What's So Great about The Great Plains?

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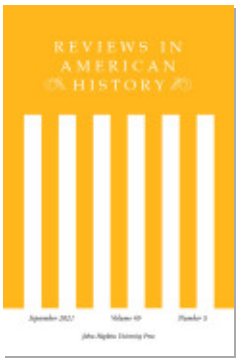

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In Retrospect

WHAT'S SO GREAT ABOUT THE GREAT PLAINS?

Andrew R. Graybill

The first review of Walter Prescott Webb's *The Great Plains* was damning, and Webb himself was partly to blame. Upon the book's release in the summer of 1931, Webb sent a copy to a friend who wrote for multiple Texas newspapers, hoping that readers in his native Lone Star State would take notice. Instead, the critic dismissed the book as based on secondary sources and devoid of fresh observations.[1] But Webb's surprise and irritation abated that fall when the *New York Times* ran a glowing assessment on the front page of its Sunday books section, hailing his study as "one of the most original and significant contributions that has been made at any time to the history of the American West." The illustration that accompanied the essay—N.C. Wyeth's painting "The Opening of the Prairies," which depicts a Native American man offering guidance to a caravan of white pioneers—perfectly captured the central theme of Webb's book: the nineteenth-century Anglo-American conquest of the nation's midsection.[2]

The academic community saluted Webb's achievement, too. Henry Steele Commager, then emerging as one of the brightest young stars in the history profession, argued that the book's regional focus should not obscure its broader importance, insisting that "both its technique and its conclusions should find application to the whole field of American history."[3] Webb won second place in the competition for the 1933 Loubat Prize, awarded by Columbia University every five years for the best work of North American social science.[4] In 1939, the Social Science Research Council chose *The Great Plains* as the subject of a conference featuring luminaries from several cognate disciplines, among them anthropologist Clark Wissler, sociologist Louis Wirth, and historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, who presided over the event.[5] As U.S. historians took stock of their field at mid-century, some identified *The Great Plains* as one of a small handful of the most influential works published since 1900.[6]

But *The Great* Plains has not aged well within the academy. Today it is one of those volumes more likely to be cited than read, and not simply because by now it is rather long in the tooth. After all, its conceptual and methodological

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limitations—evident to some of its early detractors—have received considerable scrutiny over the years. More troubling is the book's undeniable racism, which is disqualifying for many contemporary readers and may prompt caveats and disclaimers from those who would adopt it for classroom use. Such deficiencies merit reproach and undoubtedly compromise the book's legacy. Nevertheless, Webb's insights remain vital not only to scholars of the West, but also to Americanists seeking a continental understanding of the nation's past. And Webb's approach to the writing of history should be of interest to all who practice the craft.

Among the distinctive features of *The Great Plains* is the familiarity of its origin story, dutifully recounted by the many historians who have written articles, chapters, and even monographs sizing up Webb's life and career.[7] Webb touches on the episode in the book's preface, but the fullest version appears in his autobiography. There, Webb explains that one rainy night in February 1922 he experienced a "moment of synthesis," when it dawned on him that the six-shooter—and not the long rifle, as others had averred—was the gun that won the West, thanks to the ease and speed of firing a revolver from horseback. From this realization, Webb extrapolated that the distinctive environmental conditions of the Great Plains, so different from those in the East, "have bent and molded Anglo-American life, have destroyed traditions, and have influenced institutions in a most singular manner" (p. 8). As he conceded in his memoir, "I had no proof, but I knew I was right. I had to be . . . All the investigation remained to be done, but that was nothing."[8]

At the time of his epiphany, Webb was in his mid-thirties and a graduate student in history at the University of Texas at Austin. That fall, at the urging of his advisor, Webb moved with his wife and young daughter to Illinois, where he would seek "the accursed Ph.D." at the University of Chicago.[9] But Webb's brief time in Hyde Park was a debacle. His classmate and friend Avery O. Craven, who became famous as a historian of the Civil War, explained that Webb "had an independent mind" and "seemed to care little for mental discipline or differing points of view."[10] Webb failed the preliminary exams at the end of his first year, quit the doctoral program, and decamped for Austin, permanently embittered by his doomed attempt at "educational outbreeding."[11] Decades later, in his presidential address to the American Historical Association, Webb insisted that he had learned but one lesson in Chicago: "don't take an original idea into a graduate school." He resolved henceforth to "write history as I saw it from Texas, and not as it appeared in some distant center of learning."[12]

Ensconced once again at UT—really the only academic home he ever knew and where he spent nearly a half century as a student and then a professor—Webb taught classes and resumed his research on the history of the

Great Plains. In 1927 he had a chance encounter with an editor from Ginn and Company, a textbook publisher, who offered him a contract on the spot. This was a crucial development for Webb, since "it set me free to write as I pleased. My style was not cramped by having to write in such a way as to snare a publisher."[13] Thus liberated, Webb relied on direct experience as he mapped out the book in his mind, starting with his parents' move in 1892 from piney East Texas to the hardscrabble country west of Fort Worth—or "from the old America into the new," as he put it—when Webb was four years old. As he noted in his memoir, "I had seen the things I now studied, the land, the vegetation, and the animals."[14]

In another stroke of good fortune, not long after signing with Ginn and Company, Webb received a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation that freed him up to write the book. He took to his work with unbridled intensity, sometimes toiling twelve to fourteen hours at a time. Afterwards, he would collapse, utterly spent, but then "wake the next morning to find my subject as wonderful as ever, and I would return to the task as a man to his mistress."[15] Fueling Webb was his profound investment in the material. As he stipulated several years later, he wrote the book "in a state of suppressed emotion," since the central actors in his narrative—white settlers—"had long been my people, and . . . I sought to explain them to others."[16] He completed the first draft (save for one chapter) in less than five months, a period he later recalled as "the happiest half year of my life." And when he was finished, "my satisfaction in it could in no way be conditioned by any sort of criticism."[17] UT accepted it as his doctoral dissertation and awarded him the Ph.D. in 1932.

In brief—although at more than 500 pages the book itself is anything but—*The Great Plains* is a sweeping history of the region, from geologic time to the turn of the twentieth century. Webb opens with a description of the landscape, and then shifts to its human inhabitants, starting with Indigenous peoples before moving quickly to the Spanish, who made their preliminary and largely unsuccessful forays onto the Plains in the sixteenth century. These early chapters, however, serve merely as a warm-up for the headline act: Anglo-Americans, who first arrived in a trickle in the early 1800s, which became a steady stream by mid-century, and a flood thereafter. The conditions they encountered on the flat, treeless, and semiarid Plains marked such a sharp break from whence they had come in the eastern United States that Webb described the 98th meridian as an institutional fault line; beyond it, these white newcomers had to adapt through technological innovation.

