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# The AMERICAN NATURE WRITING NEWSLETTER

A Biannual Devoted to the Study of Writing on Nature

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## MONTANA ON MY MIND

Greg Jones

**In** Thomas McGuane's new novel, *Nothing But Blue Skies*, the protagonist, a fifth generation Montana rancher, states: "It's unbearable, the cowboy mentality. I don't want to hire any more cowboys. They're all like Jarrell - drunken, wife beating, snoose-chewing geeks with big belt buckles and catfish mustaches. They spend all their time reading magazines about themselves.

College professors drive out and tell them they're a dying breed. I hate them" (59-60). There's a lot in this brief diatribe: a catalogue of iconography, condemnation of an anachronistic life style, an indication that the times, they are a changin', and a backhanded swat at romanticizing academics. For me, this all ties into the question of how a special, seemingly almost sacred, place is visualized and defined. The place is Montana, and this year a whole slew of interesting and possibly important books have come out of that sparsely populated state that sometimes seems to be an emblematic microcosm of the west.

McGuane's *Nothing But Blue Skies*, Rick Bass's *Winter* and *The Nine Mile Wolves*, William Kittredge's *Hole In the Sky*, and Norman Maclean's *Young Men and Fire* have little in common in terms of genre, but an argument can be made that they share a setting and theme. McGuane's novel is about a successful business man facing down his mid-life crisis. *Winter* (1991) is a journal of a winter spent in Montana's remote Yaak Valley, and *The Nine Mile Wolves* is concerned with the fate of a litter of five wolf pups born near Marion, Montana. *Hole in the Sky* is a memoir of, among other things, coming of age on a huge ranch in eastern Oregon. Norman Maclean's posthumous masterpiece, *Five Men and Fire*, is the product of his late-life obsession with the Mann Gulch Fire and the tragic fate of a team of Forest Service smoke jumpers who lost their lives fighting it.

The shared topic of these works - Montana - raises

interesting questions of identity and place; in these works, the two cannot be separated. Each of these authors is (or was) a Montana resident: Maclean is the only native, and made his career at the University of Chicago, but the two books that he will be remembered for are set in Montana and deeply connected to that which is special (and spectacular) there; McGuane has lived in Montana for better than twenty years and the last four of his eight novels are set there; Kittredge has taught at the University of Montana since 1969 and is co-editor of the encyclopedic anthology of Montana writing, *The Last Best Place*; and Rick

Bass is a relative newcomer, having immigrated to the state's isolated northwestern corner in the fall of 1987. Such attention to these authors' origins may seem superfluous, but it is not. In the American West, the amount of time an individual has spent in a place, or been associated with that place, often determines the side of a particular question that individual's sympathies will fall. Kittredge's fine essay, "Who Owns the West," addresses ques-

tions of property and propriety in far greater depth than I can here; I merely hope that by pointing out the author's various levels of Montana legitimacy, I can lead into that us/them dynamic that invariably surfaces when people talk about places they care about or inhabit.

Each of these books is concerned in some way with the relationship of an individual or group with a place. Kittredge's poignant memories of a youth spent ranching on horses and caterpillar tractors points to the difference between living in harmony with the land and tearing a living from it. In this context the title of his homage to literary Montana, *The Last Best Place*, is no irony. There is a "them" in Maclean's book too, a federal government and Forest Service that is widely perceived as incompetent - unfamiliar with local concerns and responsible for the deaths of "our" boys. But it is in McGuane's and Bass's work that the questions of identity and place are most clearly presented. Montana's traditional industries of ranching, mining, logging, and agriculture are for the most part dead or dying. Yet if pure natural beauty, especially that of the increasingly rare unspoiled type, were measurable in

*Yet, if pure,  
natural beauty,  
especially that of  
the increasingly  
rare unspoiled  
type, were  
measurable in  
dollar terms,  
Montana would be among the wealthiest...*



## From the Editors

With this current issue on regional nature writing, we begin our new plan to focus on special topics in each issue. Obviously, we have covered only a few regions at this time, so we hope to do more regional issues in the future. In the meantime, the spring issue will be devoted to new nature writing. Topics suggested for future issues include student nature writing, animal literature, mountaineering literature, and journal writing. Please send topic suggestions and submissions to Scott Slovic, Department of English, Southwest Texas State University, San Marcos, TX 78666. Average submission length should be 600-800 words.

The newsletter is now affiliated with the newly founded Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment (see Journal and Conference Notes). To join "ASLE," fill out the attached form and send it to Mike Branch at the University of Virginia.

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The *American Nature Writing Newsletter* is published twice a year and contains brief essays, book reviews, classroom notes and information about activities relating to the study of writing on nature and the environment. Items of interest, including news about conferences, forthcoming publications and work in progress are welcome.

