

H-Net Reviews

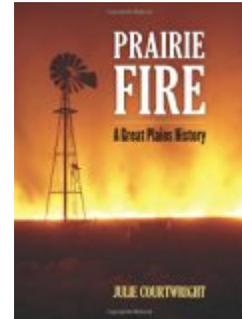
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Julie Courtwright. *Prairie Fire: A Great Plains History*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2011. 264 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-1794-4.

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Commissioned by David T. Benac



It is not often, at least in my experience, that one is asked to review a book that starts by acknowledging the author's obsession with "smokin' grass" (p. xi). However, within a few pages, it becomes clear that there is a grain of truth in Julie Courtwright's tongue-in-cheek comment. She has deeply immersed herself in stories of prairie fire (smokin' grass) on the Great Plains, and what may at times have appeared as a quirky obsession to outsiders, was in fact a deep meditation on the role of fire in plains history. The "obsession" began with her dissertation, then led to an article for *The Western Historical Quarterly*, and has reached fruition as a book, *Prairie Fire*.

In *Prairie Fire*, Courtwright sets out to explain the significance of fire to Great Plains history in three stages. Her first two chapters—in a story that will be familiar to many readers—describe American Indian fire use and its impact on society and landscapes. In a point less familiar, the coming of Euro-Americans during the "presettlement era" (1535-1870) did not mean an immediate suppression of fire but in many cases the continued use of fire to manage grasslands for grazing. The second stage began with permanent, sedentary settlement (after 1850) and a "shift in perception" to fire suppression (p. 12). Although suppression was generally successful, fire both intentional and accidental, could never be completely eliminated, and today that unruliness has laid the groundwork for a third stage: the reintroduction of fire as a management tool for Great Plains grasslands.

Stories about fire are the leitmotif holding the book together and in large measure informing its analysis. Every chapter title is drawn from a source and begins with a short vignette drawing out the themes explored. For example, chapter 6, "A Horrible World of Cinders and

Blackness," explores the dangers and damage caused by prairie fires, but also the ways it defined plains communities and brought them together in a common cause. The chapter begins on a blackened prairie in rural North Dakota where fire has recently claimed the lives of six children—a reason if there ever was one to try controlling fire's reign. Courtwright's preference for letting the sources become the narrative will be refreshing to some and off-putting to others; however, it is a legitimate organizational strategy for a book that sets itself up in part as a social history of fire where "each fire that burned across the prairies over hundreds of years is part of someone's personal narrative" (p. 5). These stories also help our understanding of the changing "conversation" (a concept Courtwright borrows from Richard White) between people and the nonhuman world on the plains.

Courtwright's goal in describing the ways humans understood fire on the plains is "to open a wider discussion of prairie fire and foster recognition of its environmental and social influence" as well as connect to the wider history of fire in the American West (p. 12). On the first of these, she is likely to be successful. The only fire to appear in Walter Prescott Webb's *The Great Plains* (1931) was an occasional "camp fire." Fire appeared in James Malin's work on the North American grasslands, but was never central to his history and ecology. More recent accounts, such as Dan Flores's *The Natural West: Environmental History in the Great Plains and Rocky Mountains* (2001) and Geoff Cunfer's *On the Great Plains: Agriculture and Environment* (2005), connect fire ecology to American Indian land use, but do not explore Courtwright's "presettlement era" when Euro-Americans also used fire to manage plains landscapes. Likewise, there is little in either book that would help a reader understand how the

Great Plains went from a land frequently visited to one seldom visited by fire and the ecological and social consequences thereof. Whether future writers decide to enter into this discussion with Courtwright remains to be seen, but her work opens the possibility and suggests the need.

On the issue of connecting the fire history of the Great Plains to the American West, this reviewer is somewhat more skeptical. Clearly, the two share narrative similarities: by the time of Euro-American settlement both landscapes had adapted to frequent burning; settlement eventually led to fire suppression; without fire, fuel loads built and species mixes changed; and perversely, suppression created the conditions for worse fires when they did occur. However, there are important differences in these stories too. In the wider American West, a combustible mixture of development, drought, and rising fuel loads makes suppression increasingly dangerous,

while also making the reintroduction of fire risky. On the plains, sparse development and more limited fuel loads (if only cattle could be trained to eat brush and trees instead of grass) make fire suppression less risky and the reintroduction of fire on some landscapes less controversial. Considering these key differences, fire will likely remain central to the wider history of the American West in a way that it may not on the Great Plains.

The book should be required reading for historians interested in the Great Plains and is of potential interest to agricultural, environmental, western, and social historians. All of these will be particularly interested in the book's extensive citations which represent a significant bibliographic contribution. Ecologists and other scientists working on grassland related topics may be less enthusiastic as the history of fire ecology and grassland ecology receives limited attention.

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