

# REDSKIN WRITING

The West, by which Americans meant the frontier, has defined one of the poles of American literature. New England, and the Northeast in general, have always represented our sense of standing in the long shadows of European civilization, and even the best Northeastern writers — Hawthorne and Irving, to take only two examples — were seduced into writing and living as Europeans. Frontier writers, roughly identical with Philip Rahv's "redskins," were more willing to take America as they found it, as oysters should be eaten: raw.

The most obvious early examples of frontier literature were the humorous Southern sketches of Augustus Baldwin Longstreet (*Georgia Scenes*) and Joseph Glover Baldwin (*Flush Times of Alabama and Mississippi*). Following the path of so many Southerners, including Mark Twain, Baldwin — originally a Virginian — ended up in California. Twain is, of course, the best known Southern frontier humorist, but his reputation for originality and uniqueness depends on our ignorance of his predecessors.

Of course, not all frontier writers are humorists or even Westerners. (The best of William Gilmore Simms is devoted to a period when South Carolina was still the frontier, and Simms deserves an honored place as godfather to Western literature.) But down-home humor, exaggeration, and crudeness have always been as much a part of Western writing as of Western living. No living writer better exemplifies the type than Edward Abbey: independent and strong-minded (or eccentric and prejudiced, if you don't care for him), Abbey has written some of the best Western fiction — *The Lonely Cowboy* — as well as some of the best essays devoted to Western themes.

His latest novel, *The Fool's Progress* (New York: Henry Holt; 485 pp., \$19.95), is vintage Abbey, Abbey taken raw. It is a suspiciously autobiographical tale of a West Virginian who moves to the Southwest after World War II. After a series of jobs as philosophy TA, park ranger, and welfare bureaucrat, and a series of wives, mistresses, and casual girl friends, Henry Lightcap is headed back to Stump Creek, West Virginia. Along the way, the reader is treated to the major episodes of his life and introduced to a rogue's gallery of characters strange enough to please Harry Crews:

Henry's IWW father, who is opposed to "Roosevelt's War" and tells his son not to enlist, but is at the same time proud of his exploits; brother Will, who comes back from the war determined to live the old life on the farm — Wendell Berry without the poetry; a cowboy artist who gets rich on land speculations; and an assortment of straight-shooting, hard-drinking veterans.

What Henry and his friends have in common is an instinctive refusal to sell out and live the lives that are created for them by marketing executives and social planners. For good or ill, they are their own men, and it is small wonder that most women prefer one of them — when they can find one — to the computer salesman with soft palms and limp mustaches, who have memorized a list of good chardonnays, and keep a rough draft of their Dewar's profile ready just in case. Abbey's roughnecks — now reduced to something like an outlaw status — may be all that is left of the true American type, going all the way back to Captain John Smith.

A former practicing liberal, Henry now has strong views on every conceivable "minority" group, but he reserves his best shots for Latinos and Orientals. "The cultural riches" Mexicans have given us, he reasons, come down to "Tacos . . . Nachos. Burritos. Salsa music. Spray-paint art. *Patrón*-style politics. Plastic Madonnas on acrylic-plush dashboards and other intellectual, scientific and artistic treasures I'm sure I could think of if I really set my mind to it."

Here is Henry a few pages later on the Japanese: "Rice Rockets, Niki-Tiki sewing machines. Hondas, Toyotas, Sonys, Kawasakis. Tofu metallics, noodle-soup plastic. Vile cheap imported garbage: to think that we Americans, in our blindness and stupidity, should throw our own people out of work, shut down our great mills, let the Forest Service clear-cut our forests and the BLM strip-mine our hills and the beef industry gnaw down our rangelands to the bone in order to produce raw materials to trade to those Niponese [sic] ant people in exchange for their bright cheap slick robot-manufactured electro-mechanical junk, none of which, not one single item of which, we actually need."

If anyone thinks this is just a fictional character talking, he hasn't read Ab-

bey's essays. And here is the problem with this moving and entertaining book. Abbey has become so angry and so committed to his principles, he has trouble writing with the openness to experience that characterizes the great novelist. The fact that he's right about most things (with the exception of religion, where he's half right in despising most of its current manifestations) doesn't necessarily make it work. *The Fool's Progress* may not be Abbey's best novel, but — part fiction, part satire — it is still a wonderful book.

The University of Oklahoma Press has recently put out *Recollections of Charley Russell* by Frank Bird Linderman (\$10.95, paper). The author was a close friend of the renowned cowboy artist, and the scattered recollections are worth dipping into.

The greatest American writer to tackle the West (although not necessarily the greatest Western writer) was Mark Twain, whose letters are being published by the University of California Press. Volume one covers the period 1853 to 1866 and includes much of his Western adventures. The letters are lively, amusing, and in most cases informative, although it would be very hard for the casual reader to figure out which side Clemens was on during the war. As a traitor to his state and deserter from the Confederate Army, he was understandably ambivalent. While publicly wrapping himself in the Union flag, he was privately writing to his Southern friends as if their cause were still his. In any case, Twain-fanciers — which includes almost every reader in America — will want to purchase this and succeeding volumes.