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## MONTANA, continued

dollar terms, Montana would be among the wealthiest states in the lower 48. This, and an ever decreasing sense of isolation (insulation?), is what seems to me to have attracted a growing population of artists and other individuals, whose livelihoods are not dependent on harvesting the land, to Montana. The conflict, then, seems to rest on whether a tree is more valuable as a component of a log cabin kit or as a living component of a grand ecosystem. For Bass, this question becomes: is a wolf a cattle-killing abomination or something of beauty, a crucial component of an already battered ecosystem? McGuane's novel can, I think, be compared to John Nichols' *The Milagro Beanfield War*, in that it is a sort of epic, concerned with a special place in the progress of change. It seems to me that Kittredge and Maclean tell us something of the way things were, and why they are not that way now. McGuane presents the conflicts of the moment, as does Bass who also, perhaps, gives us a fuzzy blueprint for the future. Each of the works, taken on its own, presents a vision worth noting; but taken as a group, as a year's literary production of a remarkable place, they present us with many questions, and maybe an answer or two, about a state that may really be "The Last Best Place." ★

University of Nevada, Reno

# THE PARADOX OF PLACE: Finding Connections in the Desert Southwest

Susan Hanson

"**The west doesn't need to wish for good writers," Wallace Stegner observes in "Coming of Age: The End of the Beginning"** (1992). "It has them" (141). In this brief assessment of current western literature, Stegner notes what many readers are only beginning to suspect. Far from playing a merely regional role, western and southwestern writers suddenly have found themselves speaking to a much wider audience - and being heard.

In part, this phenomenon can be attributed to the homogenization of landscape and culture; thanks to mass media and the sweep of advertising, geographical differences have blurred over the last few decades, creating at least an illusion of uniformity. No longer exotic or even quaint, the Southwest - along with the West in general - has become, superficially at least, just another market. On a deeper level, however, the Southwest has emerged as a symbol, not only of defiance and independence, but also, paradoxically, of the search for meaning and connection in a crumbling landscape. In addressing these concerns, southwestern writers are addressing the concerns of readers throughout the nation.

One of the first southwestern writers to reach this wider audience, the late Edward Abbey conveyed, perhaps better than anyone else, the region's spirit of self-determination and survival. "Like so many others in this century I found myself a displaced person shortly after birth and have been looking half my life for a place to take my stand," Abbey explains in his introduction to *The Journey Home* (1977). "Now that I think I've found it, I must defend it" (xi-ii). And defend it he does. In his pose as eco-warrior, he writes, "I see the preservation of wilderness as one sector of the front in the war against the encroaching industrial state" ("Freedom and Wilderness...", 235).

To whom did the role of prophet fall after Abbey's death in 1989? Among the best known nature writers, John Nichols seems the obvious successor. Although for the most part less strident than Abbey, Nichols can be every bit as defiant and self-assured. In *A Fragile Beauty* (1987), for example, a work which incorporates sections of several of his best known texts - *If Mountains Die*, *The Last Beautiful Days of Autumn*, *The Milagro Beanfield War*, and *On the Mesa* - Nichols celebrates the beauty of the Taos Valley while condemning the forces that threaten it.

In *The Sky's the Limit* (1990), a work in which stunningly beautiful photographs of northern New Mexico are juxtaposed against scathing prose indictments of the nation's environmental record, Nichols' message is even

more jarring. Indeed, it is his sense of impending loss, of the dichotomy between what is and what may soon come to pass, that gives his work its bittersweet quality. "Even as the mesa's tranquility uplifts my spirits," Nichols admits in his introductory remarks, "it also increases my anguish. At its most peaceful, the panoramic land sets my mind racing through the world situation, which I know can bring down the mesa in a minute."

Like Abbey, John Nichols writes as one defending a place he loves, a place that metaphorically calls to mind all that is "wild and beautiful enough to be commensurate with our capacity for wonder" (*Fragile*, 146). Passionate and poetic, he asks not for introspection but for action; urgent and yet hopeful, his voice is ultimately a voice of judgment.

Among other southwestern writers, however, nature evokes a somewhat different response. In the works of Terry Tempest Williams, Sharman Apt Russell, and Stephen Harrigan, for example, one finds the attention turning inward. Unlike Abbey and Nichols, whose primary purpose is to incite and arouse their readers, these writers are searching for connections, for something that will give them knowledge of the earth and, ultimately, of themselves.

"I don't know what nature is exactly," Stephen Harrigan writes in the Preface to his 1988 collection of essays, *A Natural State*, "whether it is a category that includes human beings or shuts them out - but for me it has always contained that hint of eeriness, the sense that some vital information - common knowledge to all the universe - has been specifically withheld from me." In his more recent book, *Water and Light* (1992), Harrigan attempts to gain a more intimate knowledge of nature by becoming, for a time at least, his "underwater self."