The six-shooter was but the first, if also perhaps the most dramatic, of these inventions, according to Webb. There was also barbed wire, an elegant solution to the problem of fence building in a land devoid of timber, just as the windmill allowed settlers to reach subsurface water, a necessity given that the Great Plains average less than twenty inches of annual rainfall, and some portions

of the territory receive far less than that. Likewise, Webb detected changes in the law that developed west of the 98th meridian and argued that the region spawned a homegrown cultural tradition, exemplified by the literature of the frontier in general and of the cattle kingdom in particular. He concludes the book with an exploration of the "mysteries of the Great Plains," among them its reputation for lawlessness and political radicalism. Throughout, his tone is one of unmistakable admiration for the persistence and above all the ingenuity displayed by its Anglo-American conquerors, such that the volume reads at times like a love letter to his forebears.

While Webb anticipated criticism of *The Great Plains*, he was unprepared for the assault launched by historian Fred Shannon in September 1939 at the conference sponsored by the Social Science Research Council. Held at Skytop Lodge, a luxury resort in the Pocono Mountains of northeastern Pennsylvania, this was the third such gathering of the SSRC devoted to reevaluating a single, highly influential work "after the investigator's conclusions have been tested by the researches of others."[18] Although much of Shannon's blistering, pre-circulated, 109-page (!) critique comes off as intemperate and carping—when, for example, he indicts Webb for minor errors of fact—Shannon identified several more substantive shortcomings that have served as a blueprint for later critics of the book, and which therefore deserve attention.[19] For his part, Webb charged that Shannon had missed the point of his work altogether, and was so outraged by the assessment that he contemplated boycotting the conference; in the end, the committee persuaded him to attend. In his written reply to Shannon's broadside, Webb insisted that "I would not prostitute *The Great Plains* by accepting the Shannon manuscript as an appraisal."[20]

Shannon was appalled by Webb's unorthodox methods, among them his questionable use of sources. After highlighting various places in the book where Webb failed to document key assertions or neglected to consult readily accessible primary material, Shannon twisted the knife in the next-to-last paragraph of his report. Expressing concern that readers might believe that Shannon had found "nothing at all of merit in the book," he demurred, explaining that "*The Great Plains* is an unusually interesting synthesis of a considerable number of secondary studies."[21] In his rebuttal, Webb rejected Shannon's charge that the book was derivative but acknowledged that he had in fact skimped on the scholarly apparatus because "It was not necessary for my purpose to clutter up the text," especially in light of what Webb believed was his deep familiarity with the subject matter.[22]

Still more objectionable to Shannon were Webb's sweeping generalizations based on intuition and personal experience, a practice that Shannon regarded as an affront to the standards of the discipline. To this, Webb offered a coy rejoinder, claiming that "I have never asserted that *The Great Plains* is history . . .

To me, *The Great Plains* is a work of art."[23] His close friend and UT colleague, folklorist J. Frank Dobie, put it more pithily: "[Webb] sure doesn't let the facts get in the way of the truth."[24] Near the end of his career, inoculated against reproach by a bevy of professional honors—including two Guggenheim fellowships and a pair of visiting appointments in the United Kingdom—Webb said unapologetically of *The Great Plains* that "the book I wrote was but an extension and explanation of what I had known firsthand in miniature, in a sense an autobiography with scholarly trimmings."[25] While this approach makes the book a stirring read, it also clearly generates doubt about Webb's reliability as a narrator.

In addition to this heretical methodology, Shannon pointed to what historian Richard White later described as Webb's "crude environmental determinism," reflected in Webb's central contention that the specific environmental conditions on the Great Plains were definitive in shaping the Anglo-American society that took hold there after the Civil War.[26] Webb had come by such habits of mind when, as an undergraduate, he fell under the sway of the brilliant but eccentric social scientist Lindley Miller Keasbey, whom Webb forever cited as the single most important influence on his thinking.[27] From Keasbey, the young Webb, in his own words, "learned to examine the relationship between environment and human culture."[28] As he wrote in a college paper for his mentor, "history can be foretold in broad outline, though not chronologically, from a knowledge of the topographic, orographic and hydrographic environment."[29]

The problems inherent in this position were obvious to Shannon and have drawn fire from critics ever since.[30] In Webb's telling, there was little room for culture or contingency in explaining the patterns of human experience on the Great Plains (or, perhaps, anywhere else). When confronted by Shannon on this point, Webb struck a defiant tone, stating proudly that "I was the first to apply the principles Keasbey taught to the Great Plains," which might have prompted some at the conference to ask of Webb's mentor, "who?"[31] The closest Webb appears to have come to softening his stance was when he recognized in an article published not long before his death that "the connection between what men did and the conditions surrounding them" was not the only query that historical geographers should posit, but that "it is as good as any other, better than some, and the best for me."[32] Ironically, by the time of the SSRC conference, Keasbey had long since repudiated his own environmental determinism, lamenting to Webb within months of the publication of *The Great Plains* that it was "my error, which I passed on to so many students and now have no opportunity to recall."[33]

As it happens, the stiffest challenge to Webb's theory of environmentally driven change was lying in plain sight. Given his relentless emphasis on the geographical contrast between the eastern and western United States and how the tools pioneered in the former—like the axe and the boat—were of little help

in the latter, it would seem to follow that the Great Plains was the birthplace of the advances that facilitated its eventual conquest by Anglo-Americans. And yet, not one among the troika of technological innovations identified by Webb as crucial to that process was actually created in—or even originally for deployment upon—the Great Plains. For example, although the Texas Rangers eagerly adopted the six-shooter for use against the Comanches beginning in the late 1830s, Samuel Colt, a New Englander, had dreamed up his eponymous revolver nearly a decade earlier . . . while at sea. Similarly, the first American version of the windmill appeared in antebellum Connecticut, just as barbed wire was patented in 1873 by an Illinois farmer and businessman who lived ten degrees east of Webb's mythic institutional fault line.[34]

Shannon had much less to say about the matter that may most distress those who encounter *The Great Plains* today: its author's unvarnished racial bigotry, which he directs primarily at Native people.[35] At first blush, some readers may be surprised by Webb's candid appreciation of Indigenous power, best captured when he writes that, "For two and a half centuries [the Plains Indians] maintained themselves with great fortitude against the Spanish, English, French, Mexican, Texan, and American invaders" (p. 40).[36] Moreover, Webb lionizes the original inhabitants of the region for their courage, horsemanship, and resourcefulness, and he is dazzled by the simple sophistication of Plains Sign Language, the means by which disparate groups made themselves understood to one another in the vast meeting ground of the Great Plains.[37] Even so, his sections on Indigenous peoples are consistently undermined by cringeworthy sentences such as this one, deplorable both for its hoary stereotyping as well as its intellectual languor: "The Plains Indians were by nature more ferocious, implacable, and cruel than the other tribes" (p. 59).

