

WLA—Past President's Address 1996

THE WESTERN LITERATURE ASSOCIATION'S
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Extra West

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WLA past-presidential address, delivered in fall 1996, in Lincoln, Nebraska

This is the unrevised reading text of the Past-President's Plenary address, presented to the 31st annual meeting of the Western Literature Association, Lincoln, Nebraska, on 3 October 1996. I would like to thank Susanne George, President and host, for the opportunity, and Fran Kaye for her introduction. During the address, Fran also read the lines of Lachlan MacLachlan, thus playing the part of dramatic 'extra.'

Probably Short for Extraordinary

It's certainly outside the regular order of things that a Canadian should address you as your grateful past-President. The occasion is probably unrivalled in its implications for creative cross-bordering since the high tension of the great Pig War. Given that both our countries have been said to lack history, a few of you may not recall this particular mud-wallow in our greasy bilateral relationship. For decades after European contact, what we now think of as the Pacific Northwest was a single administrative region 'ruled' by the Hudson's Bay Company. "Oregon Territory" included most of present-day British Columbia—and what is now Portland, Oregon, was in the Diocese of Quebec. When the treaty defining the international boundary west of the Rocky Mountains was signed 15 June 1846, it neglected to specify where the line ran among the islands between Vancouver Island and the Washington Territory mainland. Was San Juan Island—a Coast Salish clamping site with a Spanish name—American or British?

This question became crucial in 1854 when Lyman Cutler, a no doubt dastardly American who chose to settle on the island smack in the middle of the Hudson's Bay Company sheep farm, shot a pig belonging to the company. This porker was exceeding valuable. To protect British pigs, Governor Douglas dispatched to the island a hastily appointed justice of the peace; the British even threatened to put Cutler on trial. On the same day as the justice landed, so did a force of sixty American troops sent to defend American interests. Governor Douglas responded by sending a "powerful vessel of war" to prevent further American landings. Volleys of insults and counter-propositions ensued, and a lively struggle among diplomats. Meanwhile Americans and near-Canadians secretly mingled amicably on the island, no doubt over dinners of pork chops, or bangers and mash. Finally, in 1871, the boundary question was referred to international arbitration—to the German Emperor.

Extra-Canadian

In recognition of our meeting with the Western History Association—and bravo to Susanne George for the beyonding presidency which has pushed the association over both disciplinary and temporal borders—I thought to attempt a history of the Western Literature Association. Not a history culled from Executive Council minutes (do we even keep Executive minutes?), nor of the many Sue Rosowskis and George Days who have given devout and roguish leadership to this organization. No, a personal history of a precious association; a history, if I had time, of absent elk calls above Estes Park and of four voices who shared in reading the great white Pelican in Reno; a history of what the WLA has meant to me as a writer. ‘Ricou, a *writer*?’ anyone who has read my stuff will mutter. Nonetheless, the dream of writing in an overly cv’d profession (‘but, is that a *refereed* journal?’) is what I am trying to get at. I want to be a writer.

(I also want to be a concert tenor. And the starting striker for AC Milan.) Among my institutional homes, only the WLA has been big enough, or crazy enough, to permit me to try.

I was born in 1944, in Brandon, Manitoba, on the Assiniboine River, about sixty miles north of the Canada-U.S. boundary. I lived and was educated in that grain-farming service centre until I received a bachelor’s degree at age twenty and went off to study in Toronto. I have often heard Americans (U.S. Americans) labelled insular—national megalomania, Margaret Atwood charmingly called the trait—so it seems to me odd now to realize that as crucial as Wichita, and Coeur d’Alene and Eugene and Salt Lake City and especially Lincoln, Nebraska, have become in my life, I did not, nor did my family, once in my childhood “cross the line.” Around Brandon, going to shop in Minot, North Dakota, was always called “crossing the line” or “going over the line.” This faintly illegitimate, illegal, risky venture, figured in my own experience when I first crossed the line—we went about a mile south of the border to Midge’s Bar, the first sign of human habitation, where it was said, correctly, that the legal drinking age was interpreted much more generously than in Atwood’s prim Canada.