For Sharman Apt Russell, whose *Songs of a Fluteplayer* (1991) chronicles her attempts to start a new life in the Mimbres Valley of New Mexico, the conflict is even more familiar: She wants to live more "naturally," but not at the expense of her comfort or her security. Ultimately that dichotomy is brought home through a series of domestic challenges and choices. Will Russell and her husband remain true to their ideal of self-sufficiency, or follow the examples of their neighbors and hire illegal aliens to help them build their adobe house? Will Russell go through with her decision to give birth to her child at home, or seek conventional medical care? Will the couple continue to irrigate and tend their own garden, or give up and buy their food?

Recognizing her inability to live unencumbered by human culture, Russell writes, "We overestimated our ability to transform ourselves, to become more primitive, more sensual, thinner, browner, healthier. We wanted purity: to raise pure children, to eat soil and sun" ("Irrigation," 100).

While Russell and Harrigan long to immerse themselves in nature, and to find themselves at home there, PARADOX, continued page 6

# IN THE HEART OF APPALACHIA

Justin Askins

**W**hile I claim no Appalachian heritage, the area I grew up in still had working farms nearby and long stretches of undeveloped land. I could walk to my grammar school through half a mile of woods, and I could find clear streams loaded with frogs, turtles, and sunfish. In a profound and lasting way, I was a child of the country, even if my country was Staten Island - one of the five boroughs of New York City.

Since that childhood, I have spent much time in the mountains throughout the US and Canada. I lived on the edge of the Catskills for six years, and now have spent more years wandering the mountains of southwestern Virginia. Last year I bought 140 acres of land in Reese hollow near my home in Ironto, Virginia, and set up a part time residence in a tipi out in those secluded environs. Yet even with all this experience, I'm not sure I should be writing about nature in Appalachian literature. Nonetheless, as Jim Wayne Miller points out in his 1977 review of Appalachian literature, "Writing that allows us to 'live with' people rather than 'look at' them is preferable, no matter who the author is or where he or she comes from" (87). Though I rarely focus on people, I do write about "living with" the land, so with my early disclaimers in mind, I will try out a few ideas about nature in Appalachian literature.

As anyone familiar with Appalachian writing quickly realizes, the relationship to the land is a crucial element. Appalachia is defined by its hollows and ridges, and the central tension of many Appalachian works concerns people removed from the land - often unwillingly but sometimes of their own volition. This theme is evident in many noted Appalachian works, starting with Mary Murfree's late 19th century collection of stories *In the Tennessee Mountains*, through Jim Fox's *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine*, and continuing in Harriet Arnow's immensely sad *The Dollmaker*. That opposition retains a contemporary influence, appearing in works by current writers like Lee Smith, Wilma Dykeman, Jim Wayne Miller, and Fred Chappell, to name only a very few.

In my life, nature has been the guiding force. In fact, as a practicing deep ecologist (see Bill Devall's *Practicing Deep Ecology*), my only value is that the Earth is sacred. A simple and sane philosophy, one that I teach regularly in my "Environmental Sanity" Honors Course. But from my readings of Appalachian writers, I cannot argue that they felt or feel the same reverence. Cratis Williams pointed out in his useful *The Southern Mountaineer in Fact and Fiction* that an intimate relationship to the land is a defining characteristic of Appalachian literature. That connection is authentic, but it rarely goes beyond the human reaction to nature. Moreover, as Wendell Berry argues, the Appalachian ethos is much more traditionally Christian than holistically deep ecological.

While wildness is often celebrated, the ultimate Appalachian response is human centered. That bias led Anne Shelby to write recently that "the literature from and about the place we call Appalachia represents neither the expression of a distinct regional subculture nor the bringing together of an incoherent patchwork of second-rate writing; it represents the literary expression of an American myth" (Part I, 35). Appalachia is mythical, but its richness goes much beyond a transcendence of regional subculture and second-rate writing. Shelby's analysis misses the heart of Appalachia, its wondrous natural heritage. Any definitions of subculture and writing must start with the relationship to the land since it is obvious that without the unique and splendid Appalachian terrain, there would never have been a question of defining its separateness.

Yet Shelby is partially right when she argues that "each new version of the 'true picture of life in the hills' proves to be another projection of what the writer does *not* see *outside* the hills" (Part II, 57). The last part is true. You very rarely see outside the hills what is central to Appalachia, but to call it a projection makes it seem idiosyncratic and limited. That many writers have responded - and continue to respond - so deeply to the Appalachian landscape is because of the power of its mountains and free running water, of its wildflowers and wildlife. Anyone who has spent time in the southern Highlands comes to cherish and hopefully to protect those essential elements. ★

Radford University

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## A Note to Contributors and Readers:

Beginning in December, with the first of many snow storms, - not the least of which was yesterday's "Blizzard of '93" - winter has posed many obstacles to my work schedule. My apologies to all, contributors and readers alike, for the lateness of this issue. The first crocus, and the spring issue, are just ahead.