Whatever grudging admiration Webb might have held for peoples like the Comanche did not extend to other Indigenous groups. In the book's most infamous line, Webb, noting the Pueblo Indian origins of the mestizo population of the modern Southwest, writes that their blood "when compared with that of the Plains Indians, was as ditch water" (p. 126). Some who wish to contextualize hateful snippets like these cite Webb's upbringing in the South by parents who had fled Reconstruction-era Mississippi.[38] But while Webb held a dim view of African Americans too, his writing was particularly antagonistic toward people of Mexican descent (like the mestizos of the Southwest), which a friend once explained this way: "subconsciously he still had the Alamo-Texas Ranger chauvinistic myth deeply engraved."[39] Tellingly, two of Webb's closest friends—Dobie and the third member of their celebrated UT triumvirate, the naturalist Roy Bedichek—were products of much the same Texas milieu but were viewed with less suspicion and animus by Hispanic colleagues such as the renowned UT folklorist Américo Paredes.[40]

Because the heroes of Webb's story are white men (in another colossal failure of imagination, women get all of two pages in the entire book), Native people are mere foils, at best a whetstone for use by Anglo-Americans in sharpening their emergent—and to Webb obviously superior—culture.[41] With the collapse of the bison herds upon which Indigenous groups of the Great Plains depended, Webb argues that, "The year 1876 marks practically the end of both" (p. 44). He thus enshrines another racist trope, this time the myth of the "vanishing Indian," described by one historian as "the idea that racial hardwiring doomed savage tribes to disappear when confronted by white civilization."[42] The reservation period that followed, according to Webb, was "little else than a story of imprisonment" (p. 53), a notion since contested by scholars who see such places rather as homelands where Native languages and lifeways persist.[43] By the time he died in 1963, Webb conceded the one-sidedness of his second book, *The Texas Rangers: A Century of Frontier Defense* (1935), a deeply racist paean to that famed constabulary; it is unknown if he harbored any such regrets about *The Great Plains*. He clearly should have.[44]

Given the weight of these defects, the ballast required to stabilize the reputation of *The Great Plains* piles deep. For those inclined to the work, a good place to dig in is with a frank acknowledgment of the book's ambition. As remembered by John Fischer, who, as editor-in-chief of *Harper's Magazine*, published several pieces by Webb in the 1950s and 1960s: "[Webb] wasn't afraid to tackle big subjects. Now and then he would talk—with a mixture of sorrow, amusement and contempt—about fledging historians who would devote years of labor to some safe, respectable little theme . . . Dr. Webb preferred subjects that offered plenty of elbow room."[45] The story of the Great Plains and their absorption into the United States proved spacious indeed. Even if the scope of Webb's volume led him to generalize, such was the cost of painting on so large a canvas. Webb prided himself on being a big ideas historian, in sharp contrast to the nuts-and-bolts approach of scholars like Fred Shannon.[46]

In order to render the fullest possible portrait of the region's history, Webb read widely across multiple disciplines: in the social sciences, of course (chiefly anthropology and geography), but in the hard sciences, too (including biology and geology). No less a figure than Fred Shannon commended Webb for making legible a dense, authoritative, multivolume study of irrigation and water rights in the arid lands of the West.[47] As one of Webb's biographers has noted, because of Keasbey's overwhelming influence upon him, Webb was baffled by the SSRC's description of *The Great Plains* as "interdisciplinary," however flattering the intent; to Webb, the book merely reflected a particular "way of thinking," one which he had practiced since his days as an undergraduate.[48] Still, Webb's engagement with—if not necessarily his mastery of—such a diverse body of literature stood out then, and is perhaps all the more striking

now, in light of the academic emphasis on interdisciplinary research, often prescribed but less frequently undertaken.

One might expect that such a book—lengthy, capacious, erudite—would be off-putting to the lay reader. But Webb, who never reconciled himself to the profession after his bruising experience at Chicago, did not write with his fellow scholars in mind. Rather, as explained by Joe B. Frantz, Webb's student as well as the inaugural holder of UT's Walter Prescott Webb Chair of History and Ideas: "no matter what [Webb] wrote about, he always wrote primarily for one person—not the specter of a critical book-reviewer, as most historians do, but an imaginary Bostonian who was not a professional historian, writer, or critic but a man of wide culture . . . who could be interested in a slice of non-Bostonian history."[49] That Webb hit his mark—confirmed by the glowing reviews of *The Great Plains* that appeared in the popular press (after that disappointing initial assessment)—is all the more notable considering that his publisher was in the textbook and not the trade market.[50]

Unlike many of his academic peers, Webb thought of himself first as a writer, a career he had dreamed of since his youth. Almost as well known as the "a-ha" moment that inspired his work on *The Great Plains* is the story of how its author, who grew up in rural poverty, wrote a plaintive letter to a literary magazine in 1904, when he was sixteen, confessing frustration with his straitened circumstances and expressing his desire to become a writer.[51] His missive was spotted by a Brooklyn toy manufacturer named William Ellery Hinds, who wrote to Webb, offering encouragement as well as additional reading material. It was Hinds who persuaded Webb to matriculate at UT in 1909, and who then made his education possible by loaning the younger man—whom he never met—money for tuition and living expenses.[52] Although Webb's disastrous performance in some early college English classes shook his confidence, eventually he took up the pen again, but this time with nonfiction his chosen genre.[53]

