

AUTHORS OF THE SOUTH CROWN OF THE CONTINENT  
MY TALK TO “AFTERNOON COMMUNICATIONS CASE STUDIES  
BREAKOUT” SESSIONS”  
(2:20 & 3pm) Sept 17, 2015

by Lois Welch, Prof. Emerita, University of Montana, Missoula

Good afternoon, it is a great pleasure and honor to join this distinguished roundtable. Though I only learned of its existence this summer, I admire your goals and hope to contribute my little bit. I moved to Montana in 1966 to teach Comparative Literature at UM. Meeting and marrying the Blackfeet poet and then novelist, James Welch, changed the course--and landscape--of my life.

I'd like to start with an anecdote that embodies my principle discovery about authors of the crown of the continent. Several years ago, our US representative, Pat Williams was on an official visit to the Crow reservation. In the course of conversation with one of the elders, he asked “What did you call this area before the white man came?”

“Home,” he replied.

(By the way, I will call native peoples *Indians* because my Blackfeet husband said that's what tribal/indigenous people call themselves. )

As I have looked at the writing about the Crown, one attitude characterizes those indigenous to it and variants of another characterize those who migrated westward toward the Rockies. The Indians thought of it as home. The immigrants thought

of wilderness, wildness including varying degrees of fear and attraction. There was a lot of disappointment when it didn't turn out to be the Eden of American cultural mythology. Your conference agenda seems mercifully free of such language.

As I have pondered the effect of this landscape on those who wrote about it, I have come to realize that my early experience of these Mountains fits neither category. I grew up in Salem Oregon, the daughter of a marine biologist. The ocean was the major factor in my damp landscape life. The mountains formed a punctuation 100 miles to the east--the Cascade mountains: Mt Hood, the perfect now shattered cone of Mt St Helens, Mt Jefferson, Mt Adams. The Rocky mountains continue that dramatic punctuation eastward. My approach to the Rockies from the west had none of the breathtaking extremity one experiences dropping down from Rogers Pass, heading eastward --- suddenly seeing that wall of mountains all the way to Canada and that oceanic stretch of prairie rolling endlessly to the east. I can only imagine the effect it had and continues to have on those who look up suddenly from the flatlands to see that high magnificence. I laugh out loud every time I pass the small sign beside highway 287 toward Augusta from Bowman's Corner--it can't be more than one foot by two. Rocky Mountains, it says modestly, as though you might not have guessed.

What I missed about the Rocky Mountains was the historical hullabaloo. I grew up, knowing where the wide Columbia flowed, enjoying the fertile far side of the continent Lewis and Clark struggled so hard to cross. It took me years to realize how absolute a barrier the Rockies were to those coming from the east. No wonder

they are mythologized with a richness and variety one doesn't find in the milder northwest.

And this is just on the American side. I'm delighted to know all these groups assembled here at this Roundtable are interested in transboundary activity.

Otherwise elk might be required to have passports, as they wander north to south without politics. I've always been struck at how arbitrary the boundary is between our countries and how absolute. Twenty years ago there was a conference in Eastend, Saskatchewan, Wallace Stegner's birthplace, a few miles north of the border, and northeast of Havre Montana. Stegner had published his lovely autobiographical *Wolf Willow* (1962) which was more about bioregion than nation. The conference organizers asked Jim please to smuggle some of his books over the border to sell at the conference because they were unable to obtain them otherwise. We did. Not drugs, not guns--books! It is only barely easier now to obtain Canadian books, thanks to Amazon and global internet.

When Mary Sexton first asked me to talk to you, I felt bad that I don't know much about the writers on the other side, the Canadians of the Crown after teaching literature for 40 years! Then I discovered Canadians don't know much about their own writers either, so I don't feel so bad. I only know Margaret Atwood, Joseph Boyden, Tom King, Alice Munro, Mordecai Richter, Farley Mowat & Michael Ondaatje. Most Canadians, I discover, know only Margaret Atwood. Tom King and Rudy Wiebe are two who are relevant to our interests here. Wiebe's *The*

*Temptation of Big Bear*, 1973 won the Canadian Governor General's award. Jim admired him a lot.