This sheltered and geographically constrained upbringing—it may have had something to do with my family’s determined Anglophilia—seems to me at once bizarre and predictable. You see, the United States was our extra West, our possible wild behaviour. And our imagined life was full of your West: I knew Huck Finn and High Noon, but not one of the writers who had written in and around Brandon—not Frederick Phillip Grove or Robert Stead or Sinclair Ross or Martha Ostenso or Patricia Blondal. But when television first came to Brandon (would it be about 1958?), we were given “Horse Opera” (so much for being a concert tenor), every afternoon at five, just after we were home from school: Roy and Hopalong and the Lone Ranger (and, yes, Dale and Tonto and Silver) were our daily companions. But we never read books or watched films—other than a few earnest documentaries—set in our place. Your place was our place. *Your* place, and *their* place, where all our literature—with the exception of four or five poems and Ernest Thompson Seton, which my sixth-grade teacher had determined to introduce to us—all our literature, right through university and a degree majoring in English came from elsewhere.

Our West was extra-Canadian: it lay outside the culture we did not know we were building. But, surely, what

was “extra” emerged essential. I would argue that many Canadian writers are now writing themselves through the myth of the frontier West--the history and temptation of violence, for example—that many U.S. western writers have successfully written away from.

“Extra! Extra!”

For me, the defining scene in Margaret Laurence’s *The Diviners* (1974)—a crucial novel for all our Wests—is that slowly tightening closeup on the aspiring writer Morag, just after she is hired to copyedit at the *Manawaka Banner*. Morag finds the reports of teas and cakes and ices submitted by local correspondents “hilarious,” and begs Lachlan MacLachlan, her bulking, tweedy editor, to allow her to rewrite:

“They don’t want it rewritten, Morag. …”

“But—”

“But *what?*” Lachlan’s voice is low but slightly menacing.

“They make the *Banner* look like—well, like a small town paper.”

“They do, eh? Well, that is precisely what it is, Morag. And if you think your prose style is so much better than theirs, girl, remember one thing. Those people know things it will take you the better part of your lifetime to learn, if ever. They are not very verbal people, but if you ever in your life presume to look down on them because you have the knack of words and they do not, then you do so at your eternal risk and peril. Do you understand what I am saying?” (155)

The novel that expands from this drama follows Laurence’s own lifetime of learning the extra-semantic values—the intimacies—deepening in such marshmallow words as “lovely” and “beautiful,” and of divining the divinations of the “not very verbal.” I would choose this scene to begin my history of the WLA, my personal discovery of the importance of Lincoln, and the inordinate empathy and strength of the Fran Kayes within it: no group of academics I know has demonstrated such openness, such tolerance, such commitment to understanding of those people outside universities who—in large part—pay our salaries and allow us the extra-ordinary privilege of a life teaching and reading and writing books. No group of literary academics shows less compulsion to rewrite. No group of modern-languagers is more likely to recognize that a small-town newspaper’s local reports grow tough history, and sheltering story, and mystical poetry—and especially the extra-verbal knowledge knotted beyond “the knack of words.”

Extra Edge

The sheep grazed in an international manner.

—Ethel Wilson, *The Innocent Traveller*

Why did James Swan “decide to dare the Charlottes’ western shore, when the Haida population and the material he sought to collect for the Smithsonian [in 1883] were peppered along the eastern coastline”? Ivan Doig muses on this puzzle in *Winter Brothers* and comes up with the inevitably American answer: “[He] wanted to do it for the edge of challenge. … An extra West, one more over-the-horizon territory for the curiosity that worked in him like a second heart.”

