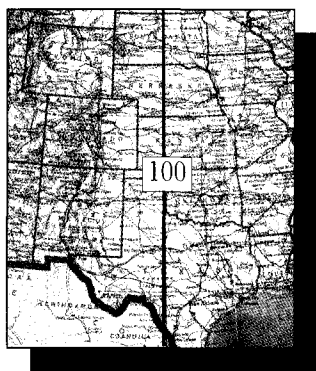


The Hundredth Meridian

by Chilton Williamson, Jr.

Friends at a Distance



Second only to prostitution, writing is the loneliest profession. Because a writer's work is wherever he happens to be, he has no real need to be anywhere; because writing is neither a team sport nor a cooperative enterprise, and because the laborious act of composition is notoriously prone to distraction, the writer normally performs his daily stint of four, five, or six hours in a state of isolation as total as he can manage. Art, Aquinas said, is a fruit of the practical intellect—like prayer, to which art is kin. Every artist, whether he knows it or not, is in some degree a religious—a monk or a nun—and his work, his cloister from which, mentally at least, he is rarely absent. Also like the religious, if he is lucky he has friends outside encouraging him—whether by prayer or some more direct and tangible means such as fan mail, including small reeking packages and boxes plastered with PERISHABLE labels.

Though Hemingway complained that any writer incautious enough to mention booze and wine in his work finds himself instantly labeled an alcoholic, my own experiments in this regard have paid off handsomely in a harvest of sin and gluttony. It was about three years ago that the first of a series of packages arrived by U.S. mail from Clyde, Kansas. Enclosed were three or four bunches of fresh garlic, painstakingly packed and artistically tied off with woolly ribbon, and a letter from one Ed Detrixhe: a Midwestern farmer with a law degree from Vanderbilt and a shared taste for garlic and pasta, in addition to red wine, bourbon, and the writings of Edward Abbey. A thank-you letter provoked an answering one from Clyde; more garlic; and, at Christmastime, a bottle of red wine produced from Mr. Detrixhe's own vineyard. The first time I phoned Ed I pronounced the name "DEH-trix-ee," followed by a giggle of self-aware ignorance. Writers, of course, are to be read, not seen or heard, but Ed Detrixhe is a patient man; also he had a glass of brandy and a cigar with him in his den. (I was drinking red wine or a dry Martini, I forget which. The Martini would account for the giggle.) Politely,

he explained that the name is "DEE-tree"—a Belgian one, though Ed is Swedish on his mother's side—then switched directly to the latest Washington atrocity, whether Janet Reno's refusal to investigate Asian campaign contributions or the 99 lives of President William Jefferson Clinton I also can't remember. (It's Tom Sheeley in Flagstaff, a classical guitarist who sent me a recording he made of Manuel Ponce's music when I moved to New Mexico two years ago, who impersonates Maddy Albright when you answer the telephone.) We wound up the conversation an hour and several refills later, after a discussion ranging from firearms loads to the writings of Nebraska author Mari Sandoz, by sticking rhetorical pins into Sarah and Jim Brady, and a couple of days later another fragrant box was delivered to my house in Las Cruces by a postman with watery eyes, holding his nose.

In the spring Ed invited me to pay him and the family a visit at the farm. By consulting a Rand McNally road map, I estimated the distance between Las Cruces, New Mexico, and Clyde, Kansas—on the banks of the Republican River ten miles east of Concordia—at 700 to 800 miles. As I was obviously failing to establish a significantly other (or otherly significant) relationship with the Land of Enchantment, I proposed to Ed that we postpone our meeting until I could get back home to Wyoming, within a shorter striking distance of northeastern Kansas—a negligible five to six hundred miles from Laramie, I guessed, or an ordinary day's journey horseback in the American West. The actual distance, from my front door to Ed's, was 542 miles: an easy nine-hour drive on I-80 from the lower end of Third Avenue in downtown Laramie to

York, Nebraska, then south a hundred miles on 81 across the Kansas-Nebraska border. The Pony Express could probably have made it in six.