I was embarrassed at my ignorance until I realized that the Crown of the Continent is terra incognita in literary circles. The last great wilderness is not a defined region like New England, the South or the West--each with its own literary canon. This should not be a surprise: hardly anyone lives in the Crown & of course there are no publishers, not more than 3 bookstores.

Imagine my delight last week in Seattle, while visiting my friend Carol Doig, widow of the novelist Ivan Doig who died in April--to spot a volume entitled *Crown of the Continent* not 10 feet from my guest room door! Better still, there was an introduction by Ivan about his Dupuyer years as a youth, along with Ralph Waldt's stunning photos and narrative. Reading it was like a refresher course in the Crown.

Let us consider what we mean when we say *authors* of the Crown. We mean men and women who write books: Fiction, non-fiction, poetry. You know: Authors: Shakespeare, Hemingway, Frost--those sorts of chaps. Jane Austen, too. We need to expand the term to mean those who write any sort of books about this landscape-- including naturalists, explorers, pioneers, journalists. travel writers. We exclude articles, unless gathered in a book of essays, like Guthrie's essays on the environment. We need to include not only those who live in the landscape but those who are influenced by the landscape--which widens our scope enormously.

We should probably exclude oral storytellers, since they haven't written books-- and that's why our literature about the Crown is dominated by European settler frontier literature and westerns, inflamed by adventure, wildness, savages, guns and greed and derring-do.

Indians have been entertaining and instructing their people for centuries with finely honed tales that take place within the parameters of their culture and which are aimed at their own people as audience. When transcribed for the rest of us, they often seem simple, like fables. Maybe it's because anthropologists do the transcribing. These stories do not meet, but are not intended to meet, our Euro-based criteria for literature. This leaves the slate a bit blank on the Crown Author Indian side.

In the last half century or so, this has begun to change. Darcy McNickle, a Salish writer who studied at Oxford in the 1920s before going to work for the US Indian Bureau, wrote two novels dealing directly with conflicting cultural lives on the Flathead reservation, *The Surrounded* (1936) & the posthumous *Wind from an enemy sky* (1978). Debra Magpie Earling, also Salish, and a former student of Jim's, published her novel *Perma Red* about a young woman on the reservation, in 2002 and continues to write while teaching at UM. Woody Kipp, a Blackfeet journalist, activist and teacher, published *Viet Cong at Wounded Knee* in 2004

And my husband's novel 1986 *Fools Crow* seems in my admittedly biased view to be a prime example of Crown Lit. It focuses on Blackfeet life in the early years of white encroachment, geographically between Glacier park and fort Benton. I don't want to toot his horn too brashly, but I remember when he realized what an important feat it had been to write that book, which is now widely taught in Montana. He said once "I wonder why no Indian ever thought of writing a historical novel before me." It was the natural move after his first two novels in which the protagonists' lives depend on discovering a past they can relate to. In *The Death of Jim Loney*, the protagonist dies for lack of that knowledge. Jim loved delving into that world as he wrote, a world he realized he had known all his life. Not wilderness; home.

Jim was born in Browning of Blackfeet and Gros Ventre parents. Of course, the Irish grandfather gave the name. His mother's name--just to remember for a moment the linguistic twists of Indian geneology-- was Rose Marie OBryan Welch. Jim's Blackfeet great-grandmother survived the Marias Massacre. Jim lived in Browning as a child, then Chemawa Oregon, then Sitka Alaska, then Junior highschool in South Dakota, highschool in Minneapolis, college in Havre & he finally graduated from UM and studied writing with the poet Richard Hugo. After we married he published *Riding the Earthboy 40*, a book of poems mainly set in the Crown. After that came, *Winter in the Blood*, a novel which has just been made into a prizewinning independent film by Alex and Andrew Smith. *The Death of Jim Loney*, *Fools Crow*, *Indian Lawyer*, *Killing Custer*. *The Heartsong of Charging Elk* completes the list.

