Wheat farmers hate gophers. The little critters cut the stalks and run off with the grain—particularly when the year is dry and the crop is light. Furthermore, to the disgust of ranchers, they dig holes in pastures, where large and commercially valuable animals like cows and horses can fall and break their large and commercially valuable legs. On the other hand, gophers are valuable members of midgrass prairie communities. In dry years, they strip the leaves and seed heads from the grasses, limiting above ground vegetation that would otherwise transfer limited moisture from the perennial underground forest of roots and rhizomes to the air through transpiration. Gophers—and their allies in drought, the grasshoppers—invented the summerfallow, but they use it selectively, fallowing the most land in the driest summers. The grasses themselves co-operate—on tallgrass prairie, the big bluestem, Indian grass, and switchgrass grow eight feet high in moist years, while in dry years they fade back and let the little bluestem, the stypas, and the other “bunchgrasses” take over and hold the soil; thus, less foliage is exposed to transpiration and little ground to evaporation, again conserving
water for the perennial root forest. Wheat, on the other hand, is an annual grass. The gophers’ mowing may slow down transpiration, but there is no living root forest to benefit, only dead and shallow structures like frost-killed petunias in an urban flowerpot. Gophers’ incessant burrowing aerates the land and separates the root forest, thinning it out so it can breathe and grow, just as the urban gardener separates the rhizomes of iris. Gophers store their seed underground, and in the event of a long drought, these storehouses become one source for grassland regeneration after the return of the rains. Gophers are the messengers of Gaia, small piping indicators of the complex biofeedback mechanisms that mark the whole blue-green Earth as a single living organism of interlocked living systems.

The Laramide orogeny of some 65 million years ago, the great collision of tectonic plates that raised the Rocky Mountains, set up the conditions for the grasslands ecosystem in the semi-arid rainshadow of the Rockies. The grasses and the gophers co-evolved with the buffalo and other even bigger ruminants, including something with a snout big enough to munch on Osage oranges. Badgers, ferrets, and hawks ate gophers, as did coyote, the trickster. Long cycles of glaciation and warming, drought and moisture, shaped the system. Rivers and wind lay down soil and stripped it away again. Dune systems grew and moved. Prairie pothole lakes formed in the remains of the glaciers, and waterfowl thrived. The long and short cycles of weather coiled past each other, and the gophers brought forth their young. When the first humans came onto the grasslands, whether emerging from the earth as the old stories tell or coming down from the north as more recent commentators would have it, they fit themselves into the cycles of the grasslands. It may be that they killed off the megafauna, or, more likely, that the cycles of cold and heat, moisture and drought no longer favoured the giant bison, the mastodons, and the others. But the grass and the gophers continued their dance through the processions of the equinoxes and the tilts in the earth’s orbit that change the name of the fixed star. At some point, the people began firing the grass, pushing the woody plants back to the verge of the creeks, and removing the overburden of dead plants. The young shoots showed improbably green on the scorched earth, and the buffalo and the gophers came to feast on bounty coming, like asparagus, from the deep and long-lived roots. Women with digging sticks
foraged for prairie turnip, timpsila, and other roots, and joined the gophers in the work of aeration. The people lived well—they lived well indeed. Prairie is a diverse ecosystem, offering hundreds of plants and animals for food, medicine, inspiration, and co-management. But hunger, want, and warfare came too, as part of the cycle—and hard work and danger. Peoples moved. Newcomers came. And every year the gophers brought forth their young and the bison calves looked red in the sun and the grasses turned their tender faces to the sky.

For 65 million years or so, the ecosystem of the Great Plains at the heart of what is currently called the North American continent was exactly that—a heartland. The violent extremes of climate, the stunning expanse of earth tapered by glaciers and ancient seas to meet the sky, the grassful dance of above-ground—all stretched across an invisible underground forest of roots; the gophers, the buffalo, the people, the hawks—all were at the centre of a universe that fitted them very well. When the horse—which had evolved precisely on that grassland—returned, it initially fit in as if it had never been away.