Sarah Freas  
Graphics and Layout

**A** great deal of contemporary American literature gets translated into Russian - much more than vice versa. Thanks to a well-organized and highly professional translating industry that has been operating in the Soviet Union for years, Russian readers are well acquainted with the works of such diverse writers as John Updike and Arthur Hailey (the latter's *Airport* was also a Russian best seller), but until recently, Loren Eiseley, the American naturalist, poet, and essayist, was completely unknown behind the "Iron Curtain."

For some years now I have been translating my favorite Eiseley pieces into Russian. (I am Russian-English bilingual and teach Russian literature at Purdue University). What began as a desire to share the writer with a few Russian friends has grown into an all-out effort, supported by a grant from Purdue, to introduce him to the Russian-speaking world. To date, nine Eiseley works have appeared in Russian periodicals in my translation; they include "The Flow of the River" (from *The Immense Journey*, 1957), "The Star Thrower" (from *The Unexpected Universe*, 1969), and "The Gold Wheel" (from the autobiographical *Night Country*, 1971). The fact that these translations originated abroad has not been, in the era of *glasnost* and geopolitical disintegration, an impediment to their publication.

My ultimate goal in Russia is to publish a definitive collection, annotated and with a critical introduction, of Eiseley's essays and short stories. From the start, I envisioned it - never mind the language - as an answer to Gerber and McFadden's call to produce a volume "of Eiseley's finest essays," excluding all that is dated, overly sentimental or bombastic and thus "allowing the full measure of his achievement...to be appreciated" (158).



Loren Eiseley, 1971. Sketch after jacket photo, *The Night Country*

*I have titled the collection Wingbeat (Vzmakh kryla), a reference to both Eiseley's use of bird imagery and the soaring quality of his prose. In Russian, as in English, Loren Eiseley is a stylist.*

## Loren Eiseley in Russia: A PRELIMINARY REPORT

Dimitri Breschinsky

The volume, which is now virtually complete, consists of three sections, each containing four essays-cum-short stories:

### I. MAN

- 1) The Gold Wheel
- 2) The Places Below
- 3) The Rat That Danced
- 4) The Palmist

### II. LIFE

- 5) The Flow of the River
- 6) The Bird and the Machine
- 7) The Judgement of the Birds
- 8) The Brown Wasps

### III. EVOLUTION

- 9) The Comet<sup>1</sup>
- 10) The Last Neanderthal
- 11) The Coming of the Giant Wasps
- 12) The Star Thrower

Section I is largely autobiographical; section II, for the most part, concerns the miracle of life; section III - the most theoretical of all - contains speculation as to the significance of evolution and man's place in the Universe. There is a clear progression here from the simple to the complex and, within each section, from an optimistic to a pessimistic view of life. The book, however, does end with the cautiously upbeat "Star Thrower," which has been called Eiseley's "seminal" essay (Cohen 208). I have titled the collection *Wingbeat* (*Vzmakh kryla*), a reference to both Eiseley's use of bird imagery and the soaring quality of his prose.<sup>2</sup> In Russian as in English, Loren Eiseley is a stylist.

All my translations go through three distinct stages. First, I do a quick literal transposition from one language into the other, indicating along the way as many variants as come to mind. Here there is almost a one-to-one correspondence between text and meaning, and consequently the translation sounds very much like, well, a translation. It is flat and lifeless. Then I surround myself with reference works and begin the laborious and time-consuming task of finding the best given variant to fit the given

EISELEY, continued page 6

EISELEY, continued

context. At this point, the translation begins to take on body and shape. Dictionaries are a glory; they represent years of attempts to establish correspondences, known and new, between languages, but they are limited in scope and need to be transcended. Finally, then, I put all the reference works back on the shelf, set the original aside, and *listen* to what I have produced from the standpoint of a critical reader. The objective in this final stage is to make the work sound as though Eiseley's native language were Russian. Not only meaning is important here, but the lilt and flow of the words, the cadence of the lines, the particular associations that are peculiarly Russian. Slowly, painfully, joyously, Eiseley, who was born in Nebraska of pioneer German stock, *becomes* Russian. And in that metamorphosis, it is my firm belief, he loses nothing.

It is too early to speculate how Eiseley will ultimately be received in Russia. It would be nice to think that his works, which so eloquently emphasize man's capacity for compassion, would have a humanizing effect in a country emerging from a seventy-year experiment in utopia. Unfortunately, in a situation where food is scarce and the politics overpowering, people have little interest in niceties of style or ultimate questions; jeans, jazz, and junk food<sup>3</sup> are the order of the day. For this reason, and also because the genre of essay is virtually unknown in Russia, I strongly suspect that my Russian Eiseley will not become a best seller anytime soon. He will just have to sit and wait for his turn - until great literature is once again a national obsession. ★

Purdue University

1. The first part of the essay "The Star Dragon" (from *The Invisible Pyramid*, 1970)

2. The term is actually used in the essay "The Bird and the Machine": "In the next second after that long minute [the sparrow hawk] was gone. Like a flicker of the light, he vanished with my eyes full on him, but without actually seeing a premonitory **wing beat**." (Loren Eiseley, *The Immense Journey* [Random House, 1957], p.191; bold mine) The quotation serves as an epigraph of the collection.

