Book Reviews and Notices

Heartland River: A Cultural and Environmental History of the Big Sioux River Valley, edited by Jon K. Lauck. Center for Western Studies, Augustana University, 2022. 403 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. $15 paperback.

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Heartland River: A Cultural and Environmental History of the Big Sioux River Valley is a love letter to the midwestern region known vernacularly as Siouxland. There are 19 essays in the anthology, grouped into six sections. Each section approaches the watershed from a different historical and thematic framework—Part 1: Natural History and Indigenous Peoples; Part 2: Explorers, Settlers, Outlaws, and War; Part 3: Writers, Scholars, and Artists; Part 4: Politics; Part 5: Water Quality; and, Part 6: Personal Reflections. Although the essays in each section are linked thematically, no themes, theses, or arguments permeate the entire book. Instead, each essay, and the entire book, is grounded in the geography and history of the Big Sioux River Valley. *Heartland River* is fully immersed in questions of *place* and regional identity in ways that recall the late Yi-Fu Tuan and his studies of topophilia. That commitment to *place* and that love of *place* unites these essays into a coherent whole.

That the book is a history not just of the river but of the river valley is a critical point. Indeed, the essays are best viewed through the lens of the river basin. The essays introduce readers to the river and engage the river's history, yes, but there is arguably more attention paid to the regional systems bordering the Big Sioux. For example, the essays discuss the ecology and geography of the tallgrass prairies that dominate the watershed, examine the novelists, scholars, and artists who have documented and (at times) shaped the culture of Siouxland, and dissect the political machinations in the modern river valley. Even the methodologies and disciplines vary from one chapter to the next, which affirms the value of incorporating interdisciplinary work. For example, chapter 17 is a study in microbiology while chapters 9–12 are an exercise in literary geography.

Part I, which includes the first four chapters (but does not include the introduction), is arguably the strongest section in the book. This first

section examines indigenous cultures in the Big Sioux River Valley as well as land use and natural history in the region. All four chapters pull from multiple perspectives and methodologies, including: indigenous history, economic history, environmental history, and western history as well as geography, archaeology, and geology. This multi-disciplinary approach is highly effective, and it creates a much richer, fuller picture of the watershed than could be found in a single discipline or source. To be clear, the multi-disciplinary approach is not unique to Part I. This book is interdisciplinary throughout, but subsequent sections are shorter in length, which necessarily means there is less engagement with different sources and methodologies.

For all its strengths, the anthology is imperfect, as all books are. For example, the book is so exhaustive in its treatment of the watershed that some readers will feel lost in the details, especially those without pre-existing knowledge of the region. Some readers will also struggle with what might be called the book's geographical orientation because there is no map in the text (only a small inset on the back cover, which can be easily missed). Additionally, Sections 4 through 6, which cover important topics and demonstrate robust scholarship, are overshadowed somewhat by the preceding sections and chapters because they are notably shorter in length. There is also an image featured prominently on the front cover, the title page, the dedication page, and the first page of each chapter that would benefit from added context. The copyright page describes this as a bison effigy incised on a catlinite tablet, which was uncovered in the 1930s at a farm along the Big Sioux River. Given the prominence of this image and its relevance to the idea of *place*, the book would have benefitted from a more detailed description or analysis of the effigy.

However, these shortcomings are fairly unimportant, and they do nothing to take away from the book's value. This is a well-written and engaging anthology, and the authors (as well as the editor, Jon Lauck) have succeeded in bringing attention to a region and a river that have been shorted by historians for far too long. Any reader with an interest in western history, indigenous history, or water issues should enjoy the anthology, but people with ties to Siouxland will be especially attracted to this book. *Heartland River* is detailed and analytical, well-researched and comprehensive, but it is also highly descriptive and rooted so deeply in a tangible place that reading the text is an almost palpable experience. It almost seems possible to feel, hear, smell, and touch the Big Sioux River Valley, and it is difficult to see how any reader could walk away without a greater love for the Big Sioux.