Every ecological system is necessary and sufficient for the plants and animals that have co-evolved with it and for those that have migrated slowly into it in response to the cycles of climate change that characterize Earth's history. The Arctic and the Kalahari are exactly home for the low-growth shrubs, the protectively coloured animals, and the people who hunt and forage there. Life may be hard because population is scarce and climate unforgiving, but neither the organisms nor the land is deficient. Far less deficient was the Great Plains for the first ten thousand, or forty thousand, or more years of its acquaintanceship with humans. Humans already occupied the land as it evolved from forest to grassland. Both archaeological and oral evidence agree that the Plains, away from the shelter of the mountains and the river valleys, was seldom traversed in the days when people walked and dogs carried their cargo on travois. (My travois dog sleeps beside me, her sturdy, big-chested body, which uses food so efficiently that she easily goes to fat in her latter-day idleness, bearing witness to the strength of her ancestors.) The oral history also tells us that emergence onto the Plains for the Lakota, the Blackfoot, the Kiowa, and the others was an emergence into a paradise, a garden that teemed with a diversity of prey animals,
from buffalo to voles, and of vegetable treasures, from saskatoon berries to mouse beans. For people like the Mandans and Hidatsas, the Omahas and Pawnees, the Plains also provided space for riverine agriculture: corn, squash, beans, and sunflowers.  

Certainly, the hunters and gatherers and farmers could see ways to improve the Plains. Again, both archaeology and oral tradition agree that the people built buffalo pounds, especially ones that would hurl the huge ruminants over cliffs so that they might easily be dispatched. People fired the prairies to repel bison with fire and to attract them with succulent new growth. Women knew the locations of all the berry, turnip, and other wild plant food grounds, though whether their practices actually enhanced the food grounds is not entirely clear. They did take berries, roots, and other products at a sustainable rate that left the grounds fruitful year after year. People cleared and planted riverine gardens and protected them from deer, birds, and other predators, including humans. They understood the land as part of a sacred tradition of earth and sky; they held sacraments such as the Sun Dance that expressed the courage and integrity of the people as worthy of the favour of the sun and the buffalo. Although many different groups of people lived on the Plains between their first emergence and some two hundred years ago, and although they understood various economic and sacred relationships to the region—including many that manipulated place, plants, weather, and animals for their own benefit—they worked from an ideology of sufficiency. What was there was what ought to be there. Droughts, severe winters, and even the deaths of individuals with superior skills in locating and securing food sources might bring about scarcities, even ones that lasted longer than a generation and required people to relocate in order to survive. But the human response to the Great Plains, until a few hundred years ago, was to use it, appreciate it, learn it, and manipulate it, but not to replace it or make drastic changes.  

For the Spanish who came with Coronado, the Great Plains were deficient in gold. The soft golden grass houses of the Wichitas were a mockery, not a marvel. A disappointed Coronado had his guide strangled. For the French and British fur trade explorers who came from the north and east, the Plains were deficient in fine furs and supported deficient people, like the Omahas, who demanded tolls of the traders coming through their territory,

4 Introduction
or like the Blackfoot Confederacy, who would not trap beaver and would neither trade with the Canadian traders nor allow the American mountain men to trap in their territory. But the true prophets of deficiency were the agricultural settlers and the people of their urban trade centres. They were prepped by theories of the Great American Desert and the Palliser Triangle to find deficiency. They also felt a strong sense of entitlement to something else, and they relied on theories about the “Manifest Destiny” of the “Anglo-Saxon race” to expand across the continent and to change the “desert” to the “Garden of the World,” the theory that “rain follows the plough,” and the idea that “free land,” “virgin land,” was just waiting for the touch of the “yeoman farmer” to “blossom like a rose” and bring forth wheat in the “Bread Basket of the World.” Tame grasses, tame water, tame cattle, land that was personal property, and a worldwide market system would end the deficiency and reclaim the empty land for civilization and Christianity, these newcomers believed.