On the Canadian side, the only Indian author I know is Thomas King, part Greek, part Cherokee. He has written numerous lively and humorous novels about tribal people, right at the edge of the Crown, on the boundary between our countries. *Medicine River* (1990) *Green Grass, Running Water*. Lots of awards, Canadian awards. Less funny than Sherman Alexie, but funny nonetheless.

Sterling Holy White Mountain and Adrian Jawort are among the third generation of Blackfeet authors to watch. Their anthology of Indigenous writers, *Off the Path*, has just been published.

Additional research is clearly going to turn up more writing going on among the Indian residents of the Crown.

Consider the contrasts in geography, in climate, in culture, in language occurring at the edges of the Crown. These aren't simple binaries of urban and rural, mountain and prairie, hot and cold, savage and civilized, male and female, historical and contemporary, mythical and true. These books come in complex varieties of characters and styles and veracity. Some are more concerned with experience and scientific fact, some more focussed on stories extrapolated from experience. I propose that the clash and tension of these binaries, like the mountainous Crown itself, provides imaginative energy for these stories.

Nature writing is a huge category, though books about the transboundary Crown are fewer than one would hope. A Canadian scholar working at UM named Jeff Gailus is currently working on an anthology of such writing, including such folks as John McPhee, Guthrie, Jack Turner, Benn Gadd, Doug Peacock and JB Mackinnon. Only Andy Russell appears from the Canadian side; he admits that Kim Barnes, Mary Clearman Blew & Gretel Erlich merit inclusion.

We must come to Bud Guthrie, *the Big Sky, the Way West, Fair Land Fair Land* and the whole whopping world of Western Literature including movies. Even when we limit our scope to writers on the edges of the Crown, we have Dorothy Johnson from Whitefish and *the Death of Liberty Valence*, the story and the movie. We might get to claim Norman McLean's *A River Runs through it*, because the Blackfoot & the Swan Valley form the southern edges of the Crown. Dee McNamer, from Cutbank, wrote *Rima in the Weeds* and *One Sweet Quarrel* whose characters have their backs to the mountains and their sights on bigger cities--like Fargo. Ivan Doig's *English Creek* (1984) is set in the Two Medicine in 1939, where Ivan spent some years as a boy. More obscurely, we might consider Mary Roberts Rinehart's *Through Glacier in 1915*, Doug Peacock's gripping *Grizzly Years* (1990) & lyrical *Dirt Work* by Christine Byl, a trail crew worker in Glacier published last year. (She reminds me of a friend's description of the *New Yorker's* appeal: they keep publishing articles about stuff you never thought you'd care about and can't put down.)

I am trying to exclude Montana and Western writers who don't write explicitly about the Crown. Tom McGuane for example, and Jim Harrison. And dozens of writers included in the humongous LAST BEST PLACE ANTHOLOGY, the Kittredge and Smith 1988 anthology that is the foundational reference point for Montana lit. I recommend it as anyone's starting point. Or doorstep. (At 1160 pages, it is as big as a book can get and still be bound.) Despite being from SW Oregon ranching country, Bill Kittredge himself is often considered the voice of the West from such books as *Owning it All* (1987) and *Who Owns the West* (1995). He doesn't write explicitly about the Crown but his anti-mythologizing stance has inspired his students at UM and readers for decades.

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I would like to conclude with a description of what I initially considered my personal literary corner of Montana, but which may turn out to be the most important literary salon in the Rocky Mountain West, rustic or not. The term *rustic salon* was used by a chap working on a biography of Bud Guthrie, who was interviewing me in the absence of Bud himself, Bud's wife and other friends after Bud's death. "What influence do you think that little rustic salon had," he asked. "Please don't call it that. They were very sophisticated people," I replied. In retrospect, those "rustics," amongst them, published 52 books, all but a couple by New York publishers.