Over the course of his career, Webb had much to say about writing, best captured in a 1955 essay commissioned by *American Heritage*, a popular magazine devoted to U.S. history that had been established only a few years earlier. In the article, Webb lamented the early-twentieth-century appearance of what he called "scientific history," out of which "arose the idea that a great gulf exists between truth and beauty," such that the "real scholar must choose truth, and somehow it is better if it is made so ugly that nobody could doubt its virginity."[54] Passages such as these may explain why the editors at *American Heritage* spiked the piece. Webb believed that graduate training—like his at Chicago—was largely to blame for inculcating "timidity and self-repression," so that most university-based historians fell into two camps: "those who can't write, [and] those who can but don't." Webb viewed himself as part of the much smaller group of "those who do," characterized by an "urge to create, the compulsion to write and to consider writing as an art."[55]

Webb's skill as a stylist—characterized by a knack for evocative phrasing—suffuses *The Great Plains*. Take, for instance, an oft-quoted passage from the introduction: "east of the Mississippi civilization stood on three legs—land, water, and timber; west of the Mississippi not one but two of these legs were withdrawn,—water and timber,—and civilization was left on one leg—land. It is small wonder that it toppled over in temporary failure" (p. 9).[56] Belying his stiff and taciturn appearance, Webb could also be quite amusing, as in this snippet from a chapter on the region's aridity: "In the Scriptures we read that Jesus went into a 'desert place' and was followed by a multitude. There was no food save five loaves and two fishes. The amount was sufficient for the first few, but it took a miracle to make it go round. So it is with water in the Great Plains" (p. 323).[57] Webb considered history to be a branch of literature, and *The Great Plains* established his writerly bona fides. As the celebrated Western historian Ray Allen Billington once said about Webb's oeuvre: "Readers of Webb's prose can forgive him anything."[58]

Notwithstanding the book's towering ambition and its author's felicitous wordsmithing, most of all *The Great Plains* endures because of its concrete definition of the region, even though the parameters drawn by Webb were contested from the start.[59] Fred Shannon spent nearly a fifth of his report to the SSRC poking at the arbitrary nature of Webb's borders, chiding him particularly for settling on the 98th meridian as the eastern edge of the expanse; Shannon argued that conditions in, say, western Iowa were not so different from those in eastern Nebraska, but only the Cornhusker State, according to Webb, was part of the region.[60] Moreover, Webb never cast his eyes north of the 49th parallel, despite the fact that the southern portion of Canada's three prairie provinces—Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba—clearly belong to the same bioregion.[61] Nevertheless, Webb's focus on aridity as the defining characteristic of the Great Plains was eventually extrapolated to the wider American West, offering a novel way to think about that section of the country.

As explained by historian Elliott West, "After reading *The Great Plains*, anyone could point to a map and say 'Here,'" when asked to identify where the West was.[62] Such precision stood in marked contrast to the westering process made famous by Frederick Jackson Turner in his "frontier thesis," which had held sway in academia and beyond since Turner famously articulated it in an address to the American Historical Association in 1893.[63] When Webb spoke to the same body sixty-five years later, he insisted that while he was an ardent fan of Turner's work and considered it an honor to be thought of as part of "the Turner school," he had developed his ideas about the frontier in isolation from his predecessor, and that, in any event, "the frontier that [Turner] knew was east of the Mississippi."[64] So vital was Webb's intellectual contribution that the "process versus place" debate that, starting in the 1980s, roiled the field of Western history—even as it bored many others to the point of stupefaction—turned in no small degree on the competing visions of these two men.[65]

Webb put a finer point on this idea in a highly controversial essay he published in *Harper's Magazine* in 1957. "The American West: Perpetual Mirage" drew on his work from *The Great Plains* in general, and its focus on the region's aridity in particular. Webb's argument was simple: "The heart of the West *is* a desert, unqualified and absolute," such that Western history "is brief and it is bizarre," characterized by all manner of deficiency.[66] While its utility as a tidy distillation of one of Webb's major arguments in *The Great Plains* has led the article to become a staple on graduate syllabi and reading lists, it was despised by many readers when it first appeared. The *Denver Post* ran a full-page editorial condemning the piece, which began: "Listen, Dr. Walter Prescott Webb . . . you better take off your glasses and your Ph.D. You've picked a fight."[67] Friends had warned Webb about the inevitable blowback, but he insisted, "I can't help it. I'll have to publish it."[68] In a letter he penned to a thoughtful Nevadan who had written him about the essay, Webb patiently explained that "[m]y purpose was to help [Westerners] understand their country and themselves," which is precisely the spirit that animates *The Great Plains*, for better and for worse.[69]

The Great Plains is a deeply flawed masterpiece. For all its imperfections, the book inspires reverence among scholars of the West, one of whom recently explained that the copy he used as a graduate student in the late 1970s bears "coffee stains, sweat marks, and scribbled notes," evidence of how he took to it "with the reverence and zeal of a seminarian studying the Holy Scriptures."[70] Likewise, historian Donald Worster, easily the most influential of Webb's intellectual descendants and himself a child of the Great Plains, recalls that, in weighing Turner against Webb as he wrestled with understanding the West, he settled definitively on the Texan. "I know in my bones," Worster writes, "if not always through my education, that Webb was right. His notion of the West as the arid region of the country fits completely with my own experience and understanding."[71] And Webb was hugely admired by non-Western historians, too, including Jacques M. Barzun and William H. McNeill.[72] Today, it is not only budding scholars and college librarians who buy *The Great Plains*—in the four decades since the University of Nebraska Press issued its edition, the book has sold an average of 575 copies per year, a remarkable total for a university press book that is approaching its hundredth anniversary.[73]

Although an artifact of a bygone era, *The Great Plains* speaks unmistakably to the present. While Webb wrote the book against the backdrop of the 1920s wheat bonanza on the southern Plains, he understood that, for all its ingenuity, the American approach to the region spelled trouble, and he predicted that the conflict "over water and water rights in the arid region has just begun" (p. 452). If he attributed this dilemma at least as much to the peculiarities of U.S. jurisprudence as to the hard fact of scarcity, Webb understood that con-

ditions on the Great Plains imposed limitations upon the best-laid plans of human schemers. For the intrepid Anglo-American pioneers who took control of the region in the mid-late-nineteenth century, it was innovation, according to Webb, that allowed them to flourish. In our own time, however, the problems swirling about the Great Plains—and across the globe—lie seemingly beyond the reach of technology. The environment will shape human possibilities in the Anthropocene in ways likely far beyond Webb's ken, but which are consonant, all the same, with his penetrating insight into the importance of the natural world as a historical actor of incontestable importance.