The study that follows is a meditation about what happened when a mass of people hit a geographical and cultural region that they felt entitled to reclaim from deficiency. It is also about the intellectual resistance from groups of people, already weakened by disease and invasion, who nonetheless attempted to deal with vastly changed circumstances in both economic and sacred contexts; people who, unlike the settlers, began from the premise of sufficiency, not deficiency.

There is no single point at which the paradigm of deficiency replaced sufficiency; indeed, that shift is still not complete and might, perhaps, someday reverse. We might begin with Coronado’s entrada in 1540–42, with the grant of Rupert’s Land to the Hudson’s Bay Company in 1670, with the Proclamation of 1763, or with the passage of the US Homestead Act, the Confederation of Canada, and the completion of the first transcontinental railroad in the 1860s. For the most part, it is this last decade that I have chosen for my starting point and that I have followed up to the present, with an outlook toward the future. My definition of the Great Plains follows that of my geographer colleagues at the Center for Great Plains Studies at the University of Nebraska (see map on next page). The region stretches roughly from the Missouri River to the Rocky Mountains and from the North Saskatchewan to the Rio Grande. It is the land that the governments
gave away as not quite good enough to be sold, unlike the land to the east, and not quite bad enough to be kept in the public domain, unlike the mountains, the deserts, and the arctic. Although the area is approximately two-thirds in the United States and one-third in Canada, I have tried to treat the two countries equally because the subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) differences in government policy and national narrative are useful for helping untangle environmental and cultural imperatives. Working with the paradigm shift from sufficiency to deficiency means that I have mostly omitted several narrative lines from earlier histories, such as the Wild West/Mild West dichotomy in many US-Canada comparisons, or the conflation of the Plains with the West Coast and Mountain West in one meta-region. As will become evident, I have been heavily influenced by many other writers, particularly Roger Epp, Sarah Carter, Barbara Belyea, Paul Voisey, Jim Pitsula, Angie Debo, James C. Malin, John Joseph Mathews, and Hamlin Garland.

Except for my great-grandparents’ adventure holding down a homestead in Colorado for a few years around 1880, my family has no farming traditions. My ancestors were coal miners and civil servants, merchants and soldiers, lawyers and teachers. Gardening, though, is a different story. My English grandparents grew bounteous vegetable and flower gardens in the long narrow lot behind their little house in South Calgary. Except for my student years, when I lived in dormitories or a co-op, I cannot remember living without a garden. True, we do not rely on our lettuce to feed us through the winter, and we know that if we don’t bother to put it in, we can supply its lack from a farmers’ market, but still, we follow the rhythm of planting and tending and harvesting at a level that, unlike the dirt under our fingernails, will not wash out. And I have lived nearly three-quarters of my life, as both child and adult, within sight and smell (I walked to school past cabbage fields in the Garden State of New Jersey) of farms. For thirty-two years, my family has lived on and with a ten-acre plot of land outside of Lincoln, Nebraska. It was a small but working dairy farm in the 1930s and a hobby farm with sheep and chickens from the 1950s to the early 1970s. We have planted vegetable gardens and fruit trees, and have watched the wide leaves of our rhubarb shrivel up after our neighbour sprayed herbicide on fields upwind from us. We have watched the tallgrass prairie regenerate in the front pasture, aided by fire and mowing, and we have watched red cedars take over the
unmowed and unburnt back pasture. We mine mud from the creek to patch up the holes around the overflow that would otherwise drain our pond—the recharge for our domestic well. One year, my husband waged a war with a solitary bank beaver (we named him David Thompson) who ate up all the willows and insisted on trying to block the overflow and raise the pond up over our driveway. Great blue herons fish the pond, and green herons nest in the boggy area around the inflow. Red-tailed hawks still whistle and soar, even though the stars have disappeared from the north sky in the light pollution of the Wal-Mart and Menards that moved in across the highway about five years ago. None of this makes me a country girl, but I know farming and the land differently than I would had I always had people rather than grasses as neighbours. And so Hamlin Garland, the son of the Middle Border, John Joseph Mathews, and the others do not seem very far away to me.

