

## **Walter P. Webb, *The Great Plains* Core Text for HIST 431**

This is a commonly available edition of the Webb text:

Webb, Walter Prescott. *The Great Plains*. Boston: Ginn & Co., 1931. Reprint, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press. 0-8032-9702-5.

It doesn't really matter what version of the text you have, or what picture is on the cover. They are all facsimiles of the 1931 edition. This book has never been out of print. When Prof. Isern read it as a text in an American West course - at Bethany College, Lindsborg, Kansas, in a year you can guess at - Webb was still regarded as current knowledge. Nowadays, we read Webb as intellectual history, that is, to discover how we came to think the way we do about the region. Webb was an idea man.

He also was an exceedingly distinguished historian. Webb Hall, at the University of Texas, is named for him, as is the Webb Chair in Great Plains Studies there.

Walter P. Webb's presidential  
address to the American  
Historical Association, 1957

*The Great Plains* is a rich text, which can be read on several levels, and so you need not confine your reactions and reflections to my selection of study questions! If you are reading thoughtfully, you will generate your own ideas. Also, remember that concepts are more important than factual detail. The facts are evidence. The point of the book is its argument. For the crux of that argument, see the [page on the Webb Thesis](#).

Speaking globally, there are two main things to get from reading Webb.

1. Understand his main thesis, adaptation to environment, and how it is developed through a series of case studies.
2. Understand how a master historian such as Webb works, the strengths as well as the weaknesses. Webb believes in the great idea, which provides the analytic foundation for the book. The

scheme of the book therefore is expository in structure. Nevertheless, Webb is a great story-teller, and so within the expository structure are strong narrative elements.

You will be required to take a quiz over the Webb text, fill out a response sheet to it, and discuss it in class.

### **Study Notes for Webb Quiz**

There will be a classroom discussion devoted to this text, and so in order to ensure people read the thing before we devote discussion to it, there will be a brief quiz. Ten questions, simple ones based on major points in the text, multiple-choice or short answer. Five points per question, total 50 points possible.

*The Great Plains* is a big book with a lot of facts in it. How can you prepare for a quiz on it? The answer is, think how we do things in this course. There are a lot of facts, but the emphasis is on ideas. So be sure you get the main ideas from Webb, and think of the facts and stories as examples or elaborations of the ideas. Here are some further hints.

- You better be able to define what the Webb Thesis is, and give examples of it from the book.
- Consider how each chapter develops or supports the main thesis. What examples of the thesis in law, or institutions, or material culture (things) are brought forward?
- Master the vocabulary of the work. What is “dry farming,” anyway? In other words, be sure to achieve an understanding of key terms. If some term seems important but is unclear to you, that’s a great opportunity for discussion on the Facebook wall!

### **Response Sheet for the Webb Text**

Fill out this sheet and bring it to class for the discussion of Webb.