

Book Review

Prairie Fire: A Great Plains History. By **Julie Courtwright**. 2011. University Press of Kansas, Lawrence, USA. 274 pages. Cloth. US\$29.95. ISBN-13: 978-0-70061794-4.

In his notes on the jacket cover of Julie Courtwright's book, *Prairie Fire: A Great Plains History*, Stephen Pyne writes, "For too long the Great Plains have been a flyover region of American fire history. Thanks to Courtwright's detailed and admirable work, they can now move from missing middle back to the center." Certainly, this book has made a major contribution to understanding the role fire plays in the ecology of the Great Plains. Not only does Courtwright establish the importance of fire to the region, but she makes the case that fire, wildlife, and humans have interacted over millennia to perpetuate the grasslands of the plains.

In the introduction, Courtwright sets the stage for the remainder of the book by telling the stories of two fires that occurred over 100 years apart in the same region of Kansas. She uses those fires to explain how people can change the environments in which they live. "Whether absent or present," she states, fire "plays a pivotal role in the environmental history of the plains." The next chapters give a historical overview of prairie fires, starting with the paleological record of fire. She then describes the importance of burning by Native Americans, the observations of prairie fires by early explorers, and the experiences of the first Euro-American settlers with those fires.

The shift in the role humans played by suppressing fires is the subject of the next several chapters. The first attempts to suppress fires were not always successful, and many buildings were burned, crops lost, and people died. As suppression efforts became more effective, prairie fires became less prevalent. The result, however, was that herbage began to build up, trees began to encroach on the grasslands, and fires, when they occurred under extreme weather conditions, burned out of control. The final chapters describe efforts to reintroduce fire using prescribed burns to mimic the effect of the Native American fires.

Environmental historians should be pleased with the over 650 notes, more than 160 primary sources, and more than 100 secondary sources. Fire ecologists, however, may find that the amount of material in the book regarding ecological processes is wanting; I was unable to find more than a dozen or so citations to the scientific ecological literature. Perhaps her most insightful writing comes at the end of each chapter, where she integrates the extensive environmental history with the basic ecological principles. In any case, fire ecologists and environmental historians will find this a useful addition to their bookshelves.

—**Jan W. van Wagtendonk**, Research Forester Emeritus, US Geological Survey, Western Ecological Research Center, Yosemite Field Station, El Portal, California 95318, USA. jan_van_wagtendonk@usgs.gov