Born in Wisconsin, raised in Iowa, and holding down a claim in Dakota Territory before becoming a successful author, Garland would seem to be the consummate American homesteader—and it is from him I first understood that the Homestead Act and its variations were most successful to the extent that they did not produce family farms. Mathews, the Oxonian Osage, showed me how un-inevitable—in fact, how freaky—it was that European ideologies replaced Osage ones, revelations underlined by Carter Revard and Leslie Silko. James Malin’s cantankerous opposition to the theory behind New Deal agricultural practices, his stubborn insistence on the existence of Great Plains dust storms long before the plough, his scorn about theories of climax vegetation, and his incessant questioning of what prairie restoration would restore prairie to influenced my conviction that no ecosystem is ever deficient for the plants and animals with which it co-evolved. Angie Debo showed in great detail both how Indigenous political and economic systems worked in the context of an overlain free market system and how they were systematically destroyed, both legally and illegally, during the twentieth century. Paul Voisey, like Garland but much more exhaustively, showed me that homesteading was sometimes only incidentally about farms. Jim Pitsula showed me that a market economy, operating exactly as it was supposed to, would rob the Great Plains of people and resources. Barbara Belyea awakened me to the contingency of all systems of categorizing geography, including those as seemingly “obvious” as river
systems. Sarah Carter teaches me many things, but especially how receptive the Plains Cree were to farming, how skilful and inventive they were, and how government policy systematically and repeatedly scuttled their successes. Most recently, I have been influenced by Roger Epp and his theories of the political de-skilling of the rural West. Other intellectual debts will become evident as this book unfolds. All errors of fact and interpretation are, of course, my own.

In chapter 1, “A Unified Field Theory of the Great Plains,” I lay out an overview of how the region has transformed since the deficiency paradigm has become the norm and why I think deficiency is, indeed, a “deficient” theory. I also deal with institutions such as the railways, cattle ranching, and the grain trade, which have definitively shaped the region but which I do not study in individual chapters. Chapter 2, “Exploring the Explorers,” looks at how the idea of deficiency was laid down by the various European and Euro–North American explorers of the Great Plains, their editors back in “civilized” locations, and subsequent historians of exploration.

The next two chapters parallel armed resistances to the paradigms of deficiency by pairing Riel’s Red River resistance to the Cheyenne with Sioux resistance to Custer’s Seventh Cavalry and then Riel’s 1885 resistance in the North West with the Ghost Dance leading up to the 1890 massacre at Wounded Knee. At the Forks of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers in Manitoba, old fur trade families, crofters “cleared” from the Scottish Highlands, Swiss soldiers, and the Peguis Ojibway-Cree had coalesced into a successful commercial settlement. Although Canadian expansionists from Ontario believed that the community would be happy to join the brand new Dominion of Canada on Canada’s terms, Red River (today’s Winnipeg and environs), under the leadership of Louis Riel, successfully resisted the extra-legal taking of the community and managed to secure some rights for the old settlers in the new province of Manitoba. A decade later, Lakota, Dakota, and Cheyenne warriors decisively defeated a certain show-off US colonel at the Battle of the Little Bighorn. Yet both of these successful resistances turned to pyrrhic victories, as they gave the federal governments of Canada and the United States graphic images of the “savagery” and hence deficiency of the inhabitants of the Great Plains; this gave intending settlers moral permission to displace, subdue, or even kill them. In the mid-
late 1880s, various religious revivals arose on the Great Plains, from the Exovedate established by Louis Riel at Batoche to the Ghost Dance among the Lakotas. Both of these movements were suppressed by the superior force of arms of the two federal governments, and both were used to extend the already coercive material and spiritual dispossession of Indigenous and mixed-blood groups in favour of European and Euro–North American settlers. The spiritual aspects of resistance survived, however, and helped mitigate the continuing attempts to “kill the Indian, and save the man,” as Richard Henry Pratt, founder of Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania, put it. Despite Anglo writer John G. Neihardt’s contention that the people’s dream died in the bloody mud at Wounded Knee Creek, South Dakota, just after Christmas 1890, resistance never failed.

