

*Recovering the Prairie*, edited by Robert F. Sayre. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999. viii, 225 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$37.95.

Reviewer Rebecca Conard is associate professor of history at Middle Tennessee State University. She is the author of *Places of Quiet Beauty: Parks, Preserves, and Environmentalism* (1997).

*Recovering the Prairie* is a richly textured book. It invites readers to see the prairie landscape as an enduring image in art and literature and to understand the prairie as a key component of our prospects for environmental sustainability. Most of its 13 essays were first presented at a 1996 symposium, "Images and Functions of the American Prairie," organized to coincide with the opening of Joni L. Kinsey's exhibit, *Plain Pictures: Images of the American Prairie*.

In the opening essay by Kinsey, Rebecca Roberts, and Sayre, "Prairie Prospects: The Aesthetics of Plainness," the authors propose that Americans' ambiguous and shifting perceptions of the prairie are reflected—and often mythologized—in art and literature. They begin by drawing a parallel between the lack of economic prospects that led Stephen Long to call the Great Plains the "American Desert" in 1820 and the lack of visual prospect that one finds in the prairie landscapes of nineteenth-century artists and photographers such as George Catlin and Solomon Butcher. When agricultural prospectors discovered that prairie soil was fertile ground, the vast desert image gave way to visions of a "garden paradise," captured in the "smiling landscapes" of regionalist painters such as Thomas Hart Benton and John Steuart Curry. Ironically, regionalists were celebrating the cultivated prairie's fecundity at the same time Farm Security Administration photographers were capturing real images of the Dust Bowl.

Ed Folsom picks up the theme of "prospects" in Walt Whitman's celebrations of the prairie as the landscape of democracy. Jane Simonsen finds similar artistic expressions of emerging economic democracy and social equality in Alexander Gardner's photographs of the Kansas prairies. In a more cosmopolitan vein, Robert Grese contrasts Jens Jensen's naturalistic prairie landscapes in Chicago's parks, Carl Sandburg's poetry, and the Prairie School architectural aesthetic with the European-inspired classicism of Daniel Burnham's White City, built on the prairie adjacent to Lake Michigan for the 1893 Chicago Exposition. Tom Lutz argues that the "cosmopolitanism" of Willa Cather, Hamlin Garland, and other regionalist authors can best be understood as an artistic vantage point, or prospect, that exploits the cultural tension between rural aesthetics (prairie as working country) and urban aesthetics (nostalgia for prairie lost). Kinsey, Roberts, and Sayre rightly note in their opening essay that one can see the same pattern of ambi-

guity reflected in public policy. They briefly recount the recent controversy over establishing Waterman Creek Prairie Preserve in O'Brien County, Iowa, which is posed as "competing prospects" that pit rural-agricultural-local community-producerist values against urban-scientific-preservationist values.

For all of its richness, *Recovering the Prairie* never really gets to the point suggested by the title and the opening essay. Shelton Stromquist interprets reform politics in the early twentieth century through the lens of what he calls the "oppositional" reform movement, that is, solidarity crafted around "producerist" values, which arose in the prairie states. Curt Meine examines Aldo Leopold's vision of the University of Wisconsin Arboretum as a place to restore native plant and animal communities. Pauline Drobney notes the prairie seed harvesting techniques developed by the Fermilab Project in Illinois; the increasing interest in prairie reconstruction at showplaces such as the Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge outside Prairie City, Iowa, and among dozens of grassroots organizations (forgive the unavoidable pun) such as the Iowa Prairie Network; and the roadside prairie projects developed by the departments of transportation in Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, and Missouri. And the edited transcript of Wes Jackson's symposium address captures his intense optimism for a "natural systems agriculture" using prairie grasses based on promising research at The Land Institute in Salina, Kansas.

These are important pieces of information, but they hardly capture the outlines of advance toward "recovering the prairie" through both public policy and private initiative. For instance, readers will find no mention of the aborted mission of the National Resources Planning Board in the 1930s or of recent cooperative efforts among several public agencies and nongovernmental organizations in both Canada and the United States to institute better public land management practices throughout the Great Plains. Closer to home, botanist Ada Hayden's inventory of Iowa's prairie remnants in the 1940s is mentioned, but readers do not learn that her pioneering work began to bear fruit in 1965, when the Iowa legislature passed the State Preserves Act, modeled after similar legislation passed in Illinois. Hayden Prairie in Howard County was the first area dedicated as a preserve, in her honor, and many more prairie remnants have been designated as preserves since then through the combined efforts of The Nature Conservancy, the Iowa Department of Natural Resources, and private landowners. Although Iowa's state preserves system includes only prairie relicts, these nonetheless have played an important role in raising public interest in prairie preservation and our level of knowledge about prairie

ecology and prairie management. The opening paragraphs of Pauline Drobney's essay are personal testimony to that effect.

It is difficult to fault a book so visually stunning, so rich in content, and so evocative in tone for falling short on the promise of its title. Yet without a perspective on public policy to balance the wonderfully textured treatment of prairie prospects contained in half of the essays, the book as a whole has an elegiac quality that tends to underscore the gulf of misunderstanding and distrust that separates humanists from resource managers when it comes to environmental policy issues.

*Debt and Dispossession: Farm Loss in America's Heartland*, by Kathryn Marie Dudley. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000. xvi, 195 pp. Illustrations, tables, graphs, appendix, notes, index. \$22.50 cloth.

Reviewer Deborah Fink is an independent anthropologist in Ames, Iowa. She is the author of *Open Country, Iowa: Rural Women, Tradition, and Change* (1986); *Agrarian Women: Wives and Mothers in Rural Nebraska, 1880-1940* (1992); and *Cutting into the Meatpacking Line: Workers and Change in the Rural Midwest* (1998).

*Debt and Dispossession* is Kathryn Marie Dudley's inside account of the 1980s farm crisis and its aftermath in the pseudonymous community of Star Prairie in western Minnesota. Drawing from intensive interviews, Dudley centers the narrative on farming men and women who lived through the loss or near loss of their farms. Secondary perspectives come from local professionals who dealt regularly with farmers; cameo appearances by regional farm protest organizers provide yet another dimension. An anthropologist, Dudley draws on careful ethnographic fieldwork to counter existing assessments, both popular and scholarly, of the anatomy of the crisis.

Much has already been written on the farm crisis, and much more will undoubtedly come. The genius of this work is that the accessible presentation and gripping stories make us *feel* a measure of the tragedy and absurdity of that time and place. The drawing by the farmer Dudley calls "Dick Porter" is a masterful depiction of the farm crisis (44). Dudley not only explains the structure of the farm credit system, she uncovers the rationality and irrationality of why the system affected different farmers in different ways. She recounts the actions taken by protest organizations and explores the logic of Star Prairie's rejection of their premises. Laying out episodes of personal decisions and community responses, she reveals the tension between ideals of help-your-neighbor friendship and the competition of the capitalist system, both of which the community endorsed. An account of a farm auction and its effect on family members conveys a small measure of the sadness

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