3. It is by now an old joke that the lines in front of Moscow's only McDonald's restaurant are longer than those in front of Lenin's mausoleum.

PARADOX, continued

Terry Tempest Williams looks to nature as a symbol of her own state of mind. In *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* (1991), she not only records the waters of the Great Salt Lake as they begin their rise in 1983. Using the rise and fall of the lake as a point of reference, she also takes her readers through an equally dramatic period of highs and lows in her own life. "I could not separate the Bird Refuge from my family," Williams admits as she witnesses the destruction of valuable marshland. "Devastation respects no boundaries. The landscape of my childhood, and the landscape of my family, the two things I had always regarded as bedrock, were now subject to change. Quicksand" (40). In short, Williams exemplifies the trend among southwestern writers to find and reveal themselves through nature.

There is yet another approach, however, an approach which combines the advocacy of Abbey and Nichols with the more personal, self-revelatory style of Williams, Harrigan and Russell. "Everyone may have a landscape of the heart - not necessarily one's birthplace, but a terrain that corresponds to some inner spring," Bruce Berger writes in "Of Will and the Desert" (*The Telling Distance*, 76). For Berger that landscape is the Sonoran Desert, which he first visited as a child.

Like Abbey and Nichols, Berger defends this landscape not only against eco-tourists ("The Silent Elite," "The Vibram Stomp"), but also against the Bureau of Land Management ("Back Country") and the degradation of the wilderness in general ("The Assault of Squaw Peak"). In his more meditative moments, however, Berger depicts the desert as a place of renewal and self-recollection.

What sets today's southwestern writers apart, then, is not just their outspokenness as champions of the environment. Indeed, as important as direct advocacy has been in the work of Edward Abbey and John Nichols, the current trend seems to be away from overt political language and toward a more personal self-revelatory style. In focusing on the vast and yet fragile landscape of the Southwest, writers such as Terry Tempest Williams, Stephen Harrigan, Sharman Apt Russell, and Bruce Berger reflect on nature not only as an object of study, but also as the medium in which they find themselves immersed. Thus, rather than speaking from a merely intellectual understanding of nature, they write as individuals who have sought and gained firsthand knowledge of their environment, an austere landscape that is nonetheless steeped in myth and mystery. What they offer their readers, in short, is a paradoxical sense of nature - nature as adversary and healer, nature as benefactor and boundry, nature as both the source and victim of human freedom. ★

Southwest Texas State University

# Becoming Native to a Place

## ECOFEMINISM AND REGIONAL NATURE WRITING

Natalie Dandekar

One of the key ideas of bioregionalism - "becoming native to a place" - resonates in interesting ways with an ecofeminist approach to ethical thinking. How does one become native to a place? The simplest answer seems to be that one becomes native by *being*; i.e., one who is born in a place and grows up in it is a native to a place. However, this obviously cannot be right for at least two reasons. First, it would mean that the second generation of ecologically disruptive exotics would be "natives." Obviously, this would undermine bioregionalism rather than define it. Second, if one is already native, then there is no sense in becoming native. To *become* implies change. One can of course become more oneself, but that is still to develop one's defining capacities. Ecofeminism offers important insights for thinking ethically about bioregionalism.

The person who would become native to a region must learn the values which will support the well-being of the bioregion. This in turn means that one becomes native through first becoming aware of the particular ecological relationships that operate within and around this place to which one would become native and second through evolving social behavior that will enrich the life of that place, restore its life-supporting systems and establish a sustainable pattern of existence within it. Becoming native to a place is not just a matter of appropriate technology. With its emphasis on distinct regional cultures and identities strongly attached to their natural environments, bioregionalism offers a practical framework valuing pluralism worth knowing and living within in their distinct richness. But only with certain caveats.

An example drawn from Central America illustrates both some of the strengths of bioregionalism and also why caveats are necessary. In Costa Rica, the indigenous Bribri people have developed a culture in which their way of understanding the relationships among nature, God and human societies effectively protects and sustains their forests. On a map of Costa Rica, the influences of modernization and development correlate non-accidentally with the loss of forest communities. But where there are Indians, there are forests, and where there are forests there are Indians, living in mutual co-sustaining relationships. However, the process by which the Bribri have thus far managed to sustain their culture and its support for/dependency upon the viability of the whole forest ecosystem against the encroachment of agroindustries, squatters and poachers involved negotiating a relationship with the larger political system. The Bribri had to engage in cultural reinforcement through the publication of books and establishment of a Reserve school for traditional culture and environmental education. They had to negotiate better enforcement of Reserve boundaries coupled with projects to cultivate and market medicinal plants.

