

## EDITOR'S CORNER

I don't know about its original inhabitants, the native peoples who lived on (one might well say *with*) the Great Plains before Columbus, but certainly the Europeans who ever since Coronado have ventured into the region have had some little difficulty in comprehending and describing the essence of the Plains. Coronado, although at times nearly overwhelmed by the seemingly endless horizons, nevertheless recognized the potential of the Plains for a livestock economy. The grasses of the Plains were, to his eyes, lush compared to the rocky and barren landscapes he had traversed before reaching the Llano Estacado. Two and a half centuries later when the first official American explorers, Pike and Long, crossed the Great Plains, they saw only desolation—the Great American Desert. Coming from the humid east with its low mountain ranges and fertile valleys, its forests of hardwood, and its abundance of full-flowing streams, the short grasses of the level Plains indeed looked sterile to them. Yet only a half-century later this Great American Desert was being touted as the Garden of the World as settlers began to flock into the region, spurred first by the bloody struggle in Kansas Territory between pro- and anti-slavery factions and then by the Homestead Act following the Civil War. The frontier that President Jefferson in the first decade of the nineteenth century thought would remain uninhabited for hundreds of years save for Indian tribes had disappeared by the last decade of that century.

In this issue of *Heritage of the Great Plains* three scholars examine some of the diverse ways that novelists, historians, sociologists, and anthropologists have envisioned the Plains and some of the effects, both natural and cultural, of these competing visions. The immensity of the Plains, it seems, overwhelms those who would attempt to distill their essence; the diverseness of this region of seeming sameness renders impossible a simple overarching judgment. I find it interesting that the two original and contradictory perceptions—desert or garden—continue to recur into the twenty-first century. Perhaps that is because the essence of the Great Plains is, in fact, complex and contradictory, both a garden and a desert.

I hope that readers, as I did, will enjoy and learn from these insightful studies.