

Writing From America's Heartland

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The most enduring of American novels ends with a ragged boy shrugging off his last tie with civilized restraint. "I reckon," he said, "I got to light out for the Territory." Half a century before Huck Finn that movement had begun—restless people crossing the Allegheny Mountains into the Territory North-west of the River Ohio. Only in a wild new country could "territory" become so large and potent a metaphor. For millions it meant freedom, independence, and a new beginning.

The Northwest Territory—now known as the Old Northwest—was created by the Ordinance of 1787 that extended America westward into the wilderness between the Ohio River and the Great Lakes. Eventually to become six states, it was the first public domain of the new nation, a region five times as big as England. Its first roads were trails of hunting and tribal warfare. The Indian words for cold and hunger were soon known to the explorers. Some 45,000 tribesmen lived precariously in the region that now supports 45 million people in comfort and security.

In fifty years the empty Northwest became the busy Midwest; within a century it became a central region, the heartland of the nation. The fictional Augie March in Saul Bellow's novel marveled at crippled old Einhorn "the man who had found Chicago a swamp and left it a great city." In 1837 when Queen Victoria's coronation procession moved through the streets of London, Chicago was incorporated with 4,117 persons—a place of mud roads and bare board buildings around a ruined Indian fort. In 1901 when the Queen's funeral cortege passed through the same gray London streets, Chicago, with two million people, was

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the center of an area more productive than all of England. No other region on earth has been so transformed in one life span.

The first sense of place in the Old Northwest was a sense of space. In the spring of 1851 Emerson left Concord, Massachusetts, to lecture in the raw academy halls and drafty churches of the frontier. He went by steamboat down the Ohio and then up the Mississippi. To Thomas Carlyle beside the Thames in London he wrote: "The Far West is the right name for these verdant deserts. On the Mississippi shores interminable silent forests. If you land there is prairie behind prairie, forest beyond forest, sites of nations, no nations. The raw bullion of nature; what we call 'moral' value not yet stamped upon it." A hundred years later Robert Frost would repeat that impression: "the land vaguely realizing westward, but still unstoried, artless, unenhanced."

On the upper Mississippi Emerson saw more Indian camps than frontier settlements. The river inspired artists George Catlin and Seth Eastman to paint its varied scenes of wilderness and civilization. In 1848 Longfellow had declared "We want a national literature commensurate with our mountains and rivers...We want a literature altogether shaggy and unshorn that will shake the earth like a herd of buffaloes thundering over the prairie." At the same time Herman Melville was writing his allegory *Mardi*, in which the people of Vivenza [the United States] exclaimed: "Saw ye ever such a land as this? Is it not a great and extensive republic?...Swear now that this land surpasses all others." As though responding to these writers six American artists between 1840 and 1850 painted mammoth panoramas of the Mississippi—paintings that were unrolled before marveling audiences as the valley itself unrolled from the deck of a steamboat. Millions of people in the eastern cities, and in England, France and Germany, made this vicarious voyage through the heart of America. The Northwest was a name for magnitude and expectation.

The American imagination was stirred by that sense of space and of new beginnings. Some of our most memorable novels begin with

the first people in a new country. Think of Willa Cather's *My Antonia* that begins with a boy peering from a jolting wagon in the starlight; what he saw was "nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made." In *The Trees* Conrad Richter shows a Pennsylvania family entering the dark Ohio wilderness, and Rolvaag's *Giants in the Earth* follows a Norwegian family into the windblown Dakota prairie. In *The Grandmothers* Glenway Wescott pictured his English forebears hacking out clearings in the Wisconsin woods. Elizabeth Maddox Roberts showed in *The Great Meadow* a Virginia caravan toiling up a mountain pass where the water ran in three directions. They had a cheerful rhyme about it:

Cumberland Gap is a noted place,
Three kinds of water to wash your face.

For them the best kind was the water that ran northward toward the Ohio valley. As their wagons creaked over the ridge they were creating the first chapter of its history.

People bring character to a place. A territory is space without memory, without history. As people take possession they change the land. Conrad Richter's trilogy of titles, *The Trees*, *The Fields*, *The Town*, is a six-word chronology of what Ohio people did to their wilderness in one lifetime. And in that process the land shapes the people, giving them energies, attitudes, postures and purposes. Beyond the taming of wild land they created distinct cultures. The fifty books in the American Guides Series share a format that begins with topography and ends with arts. Each state has some individuality. There are crude differences of terrain—these come with the territory—and beyond terrain are differences of mind and spirit. Even bordering states without visible bounds are distinct from each other. Iowa cannot be confused with Missouri; neither Grant Wood nor Thomas Hart Benton could have produced the other's paintings.