Bribri culture, to survive, must maintain the rain forest with which it is so intimately co-evolved. But it must do so in ways that engage the respect of others, so that they become respectful allies of the Bribri's endeavors. And this means that the Bribri also change.

Since change is inevitable, the focus of an ecofeminist understanding of bioregionalism must look to the institution of values that are both compatible with sustaining the regional community and with sustaining non-exploitive interactions. This will not be easy. It will involve a re-thinking about the space and content of noble actions, so that these may be reformulated in genuinely non-exploitive modes. ★

University of Rhode Island

## Journal Notes

*Weber Studies: An Interdisciplinary Humanities Journal* will devote its fall 1994 issue to "wilderness". Send inquiries or submissions of poetry, short fiction, personal/critical essays to Neila C. Seshachari, Weber Studies, Department of English, Weber State University, Ogden, UT 84408. Submission deadline: December 31, 1993.

## Conferences

On October 8-10, the Western Literature Association held its 1992 conference in Reno, Nevada. There were nearly twenty sessions pertaining to various aspects of nature writing, including modern poetry and gaia theory, mountaineering literature, Edward Abbey, critical approaches to nature writing and bioregionalism. On October 9, an organizational meeting was held for the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment (ASLE); contact Scott Slovic, Cheryl Burgess-Glofelty or Mike Branch for further information. The 1993 WLA meeting will take place October 7-9 in Wichita, Kansas. For information, write to Diane Quantic, President, WLA, Department of English, The Wichita State University, Wichita, KS 67260-0014.

The 1993 College English Association Convention will take place April 1-3 in Charlotte, North Carolina. There will be a round-table discussion of "Nature Writing and Religion." For information about the session, write to Betsy Hilbert, Independent Studies, Miami-Dade Community College, 11011 S.W. 104 Street, Miami, FL 33176-3393.

After a two year hiatus, the North American Interdisciplinary Wilderness Conference is scheduled to resume in November, 1993. For information, write to Mike Vause, Department of English, Weber State University, Ogden UT 84408.



# Book Reviews

## *A Republic of Rivers: Three Centuries of Nature Writing from Alaska and the Yukon.*

Edited by John A. Murray. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990.

Bil Gilbert once complained that Arctic-American literature is promulgated by “romantics of both the sit-by-the-fire-and-fantasize and the grab-the-old-parka-and-get-some-epiphanic-experience sorts,” with the result that arctic writing “tends to be stylized and predictable, like stories about dogs or professional football.” In his recent anthology of nature writing from Alaska and the Yukon, John Murray has transcended arctic tropes by showing us the land as it is refracted through a wide range of ideological and aesthetic sensibilities. The first anthology of Arctic-American nature writing to be published, *A Republic of Rivers* is an ambitious collection of forty-eight passages from and about the wilds of the North. The book’s tripartite structure chronologically addresses the Ages of Exploration, Exploitation, and Environmentalism, covering the period from 1741 to 1989. The anthology also includes an editor’s introduction, a section of relevant photographs and maps, a useful list of further reading, and a complete index.

The real strength of this anthology, though, is the diversity of authors it contains. Women and men, natives and whites, Alaskans and visitors, poets and scientists, photographers and hunters, conservationists and exploiters, all are represented within. The early pages are contributed by early explorers whose names we know as places on maps - names such as Cook, Vancouver, Mackenzie, and Wrangell. Later contributions are made by more familiar authors including John Muir, John Burroughs, and Jack London. The third section, which covers the period since Alaska gained statehood in 1959, features many fine contemporary nature writers such as John Haines, Annie Dillard, Edward Abbey, Barry Lopez, and David Rains Wallace. Although I might quibble with Murray’s few omissions - the poetry of Robert Service or John McPhee’s 1977 Alaska classic *Coming into the Country* - *A Republic of Rivers* is startlingly comprehensive.

Indeed, the work of the many well-known authors hardly accounts for the charm of the book, which is very often provided by the ingenuous immediacy of the more obscure authors’ personal accounts of Alaska. There are enigmatic Eskimo folk tales, poems, and riddles, which present the land and its creatures as members of a great family. There is Russian missionary Ivan Venianimov,

whose protoecological sensibility prompted him to eloquently propose the protection of the sea otter as early as 1840. There is the vivacious Ella Higginson, who in 1908 lambasted the British explorer Whidby for his dispassionate and masculinist response to northern landscape. There is wolf ecologist Adolph Murie, who describes wriggling into the burrow of an uninhabited den in what is now Denali National Park. And there is David Cooper, who in 1976 completed a solo backpacking trip into the wilderness of the Brooks Range by building a log raft and riding it down the Alatna River.

