

Preface

A great archaeologist once told me not to let facts get in the way of a good story. For the most part I have ignored that advice. In the following pages I have tried to make an ancient, dusty, nearly forgotten story come alive. To do so I have had to expand my assumptions and my thinking well beyond the realm of facts. Over twelve thousand years of residency in North America, the Native inhabitants left us no written records of their dreams and aspirations, or of anything else. To put flesh on the skeletons of these people's lives we have to dream along with them. Capturing people and events that disappeared from our world centuries ago requires a judicious helping of imagination, hence the title of this book.

The book isn't about what are traditionally considered the great historic achievements of our species. There are no magnificent cities built, no colossal monuments erected, no gigantic statues carved, no kingdoms conquered. It was very much this deviation from classical concepts of "civilization" that motivated me to write this book. Modern society seems to equate human achievement with monumental substance and architectural grandeur. Asked to name the greatest accomplishments of ancient cultures you would certainly hear of the Great Wall of China, Stonehenge, the Great Pyramids, and the civilizations that ruled Greece and Rome. Shunted off to the side are many ancient cultures that achieved greatness through their skill, knowledge, and ingenuity – cultures that managed to survive in demanding environments for extraordinary lengths of time without leaving towering monuments to themselves. In the coming pages I hope to show how simple lines of rocks stretching across the prairies are every bit as inspirational as rocks piled up in the shape of a pyramid.

This is a book about one of the truly remarkable accomplishments in human history. It is the story of an unheralded, unassuming, almost anonymous group of people who hunted for a living. They occupied an open, windswept, often featureless tract of land. They lived in conical skin tents that they lugged around with them in their search for food. A life of nearly constant motion negated permanent villages and cumbersome material possessions. They shared this immense landscape with herds of a wild and powerful beast – the largest animal on the continent. In a land virtually without limits, people of seemingly unsophisticated hunting societies managed to direct huge

herds of buffalo to pinpoint destinations where ancient knowledge and spiritual guidance taught them massive kills could be achieved. It was an *event* that guaranteed survival of the people for months to come, a *process* that ensured their existence for millennia. Using their skill and their astonishing knowledge of bison biology and behaviour, bands of hunters drove great herds of buffalo over steep cliffs and into wooden corrals. In the blink of an eye they obtained more food in a single moment than any other people in human history. How they accomplished this is a story as breathtaking in scope and complexity as the country in which the events unfolded.

Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump in southern Alberta, Canada, is but one of many places where herds of bison were brought to their deaths by the Native inhabitants of the Plains. It forms the nucleus around which my story unfolds. But this is not so much the story of one place, one people, or one time. It is the story of countless people who thrived over an enormous expanse of time and territory by orchestrating mass kills of bison. There were two reasons I wanted to write this book. First, to bring to a wider audience a story that I felt was so compelling and inspirational that it should not be allowed to fade from contemporary memory. And second, to do justice to the people who orchestrated these remarkable events.

For the most part I have built my story around the fascinating accounts of early explorers, fur traders and missionaries who roamed the Great Plains and witnessed the final episodes of traditional hunting. That these important records are flawed is a given; the authors often felt compelled to embellish their stories and to overlay their own social values on the Native people they encountered – seldom in a way that favoured the Aboriginal characters. Yet they provide a richness of detail that the archaeological record alone could never supply. There is nothing quite comparable to the words, reactions, and sentiments of those who were at the scene of the great buffalo kills. When Henry Youle Hind stood beside the rotting carcasses of a Cree buffalo pound in the 1850s and remarked, “it is needless to say that the odour was overpowering, [with] millions of large blue flesh flies, humming and buzzing over the putrefying bodies,” nothing that I could imagine, or add, could convey this in the sense of his own words. Notes at the end of the book provide reference for the citations. A much more extensive bibliography, organized by chapter, is available at www.aupress.ca.

While there is an authority and immediacy to historical records, using them comes with a cost. Aside from the obvious issue of bias, reliance on historical records compresses the element of time. Europeans witnessed bison killing on the Plains for little more than a century and a half; a mere fraction of the span of Aboriginal history. By telling the story from a historical perspective, I am essentially telling how the *last* hunting of bison took place. In so doing I mask some important events that transpired on the Great Plains over many millennia. Animal species changed, populations rose and fell, severe droughts came and went. The buffalo hunting that I describe is true to a period and a place. It is not the only story of buffalo hunting on the Plains. It is not likely the one that consumed the bulk of the time people in which have occupied this region. What the long view of archaeology teaches us, that historical records cannot, is that nothing ever persists unchanged over great spans of time. Stretching over six hundred generations of Plains life, we should expect nothing less than an ebb and flow of different people and different cultural adaptations across the vast prairies.

Perhaps as well as any bison kill site, Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump documents the complex, fluid nature of prehistoric life on the Great Plains. Herds of buffalo were first driven over the cliff at Head-Smashed-In nearly six thousand years ago; a time when no other buffalo jump in North America was being used. How do we explain such an early use of this site? In short order Head-Smashed-In was abandoned, possibly for as long as two thousand years. What's that all about? Why would people walk away from an ingenious trap, the tricks of which they had clearly mastered? Then about two thousand years ago, Head-Smashed-In became a veritable cornucopia of bison killing. So rich in bones and artifacts are these more recent kill events that some (including me) have argued that the great buffalo kills had evolved into "factories," producing bison products beyond the immediate needs of the people, products destined for trade to distant regions of North America.

These are stories that document the unceasing flux of ancient life across the Great Plains and beyond. They are important and incredibly interesting, but I can't address them all. I have directed my efforts to capture just a snapshot of the saga of buffalo hunting in North America. Snapshots have inherent limitations – they freeze a moment

in time, failing to illuminate a subject in the moments before and after the captured event. The rest I leave to another author.

Finally, the pages that follow document a personal journey – one of exploration, bewilderment, and exhilaration. In an academic sense the journey is unconventional; it is filled with my own experiences, many of them part of my own process of discovery. And it begs the reader to traverse the vastness of the Great Plains and the cultures of its Aboriginal inhabitants along with me.

Jack Brink

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