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1. Webb describes this episode in a memoir he composed while at the University of Oxford in 1942–43 as the Harmsworth Visiting Professor of American History. He seems never to have returned to the project, which as an unpublished manuscript in his personal papers was mined by scholars for years until it was recently issued as *A Texan's Story: The Autobiography of Walter Prescott Webb*, ed. Michael L. Collins (2020). This anecdote appears on p. 164. For more on Webb's memoir, see Andrew R. Graybill, "A Historian's History," *Texas Monthly*, February 2021, 36–41.

2. William MacDonald, "The Conquest of the Prairies," *New York Times*, September 6, 1931.

3. Henry S. Commager, "Where Forests Ceased," *New York Herald Tribune*, August 23, 1931. My heartfelt thanks to "Diane at the New York Public Library" (how she chose to be identified, with no last name) who helped me locate this article. Frederick L. Paxson, perhaps the most prominent Western historian of the time, declared it "the most useful book on the West that has appeared in many years." See his review in *American Historical Review* 37, no. 2 (January 1932): 359–60, quotation on p. 359.

4. The Loubat Prize was established in 1893 and presented to one winner and one runner up until 1958, when it was discontinued. See "Paulin and Wright Win Loubat Award," *New York Times*, April 11, 1933. Webb loved to tell the story of how he was notified of his triumph. Upon answering a late-night phone call from the editor of an Austin newspaper informing him of his second-place finish and asking for comment, Webb replied, "I never heard of the Loubat prize," to which the editor tartly responded, "I never heard of *The Great Plains*." See Webb, *A Texan's Story*, 167.

5. The proceedings were published in Fred A. Shannon, *An Appraisal of Walter Prescott Webb's The Great Plains: A Study in Institutions and Environment*, Critiques of Research in the Social Sciences, vol. 3 (1940).

6. In a survey of 125 American historians conducted in the early 1950s, *The Great Plains* finished in third place among "preferred works in American history, 1920–1935." See John Walton Caughey, "Historian's Choice: Results of a Poll on Recently Published American History and Biography," *Mississippi Valley Historical* Review 39, no. 2 (September 1952): 299. Several sources claim that Webb's book was chosen by members of the American Historical Association as the single most significant work in U.S. history published during the first half of the twentieth century, but I have been unable to locate any documentary evidence supporting that claim (or even the existence of such a survey).

7. The secondary literature on Webb is so extensive that one prominent Western historian claimed that studies of Webb and his work exceed the number of those books "devoted entirely to any American historian other than Cotton Mather, Henry Adams, and Theodore Roosevelt." See Earl Pomeroy, "Environmental Interpretations of an Environmentalist: Walter Prescott Webb," *Reviews in American History* 5, no. 3 (September 1977): 397. Among the most important scholarly pieces about Webb consulted for this essay are the following: Necah Stewart Furman, *Walter Prescott Webb: His Life and Impact* (1976); Gregory M. Tobin, *The Making of a History: Walter Prescott Webb and* The Great Plains (1976); George Wolfskill, "Walter Prescott Webb and *The Great Plains*: Then and Now," *Reviews in American History* 12, no. 2 (June 1984): 296–307; Gregory M. Tobin, "Walter Prescott Webb," in *Historians of the American Frontier: A Bio-Bibliographical Sourcebook*, ed. John R. Wunder (1988), 713–28; Elliott West, "Walter Prescott Webb and the Search for the West," in *Writing Western History: Essays on Major Western Historians*, ed. Richard W. Etulain (1991), 167–91; Geoff Cunfer, *On the Great Plains: Agriculture and Environment* (2005); George O'Har, "Where the Buffalo Roam: Walter Prescott Webb's *The Great Plains*," *Technology and Culture* 47, no. 1 (January 2006): 156–63; and Michael L. Collins, "Walter Prescott Webb," in *Writing the Story of Texas*, ed. Patrick L. Cox and Kenneth E. Hendrickson, Jr. (2013), 43–66.

8. For this episode see Webb, *A Texan's Story*, 137.

9. Walter Prescott Webb, "History as High Adventure," *American Historical Review* 64, no. 2 (January 1959): 271.

10. Craven quoted in Furman, *Walter Prescott Webb*, 81.

11. Webb, *A Texan's Story*, 144. One of Webb's mentors sought to place Webb at Harvard under the tutelage of the renowned frontier historian Frederick Jackson Turner; Turner supposedly declined because he thought Webb was "too old." See Furman, *Walter Prescott Webb*, 78. Webb described his failure at Chicago as the "hardest blow I had ever received," and briefly entertained thoughts of suicide. In the end, he retained only three pleasant memories from his time in the Windy City, including the night that the writer Carl Sandberg—then engaged with what became his popular 1927 anthology *The American Songbag*—climbed the stairs to Webb's cramped, third-floor apartment to interview the younger man about Texas music. See Webb, *A Texan's Story*, 142–43.

12. Both quotations are drawn from Webb, "History as High Adventure," 271, 272.

13. Webb, *A Texan's Story*, 160

14. Ibid. Quotations appear in Webb, *A Texan's Story*, p. 20 and p. 154.

15. See Webb, *A Texan's Story*, 161–63; quotation on p. 163.

16. Quotations from Shannon, *An Appraisal*, 114.

17. Quotations from Webb, *A Texan's Story*, p. 161 and p. 163

18. Quotation from Shannon, *An Appraisal*, vii. The first two works taken up by the committee were William I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America: Monograph of an Immigrant Group*, 5 vols. (1918–20); and Frederick C. Mills, *The Behavior of Prices* (1927).

19. Elliott West notes that Shannon's "face-to-face showdown with Webb was one of the most dramatic episodes in the history of the profession," while George Wolfskill suggests that the contretemps "had the general effect of dividing the profession." See West, "Walter Prescott Webb," 176, and Wolfskill, "Walter Prescott Webb," 300. A reading of the conference proceedings indicates that most participants were sympathetic to Webb, perhaps because of Shannon's pugnacious reputation; for instance, as Berkeley historian John D. Hicks put it at the time: "There is a good deal of picayunish criticism in the appraisal." See Shannon, *An*

Appraisal, 192. Avery Craven, a friend of Webb's since they overlapped at Chicago, wrote a blistering review of Shannon's assessment, which included the charge that "[Shannon's] general approach and the temper of his criticisms are bad." See Avery Craven, review of *An Appraisal of Walter Prescott Webb's The Great Plains: A Study in Institutions and Environment*, by Fred A. Shannon, *American Historical Review* 47, no. 3 (April 1942): 627–30, quotation on p. 629. For his part, Shannon got even the following year in his review of *The Coming of the Civil War*, by Avery Craven, *American Historical Review* 48, no. 3 (April 1943): 587–89. Their spat culminated in a bitter exchange of letters—see "Communications," *American Historical Review*, 49, no. 1 (October 1943): 195–98. For more about Shannon, see Peter H. Argersinger, "Fred Albert Shannon," in *Historians of the American Frontier: A Bio-Bibliographical Sourcebook*, ed. John R. Wunder (1988), 624–35.

