Past President's Address 1999

THE WESTERN LITERATURE ASSOCIATION’S
OFFICIAL HOME PAGE

Crossing Frontiers, Riding Point
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WLA past-presidential address, given fall 1999, in Sacramento, California

One of the images I thought about using as publicity picture for last year’s Banff meeting is a snapshot, taken in 1953, featuring Marilyn Monroe seated in a canoe on what looks like the Bow River. Alongside, standing on a dock, looking down solicitously, is a Mounted Policeman in full formal serge uniform, complete with the flat-brimmed stetson. Monroe was there filming *River of No Return* and the snapshot was taken by a student working for the summer at one of the hotels (see Benidickson, facing 17). I thought it would have been a perfect poster picture—in years just previous here at WLA, there seemed a trend toward commemorative T-shirts (Vancouver) and posters (Lincoln). But that trend was quashed in Albuquerque when Gary Scharnhorst was satisfied, apparently, with a mariachi band on opening night. So Monroe stayed in her canoe, and we did Banff without her although, doubtless, Mounties of various sorts—postcard, plush, keychain—crossed back to the United States with many of our number. (I myself bought this Mountie tie—and several other things besides—at the Mountie Store at Chateau Lake Louise. The stores are franchised. The Disney Corporation now markets the Mounties. Suffice it to say, many people, especially Canadians, are disturbed by this.) Marilyn Monroe and the Mounted Police: Hollywood. It’s hard to imagine a better image.

When I was putting the Banff program together, I noticed a single text garnering considerable, immediate attention: Guy Vanderhaeghe’s *The Englishman’s Boy* (1996). It won Canada’s 1996 Governor-General’s Award for Fiction and, as criticism has since shown, has found a quick currency. Vanderhaeghe, a Saskatchewan writer who had previously established himself as the author of stories about sensitive, perplexed men, had headed off in a new direction with *The Englishman’s Boy*. It is an historical fiction that combines a narrative of the 1873 Cypress Hills massacre of a group of Assiniboine by revenge-seeking American wolfers with a fictional narrative of Hollywood’s 1920s rendering of this same event into a film entitled *Besieged*. Alternating one with the other as they do, Vanderhaeghe’s two narratives mediate and meditate the relations between a historical happening and any telling of it, imaginative or otherwise.

As Gary Scharnhorst said last year in his Past President’s Address, “Any of you can read Hayden White’s ‘The Historical Text as Literary Artifact’ as well as I can” (345). That’s certainly true, but there are several Hayden White-type things brought into focus for me by *The Englishman’s Boy* which will get me to my topic of “Crossing Frontiers.” The first two of these are contextual: the Cypress Hills Massacre was the precipitating
event for the creation of the North West Mounted Police in 1873. As Wallace Stegner wrote in *Wolf Willow* (1962), “Never was the dignity of the uniform more carefully cultivated, and rarely has the ceremonial quality of impartial law and order been more dramatically exploited.” Vanderhaeghe’s narrator calls the creation of the Mounted Police “a mythic act of possession” (326). And that’s just it. As Stegner goes on to say, “One of the most visible aspects of the international boundary was that it was a color line: blue below, red above, blue for treachery and unkept promises, red for protection and the straight tongue” (101). And Vanderhaeghe was, no doubt consciously, focusing on the Cypress Hills incident as perhaps something of a homage, even, to Stegner’s *Wolf Willow*, doubtless the best-known book to come out of the Cypress Hills. By evocatively re-creating the Cypress Hills Massacre, Vanderhaeghe returned to the “last plains frontier” of Stegner’s subtitle: in his book, the historical act, the historical fact, is rendered now, rendered complex, rendered human. With the Englishman’s boy, we are there; Vanderhaeghe begins:

Even from such a distance Fine Man could smell their camp, the fried-pig stink of white men. He took up a pinch of dirt, placed it under his tongue, and made a prayer. Keep me close, Mother Earth, hide me, Mother Earth. It was light as day, the moon’s bright face a trader’s steel mirror, the grey leaves of the sage and wolf willow shining silver, as if coated with hoarfrost. Under a full moon, it was dangerous to steal horses—even from foolish white men. (1)

This is the precipitating moment of the Cypress Hills Massacre—though we don’t know that yet—the point of departure that begins the crossing of the frontier—first by Fine Man and the other Natives with their stolen horses and then by the wronged wolfers, seeking those horses and their revenge through Native deaths. Chapter by chapter, the wolfers are textualized—described but not explained—detailed in their act of riding north. They are reminiscent of Larry McMurtry’s riders in *Lonesome Dove*, but these riders ride north consciously toward a frontier that, in 1873 circumstances, is never really seen to have been crossed. It is what the Native people called “The Medicine Line,” demarcated (at least on the plains) between the U.S. and British “possessions” in 1818, surveyed just the year before this action, in 1872, an intersection of the Missouri and Hudson’s Bay watersheds, the 49th parallel ran through Stegner’s childhood, he writes in *Wolf Willow*, dividing him in two (81). And that imaginative division is what I seek to describe here.

