
Drawn to Antiquity

In Cass County, Illinois, just east of Chandlerville, I stood upon the promontory of a steep, south-facing hillside covered with prairie grasses, wildflowers, and shrubs. It was a tough climb to this spot, fighting the thorny brambles and thick vegetation, but it was worth it to see the expansive view of the small creek valley, where hawks would sometimes glide past at eye level. All that I saw, except for the small hill prairie where I stood, was forested. But I knew that there were other hill prairies in the area, and that all of them were mere remnants of much greater grasslands that once covered the flat uplands and rolling hills of central Illinois. I am drawn to this hillside and others like it for the view and the wildlife, but also for its connection to a far distant past—before Illinois, before the Europeans—to antiquity.

Twenty thousand years ago, when there were glaciers, arctic tundra, and boreal forests, there were no prairies in Illinois. After the glaciers retreated northward, and when the climate became much warmer—warmer than even the present day—the prairies, encouraged by wild fires,