20. Shannon, *An Appraisal*, 120. Despite Webb's bitterness over the affair, he mended fences in most amusing fashion at the 1954 annual meeting of the Mississippi Valley Historical Association (forerunner of the Organization of American Historians). As vice president of the MVHA, it was Webb's duty to introduce Shannon—then serving as president—at the presidential dinner, which was packed because of their fabled confrontation fifteen years earlier. Webb began dryly, but eventually tipped his hand when he joked that, "my knowledge of the speaker's skill and ability as a critic is intimate and has the validity of a primary source." Walter Prescott Webb, *An Honest Preface and Other Essays* (1959), 118–21, quotation p. 120.

21. Shannon, *An Appraisal*, 111.

22. Ibid, 133.

23. Ibid, 114.

24. Quoted many places, but here in Joe B. Frantz, "Remembering Walter Prescott Webb," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 92, no. 1 (July 1988): 18.

25. Webb, "History as High Adventure," 274.

26. Richard White, "American Environmental History: The Development of a New Historical Field," *Pacific Historical Review* 54, no. 3 (August 1985): 297. In this regard, Webb has often been unfavorably compared to his contemporary, James C. Malin, who adopted, in the words of historian Frederick C. Luebke, a more subtle and sophisticated "ecological interpretation." See Luebke's introduction to Brian W. Blouet and Frederick C. Luebke, eds., *The Great Plains: Environment and Culture* (1979), xiv. For Malin's take on the Skytop kerfuffle and his own challenges to Webb's thinking, see James C. Malin, *History and Ecology: Studies of the Grassland*, ed. Robert P. Swierenga (1984), 85–104. Historians continue to wrestle with the implications of Webb's problematic approach to the environment as a historical actor, as in the introduction to Brian Frehner and Kathleen A. Brosnan, eds., *The Greater Plains: Rethinking a Region's Environmental Histories* (2021), xiii-xxviii.

27. Keasbey is a fascinating figure in his own right, with a fine short biography found at Walter F. Pilcher, "Keasbey, Lindley Miller," *Handbook of Texas Online*, https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/keasbey-lindley-miller (accessed March 15, 2021). Keasbey arrived at UT in 1905 to head the political science department, but soon found himself at odds with the university administration because of allegations that he was a socialist. This charge led eventually to his removal from political science and the establishment of the so-called Institutional History Department, in which Keasbey was the sole faculty member and where Webb first encountered him several years later as a junior in college. Keasbey was fired by the UT regents in July 1917 for publicly opposing American entry into World War I. Eventually, he moved to Tucson, where he raised champion show dogs, including chihuahuas, dachshunds, and greyhounds. See Fred Finney, "More Interest Taken in Dogs," *Arizona Daily Star*, February 22, 1935. Keasbey died at age 79 in 1946.

28. Webb, *A Texan's Story*, 122. It is important to note that Keasbey's determinist thinking was reflective of a wider trend among geographers of the time, best captured by Ellen Churchill Semple's famous line that, "Man is a product of the earth's surface." See her book, *Influences of Geographic Environment* (1911), 1.

29. Quoted in Tobin, *The Making of a History*, 47.

30. In fact, Fred Shannon was not the only scholar at Skytop to raise such objections. Of determinism sociologist Louis Wirth said, "instead of that older theory, there is [now] a

general tendency among human geographers, sociologists, and cultural anthropologists to believe that this relationship is much less direct than used to be believed." See Shannon, *An Appraisal*, 180. Even in a piece honoring Webb published shortly after his death, the renowned Southern historian C. Vann Woodward wrote that, "As an historian, Webb was something of a determinist. He would probably have preferred, with good reason, to call himself an environmentalist." See *Walter Prescott Webb: A Man, His Land and His Work* (1966), 16.

31. Shannon, *An Appraisal,* 114.

32. Walter Prescott Webb, "Geographical-Historical Concepts in American History," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 50, no. 2 (June 1960): 85–86.

33. Tobin notes that Webb broke off contact with Keasbey shortly thereafter, perhaps at least as much because "Webb believed that his old mentor had lapsed into both mysticism and Catholicism . . . [Webb] preferred to remember Keasbey as the exciting teacher of his undergraduate days rather than as the sad figure he had now become." This passage and the in-text quotation above from Tobin, *The Making of a History*, 52.

34. On Colt's epiphany, see Jim Rasenberger, *Revolver: Sam Colt and the Six-Shooter That Changed America* (2020), 48. Windmills first appeared in the tenth-century Middle East, but the basic technology upon which subsequent American models were based trace their origin to twelfth-century Europe. See Robert W. Righter, *Windfall: Wind Energy in America Today* (2011), 5–6. For more on windmills, see T. Lindsay Baker, *A Field Guide to American Windmills* (1985), and Peter Asmus, *Reaping the Wind: How Mechanical Wizards, Visionaries, and Profiteers Helped Shape Our Energy Future* (2000). On barbed wire, see Henry D. McCallum and Frances T. McCallum, *The Wire That Fenced the West* (1965), and Joanne S. Liu, *Barbed Wire: The Fence That Changed the West* (2009).

35. The question of Webb's racism has long been a subject of interest to his admirers and detractors alike. O'Har captures the general perspective of those more sympathetic to Webb, writing that "While it seems clear that Webb was not particularly racist by the measure of his own time, a modern reader can hardly fail to take him that way." See "Where the Buffalo Roam," 160. Revealing, however, is the fact that some of Webb's contemporaries, including his protégé, Joe B. Frantz, believed otherwise. In one of several warm but candid reminiscences about his mentor, Frantz ascribed Webb's racial prejudice to his upbringing by Southern parents who had been traumatized by Reconstruction, with their resentments likely reinforced by Webb's father-in-law, who had served in the Confederate Army. See Joe B. Frantz, "Walter Prescott Webb and the South," in *Essays on Walter Prescott Webb*, ed. Kenneth R. Philp and Elliott West (1976), 3–15. Elsewhere, Frantz put it more bluntly, writing that "[Webb] showed strong nativist tendencies and his views on racial matters were not exactly progressive, were even a bit barbaric." See Ronnie Dugger, ed., *Three Men in Texas: Bedichek, Webb, and Dobie* (1967), 132.

