



NOT BISON FOR DINNER AGAIN?

James Walker
Buffalo Hunt 1878
reproduced from *The Bison
in Art: A Graphic Chronicle
of the American Bison* by
Larry Barsness (Flagstaff, Ariz.:
Northland Press, c.1977)

Russell Doust finds bison in
the butcher, bison in the wilds
of Oklahoma and bison in the
National Library of Australia

I was in my butcher's shop the other day and noticed that he had various cuts of bison. He is perhaps not your ordinary butcher, since he stocks not only bison but also other exotic game—quail, pheasant, possum, ostrich, even camel—but nevertheless I was intrigued by the bison. I asked where it came from. Victoria, he told me, adding that there was a man there who had been raising them for twenty years. I explained that earlier in the year, in a visit to the United States, I had encountered about three and a half thousand bison in

the wild, in the Tall Grasses Prairies in Oklahoma. 'They are huge beasts,' I said, showing off my recently acquired knowledge, 'they weigh about 12 tonnes each, and they can jump fences!'

Fortunately another customer needed his attention, for I had just about exhausted my store of knowledge about bison. But I thought that I really should know a bit more, if ever I got myself into a conversation about bison again.

As one does, I turned to Google and discovered plenty of references, including the now inevitable Wikipedia article from which, amongst other things, I found out that bisons are sometimes called American buffaloes but apparently aren't buffaloes at all. I was keen to explore the subject further at the National Library of Australia to find what was written or recorded in images. There, in the catalogue, were references to a wealth of material about bison, although it seemed that the terms 'buffalo' and 'bison' were a bit mixed up.

Out of the 47 catalogue references I chose half a dozen, and started my learning process. In American Western culture, the

bison is commonly referred to as 'buffalo' but that name is properly applied only to the Asian Water Buffalo and the African Buffalo; both buffalo and bison, however, do belong to the family of Bovidae.

The definitive work on bison appears to be *The American Bison: The Story of Its Extermination as a Wild Species and Its Restoration under Federal Protection* by Martin S. Garretson, published by the New York Zoological Society in 1938. This book is as fascinating for its illustrations as for the story itself. One image shows a train being held up while a huge herd of bison crosses the tracks. Garretson writes about the wealthy Irish nobleman, Sir George Gore, who hunted bison in 1854 on the western plains and in the Rocky Mountains. He took with him 40 servants, two or three scientists, 120 horses and 21 carts, 14 hunting dogs and, of course, the latest and best of firearms. The extent of Gore's depredations almost beggars belief: he and his party accounted for 40 grizzly bears, 2500 bison, together with uncounted elk, deer, antelope and other small game. It is possible, of course, that Gore's party ate some of them, and certainly there are other accounts of bison being eaten—but mostly it was only the hump (just behind the beast's shoulders) and the tongue, the rest being left to rot. The hide, however, was much prized and an enormous trade in 'buffalo' robes burgeoned. Garretson remarks that 'hundreds of thousands of animals were killed annually ... every plainsman had one or more robes ... thousands were made into overcoats'.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the American buffalo or bison was all but extinct. Only two small herds remained but fortunately a small 'tame herd' had been protected by federal law in the Yellowstone National Park. Read Garretson if you want to know the story of how the bison eventually survived. I found no better or more authoritative account, although his many black and white illustrations give little idea of the drama of these huge beasts. For that, go to *The Bison in Art: A Graphic Chronicle of the American Bison* by Larry Barsness (1977). Inside its covers are colourful paintings showing Indians of centuries ago hunting bison with spears or bows and arrows as well as pictures of white men hunting with guns.



An interesting book, almost 'Boy's Own Paper' style, is *Buffalo Adventures on the Western Plains*, edited by Alfred Powers and published in 1945. Apart from its intrinsic interest for young readers, this book is important as it brings together fictional accounts by much earlier writers such as Richard Hakluyt, James Fenimore Cooper, Washington Irving, R.M. Ballantyne and others. Here, Cooper's characters are in search of bison but have been delayed by an encounter with the Sioux Indians who are distinctly unfriendly:

'It is glorious! Rarely have I seen a richer rising of the sun'. 'Rising of the sun! I like not such rising of the sun' slowly repeated the old man. 'The imps [the Indians] have circumvented us with a vengeance. The prairie is on fire!' Although the day was beginning to dawn, the vivid colors of the sky continued to deepen.



above:
M.S. Garretson (1866–1955)
A 'Holdup' on the Kansas Pacific Railroad, 1869 1913
reproduced from *The American Bison*
by Martin S. Garretson (New York:
New York Zoological Society, 1938)

below:
Unknown artist
Buffalo
reproduced from *Buffalo Adventures on the Western Plains* by Alfred Powers (ed.) (Portland: Binfords & Mort, 1945)

right:
John Young
Shedding Season
reproduced from *The Great Buffalo Hunt* by Wayne Gard
(New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1959)

below left:
Title page of *The Border and the Buffalo: An Untold Story of the Southwest Plains* by Milo Milton Quaife (ed.) (Chicago: The Lakeside Press, 1938)

below right:
Title page of *The Great Buffalo Hunt* by Wayne Gard (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1959)