Like Stegner in *Wolf Willow*, Harry Vincent, Vanderhaeghe’s first-person narrator of the novel’s other narrative, recalls his younger self when he was working as a title-writer in 1923 in Hollywood at Best Chance Pictures. Looking back from 1953 Saskatoon, Vincent sees “the South Saskatchewan River, the frozen jigsaw pieces bumping sluggishly downstream, the cold, black water streaming between them” (5). In 1923, plucked from the obscurity of title-writing, Vincent is taken up by the studio’s owner, Damon Ira Chance, and set to pursue the firsthand account of one Shorty McAdoo, a person who was among those 1873 riders and who ultimately participated in the massacre. Chance, a racist xenophobe who is out to emulate D. W. Griffith, wants Harry to discover exactly how the massacre occurred and write a screenplay based on those facts. Setting Vincent to the task, he says “‘You mark my words, Harry, there’ll come a day when the public won’t swallow any of our stories unless they believe them to be real. Everybody wants the real thing, or thinks they do. Truth is stranger
than fiction, someone said. It may not be, but it’s more satisfying. Facts are the bread America wants to eat. The poetry of facts is the poetry of the American soul” (19). Vincent does what he was asked, but, not surprisingly, Chance proves to be megalomaniacal, wrong in his assertion here, and dead (largely in that order).

At the heart of *The Englishman’s Boy* lies an irony that Vanderhaeghe exploits effectively. It is the same division that animates Stegner in *Wolf Willow*: that is, a bifurcated perspective. Chance is seeking to write cinematic “American” poetry through Canadian facts, gotten by a Canadian from an Englishman, written by a Canadian screenwriter. Vanderhaeghe crosses a frontier, privileging the Canadian point of view of the American Western mythos so as to offer a view, as it were, from above. This is the same crossing, the same privileging that has made much of Margaret Atwood’s fiction so effective—she is in America but not of it, a (North) American who is not American. This is part of what makes *Wolf Willow* such a haunting book, at least for me: the bifurcated sensibility, the conflicting cultural claims, the separate versions of history, the different vision—it is a matter, as Don D. Walker asked at the 1976 WLA meeting in Bellingham, of “Who’s going to ride point?”

Who, indeed? Over the last few years I’ve done a lot of reading for the Western Literature Association: since the early 1990s, I’ve been on the Nominating Committee for the Don D. Walker Award for the best article in Western American literature; last year I selected and this year I helped judge the essays for the J. Golden Taylor Award for the best paper by a graduate student presented at the annual meeting; last year I read all the papers on the program (at least those that I saw); and last, but certainly not least, I recently got to write an essay review of Blake Allmendinger’s contentious (and pretentious) *Ten Most Wanted: The New Western Literature* for *Western American Literature*. What this means is that I have some knowledge of, and certainly a very healthy respect for, the breadth, depth, and scope of the writing done by members of this association.

One of the pieces that caught my attention in all this is Jonathan Pitts’s *WAL* essay, “Writing On: Blood Meridian as Devisionary Western,” where he returns to Frederick Jackson Turner and writes that the frontier has been displaced and reconstituted so convincingly in our likeness that we cannot help but read it as our history, as a reflection of our presence. It is literally impossible to see our absence, for where we are not we will inevitably be, and where we once were we can never leave. To open the American eye is to see that which is inevitably and originally American. With the closing of the American frontier comes the opening, as in a God’s-eye view, of the American landscape, of the American eye. In this optical democracy, in this intellectual and spiritual equilibrium, everything is necessarily luminous. (18)

Pitts’s articulation here of Emersonian ideas refracted through the Turnerian prism and focused upon the American West as place—what he calls “optical democracy”—is both apt for the notion of “Crossing Frontiers” and relevant to *The Englishman’s Boy* as a frontier-crossing text. Looking down once more at the South Saskatchewan river as the novel closes, Vincent remembers that “Chance believed character didn’t count for much in history. But looking at the river, I remind myself the map of the river is not the river itself. That hidden in it are deep, mysterious, submerged, and unpredictable currents. The characters of all those wolfers, Canadian
and American, cast longer shadows than I had any inkling of that endless night in which McAdoo made his confession, crouched on a cot in a desolate bunkhouse, an old man reliving his pain and guilt thousands of miles from an obscure dot on the Saskatchewan prairie” (326).