36. Far more sophisticated understandings of Native power on the Great Plains can be found in the work of Pekka Hämäläinen, especially his *Comanche Empire* (2008), and *Lakota America: A New History of Indigenous Power* (2019). See also Elliott West, *The Contested Plains: Indians, Goldseekers, and the Rush to Colorado* (1998); Andrew C. Isenberg, *The Destruction of the Bison: An Environmental History, 1750–1920* (2000); Brian DeLay, *War of a Thousand Deserts: Indian Raids and the U.S.-Mexican War* (2008); Elizabeth Fenn, *Encounters at the Heart of the World: A History of the Mandan People* (2014); Nick Estes, *Our History is the Future: Standing Rock Versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance* (2019); Jacob F. Lee, *Masters of the Middle Waters: Indian Nations and Colonial Ambitions Along the Mississippi* (2019); and Ryan Hall, *Beneath the Backbone of the World: Blackfoot People and the North American Borderlands, 1720–1877* (2020).

37. While he hardly grasped the extent to which Native Americans created entirely new cultures on the Plains beginning around the start of the eighteenth century, Webb's fascination with Indigenous peoples of the region was genuine, if inelegantly expressed. After watching the running of some sled dogs in the Alaska backcountry in the summer of 1962, he wrote his wife to explain that "The emotional impact of those dogs running really did things to my insides . . . I had a similar experience when in 1933 I went to a Plains Indian exhibit at the Chicago Exposition, and saw my Plains Indians come out in full regalia . . . I guess I

just love dogs and Plains Indians." See Betty Hanstein Adams, Walter Prescott Webb, and Terrell Dobbs Maverick, "Touched With a Sunset: The Letters of Terrell Maverick and Walter Prescott Webb—A Love Story," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 113, no. 4 (April 2010): 498. My thanks to Gregg Cantrell for directing me to this correspondence.

38. Webb said of his father that "his boyhood was a constant fight for white supremacy over his colored companions and white ones too." See Webb, *A Texan's Story*, 23. Webb's Southern partisanship received its fullest expression in his third book, *Divided We Stand: The Crisis of a Frontierless Democracy* (1937), which inveighed against Northern domination of the South and West.

39. For evidence of Webb's lamentable attitude toward African Americans, see, for instance, his article, "Notes on Folk-Lore of Texas," *Journal of American Folk-Lore* 28, no. 109 (July-September 1915): 290–99. For the quotation about his ethnic chauvinism, see Furman, *Walter Prescott Webb*, 48.

40. In his celebrated study of Gregorio Cortez, a Mexican American man unjustly pursued by the Texas Rangers in the early twentieth century, Paredes upbraided both Dobie and Webb for their highly selective interpretations of the event. See *"With His Pistol in His Hand": A Border Ballad and Its Hero* (1958), especially p. 17. And yet as the scholar John Phillip Santos has recently pointed out, Paredes came to a more generous understanding of Dobie, with the two "appreciating each other's company on numerous occasions, even maintaining a correspondence . . . (There was no such rapprochement with Walter Prescott Webb.)" See his article, "Américo Paredes vs. J. Frank Dobie," *Texas Monthly*, October 2019, https://www.texasmonthly.com/articles/americo-paredes-j-frank-dobie/ (accessed March 16, 2021).

41. Webb himself acknowledged this deficiency—even if he did little to rectify it—when writing in the book's closing pages that, "practically this whole study has been devoted to the men." See Webb, *The Great Plains*, 505. The literature about women and their experiences on the Great Plains is extensive, and includes: John Mack Faragher, *Women and Men on the Overland Trail* (1979); Julie Roy Jeffrey, *Frontier Women: The Trans-Mississippi West, 1840–1880* (1979); Patricia Albers and Beatrice Medicine, eds., *The Hidden Half: Studies of Plains Indian Women* (1983); Annette Kolodny, *The Land Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontiers, 1630–1860* (1984); Deborah Fink, *Agrarian Women: Wives and Mothers in Rural Nebraska, 1880–1940* (1992); Katherine Jellison, *Entitled to Power: Farm Women and Technology, 1913–1963* (1993); Anne F. Hyde, *Empires, Nations, and Families: A New History of the North American West, 1800–1860* (2011); and Andrew R. Graybill, *The Red and the White: A Family Saga of the American West* (2013).

42. Ari Kelman, "The Myth of the Vanishing Indian," *Times Literary Supplement*, July 5, 2019, https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/the-myth-of-the-vanishing-indian/ (accessed March 15, 2021). See also Brian W. Dippie, *The Vanishing American: White Attitudes and U.S. Indian Policy* (1982).

43. For alternate views of the reservation, see especially Frederick E. Hoxie, "From Prison to Homeland: The Cheyenne River Indian Reservation before WWI," *South Dakota History* 10, no. 1 (Winter 1979): 1–24; Peter Iverson, "Building toward Self-Determination: Plains and Southwestern Indians in the 1940s and 1950s," *Western Historical Quarterly* 16, no. 2 (April 1985): 163–73; Paul C. Rosier, *Rebirth of the Blackfeet Nation, 1912–1954* (2001); Willy Bauer, *We Were All Like Migrant Workers Here: Work, Community, and Memory on California's Round Valley Reservation, 1850–1941* (2009); Donald L. Fixico, *Indian Resilience and Rebuilding: Indigenous Nations in the Modern American West* (2013); Alexandra Harmon, *Reclaiming the Reservation: Histories of Indian Sovereignty Suppressed and Renewed* (2019); Maurice Crandall, *These People Have Always Been a Republic: Indigenous Electorates in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands, 1598–1912* (2019); and David Treuer, *The Heartbeat of Wounded Knee: Native America from 1890 to the Present* (2019).