An interesting sidelight on the West is provided by a new study of the Hatfield/McCoy war: *Feud: Hatfields, McCoys, and Social Change in Appalachia, 1860-1900* by Altina L. Waller (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press; 313 pp., \$32.50). While telling the story of the feud, Waller explains the conflict was not so much the result of personal animosities or of an inherently violent Appalachian nature as it was a contest for power between the progressive and well-to-do McCoys, who favored economic development and outside interests, and the old-fashioned Hatfields, who retained their faith in local traditions and community autonomy. (TF)

## Letter From the Northwest

by Catherine Rudolph

### Breaking the Cowboys

I had occasion to visit Pendleton, Oregon recently. It is the "purple mountains' majesty, above the fruited plain" that we sing about, only the peaks that rim the valley bowl are the Blue Mountains, and the fruit of the land is animal as well as vegetable.

Pendleton is famous for its glorious woolens, which you can read about in *Vogue* and buy across America. Its other claim to fame is the Pendleton Round-Up, a rodeo and in-gathering of the people who still ride the range for a living.

The Round-Up features competitions that demonstrate the sparkle experience lends to natural ability: you think you can only watch so many guys lasso and hogtie a frightened calf, and then a cowboy comes on the scene who puts that extra little fillip into the way he throws his rope and downs the calf in such a deft way that you wouldn't have missed the poetry of it.

There are cowgirls, too, and the people who recruit fashion models should stop traveling to Sweden if they want the lean, clean look. The ladies and gentlemen of the ranch are spare and elegant enough for a Ralph Lauren ad, and the buckles on their belts are works of art (a sterling silver beauty with garnets costs \$100).

The round-up also symbolizes, in the most basic fashion, the clash between the urban regulators who govern from western Washington and Oregon, and the hardworking souls in the eastern part of the states who wrest a living from the land. People who have not paid the price for the livelihood threaten it.

Coming up I-84 from Salt Lake City, you pass through the thundering barrenness of southern Idaho. No respectable jackrabbit would live there, and on this trip, coming back from a

close friend's birthday celebration, I didn't spot any. As you come closer to Boise, life starts to appear again, and on the greening edge of western Idaho, there are cattle and potatoes.

Then you come to the marvelous accidents of weather and geography that make Washington and Oregon so interesting. Volcanic and glacial activity have made tall mountains and deep valleys, and around La Grande, Oregon, one such accident has made topsoil as black as bear fur, as rich and verdant as any I saw when I lived in Iowa, our nation's most fortunate state when it comes to good dirt. But mostly, the people who live east of the Cascade Mountains have to deal with semiarid land that is none too rich.

So the "drysidlers" need irrigation water and fertilizers (organic or otherwise) to coax the land to support pasture or wine grapes. This year, water has been in short supply here, as in the Midwest. The focus of the national media has been on areas that can be covered from the Chicago bureau, but the drought has caused hardship in a hard land, coming on the heels of years of regulation. The rewards of hard work—houses on the hill that would suit a Spanish grandee; property that is measured in hectares—are threatened by the natural cycles of rainfall and the unnatural demands of the regulators.

Bureaucrats who work for the same governor who campaigns on a platform of good jobs and good wages rob the people of their labor. A ranch is labor-intensive, even at its most efficient. A machine cannot free a calf stuck in a fence, nor break the ice from the surface of the water supply in the dead of winter. A sheep lost on a ridge of lava rock must be retrieved on horseback or on foot. This is a special job for an individual who is patient, tough, and deft.

The livestock have to go to market, more cheaply if the market is close at hand. The environmental regulators have already driven the meat-packing industry out of Washington State (fortunately, some of it landed in Idaho),

and over the past few years have begun to fret over the proximity of cattle to lakes and streams. It seems they regard manure as a threat to the purity of the water supply, saying it may kill the occasional salmon.

These regulations are mostly written to protect coastal streams, but are in effect statewide. So an older rancher, squinting into the clouded looking glass for the future, might decide he's had enough, and let his cowhands look for another job.

Across the Columbia from Pendleton, in Richland, Washington, the clever environmentalists have robbed the state of brains as well as money. They have managed, with the governor of Washington's able assistance, to irk the federal government until it has shut down the N-Reactor at the Hanford Nuclear Reservation. All the high-salaried engineers who have made Richland such a bright spot in the state's economy and intellectual life will take their salaries and their intelligent children to South Carolina. Their experimental projects and the industrial spinoffs from those projects will leave with them. In a few years, some backwater town in South Carolina will be shinier and wealthier and have a dazzling youth symphony because these engineers have settled there.

My ancestors and their traveling companions, who came to the West on the Oregon Trail in the 1840's, would not have dreamed of this when they came down Dead Man's Pass into the smooth bowl that is Pendleton. They knew that when their journey had ended, still another would begin: to wrest a living off the land they had come to. To read their diaries is to marvel at human endurance and to scar the soul.

The people who came to this place were truly the people of the edge. Their ancestors had jumped off the shores of Europe to reach America, with a second jump into the Northwest Territories (as the Midwest was then called), and these children of pioneers took one more treacherous leap, a long one, across mountain and desert, un-