I called Doig's answer "inevitably American," a signal of my slight annoyance (and vestigial fear?) that in this intricately woven writing, which I find has so much to tell me about where I live, Doig hangs so obsessively on the frontier myth. Yet Doig is, I believe, more inclined to the *borderland of exchange* than the "edge of challenge." Consider, for example, these extra Wests at work in his work:

1. Within the contiguous forty-eight, popular culture is recognizing an alternative *Pacific* West that is north.

Surely when that Empire State building elevator descends, Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan will fly north and west for a very, very good sleep in Seattle. That precocious young matchmaker will give up late-night talk shows, take up soccer and his parents will glow in the Saturday-morning drizzle. Niles Crane will settle into another double-tall non-fat latte, light foam and just a dusting of cinnamon, and wake himself up to a West Coast world which every reader's club in North America will recognize from David Guterson's *Snow Falling on Cedars*: "verdant green that inclined its residents toward the poetical." As Richard Rodriguez proposes in a provocative essay in the September 1996 *Harper's*: "In something like the way the East Coast invented the West, California today is inventing a *rectified* North. From the perspective of California, Oregon is a northern state and Seattle is a northern city. Vancouver becomes a part of the continuum without regard to international boundaries."

2. Swan's extra West (for all that the Queen Charlotte Islands are named after the wife of King George III, and are nominally part of Canada) is aboriginal territory. Haida Gwai. And to supplement Swan on the Haida, Doig turns to Haida artist, Bill Reid, the creator of "Raven and the First Men," that yellow cedar bursting clamshell so many of you marvelled at in the Museum of Anthropology during last year's conference. Haida artists "weren't bound" Reid instructs us 'by the silly feeling that it's impossible for two figures to occupy the same place at the same time'" (195). This aesthetic of outcrazing the loopy in turns teaches Doig about the rain forest ecosystem:

The fascination of the rain forest is that all flows in and out of all else; here I can sense how the Haidas, whom Swan went among in their own clouds of forest, could produce art in which creatures swim in and out of each other, the designs tumble, notch together, uncouple, compress, surge. (212)

I like to think, despite Doig's first conclusion, that Swan, torn between collecting and marvelling, eventually seeks the west side of the Charlottes to leave the Haida alone, to know them (if at all) not in crates of artifacts shipped to the Smithsonian but through the clouds of forest. I like to think Swan intuited the extra West—outside of, completely unaffiliated with, a Western: a precontact, non-West, unaware of the European compass.

3. The extra West for Swan is ocean. This sea is Pacific—its storminess is calming. The formula for West is necessarily extra: take any object, or animal, or process, multiply it by land, and multiply the product by water. By water by land.

4. An extra West is always layered in writing about writing about place. Its history is openly, self-consciously mediated in metaphor and myth. Doig writes his way into his region by writing around and through Swan's meticulous, voluminous diaries, which are themselves a struggle to match in writing the Makah and Clallam peoples, powerfully verbal peoples but without the knack of written words. And into this writerly nurse-log seed

Reid and Holm and Callenbach and ...

5. There is that extra West again, an aria in the horse opera, a corner of Midge's Bar. Four of the five essays I have published about writing in the Pacific Northwest draw on Doig's remarkable book. And much as I love the words of Daphne Marlatt, Evelyn Lau, Robert Bringhurst, and Shirley Sterling, when I look for resonant regional definition I seem to be pulled most often to U.S.-based nonfiction writers: to Timothy Egan, David James Duncan, Isabel Heckman, Kim Stafford and Sallie Tisdale. In this pastoral, the sheep certainly do seem to graze in an international manner.

Extra Territorial

In Estes Park (1991), Jim Work allowed me to post "A Letter to WLA Members Who Will Skip This Session Because They're Not Really Interested in Canadian Writing." It began like this:

Dear Colleague,

I write *colleague*, genuinely, because I believe you and I share the same aspirations. But as a Canadian, whose teaching specialty is Canadian literature, I often don't feel like a colleague. For all of your friendship, and generosity, I often feel—more of an outsider, a visitor not quite admitted. ... while you were jamming sessions on "Ecology and Literary Criticism," you seem content to continue to imagine a world of West where coyotes and cormorants, the Kuroshio current and the Chinook wind—indeed cultural species and language itself—stop, stop *dead*, at an imaginary line surveyors know as the 49th parallel.