As a student of western landscape, I am drawn to moments like this, to moments in texts, I suppose, of epiphany, when as Pitts says, “everything is necessarily luminous.” That is, when the texts we read manage words so aligned that, themselves, commingling character, landscape, circumstance, and moment within a configuration that glows. There is such a moment in Wolf Willow when Stegner rediscovers “all around” “that odor that I have not smelled since I was eleven, but have never forgotten—have dreamed, more than once.” And then he continues, saying, “Then I pull myself up the bank by a gray-leafed bush, and I have it. The tantalizing and ambiguous and wholly native smell is no more than the shrub we called wolf willow, now blooming with small yellow flowers” (18). (Not for nothing is this selfsame shrub evident in Vanderhaege’s opening paragraph: “Homage, Wallace Stegner.”) This wolf willow “brings” Stegner “home”: “If I am native to anything,” he asserts, “I am native to this” (19, 20).

But more achieved, more evocative, than Stegner’s moment is Willa Cather’s in My Ántonia. There are several such moments in that novel: the image of Mr. Shimirda trudging toward the setting frontier Nebraska sun during the final fall of his life (one of the Benda woodcuts), or the sun again setting behind the abandoned plow while Jim picnics with the Hired Girls. These are two. But as a reader I am most drawn not to these dramatic “necessarily luminous” moments but rather to one more subdued, one less frequently commented on, but one more powerfully luminous to my mind (see Thacker, Murphy, Millington). Toward the end of Book Four, when Burden finally manages to visit the supposedly disgraced Ántonia before he goes away for another twenty years, Cather writes:

As we walked homeward across the fields, the sun dropped and lay like a golden globe in the low west. While it hung there, the moon rose in the east, as big as a cartwheel, pale silver and streaked with rose color, thin as a bubble or a ghost-moon. For five, perhaps ten minutes, the two luminaries confronted each other across the level land, resting on opposite edges of the world. In that singular light every tree and shock of wheat, every sunflower stalk and clump of snow-on-the-mountain, drew itself up high and pointed; the very clods and furrows in the fields seemed to stand up sharply. I felt the old pull of the earth, the solemn magic that comes out of those fields at nightfall. I wished I could be a little boy again, and that my way could end there. (313)

More than the famous plow scene, this one seems to me to best configure what Cather describes in My Ántonia’s introduction as, for her and Jim both, “the country, the conditions, the whole adventure of our childhood” (xii). More than any other scene in that novel, and perhaps even within the whole of Cather’s work, this “two luminaries” passage illustrates an assertion made in 1946 by E. K. Brown that “Cather had always understood that a person’s relation to a place might be as valuable to him, and as decisive in his growth or retardation, as any relation he might have with other persons. What happens in one place could not happen in just the same way in any other” (Homage 85).

If The Englishman’s Boy reveals a central irony—the American West seen and understood and made myth out
of by a Canadian, a non-American—so too is it ironic that Willa Cather’s first biographer—a person the notoriously self-constructing Cather had all but authorized in the role before she died—was E. K. Brown, also a Canadian. Along with major work on Matthew Arnold and Edith Wharton, Brown wrote *On Canadian Poetry* (1943)—arguably the first modern critical study of Canadian writing, one whose basic concepts still hold sway over fifty years later. His two essays on Cather, “Willa Cather and the West” (1935) and, especially, “Homage to Willa Cather” (1946), occasioned correspondence and the two planned to meet but Cather died before they could. She would not have known of it, but Cather probably would have been pleased to know that Brown wrote in the back of his copy of *The Professor’s House*, “I always think Willa Cather’s books too good for this (America) continent.” Almost fifty years later, and amid the present moment of the still burgeoning Cather critical industry, and certainly here at WLA, Brown’s comment seems appalling. Yet he meant it as praise, as compliment, and Cather, aesthete that she was, likely would have taken it as such.

One of the few interesting things Blake Allmendinger has to say in *Ten Most Wanted* has to do with Cather, who, he says, “was a crossover artist whose work is admired by both mainstream critics and westernists” (3). I won’t belabor his invidious intentions by the latter opposition, but I do like his use of the term “crossover.” With Brown, Stegner, and Vanderhaeghe, Cather shared what might be called a crossover sensibility. Speaking of *Shadows on the Rock*, Brown calls it “a novel of survivals, a series of pictures illustrating the will of a highly civilized people to preserve its civilization,” and he holds that “it is far too little to say of ‘Shadows on the Rock’ that it is the best novel drawn from the rich material of Canadian history.” And given his own training—Brown held a Doctorate des lettres from the Sorbonne—and scholarship, Brown asserts further, “Nor would any historical novels by French Canadians sustain a comparison with Miss Cather’s craftsmanship and vision” (Homage 88, 89; see George).