Bud Guthrie is in a category by himself. A gallant old man when Jim and I met him and Carol at a conference in 1975, he had already 7 books and 7 films to his credit. At the 50th anniversary celebration of the publication of *The Big Sky*, Jim

gave a talk in which he said “If the theme of Guthrie’s work was ‘it’s all gone,’ to the Blackfeet, the country was going. They had to learn to cope with this going. But they did it because they were a tribal society. They’d lived in the country for a very long time. They knew how to do it. And there were certain mores that allowed them to live in harmony with this country. They didn’t fight it. They lived with it. ... They’re still here.” (Farr & Bevis,180)

Mildred Walker was a lesser known novelist who lived most of her adult life in Great Falls. Her 12 novels dealt increasingly with the country she lived in. If a *Lion Could Talk* (1970) is most relevant to our concerns. It focuses on the lack of communication between an eastern missionary and his wife and the Indian wife of the commander of Fort Benton who refuses to speak English, though she understands it perfectly well. Fascinating premise.

But, to begin at the beginning: in 1937 Dr Ferdinand Schemm and his wife, the novelist Mildred Walker, bought a one room cabin 25 miles west of Choteau on the South Fork of the Teton river. The Rocky Mountain Front goes straight up behind the cabin. Wind Mountain rises clifflike across the road. They had three children. The oldest, Ripley, would marry the poet Richard Hugo in 1974 and published two books of poems herself. Bud Guthrie lived up the road a piece at Twin Lakes and was a major western writer, winning the Pulitzer in 1947 for *The Way West*. Joseph Kinsey Howard, the Great Falls journalist who wrote *Montana High Wide and Handsome*--that important exposé of how Anaconda Copper and Montana Power owned Montana-- had a little cabin across the river. Most days you

could cross the river in two jumps. I know that during the summers in the '40s and '50s, they all spent lots of time together at one place or another. And writers talk books--even if they don't talk in detail, they ask "What are you working on now, Bud" or "How did you like that last review, Mildred? He was pretty brutal." Until Ripley Schemm Hugo spent a month the the summer of 2001 working on her biography of her mother, no one I think actually wrote *at* the cabin. But they socialized there, as well as in town, and so I like to think of it as a literary nexus, a rustic salon, if you must, in the Crown of the Continent. Will further research turn up another such?

After Ripley and Hugo got married, they often went to the cabin with her two children. By this time it had expanded to two rooms, each about 20 by 15 feet, electricity, no running water. Jim and I often went along. Consequently we became good friends with the Bud and Carol Guthrie. Herb Luthin, Guthrie's stepson was actually a student of mine at UM.

Ripley's son Matthew was an avid outdoorsman as a young man, hiking when he was 20 or so from their doorstep in Missoula, through the Rattlesnake, across the Bob Marshall and over Headquarters Pass to the cabin on the South Fork. He was one of the co-founders of the Friends of the Rocky Mountain Front, a group still working to protect the Front from development. After getting a degree in history from UM, he spent one autumn and perhaps winter at the cabin, writing poetry and working on oral histories of the residents of the canyon for the Montana Historical

Society. He developed cancer and died at the age of 23, leaving behind one lovely book of poems, *Clearing*, printed by a small press after his death.

If you count Guthrie's 19 books, Mildred's 13, Hugo's 7, Ripley's 3, Jim's 7, Joseph Kinsey Howard's 2 and Matt's 1--you have 52 books published by denizens of that little cabin on the South Fork of the Teton River, nestled in a crook of the SE corner of the Crown of the Continent. And to add the authentic rustic literary note, Alice Gleason, co-founder of the Circle 8 Ranch on which Ripley's and Joseph Kinsey Howard's ranches were located, wrote her own book, *Starting from Scratch: The Adventures of a Lady Dude Rancher*, published in 2000. That's 53.

Without our stories we don't know who we are. The Crown of the Continent is not only the headwaters of our nation's rivers--north, east and west from Triple peak in Glacier-- and a haven of wild animals and plants, but a rich touchstone for stories that tell us what our lives mean, now and hopefully in a sustainable future.