Pioneers following the Platte River west had to contend with hostile Indians, rampaging buffalo herds, rattlesnakes, prairie fires, sandstorms, blizzards, lawless lawmen, and acute alcohol deprivation. Today, motorized travelers crossing the state of Nebraska between Omaha and Pine Bluffs, Wyoming, anticipate merely tedium. The mileage signs do become discouraging—Lincoln 455, Kearney 120, North Platte 148, Ogallala 198—the shortest of these distances being a far piece in less expansive regions of the country. But to say the landscape doesn't "change" over 458 miles is like claiming the Atlantic Ocean between New York City and Southampton, England, is a dull uniformity. On this Indian summer day in late October, driving from dawn until early evening beneath the parabolic arc of the south-traveling sun, anyone who cared to look could have observed a wonderful progression of light, shadow, and texture in the Lodgepole River valley running to meet the South Platte west of Ogallala, and in the valley of the Platte on course across southern Nebraska to join the Missouri near Omaha. As the sky changed from morning yellow through noontime cobalt to the fierce ultraviolet of afternoon, the fall haze gathered in the river bottom where the braided river gleamed between golden cottonwood islands scattering leaves like weightless coins into the slow backwaters and cutoff meanders of the Platte. The Sandhills crowding down from the north went from gold to pink as the widening valley pressed them back, while south of the river the pine bluffs darkened with shadow. From the bottom of this watery geological crease the vast prairie around was hidden, its presence suggested only by the unbroken sky spreading in all directions toward an invisible horizon, but there were harvesting fields to see beneath wheeling flocks of starlings, and comfortable redbrick and clapboard towns shaded by mature cottonwoods and overshadowed by the towering grain elevators. At York, 40

miles east of Grand Island, I turned south off the interstate onto Highway 81, headed for the Kansas border across gently rolling hills with woods growing up between them in the drainages. The highway—the northern extension of U.S. 35—was under construction, being widened from two lanes to four to accommodate enhanced truck traffic between Canada and Nuevo Laredo, Mexico, since NAFTA. For the 100 miles on to Concordia the swath of destruction, an intermittent double ribbon of concrete bordered by fresh cutbanks, chained cedar trees, and smoldering brushpiles, raced across the lovely rural heartland, otherwise good for nothing except as a butt for editorialists and nighttime TV hosts. Ed's hand-drawn map, arrived the afternoon before my departure, instructed me to turn left at Concordia's first stoplight and continue nine and a half miles to the hamlet of Ames, take a right, proceed a mile and a half to a black mailbox on the left side of the road, then right again along the gravel driveway opposite the box. Waiting to greet me on the turnaround in front of the house as I drove up were a boy and his dog, Ben and Black. You'll never find a more American welcome than that.

First meetings after months or years of formed telephonic impressions can be a shock. In this instance, Ed (wearing the Carhart overalls of the Kansas husband-man and work boots) and I (cowboy boots, snapbutton shirt, and "End of the Trail" belt buckle) simply picked up where we'd left off the evening before. He'd postponed the cocktail hour to join me in a beer, but first I had to make a tour of the premises with Ben, a precocious nine-year-old, starting with the dog run and proceeding by serpentine paths to the bass pond only a few yards from the house and another, smaller pond behind it that Ben promised was full of lunker catfish. From there we continued on to the vineyard, Ed's vegetable garden and Mari's flower beds, the Tower (a raised platform with chairs and a roof over it, cast by Ed in concrete), and the Cave (excavated from the backfill taken from the bass pond when it was dug 18 years ago), containing the fall harvest of potatoes, sweet potatoes, and garlic, Ed's reloading bench, an impressive collection of tools and machinery, and a still more impressive wine cellar. "It's a life's work," Ed said simply when I complimented him on the spread that had its beginning years ago when he acquired the land from his

parents, whose own farm is not more than a couple of miles away.

