“Pacing Dakota” by Dr. Tom Isern

Book review by Dr. Lewis and Dr. Dona Reeves-Marquardt, Austin, Texas

“Certain things speak for themselves,” Thomas D. Isern states, but in his latest assemblage of parables, personal studies and observations in *Pacing Dakota* (Fargo, ND: North Dakota State University Press, 2018, 241 pp. + index), the author questions whether he may have “crossed the red line into the territory of a memoir.” He admits that he entered the realm of “self-conscious regionalism” by spending most of his life on the Great Plains of America. For many of us who also love the area, Isern’s almost forty years of academic study of the Plains, first in Kansas, then in North Dakota, have produced a most rewarding view, whether academic or memorial, of a regional culture many take for granted.

The American prairie has been continuously rediscovered by historians, sociologists, ethnographers and assorted students, yet many representing, in Isern’s view, “an ascetic denial of sensuality.” Isern’s view is not into the trope of denial nor desolation, but celebration. His table creaks with abundance as found in the prairie’s wild life, the Benedictine garden in Richardton or the cellars of home cooking pioneers; his landscapes unfold with spectacle. This new work then, standing without scholarly verbiage and unnecessary footnotes speaks of religion as “landmarks of faith,” and ethnicity, whether of Norwegian, Ukrainian, or Germans from Russia, as strengths upon the land. The book raises the bar for future authors of the Upper Midwest who propose to extend and expand our knowledge of an area largely unfamiliar to and dismissed by readers from more southern or coastal climes. Isern admits he is “trying to do good history,” and though he modestly argues for a denial of declensionist history, he nevertheless produces a good read and an excellent study. We found it filled with adventures and observations, landscapes and personalities equaling the work of other such territorial writers as Wallace Stegner, Terry Jordan or Hamlin Garland. We were particularly intrigued by Isern’s cast of characters that seemed to burst from his imagination until we encountered our own acquaintances, Brother Placid Gross and Carol Just: his characters are not mere stereotypes; they are flesh and blood neighbors and friends, even though there might be some rascals among us.

The book is also a pleasure to read! It is put together in short essays bound by colorful chapter headings such as “The Roads are Pink Ribbons,” and “Blooming in Richer Color,” chapters rich in “sensate story.” Based upon hundreds of authored radio broadcasts, carefully edited and wisely including an index, *Pacing Dakota* is more than a metaphor for the “Prairie Historian’s” treks over empty fields and sectional roadways. It is a love story for a region, a collection of stories and images, views of memorable people, places, geologic and architectural insight, and love, a happy marriage with few moments of tension between author and plains. As Isern writes, “From the countless stories...come certain emergences, maybe even a grain of wisdom.” Like its medieval predecessor, the chap-book, this volume entertains and instructs as well as delights. We wished it had even more photographs and maps, but words can also illuminate. The Great Plains is a fairly unpopulated place with a narrative here that is told by Isern more humbly, more fascinatingly, and closer to that spirit of humanity that many of us miss in our present quandary.