in her survey, which surely complicated the study, is wise because photography seems especially successful in expressing the physical and spiritual effect of the plains. The paintings, in comparison, can seem episodic and overly narrative. In the twentieth century, images of the American prairies began to reflect the modern style of abstraction. The common wisdom that Georgia O'Keeffe was the first painter to really capture the spirit of the plains with her distinctive modernism may have seemed redundant to Kinsey, since she only briefly discusses the artist who, for many viewers, produced the most moving expression of the plains' light and space. But she does suggest the importance of O'Keeffe's work as a forerunner of present-day prairie landscape pictures.

The plains played their most dramatic role in our history from the 1920s to the 1940s. The locus of some of the nation's most serious dislocations, whether ecological, economic, or human, that period has become legendary in our culture. No one can discuss it without noting the polarities in its depictions between Grant Wood's regionalist view

and the views of Alexandre Hogue and the Farm Security Administration photographers. Hogue and the documentary photographers are usually seen as the most clear-eyed and honest recorders. Wood's paintings and New Deal murals are usually assessed as falsely self-congratulatory and idyllic, the embodiment of a "hollow heroism," to use Kinsey's term. While recognizing the failures, Kinsey also astutely shows that this brand of American Scene was not simply naive; rather, it was a complex, sophisticated phenomenon, often knowingly manipulated by the artists themselves. She describes that art as a paradox, and that may be the reason it has remained so meaningful to Americans whether they look at Hogue's work or at Wood's.

In the last section of the book, Kinsey faced not a paucity of visual material but an abundance. Postwar artists have documented, examined, and expressed the plains from every direction and angle, from Terry Evans's beautiful photographs of the roots of prairie grasses to Stan Herd's "earth portraits" that coalesce into recognizable images only when seen from an airplane. The discomfiture with the landscape has been replaced by a fascination with its openness, blankness, and history. Now we have our cultural memory of the Great Plains as the last major area to be settled, an area that remains a hostile environment at times with its floods, droughts, and economic edginess. Kinsey's selection of contemporary prairie pictures is compelling in its scope and variety, and it must be only a portion of the images the author reviewed.

This is a rich, closely written book, full of erudition and passion for the subject matter. Kinsey has organized a complicated issue into intelligible topics without losing the enduring, compelling scope of the landscape itself. The quality of the illustrations is good, and they are related usefully to the text. The notes and bibliography are a treasure for anyone who wishes to know more about any aspect of the prairies as well as for scholars who will find new resources and inspiration for their own work.

Self-Rule: A Cultural History of American Democracy, by Robert H. Wiebe. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995. x, 321 pp. Notes, index. \$25.95 cloth, \$15.95 paper.

REVIEWED BY HAROLD D. WOODMAN, PURDUE UNIVERSITY

Robert Wiebe's new book is an investigation of the origins and evolution of American democracy, the nation's "most distinguishing characteristic and its most significant contribution to world history" (1).

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