44. See Walter Prescott Webb, *The Texas Rangers: A Century of Frontier Defense* (1935, 1965). In the words of the eminent Texas writer Larry McMurtry, "Webb admired the Rangers inordinately, and as a consequence the book mixes homage with history in a manner one can only think sloppy." See McMurtry, *In a Narrow Grave: Essays on Texas* (1968, 2018), 69. For Webb's ambivalence about the book in his twilight years, see Llerena B. Friend, "W.P. Webb's

Texas Rangers," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 74, no. 3 (January 1971): 293–323. For recent revisionist interpretations of Ranger history focusing especially on the constabulary's early twentieth-century abuse of peoples of Mexican descent, see Benjamin H. Johnson, *Revolution in Texas: How a Forgotten Rebellion and its Bloody Suppression Turned Mexicans into Americans* (2003); Monica Muñoz Martinez, *The Injustice Never Leaves You: Anti-Mexican Violence in Texas* (2018); and Sonia Hernández and John Morán González, eds., *Reverberations of Racial Violence: Critical Reflections on the History of the Border* (2021).

45. *Walter Prescott Webb: A Man, His Land and His Work*, 18.

46. In fairness to Shannon, that nuts-and-bolts approach won him the 1929 Pulitzer Prize in History for *The Organization and Administration of the Union Army, 1861–1865*, 2 vols. (1928).

47. Shannon, *An Appraisal*, 106.

48. Tobin, "Walter Prescott Webb," 723.

49. Wilbur R. Jacobs, John W. Caughey, and Joe B. Frantz, *Turner, Bolton, and Webb: Three Historians of the American Frontier* (1965), 76–77.

50. See the glowing review by Lewis Gannett, "Books and Other Things," *New York Herald Tribune*, August 11, 1931. (Gannett was one of the most prolific and admired book reviewers of his era.)

51. See Webb, *A Texan's Story*, 76–80. While Tobin, in "Walter Prescott Webb," questions none of the specifics, he observes that "For several decades before his retirement, Webb discreetly laid out a line of autobiographical detail, leaving skillfully arranged clues to the stages of his growth as a personality and as an intellect, and making sure that the image that he found in his own contemplation of self was taken up and reproduced by others." See p. 715.

52. Webb wrote poignantly of his benefactor—to whom he dedicated *The Texas Rangers*—in "The Search for William E. Hinds," *Harper's Magazine*, July 1961, 62–69. Webb apparently believed it was the best piece he ever wrote. See *Walter Prescott Webb: A Man, His Land and His Work*, 42.

53. See Webb, *A Texan's Story*, 113–16.

54. Webb, *An Honest Preface*, 131–39, quotation on p. 135. Historian Barbara Tuchman, venerated for her own stylistic gifts, cited this passage approvingly in an address she gave at the 1966 annual meeting of the American Historical Association. See "History, Jargon, and Ph.D.'s," *New York Times*, January 1, 1967.

55. Webb, *An Honest Preface*, quotations on p. 136 and p. 138.

56. Years later Webb acknowledged that he was introduced to this particular phrasing by a student. See Webb, *A Texan's Story*, 149–50.

57. On Webb's disposition, see Dugger, *Three Men in Texas*, 158–59, and especially the reminiscences that appear in a special issue of *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 92, no. 1 (July 1988).

58. Quoted in Wolfskill, "Walter Prescott Webb," 301.

59. It is worth noting that, however original, *The Great Plains* appeared within the context of an emergent turn toward regionalism within several academic disciplines, marked by the publication of contemporary studies including Twelve Southerners, *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (1930).

60. Shannon, *An Appraisal*, 16. (Of course it was only the portion of Nebraska west of the 98th meridian—beginning roughly in the environs of Grand Island—that fit Webb's definition.)

61. See Andrew R. Graybill, *Policing the Great Plains: Rangers, Mounties, and the North American Frontier, 1875–1910* (2007), especially 8–12. An engagement with the vast secondary literature about the Canadian Great Plains lies well beyond the scope of this essay. The best comprehensive examination remains Gerald Friesen, *The Canadian Prairies: A History* (1984). A slimmer and more focused study is Sarah Carter, *Aboriginal People and Colonizers of Western Canada* (1999).

62. West, "Walter Prescott Webb," 174.

63. The literature on Turner and the frontier thesis is immense. The best place to start is with Frederick Jackson Turner, *Rereading Frederick Jackson Turner: The Significance of the Frontier in American History and Other Essays*, ed. John Mack Faragher (1994). See also Allan G. Bogue, *Frederick Jackson Turner: Strange Roads Going Down* (1998).

64. Webb, "History as High Adventure," 278–79. Tobin proves that—despite Webb's claim, on at least one occasion, that he had not read Turner's essay until after he completed *The Great Plains*—Webb referenced the piece in his own writing as early as 1924. See Tobin, *The Making of a History*, 110. Regardless, Webb's final book—*The Great Frontier* (1952)—has an undeniably Turnerian inflection, beginning with the title.

65. One of the central tenets of the so-called New Western History holds that the West is a definable geographic space, which derives to a great extent from Webb's ideas. Key works that reflect this perspective, whether implicitly or explicitly, include Patricia Nelson Limerck, *Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (1987); Clyde A. Milner, II, Patricia Nelson Limerick, and Charles E. Rankin, eds., *Trails: Toward a New Western History* (1991); and Richard White, *"It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own": A New History of the American West* (1991). For a recent retrospective on this era, see Nathalie Massip, "When Western History Tried to Reinvent Itself: Revisionism, Controversy, and the Reception of the New Western History," *Western Historical Quarterly* 52, no. 1 (Spring 2021): 59–85.

66. Walter Prescott Webb, "The American West: Perpetual Mirage," *Harper's Magazine*, May 1957, 25–31, for quotations see p. 26 and p. 31.

67. Webb, *An Honest Preface*, 179

68. Dugger, *Three Men in Texas*, 158.

69. Webb, *An Honest Preface*, 193.

70. See Michael L. Collins's introduction to Webb, *A Texan's Story*, 2.

71. Donald Worster, *Under Western Skies: Nature and History in the American West* (1992), 24. In the same vein, O'Har notes that "Reading Webb today is every bit as exhilarating as it was when I first read him in graduate school. There is something fundamentally right about what he has to say about the plains and about how they whittled on and shaped those who dared to go west." See "Where the Buffalo Roam," 162,

72. See Jacques M. Barzun, "Walter Prescott Webb and the Fate of History," in *Essays on Walter Prescott Webb and the Teaching of History*, ed. Dennis Reinhartz and Stephen E. Maizlish (1985), 11–35, and William H. McNeill, *The Great Frontier: Freedom and Hierarchy in Modern Times* (1983).

73. Bridget Barry (editor-in-chief, University of Nebraska Press), email message to author, September 29, 2020. Barry noted that while overall sales since 1981 exceed 23,000 copies, in recent years annual sales have more typically fallen between 120–150 copies.