Many strains of people came to the America that Whitman called "a

nation of nations," and nowhere is the social diversity more evident than in the heartland. A 20-mile circle drawn around Bemidji, Minnesota, includes the towns of Naytawash, Fernhill, Ebro, Gunder, La Porte—five nations and five languages there. In 1910 the mining town of Hibbing on the Mesabi iron range contained 25 nationalities. With so diverse a society Midwestern fiction has the greatest variety of characters: Jennie Gerhardt, Carol Kennicott, Thea Kronberg, Studs Lonigan, Bigger Thomas, Jay Gatsby, Augie March, Windy McPherson. See the backgrounds there: German, English, Swedish, Danish, Yiddish, Irish, Negro, Scotch. The literary imagination has embraced them all. In 1832 a traveler on the Ohio River reflected on the timely invention of the steamboat at the very point in history when multitudes were migrating to new lands. Then he made a sharper observation. Standing at the rail he heard the mingled tongues around him. He counted the nations represented there: English, Scotch, Irish, Welsh, French, Dutch, German, Swiss, and off to one side a group of seven blackrobed priests from Austria.

A second gift of the Midwest to its writers is a past that reaches back to the beginnings. In Kilkenny County, Ireland, the famous old Kilkenny School has recently added a new building named for an 18th century philosopher who was one of its graduates. Berkeley Hall replaced an abandoned almshouse, which rested upon the floor of a ruined courtroom, which occupied the site of a former monastery, which is said to have replaced an ancient market house. In that sequence—college, almshouse, courtroom, barracks, monastery, market house—the past fades back till it is lost to recollection. In an older world we think of our own country; at Kilkenny I thought of an Ohio college that is built on the site of an Indian burial ground.

But if our past is brief, none of it is lost. We can look back to the beginnings—to the first landfall, the first river passage, the first ax thudding in the woods. Who discovered the Rhine River and the Danube? Who knows? The literature of Europe has no "landlookers,"

no search for a Northwest Passage, no trail-breakers in the wilderness. But in America we know how DeSoto discovered the Mississippi below present Memphis, and Marquette discovered it at Prairie du Chien, and Schoolcraft found its source in Itasca Lake; and we know what each of them did and said at the moment of discovery. We can recall the first blacksmith in a township, the first circuit rider in the forest, the first pedlar on the road. Our past is all recoverable.

A Peace Corps teacher in Africa writes that in Nigeria, America means two things: skyscrapers and wagon trains. In the mass media the old America persists alongside the new. A few years ago a handsome new restaurant was opened on the shore of one of the Italian Lakes. For an international clientele an Italian baritone sang "Old Man River." Outside the moonlight glimmered on Lake Como and the snows of the Swiss Alps gleamed in the distance. But in that room people from five countries saw the legend-haunted Mississippi rolling through the heart of America.

Old Man River...The land was old but the human enterprise was new. In 1818 when Illinois became a state, when the Cumberland Road reached over the mountains to the Ohio River, when the first steamboat churned the waters of Lake Erie, when George Rogers Clark died beside the Ohio River in Kentucky and 9-year-old Abe Lincoln whittled pegs for his mother's coffin, a land treaty was signed by three Indian chiefs at St. Mary's, Ohio. The treaty surrendered a big tract of central Indiana, and at the same time a village site of the Munsey tribe was sold to a land speculator by the halfbreed daughter of William Wells who had been killed in the massacre of Fort Dearborn at the mouth of the Chicago River. The next year that site was plotted as the town of Muncie, Indiana, which a century later was described by two famous sociologists as Middletown, the typical American community. They could tell its whole story.

While history is a writer's resource, it is not his subject. History is the record of people; literature is the life of persons. Literature is

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always individual; it cares nothing for data and statistics; it looks only at a time. "Arms and the man, I sing" Vergil began his epic poem of ancient Aeneas. Centuries later Walt Whitman wrote: "One's self I sing, a single, separate person."

Robert Frost told how a census-taker came upon an empty lumber camp in a New Hampshire valley. In a half-sad humor he began picturing the vanished woodsmen. He counted nine of them in his dreamy unofficial census before he got back to business and declared the place deserted. There are four billion people in the world census, and also some others, more lasting, who don't get counted. These are the people of fiction: Martin Arrowsmith, Nick Adams, Sayward Lucket, Alwyn Tower, Walter Mitty, Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn. They never lived except in the imagination, and they never die. They become the heartbeat of our cultural heritage.