WHITE MAN VERSUS THE PRAIRIE

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The prairie that I have in mind in this essay is that vast sweep of potentially natural grassland that stretches from the ninety-fifth meridian westward to about the one hundred and fifth meridian, and from Canada southward to the Rio Grande and the Gulf. The title suggests something of the nature of a contest in which the advantage may swing now toward one factor, and at another period the other may be favored. We are thus reminded of the ebb and flow of the rhythms that characterize so many of the phenomena of dynamic natural history.

Much of the thrill that helps to compensate the scientist, in his constant search for truth, comes from the contemplation of the natural cycles that appear on every hand. Man himself is a composite rhythm of precariously complex balances, as indeed is the universe as a whole. Life and death are but two of the termini that mark the rhythmic phenomena of the cosmos. As Goethe wrote:

The spectacle of nature is always new, for she is always renewing the spectators. Life is her most exquisite invention, and death is her expert contrivance to get plenty of it.

During the past century scientists have clearly demonstrated that nature and time had played with inferior organisms of great variety in lapping waters and by muddy shorelines for hundreds of millions of years before man entered the dynamic landscape. Many of those early creatures had already gone the way of all dust because they failed to adjust their fundamental affairs to meet the rhythmic vicissitudes that have characterized the sweep of time. Primitive man, crude as he may have been, was “smart enough”
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