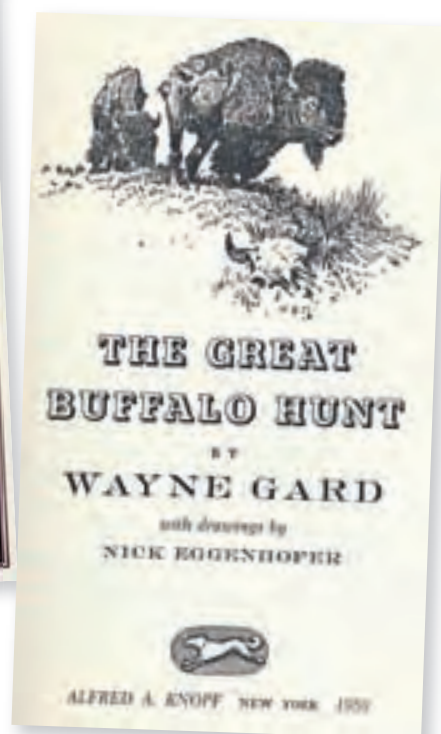
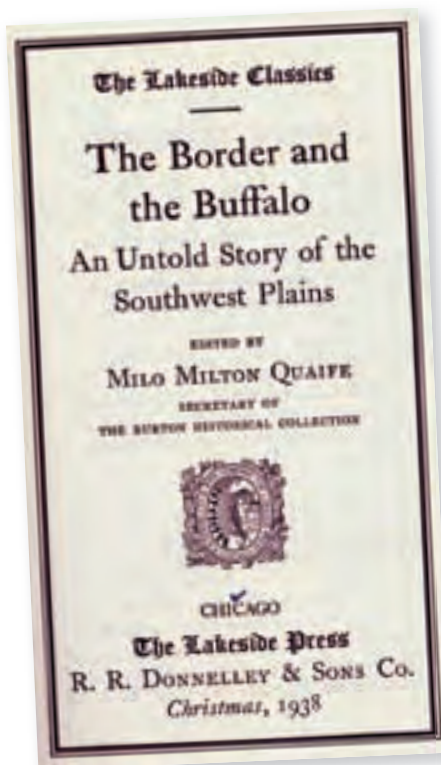
Bright flashes of flame shot up here and there, along the margin of the waste ... 'Let us mount and ride!' cried Middleton ... 'Whither would ye go? Is a horse a salamander that can walk through fiery flames unhurt?' ... There are Siouzes too, hemming the fire with their arrows and knives on every side of us, or I am no judge of their murderous deviltries.'

This is adventure writing to capture the hearts of youngsters and, in case you are wondering, the party escaped but only with the help of a friendly young Indian of another tribe. We now know that hunting parties such as these were among those responsible for the near extermination of the largest beast that walked the American continent in modern times.

If you want a more factual account of life on the prairie, try *The Border and the Buffalo: An Untold Story of the Southwest Plains* (1938) which reprinted a 1907 book of J.R. Cook who describes frontier life in the 1870s and 1880s.

Coming up to where Buck was, he informed me that he had killed sixteen buffaloes. Jo was thrilled with delight; whereas, in less than four months I looked upon such things as a matter of course. Following Buck, and driving nearly half a mile farther, we came to the first carcass. One of the horses was so frightened at sight and scent of the dead animal that we had much trouble to manage him.

I shall spare you the details of how the bison were skinned and at what speed. In contrast to this dramatic story, you can find a more balanced account of bison hunting in *The Great Buffalo Hunt* by Wayne Gard (1959).



The Library also has material on the prehistory of the bison and its predators—bison meat was a staple of the Indians of the plains and the forests. Here is a brief extract from the introduction to *Bootlegger Trail Site: A Spring Bison Kill* (1978), an official US Government report, describing Indians' preparation for their annual bison hunt:

For generations the ancestors of the People, and others, used the gully-dissected south bank of the Marries River breaks as a place to kill bison ... They knew that the high, wind-swept, grassy plains provided conditions sufficient for aggregation of thousands of the shaggy beasts. Even during the long Montana winter, the Chinook winds that flowed off the eastern slopes of the Rocky Mountains ensured the presence of exposed grasses at intervals ... This winter when the People arrived to put the finishing touches on the drive and the killing place, the bison had not yet come together on the plain above ... [they] continued their preparation for the ensuing hunt while they waited ... Finally, in late February, a sufficient number of bison appeared ... Once they had the animals contained, the hunters proceeded with the kill: arrows flew until the last animal dropped.

By now, you might be wondering whether I bought my piece of bison from the butcher. As a matter of fact I did not, it being too large for two people. But if I had, how

would I have cooked it? We know from contemporary accounts quite a lot about how bison were cooked in the nineteenth century in North America. The tongue and the hump were the easiest to cook, often just being boiled, but it would have been interesting to know whether bison was as common on present day North American tables as kangaroo is today in Australia. But, I regret to say, of the 7026 National Library catalogue entries for books on cooking meat, the first 500 did not produce a bison cookbook—after that I gave up. However, the Library did have *Buffalo Cook Book*, compiled and published by the Country Women's Association of the Northern Territory in 1981—there were no tongue recipes but there were plenty of other ideas: Buffalo Steak Diane, Buffalo Stroganoff, Buffalo Curry, Spiced Buffalo, Buffalo Meat Balls, Braised Buffalo with Herbs, Polish Style Buff Stew, even Macaroni Buffalaise! Might try some one day.

RUSSELL DOUST USED to cook a lot when he was State Librarian of New South Wales, and still does



Cover of *Buffalo Cook Book* (Darwin: Country Women's Association of the Northern Territory, 1981)

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Olive Cotton (1911–2003), *Girl with Mirror* 1938
gelatin silver photograph, 35.4 x 30.6 cm
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