Two Indigenous historians, discussed in chapter 5, are Hehaka Sapa (Nicholas Black Elk), an Oglala Lakota, and John Joseph Mathews, a mixed-blood Osage. For them, there was no question about whether “Indians” had survived the “Indian wars.” They had. In 1932, each of these men published a book—Black Elk through the interpretation of his son, Ben, and the rewriting of John Neihardt. The volumes each suggested ways in which specifically Siouan constructs of the universe—and particularly the intricate interconnection of material and spiritual life in the specific ecosphere of the Great Plains—could frame a sustainable way of living that was completely different from the linear and progressive model of the Amer-Europeans.

To Amer-Europeans—John Joseph Mathews’ term for people of European descent who inhabited America but had failed to become naturalized to the land and its customs—the end of the nineteenth century seemed to mark the end of the frontier, the defeat of the “deficient” people who had peopled the Great Plains, and the triumph of a bicoastal Anglo-Saxon democracy, premised on a market economy and a particular definition of Christianity. Chapter 6 looks at how the saga of the “Closing of the West” was created for the United States by Frederic Jackson Turner and for Canada by Harold Innis, and how the saga has been tweaked and rewritten by our contemporary New West historians.

Yet “Indians” were not the sole history of the Great Plains during the period it was being transformed into commercial agriculture. The eastern,
central, and West Coast areas of North America were never “free land” in the way that the Great Plains was purported to be. Quebec, Plymouth, Williamsburg, and other seventeenth-century settlements were sited on or near Indigenous settlements and were dependent upon Indigenous people for their survival. Land was granted to seigneurs or to compacts and parcelled out to settlers. Eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century settlers or agents purchased land or were granted it for service in war. Oregon Territory featured an early *Homestead Act* designed to draw settlers west (ignoring the Great Plains) in order to hold the territory for the United States against British claims. The mountain and desert Wests and the North remain largely federal lands not “settled” by agrarians. The Great Plains, however, was “free land” to be made into farm homes by idealistic young families. Or so, at least, said the backers of the *Homestead Act* and the *Dominion Lands Act* and even the *Dawes Allotment Act*, which broke up the reservations into individual allotments for Indigenous people and “surplus” lands for Amer-European homesteaders. In chapter 7, however, we see that the great success of the Homestead Acts was in transforming “free land” into capital for the market development of the Great Plains, not in turning “virgin land” into “family farms.”

Homestead laws both implicitly and explicitly, especially in Canada, excluded most women from homesteading in their own right. The *Indian Act* in Canada and other laws and treaties defined race in terms of gender. Only male persons were described as Indian—women’s Indian status was dependent upon being fathered by or married to an Indian, and could be erased by marriage to a non-Indian. The destruction of the buffalo economy and of the definitions of the sacred year around the buffalo affected men more severely than it did women. Chapter 8 discusses the ways in which deficiency definitions affected women distinctively.

The deficiency definitions of the West did not disappear in the twentieth century, nor did the Amer-European belief that it was appropriate to continue to take Indian land, lives, and culture because they continued to be deficient by Amer-European standards. Chapter 9 looks at the de-Indianizing of the state of Oklahoma, the former “Indian Territory,” from before statehood up through the 1930s; we also examine the “mixed economy” that had been re-created and rebuilt since the various “removals” of people
to Oklahoma. And Indigenous peoples were not the only ones who resisted the imposition of Amer-European agriculture and farms on the Great Plains. The Dust Bowl of the 1930s—following on the depressed years of the 1920s on the Plains—forced Canadians and Americans to rethink the whole prospect of living on the Plains. The Dust Bowl reinforced the deficiency idea, of course, but it also forced people to reconsider the way they were doing things. Not all Amer-Europeans shared the belief in the deficiency of the Great Plains: there had always been people seeking to become native to the place, like Osage agent Laban Miles, of whom Mathews wrote.

