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In *Grasslands Grown*, Molly P. Rozum analyzes the construction of place and regional identity in North America’s northern grasslands during the first generation of settler society. Rozum, an associate professor and Ronald R. Nelson Chair of Great Plains and South Dakota History at the University of South Dakota, has written extensively on the northern Great Plains, environmental and cultural history, the North American West, and childhood memory and experiences. In this well-conceived and deeply researched book, she aims to unpack how the first post-pioneer generation (settlers either born on or brought to the northern grasslands by their parents) “adopted regional identities and formed senses of place as a result of privilege ensuing from their parents’ settler-colonial efforts.” To do so, she delves into the lives of a number of middle-class settlers raised on the northern grasslands. By interrogating their writings to reconstruct the first generation’s childhood and adolescent experiences, travel, education, relationships with indigenous peoples, and professional careers, Rozum highlights how they interacted with northern grasslands microenvironments to form a sense of place while ultimately “intellectually linking local life to the continent’s northern grasslands as a whole to form geographic regional identities” (p. 10).

Rozum situates her study of place and regional identity construction on the “northern grasslands.” Encompassing much of the interior North America, the grasslands comprise parts or all of modern-day Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Montana, and the Dakotas. Rozum argues that the grasslands, a single ecological region, serve as a “unique venue” for investigating how the interaction between culture and environment generates both senses of place and also broader regional identities. Unlike the central and southern grasslands in the United States, the northern grasslands span an international boundary, experienced a similar timing of white settlement, generally share the same climate (semi-arid) and environment (grasslands), and occupy a low political and social status in their respective national consciousnesses. “Settler-society grasslands’ experiences in Canada and the United States,” Rozum explains, “were not identical, nor one derivative of the other, but still the two countries became entwined through sharing common northern and grasslands experiences” (p. 8).
Grasslands Grown is divided into eight roughly chronological chapters, each of which traces the lives of the first settler generation from childhood through adulthood. Chapter 1 sets the context by providing an overview of American and Canadian government land policies, indigenous treaty making and dispossession, the advent of the railroad era, and immigration and settlement patterns in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The second chapter highlights how settler children learned grasslands ecology through sensual, corporeal immersion with animals. Observing, riding, shooting, skinning, carving, plucking, dressing, cooking, and tasting animals enabled children to intimately interact with their local grasslands. Chapter 3 explores how “place entered the body through daily, physical encounter with the grasslands” (p. 94). In particular, it investigates how smelling, tasting, and seeing grasses, grains, waters, woods, rocks, and snow sensuously absorbed settlers in their local environments. In chapter 4, Rozum shows how train travel, leaving home for educational experiences, and outdoor adventures nurtured regional concepts in adolescents and young adults. Chapter 5 surveys how settlers interacted with indigenous peoples and later reminisced about and romanticized those encounters. The sixth chapter analyzes settler-society aesthetics and culture through art, paintings, poetry, and fiction. Chapter 7 traces how the first generation of settlers responded to the rise of commercial crop production (farm mechanization and fertilization) and corporate agribusiness, which transformed the northern grasslands into an endless expanse of farms and ranches, as well as the budding impulse for grasslands conservation to preserve a remnant of the grasslands for settler society’s aesthetic pleasure and recreation. Finally, chapter 8 wraps up Grasslands Grown with an analysis of evolving cultural labels and terminology: the West, Middle West, prairie provinces, northern Great Plains, and so forth. Based on the requirements of capitalist agriculture, “settler society’s geographic regional labels” functioned as a mechanism for “signal[ing] national possession of space on a cultural plane to all in the body politic, including people excluded explicitly or implicitly” (p. 348).

Perhaps the greatest strength of Grasslands Grown is its extensive mining of primary sources, both published and archival. The assortment of voices and experiences captured in the text is as vast as the pre-settlement grasslands. Rozum introduces us to archaeologist George F. Will, Wallace Stegner, Effie Laurie Storer, Elsie May Hammond, artist Annora Brown, Era Bell Thompson, Thorstina Jackson Walters, and many others. Rozum’s subjects, who mostly achieved regional but not national or international prominence and later enjoyed middle-class lives, produced memoirs, diaries, childhood drawings, fictional works, autobiographies, novels, and immigration chronicles during their lifetimes. “This generation,” Rozum insists, “exhibited a distinct form of settler colonialism, storying themselves into the land and mythologizing pioneer parents” (p. 55).

In their accounts of childhood and pioneer origin stories, these individuals created unique senses of place. Rozum casts place as local, environmental, emotional, and centralized—that is, experienced through sensory and corporeal immersion with microenvironments. As the post-pioneer “grasslands grown” generation reached adulthood, they corresponded with one another, attended the same events, and promoted regional identities by helping found “settler-colonial infrastructures,” including historical societies, museums, universities and colleges, newspapers, and governing institutions (p. 11). Moreover, as the final generation of settlers who grew up on the northern grasslands before agribusiness and corporate farming and ranching interests permanently altered the face of the land, their written works and professional activities scripted regional identities and meanings for later generations who never knew grasslands. Thus, for Rozum, regional identities, stitched together from disparate experi-
ences rooted in place, are inclined more toward geographic, climatic, national, and conceptual underpinnings.

Rozum situates her analysis of the “grasslands grown” generation within the centuries-long process of indigenous homeland expropriation. As a result, the settlers’ interactions with indigenous peoples became a major component of placemaking. Growing up beginning in the late 1880s and 1890s, Rozum’s subjects began to interact with the grasslands at the same moment that the American and Canadian governments were sending indigenous children to distant boarding schools and violently herding their parents and grandparents onto reservations and reserves. These policies of dispossession reserved northern soils for settler families and segregated them from indigenous cultures. Indeed, when the grasslands grown generation encountered indigenous culture, they often did so during ritualized events, including town fairs, rodeos, or local holiday programs—“spaces controlled by settler society” (p. 185). Later in life, many of Rozum’s subjects, including Harvard-educated George F. Will, sought out indigenous knowledge for their own purposes, in Will’s case a study of the varieties of corn and its ceremonial traditions in Mandan and Arikara history. Will’s experiences suggest the evolution of “hybrid—shared—spaces” between indigenous and settler communities across the grasslands, but ultimately he, like many of his counterparts, “did not see [his] appropriation of aspects of Indigenous practice and culture as further colonial actions” (pp. 185, 217).

Overall, Rozum’s book is clear, engaging, and well argued. It deserves a place on the bookshelves of scholars who study settler placemaking, the North American grasslands, the northern borderlands, and the ways the interaction of culture and environment fosters senses of place and regional identity creation.

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