"I recognize the voice!" Mari exclaimed as Ed and I entered the house by the back door. A dark-haired, willowy beauty from Minnesota, she is the daughter of a Lutheran minister and the accomplished organist at her local church—also the best cook, I was to discover, between Kansas City and Reno, Nevada—to whom Ed had artfully arranged an introduction in 1986. Seated at the granite-slab island in Mari's kitchen, the three of us killed our thirst with cold beer before Ed uncorked a bottle of Detrixhe Vineyard Red: a year younger than what he'd sent at Christmas and, if anything, even drier and more bodied.

There is no greater pleasure in life than an intimate dinner party with closest friends, one of them a Jeffersonian polymath, the other a lovely and clever woman (even if she isn't yours). Ed set the answering machine to take calls while we enjoyed Mari's pasta, two bottles of red wine, and the brilliant conversation in peace and candlelight; after the dessert (something wonderful by Mari, who is her own pastry chef and baker) the men adjourned to Ed's book- and gun-lined den for brandy, cigars, and—something wonderful I couldn't have anticipated.

I was on my second brandy and already stubbing the first cigar, my feet up in an easy chair, when I became aware of a presence I realized had been intruding on my consciousness for a good half-hour and more. "Who is *that*?" I asked Ed, sitting straight up in the chair, and from his gratified expression understood we'd identified yet another taste in common. Her name was—is—Andrea Marcovicci, a cabaret or torch singer performing regularly in San Francisco, Chicago, and the Algonquin Hotel's Oak Room in New York, with a pure voice, exquisite technique, and enough refined sex appeal to make the connoisseur of true womanhood shoot a bottle of Delamain brandy off the mahogany sideboard. I had to hear "Do You Miss Me?" and the old torch classic, "These Foolish Things," over and over, while Ed sat back in his chair with his feet up on the desk, grinning like a man whose ugly duckling has just won a beauty contest and a scholarship to Oxford—previous attempts at impressing friends with the marvel that is Marcovicci having been met by shrugs and a polite, "Oh, Ed . . ." An unabashed romantic with her heart in Piaf's

and Hemingway's Paris and Dietrich's Berlin, Andrea isn't everyone's cup of tea. For me, she's a 120-pound charger from which to restore one's own romantic battery. (Awfully good to look at in her trademark black velvet dress, too.)

I spent four days with the Detrixhes, fishing in the pond before supper while the smoke of Ed's cigar mingled fragrantly with the October haze and Ben's minnow lure took the biggest bass, hotting up reloads for use on the target range Ed had made above the creek, visiting a gun show in Belleville (where at least one exhibitor confessed to quitting the gun business that the government crackdown has converted into a major legal risk), exploring the country about, talking, eating, and drinking—until Sunday morning, when Mari departed with her music for church and I got on the road for home, 542 miles and nine hours away, leaving Ed to take up his life's work again.

This was community in modern America, I thought, following the Republican River west across an endless series of hills and valleys stepping inexorably up to the still unsuspected mountains: a country of 270 million people, measuring 3,000 miles by 2,000, where you drive 542 miles to visit closest friends. I have many friends, scattered everywhere in the United States—few of the best of them, it seems, in whatever place I call home. What is needed is my own community—call it Chiltown—bringing together all my friends in a single unincorporated locale where we can shoot guns and hunt, ride horses, listen to good music, drink red wine, eat, talk, make love to beautiful and brilliant women—and they to us. Driving through Red Cloud—Willa Cather's hometown—I realized the futility of such dreams. Though Red Cloud still looks prosperous, the other towns along Route 136—Inavale, River-ton, Franklin—are merely ghosts of perished communities, the stone buildings along the thoroughfare vacant, crumbling literally into the street, people moved away to Lincoln, Omaha, Kansas City, those remaining taking their business to the malls and supermarkets of Kearney and Grand Island. A sad development in the history of American civilization, but one not entirely without hope. Behemoth can—it has—destroyed community; but only friends have the power to destroy friendship. Refusing to exercise that power is more than our last best hope; it is, as well, the ultimate revenge.