Chapter 11 discusses how two unusual leaders, George Norris of Nebraska and Tommy Douglas of Saskatchewan, attempted to mitigate what was going wrong for the people who were living on the Plains. Both recognized that the extreme individualism preached by Manifest Destiny narratives simply was not working on the Plains, although their ways of mitigating both market forces and the particularities of the environment were fairly conventional. Douglas, particularly, recognized that market forces, working as they theoretically were supposed to work, would inevitably impoverish and depopulate the Great Plains. He believed that government development and a planned economy would mitigate the unforgiving hand of the market. Chapter 12 looks at how planning and growth theory can help us understand how the history of the Great Plains developed under an explicit model of deficiency that does not necessarily provide a blueprint for a better future—except for a planned depopulation of Buffalo Commons. In fact, the global blunders committed in the name of planning foreshadow a dark role for the Great Plains in terms of the global economy. “Mouse Beans and Drowned Rivers,” chapter 13, shows how, again, the theories of the deficiency of the land and of its Indigenous inhabitants intersect, this time resulting in the string of dams built to “reclaim” the Missouri River for flood control, power generation, and navigation for Amer-European market agriculture and cities, all at the expense of the subsistence, convenience, tradition, and commercial livelihood of the tribal communities that were systematically flooded.

Although we have been looking primarily at an agricultural history of the Great Plains, resource extraction has also been a significant part of the story. While the region (except for a small section near the Black
Hills) has been spared consideration as a “National Sacrifice Area” (à la the uranium-producing Four Corners region of the United States), extraction of fossil fuels, and particularly oil and gas, has played a large part in the economic prosperity—and subsequent economic busts—of the region. Extraction comes with certain environmental degradations that emphasize the expendability of the place and its human and non-human residents. Alberta’s oil sands are north of the Great Plains, but the vast expenditures of water, energy, and habitat in producing oil are resonant with the petroleum industry’s history from Texas and Oklahoma up through Wyoming and the Dakotas to Alberta and Saskatchewan. Roger Epp’s consideration of how they add to the “de-skilling” of the rural West is a twenty-first-century explication of the deficiency paradigm.

The final chapter suggests a way in which we might reconceptualize our whole understanding of this region within a paradigm that does not depend on deficiency. Among the “deficiencies” of Indigenous people that Amer-Europeans attempted to rectify was the “lack” of a justice system. As innumerable inquiries into the provision of justice (or lack thereof) to Aboriginal individuals and communities have repeatedly concluded, the vaunted, adversarial, rights-based Anglo justice system has been, especially in the Prairies, a travesty for Native people, who are, from birth, more likely than anyone else to be “victims” or “perpetrators” of crimes. Although things may be getting worse for actual Indigenous persons, society is no longer uniformly proclaiming that it is Native people who are deficient. Rather, it is the imposed “justice system” that has failed. Chapter 15 looks at how social justice might improve were it framed in an Indigenous intellectual context. It argues that a similar reframing might enable us to better understand how to create a thoroughly twenty-first-century form of sufficiency on the Great Plains that satisfies human beings without devastating the non-human Plains ecosystem.

Almost every summer morning, the dogs and I leave the little house in Calgary and walk past the neatly groomed fairways of the golf course to a few acres of “natural area” park. About three or four years ago, the neighbourhood community had the park declared pesticide-free and staged a raid on yellow goatsbeard or false salsify (*Tragopogon dubius*), a Eurasian plant that in Nebraska is content to be a minor forb in the tallgrass prairie, but here in
the fescue shortgrass is a serious invasive. So each morning we stop, I put my right foot on the leashes, and I grasp the stem of the goatsbeard. Pull steadily, straight up, so as not to break off the stem at ground level. It is best to work two days after a rain, so that the water has penetrated deep enough to soften the ground. Pull out the taproot, which looks like a skinny parsnip or real salsify. If you are patient, you can boil the roots and scrape out the edible flesh between the woody core and the skin and root hairs to make a tasty porridge. Supposedly goatsbeard, like other salsifies, is a remedy for liver and gallbladder malfunctions, but it would take a very patient herbalist to work with it. Some of the other exotics in the natural area park—brome grass, dandelions, European vetches—were deliberately introduced to North America for their nutritive values, but goatsbeard probably just came along for the ride, mixed in with the seeds of those more prized Eurasian fodder plants. No one, not even I, bothers to cook up the yellow goatsbeard. The plants are allowed to dry out and disintegrate on the paths or are carefully bagged in plastic for the trash. I can see them now at any distance across the field, their shade of yellow entirely distinct from any other yellow, their silhouette of leaf and stalk standing out, now that I have hunted them for so long, from all the other grasses, forbs, and woody shrubs.