The rich diversity of Murray’s selections also functions as a refusal to circumscribe the genre of “nature writing,” at least as it appears in its Arctic-American incarnation. By resisting the factitious distinctions which define a canon, genre, or regional body of work in an unnecessarily limited way, *A Republic of Rivers* has escaped the parochial narrowness which too often informs anthologies of its sort. While some readers may feel a certain lack of cohesiveness has been the price of Murray’s catholic (or “ecological”) inclusiveness, I find that the book - like the great Alaskan wilderness it attempts to represent - must be willing to express contradictions; it must, to borrow Whitman’s locution, “contain multitudes.” Should an official expedition narrative or a lyric poem be organized under the rubric of “nature writing”? What about scientific report, a set of field notes, a personal diary, a tale, a riddle, or a song? While those of us interested in the literature of nature continue to debate the question of genre, Murray’s book quietly demonstrates (assuming certain thematic emphases) that literature of any genre or style may function perfectly well within the critical paradigm of nature writing. My primary objection to this book - which is substantial although it is a perennial complaint among reviewers of anthologies - is that the selections are far too brief. In most cases Murray’s excerpts do not exceed three pages, and often they are considerably shorter.

I might conclude with an observation about how *Republic of Rivers* functions as a regional anthology. I am delighted that Murray has chosen to include in his book the literature of the Yukon, a region united with Alaska by “a common river, language, and history” (viii). This incipiently bioregional definition of “region” - which is also being used to structure other new anthologies such as John Henrickson’s *North Writers* - strikes me as the most honest and intelligent means by which to constellate the work of a certain geographical area. Having read *A Republic of Rivers* during a recent trip to Alaska, however, I was left wondering whether any such anthology could truly succeed in showing us the land as *home*, or whether the elusive attempt to create and recreate a sense of place is doomed, finally, to a kind of literary tourism. Even as they live in close contact with the wilderness of the region, many of the authors included speculate upon how strange it is to conceive of Alaska as *home*. Like Kenneth Brower, I often found myself waiting “to feel at home in the country, but the feeling did not come” (216). Perhaps John Haines is



right that the development of a genuine sense of the Alaskan landscape as home depends upon "closeness" - upon "long residence, intimacy of a sort that demands a certain daring and risk: a surrender, an abandonment, or just a sense of somehow being stuck with it" (13). While no anthology can replace the need for such "closeness," *A Republic of Rivers* does an excellent job reminding us of why it is necessary, and of how it may still be possible. ★  
**Michael Branch**, University of Virginia

### ***North Writers: A Strong Woods Collection.***

Edited by John Henricksson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991.

In the anthology *North Writers: A Strong Woods Collection*, editor John Henricksson has collected 37 naturalists' essays, memoirs, short stories, and poems that represent a contemporary attempt to mythologize the Minnesota boreal forest and canoe country. There is clearly an effort in this collection to build the kind of bioregional truth Jim Cheney calls for in his essay "Postmodern Environmental Ethics: Ethics as a Bioregional Narrative" - to situate the self in landscape and, through that process, to construct a genuinely contextualist land ethic. While *North Writers* is a remarkably readable collection, it achieves limited success for several reasons. First, a good half of the pieces draw on the very kinds of romantic, totalizing notions about land and humans that Cheney critiques. Second, despite Henricksson's introductory claim that the legends of the Ojibway, the region's original inhabitants, "should be chronicled as the first nature writing of the region," he has included only a handful of pieces by Ojibway writers. Notable among these are Heart Warrior Chosa's "Basswood Lake," Jim Northrup's "Ricing Again," and Carl Gawboy's "Christmas at Birch Lake." Third, only nine of the collection's thirty-seven pieces are written by women. In a book that strives to "offer a wide range of voices and sensibilities rather than one formulaic approach," this kind of imbalance seems inappropriate.

In his introduction, Henricksson suggests that two of his goals are to go national with what has largely been a regional story, and to expand our notions of what constitutes nature writing. Middle America, he claims, has too often been disregarded in nature writing. The northwoods, or the boreal forest, remain relatively unknown except to those of us who live here and read regional writers such as Helen Hoover, Sigurd Olson, Justine Kerfoot, and Peter M. Leschak. It is this forgotten region, which he calls *bois forts* (strong woods), borrowing the name used by early French explorers, that Henricksson wants to translate for a wider audience. He writes that "the value of nature writing today lies in its ability to translate nature, not merely uncover it."

The best pieces in this collection do just that - translate the northwoods and remythologize relationships between humans, the land, and nonhuman others - moose, wolves, sled dogs, and the spirits of the place. The least effective of the pieces perpetuate the old myths of the northwoods as the "strong woods" - a strong white man's world.

