



The Red House On The Niobrara

Alan Wilkinson

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This book takes the reader right to the heart of the Great Plains landscape. Fascinated by the life and work of Mari Sandoz (Crazy Horse, Cheyenne Autumn, Old Jules), British writer Alan Wilkinson had visited her home state a dozen times over twenty years. He'd read a great deal about the early days on the Nebraska frontier, but wanted to know more. What would it really, truly, be like to live on the naked Plains for a season? Could he still get a sense of what those pioneers went through, a century ago? There was only one way to find out - and when a ranching couple offered him the use of a hundred-year-old hunting lodge, built by settlers on the banks of the Niobrara river, he shook hands on the deal before they could change their minds. Sure there were holes in the roof, and snakes in the basement - but he wanted an authentic frontier experience, right? The week after he moved in he was hit by an April blizzard. A month later his road was washed away by a thunderstorm. Determined to act out a part of the pioneer experience, he collected a pile of cow-chips and planted a garden. The first was wiped out by hailstones, the second by grasshoppers. He spent the spring and summer hiking the hills, exploring the riverside and investigating the history of the Danish immigrants who first settled this little plot, hardy folk who graduated from a dug-out to a soddy, then built the little red house that was now his home. For relaxation he socialized with local ranchers, hit the bars and the rodeo, rode the range with Department of Agriculture surveyors, worked on the spring round-up and helped cut the hay. In between he re-considered the life and work of his heroine, Mari Sandoz, re-visiting what remains of her home and camping out at her grave-site. This is a reflective work, a lyrical appreciation of place that remains firmly rooted in the author's elemental relationship with a unique landscape. It is a narrative populated by a cast of genuine western characters, living and dead.

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