Except for Autumn, the strong travois dog (licensed as an Australian cattle dog because the City of Calgary has no categories for Indigenous North American dogs), the dogs and I are as much invasive exotics as the yellow goatsbeard, as the brome and dandelions, as the Hungarian partridges who fill the niche once claimed by prairie chickens, as the English sparrows and city pigeons. Yet sometimes we find coyote scat or surprise a jackrabbit hurrying off with stiff-legged bounds. I give thanks for the pin cherries and strawberries, the wolf willows and wild roses, the spruces and poplars, the fescue grasses and the spring crocuses, the ears of the prairie, and I wonder by what right I uproot my fellow invasive, the pretty yellow flower that, if left alone, produces a perfect hoary globe, like a giant dandelion plume, that might delight a small child; the flower that, if left alone, could be harvested in the fall as food and medicine.

On most fall and winter and spring mornings, the dogs and I leave the big old farmhouse in Nebraska and walk down our driveway, past the pond that feeds the well, along the abandoned railroad tracks, then up the
gravel service road to the tower that sends 911 signals across the southern half of Lancaster County. Red-tailed hawks perch on the guy wires of the tower and launch off to search for the small mammals who make up most of their diet. On our own land, we walk through the regenerated tallgrass prairie, where the big and little bluestem, the switchgrass, the Indian grass, and the rest are slowly taking back these few acres from the brome that was planted there some ninety years ago. Already the yellow sweet clover that came up the year after we pastured the neighbours’ horse is gone. We have wild roses and many forms of composite sunflowers and asters and daisies and iron weed, distant cousins of the yellow goatsbeard. We have the woody sumacs, whose “fire-fangled feathers” give fall colour to the field. We lack leadweed and sensitive plant and most of the other legumes of the prairie, who did not shelter a population along the creek beds sufficient to accompany the grasses back into the ploughed and seeded monoculture of the brome. The creek is the home of black willows of the kind one might cut to build a sweatlodge, and of one huge and symmetrical cottonwood tree. As we walk up to the tower, we walk between a fenceline of mulberries and Siberian elms, both deliberately introduced exotics who are now invasive, and a field that used to be sown in wheat or milo, both semi-arid plants, but that now is always given to the thirstier soybeans or corn. Only the corn is native to the Americas, but these commercial hybrids are a long way from the multi-coloured “Indian corn” of the Pawnee and Omaha and Oto corn villages that dotted southeastern Nebraska a few centuries ago. I am grateful for the properly named velvet leaf, which, exotic as it is, breaks up the monoculture. And I am grateful for the cattle who glean the fields after harvest, giving them shape and dimension. I know that on a late fall afternoon, coming home after dark, it is wise to be sure that the blacker shadow of the willow tree by the pond does not hide an Aberdeen-Angus heifer who has got through the fence. And I do not pull out the yellow goatsbeard that so modestly raises its head from the tall grass or the hedgerow. In Nebraska, it seems to have become naturalized, in equilibrium, not threatening to claim more than a sustainable niche in the floral ecosystem. Perhaps the dogs and I should aspire to the humility of Nebraska goatsbeard. Each morning I choose the highest point of our walk to face the four directions and salute the array of leafy beings against the great prairie sky.