

Reading Log #1

In the book *Imagining Head-Smashed-In: Aboriginal Buffalo Hunting on the Northern Plains* by Jack Brink, chapter one looks at the historic buffalo jump located in southwestern Alberta. Brink, an archaeologist, examines the remnants of the Head-Smashed-In buffalo jump to better understand this communal hunting technique and the people who used it. The reason behind his book is to combat misconceptions and spread the true history of buffalo jumps in Canada. He does this by challenging stereotypes, providing historic information on the jumps, as well as guiding the reader to further understand life on the Great Prairies thousands of years ago.

Brink opens his book by describing the archaeologists arriving at the jump site and imagining a buffalo jump taking place right where they are, but many years prior. One sentence describes the scene how “people once ran frantically in all directions” yet when it comes to the complexity of a buffalo jump, those involved would probably not see it as frantic but rather a planned hunt (1). This however is just an example of the language used and is not one of the stereotypes he challenges in this chapter. He combats the stereotype of the people being hungry and living in unideal living conditions by saying that they “might actually have been quite comfortable” (10). Brink says this because buffalo jumps provide mass amounts of food at a time and the people lived in the same conditions for thousands of years. Another notable stereotype that may be confusing to outsiders is that not all cliffs were used for buffalo jumps. “The prairies are littered with cliffs, drops, inclines, and precipices that were never used by anybody or anything” (12).

On the topic of providing historic information regarding the buffalo jumps, Brink states “[t]here are about a hundred sites in Alberta alone that are considered to be buffalo jumps or other mass kill places” (14). He continues by saying “[i]t is estimated that the blood of more than one hundred thousand buffalo has soaked into the earth at Head-Smashed-In” (15). These numbers according to Brink make Head-Smashed-In “the Mother of all Buffalo Jumps” (6). He also goes on to explain about the discovery of stone tools near these jump sites and how the “tools themselves cannot be dated with the radiocarbon technique” making it hard to determine a specific timeline for some historic sites if not found alongside bones (21).

Brink also helps show the readers what life might have been like on the prairies thousands of years ago. One way he describes the people of the land is “tenacious people in their relentless pursuit of an extraordinary way of life” (6). He expands on this by explaining that the buffalo jump requires more than a few people or more than even one group. It is an event that brings people from other groups together to achieve the same goal: hunting for food. Brink also compares this method to other hunting techniques such as individual game hunting with deer and other local animals. He explains how buffalo jumps were “the most productive food-getting enterprise ever devised by human beings” because the meat would feed many groups for many months to come (6).

Overall, Brink does a successful job at breaking down misconceptions, providing historic information, and allowing the reader to imagine life thousands of years ago on the Canadian prairies. One quote that stuck out near the beginning of the chapter was “[w]hy else study the past if not to bring it back to life”, and the reading was capable of bringing history back to life and not letting it be forgotten (6).