This anthology does construct a vivid picture of the landscape: water, rock, lichen, pines, birch, wolves, moose, deer, canoes, northern lights, sled dogs, snow, cold, ice, venison and rabbit for dinner, snowshoes. The best pieces are the least romantic. They include Helen Hoover's extended musing on the weather of the region; Peter M. Leschak's joyful and intense essay about skating on a newly frozen lake, and works by Jim Dale Vickery, Ellen Hawkins, Robert Treuer, Lynn Maria Laitala, Judith Niemi, Ted Hall, and Mathew Miltich. All of the pieces suggest the still possible remoteness of this land, the character of those who have chosen to live here, the presence of wildness, and the gritty and painful politics of wilderness preservation.

This is an important anthology, a significant collection of bioregional narratives that progresses a long way toward Henricksson's goal of going national with what has been a regional truth, and revising our notion of nature writing. The title itself suggests a kind of machismo which, fortunately, is only partly played out in the book, thanks to the tone set early on by the naturalist and wilderness guide Douglas Woods in "The Wildness Within," one of the best essays in the collection. Woods writes about the wildness within, its mystery, and how we've been able to touch and articulate that mystery through myth, poetry, literature, ceremony, and personal spiritual experience. But as a revision of the "manly" myths of the northwoods, the collection is not entirely successful. There are not enough "alternate" voices here to point us toward any truly *new* understanding of this place. ★

**Gretchen Legler**, University of Minnesota



***Spirit of Place: The Making of an American Literary Landscape.*** By Frederick Turner. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1990.

William Carlos Williams's short poem "Between Walls" runs, in its entirety:

the black wings  
of the

hospital where  
nothing

will grow lie  
cinders

in which shine  
the broken

pieces of a green  
bottle.

This poem has always struck me as central to Williams' modernist poetics: the examination of the immediate "thing," the close-at-hand, the local, as the birthright of the poem. As such, it could well serve as an epigraph to Frederick Turner's recent study, *Spirit of Place: The Making of an American Literary Landscape* (1989). Turner's book charts the coming together of nine particular landscapes and the nine American writers who discovered in them so much of their artistic homes. Some of his choices seem obvious: Thoreau and Walden, Twain and the Mississippi River, Faulkner and his slice of northern Mississippi. Others, such as George Washington Cable's New Orleans, the Nebraska panhandle of Mari Sandoz, and Leslie Marmon Silko's Laguna Pueblo (in New Mexico), will for some be less familiar, and thus perhaps more interesting.

Turner's method here is more that of the cultural historian than of the literary critic - a natural enough fact when one bears in mind his earlier work in American history, especially the fine revisionist study, *Beyond Geography* (1983). He spins often lyrical, largely biographical tales to show how a "spirit of place" manifests itself in the writers' work. Each chapter concludes with a kind of coda in which Turner sketches his own travels to these "literary landscapes," searching out a level of understanding and connection above and beyond what "mere" reading seems to offer him.

Turner's interest in biography seems to be directed toward locating the point at which each writer became aware of the significance that "place" would play in his or her work. For Thoreau, he points to an early journal entry of 1841: "I think I could write a poem to be called Concord - For argument I should have the River - the Woods - the Ponds - the Hills - the Fields - the Swamps

and Meadows - the Streets and Buildings - and the Villagers" (28). For Willa Cather, the Sante Fe and surrounding Anasazi ruins featured in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927), though not the landscape of her birth or upbringing, are connected to her "in a larger generic way...they were part of the history of the human race, they spoke profoundly of the often difficult accommodations human cultures must make with their environments" (149).

His portraits of the writers' lands and lives are evocative and lovely, if sometimes lacking in critical rigor. The personal narratives that round off each chapter are in many ways the most interesting and useful sections of the book, for Turner is an astute observer of people and places, and a gifted writer of prose. In some cases, these narratives offer not just a way to connect the present circumstance of a place with its literary past (as when he visits the "Walden Breezes" trailer court with Walter Harding, or has a run-in with the proprietor of the Mark Twain Cave); they allow us to step back from the texts a moment and feel perhaps something of the spirit of place that infused and informed an author's work. Similar moments occur when Turner peers into the Paterson Falls with Paul Mariani, Williams' biographer, or when he tours the Laguna Pueblo with Lee Marmon, Leslie Marmon Silko's father.

Even if Turner's selection of writers seems a bit arbitrary (John Burroughs, Mary Austin, or Wendell Berry could certainly find a place here), the book does have a cohesive thread. Each of these writers has a stake in discovering in the local landscape or situation something of the universal, a way of telling a story based in the familiar that might have much wider reverberations. Turner says it well: "The question [is]...how to see your place imaginatively enough and comprehensively enough so that its prosaic defects [can] become your best assets" (296). This question remains an essential part of the American history, and *Spirit of Place* presents it with insight and eloquence. ★

Ralph Black, New York University

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