This lament sounds to me now, as it must have seemed to some of you then, an annoying bit of whining. The moreso, when, a year later at our meeting in Reno, one of you (poor footnoting—I recorded the comment, but not the speaker) said, "We are the most insecure of nations ... always searching for our own identity." And she, or he, was speaking of the United States! One of many blows in recent years to my easy binaries of national difference. The "full circle West" (as Ken Kesey termed it) goes globegirdling. Not, I sense now, always to fulfill a ham-fisted destiny, but sometimes to nurture a covert humility. To recall again my thoughts in 1991, our shared West may be our shared vulnerability:

... I suppose all of you have had the experience, by virtue of your own interest in western American literature, to say "Dear Colleague" (question mark). You're working on a subject which is still academically suspect: it's provincial, it's narrowly local, it's sentimental. You suspect that they suspect that you're in Western writing, because there the intellectual temperature is not quite as high; you know that they think that most of your 'literature' is simply bad. So you feel somehow out of doors in your own departments.

You feel if they'd only read this stuff and give it a chance. You feel that the fine writing you are reading articulates a commitment to land and places that is fundamental to the human spirit.

Our past, to be sure, may take a long while to happen. But, over the years I have known it, the WLA has been building a history on the principle of the *Plain*, and the presence of an *Extra*:

* It has found a centre in the great PLAIN. We have squirmed in the presence of, and sometimes burlesqued big

words, and Pig Wars. And we have yearned to relearn the plain-speaking and plain-writing of those people—and animals and trees—who just plain don't get all this academic bullshit. And, whatever our region, our local interest, our favourite writers, we have had a spiritual home in and around Lincoln, Nebraska, on the Great Plains, the ultimate defining place, the topography whose illusory plain-ness forces us to attend to the small things, the single whispering blade of grass, the buried stone hammer. Aldo Leopold: "In country, as in people, a plain exterior often conceals hidden riches, to perceive which requires much living in and with."

* Having lived in and with the great PLAIN, we inherited the need sooner or later to go over the line. And when writers *go over the line*, they of course add on, or they interpolate, or they cross through. Writing over the line allows two figures, or two or more words, to occupy the same place at the same time. Writing over, not rewriting, with an extra poem, an extra metaphor, an extra connection that makes our mysterious extra-western citizenship a little stranger, a little crazier.

Extra Academic

I like it that when the history of the Western Literature Association is written, it will be a story of writing. In this organization we seem less likely to divide into critics and writers, scholars and writers, academics and writers. Here we have writers and writers. Our program places "*The Great Gatsby*, *A Lost Lady*, and *Fitzgerald's Plagiarism*" side by side with stories titled "Splitting the Heart of the Sun" and "Treading Water." We will allow an opportunity for an academic, molded by twenty years of post-PhDism, to try her hand at the personal essay, to act in a play, to read aloud his first short story—to give a plenary address long on feelings and short on footnotes.

Extrnational

Kaiser Wilhelm, incidentally, decided in favour of the claim of the United States. But I take some comfort from the ambiguous summary of the historians who told me the story of the Pig War:

It is easy to see the conflict in both nations between those who felt keenly that they could not take the responsibility of relinquishing the slightest part of the national heritage entrusted to their care, and those who took broader and saner views of the national interests.

It was not very realistic to insist on interpreting strictly the words of a treaty which had obviously not been based on as close a survey of the topography as its interpreters had at their command, and to rely on the treaty as if it had been carefully drafted to deal with islands which it had not, at the time, been thought worthwhile to mention in it. (F.W. Howay, W.N. Sage, and H.F. Angus, *British Columbia and the United States* [1992])