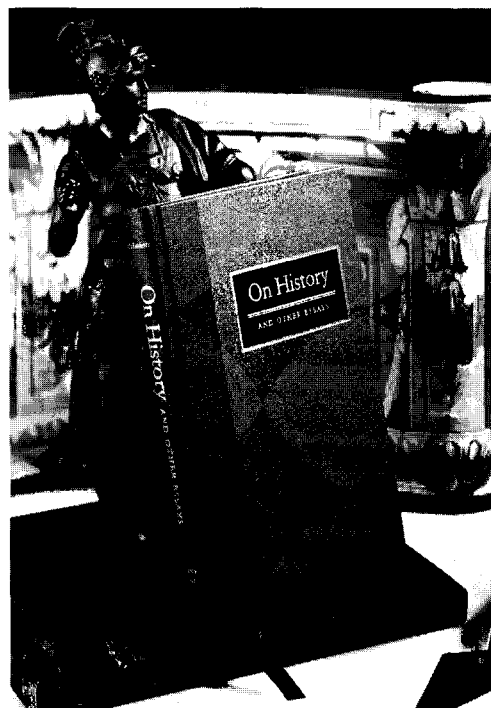
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Michael Oakeshott (1901–1990) was Professor of Political Science at the London School of Economics and a Fellow of Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge. He was the author of many works, including *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* and *Hobbes on Civil Association*, both published by Liberty Fund.

Timothy Fuller is Dean of Colorado College and has published widely on the works of Michael Oakeshott.

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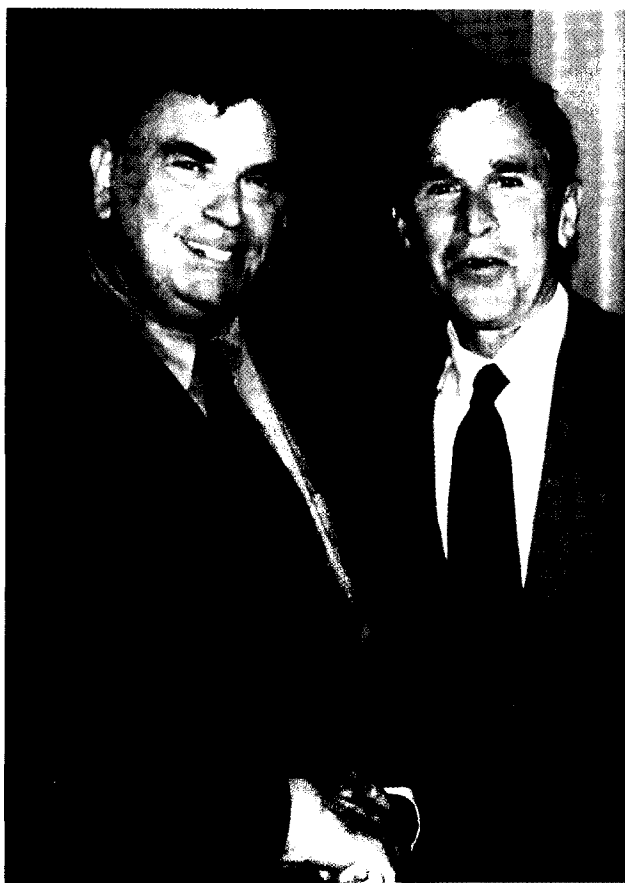


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Constitution Party Presidential Nominee Howard Phillips
discuss the Year 2000 Campaign during an October 7 conversation*

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Since 1974, as Chairman of The Conservative Caucus, Phillips has led national campaigns to keep America in Panama and get Red China out, to deploy a Strategic Defense Initiative, to defund the Left, and to stop socialized medicine. As Director of the U.S. Office of Economic Opportunity, he fought to end Federal subsidies to left-wing activist groups promoting abortion, homosexuality and welfare rights, as well as challenges to parental authority in education and family leadership.

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