**Crossing Frontiers**

With *Shadows*, Cather remained—as she had previously in *O Pioneers!*, *My Ántonia*, *A Lost Lady*, *The Professor’s House*, and, especially, *Death Comes for the Archbishop*—“on the frontier.” More than this, her work exhibits a sensibility that perpetually crosses frontiers since, as Pitts asserts, “where we are not we will inevitably be, and where we once were we can never leave.” Cather left Virginia, she left Nebraska, and throughout her life, as Joseph R. Urgo has recently argued, she was always traveling somewhere. Her “particular genius for evoking landscapes,” as Merrill Maguire Skaggs has called it, ranged throughout North America (20). What this means to me as a student of western landscape and, more and more, an utterly immersed student of Cather, is that she never left some frontier; she crossed from one into another—spatially and imaginatively—and repeatedly. By creating the shadows on the rock of Cap Diament in Quebec, Cather recreated what was arguably one of the first (European) western frontiers in North America. By so doing, too, she displays what I would call a Canadian sensibility; that is, an imaginative facility that kept her crossing over, crossing from frontier to frontier, a movement that concurrently both took her deeper into the human condition—her own humanity, her own story, paramount in the fiction itself—and rooted her all the more firmly in her own places. Those places, arguably, were ever on the frontier: Nebraska, New Mexico, Quebec, and,
even, the 1850s Virginia of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. This sensibility is “Canadian,” I would hold, by virtue of its contingent duality: to speak, as Emerson, as Turner, and as many others have of “the American landscape” and “the American eye,” and “the American frontier” is to imagine a homogeneity that no Canadian could countenance—recent criticism on all these matters has only confirmed as much. Such a frontier-crossing sensibility is part of what animates Vanderhaeghe’s *The Englishman’s Boy*, it is the very purpose of Stegner’s *Wolf Willow*, and it is what drew Brown to Cather in the first place. To have a Canadian point of view, especially an English-Canadian point of view is to be “on the frontier,” to be above *America* but part of America, to have to cross frontiers.

To close, I want to tell you that I feel a bit like Nick Carraway at the end of *The Great Gatsby*—no, not the floating dead guy stuff but rather his memories of returning home to Minnesota for Christmas, his recognition of his “home place”: “I see now that this has been a story of the West, after all …,” he writes (184). Well, for me, now quoting Pitts again, one of the places I “once was and can never leave” is here at WLA. Last year, doing this, Gary maintained, “More than any other group I know, certainly more than any other group to which I belong, the Western Literature Association has nurtured a tradition of iconoclasm” (347). To that I can only fully agree and say “huzzah!” Yet along with this iconoclasm is WLA’s generous acceptance of numerous western frontiers—generic, ideological, linguistic, theoretical, gendered, (in my own case) national, racial, ecocritical—these discrete groupings, and others, are to be found each year on the program, in the prize nominations, and in *Western American Literature*. When he ended his 1976 talk in Bellingham, Don D. Walker called for “another bunch of riders at point,” letting “DeVoto and Dobie and others ride off into the sunset of critical memory.” “The literary art of the West needs all of the craft and sophistication and philosophical seriousness it can muster. I don’t know that we can ask old Henry James to put on his chaps … but we can nevertheless hope for a Western writer-critic of equally high literary knowledge to show us the way” (30).

In 1978, when as a graduate student at the University of Manitoba I first came to WLA at Park City, Utah, to give the second paper of my career—it was on, I note, the “urban West,” a topic that still has some currency—I flew there from Winnipeg on Frontier Airlines—using Frontier to cross the frontier, as it were. On the leg from Denver to Salt Lake I happened to sit next to a woman also headed to WLA. She proved to be Susan Rosowski; we met, discovered our shared destination, and, in the way of academics everywhere heading to confer, talked the rest of the way about WLA, academy, the Mounted Police, and—oh, what a surprise!—Willa Cather. Susan and I have been at these topics ever since, and very happily, thank you. And the other person on my panel at Park City was John Murphy, who (and here is a surprise) did not talk about Cather—rather, he spoke of Gabrielle Roy, a Franco-Manitobian writer. And at Park City too I met and was welcomed by Ann Ronald, who, among other things, gave me advice for the comps I faced that fall; Bless her—said she thought I’d pass. She was right. Earlier that year I had attended “Crossing Frontiers” in Banff and there had met two other now longtime Canadian cronies: Michael Peterman and Laurie Ricou; there too I heard Stegner, Don D. Walker, Bernice Slote, and many other major western critics speak. And ever since, WLA has been and remains the site
of many another such rendezvous. I hope my point, as I close, is clear: for me, someone who has ended up in
the East but writes of the West, the Western Literature Association has been both place and purpose,
imaginative space and convivial connection. Who’s going to ride point? We are. And we do.

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