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LANDSCAPE AND TECHNIQUE:
THE BACKGROUND AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE NORTH AMERICAN PRAIRIE NOVEL

by

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For my parents:

Ned and Joanne Thacker

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ABSTRACT

Historically ill-equipped to comprehend the prairie landscape, European man came to understand its unique topography only gradually. This study traces the transformation of the prairie from unknown land into familiar landscape, beginning with an examination of the major explorers' journals and travelers' accounts.

Those who first used the landscape as artistic setting were painters and illustrators, and their work is treated here in order to provide an analogue for the primary focus--prose fiction--which also exhibits a confrontation between artistic convention and the prairie landscape. Turning to the literature, this study then traces the incorporation of the landscape into the North American literary tradition; works such as Cooper's The Prairie, Irving's A Tour on the Prairies, Parkman's The Oregon Trail and Melville's Moby-Dick illustrate the way in which topography was transformed into setting.

Turning next to the romantic and realistic fiction of the latter half of the nineteenth century, this study demonstrates that the development of the prairie literature tradition recapitulates the individual's reaction to the landscape: from initial enthusiasm to an awareness of the prairie's bleaker aspects. Finally, viewing the prairie novels of Willa Cather, O. E. Rölvaag, Sinclair Ross, and W. O. Mitchell within the context of their predecessors, then, this study explores the way in which their commingling of realism with romance constitutes the

maturity of the prairie landscape tradition.

This study departs from previous criticism in that its scope is bicultural: Canadian examples are considered equally with American ones. Similarly, this is the first study of North American prairie fiction to treat the development of landscape technique from first exploration to the present.

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INTRODUCTION

The prairie is a phenomenon unique to North America. Geographically, it is defined as that area of generally level unforested farmland--formerly grassland--between the Ohio River and the plateaus of the West which extends north into Canada to include portions of the provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta, and south to include the area extending to the gulf coast of Texas. Its significance in the history and development of North American literature stems mainly from its singularity: no old-world topography equals the prairie's stark expanses (barring, of course, the Russian Steppes with which few North American settlers were familiar). To Europeans glimpsing it for the first time, the prairie was the most unfamiliar of landscapes. The hardwood forests of the Atlantic seaboard, though dense and foreboding, presented the same topography as European forests and much the same may be said of the Appalachian Mountains. The North American prairie, however, was another matter altogether.

The central premise of this study is that European man was historically ill-equipped to view the prairie, and that its unique topography posed both practical and epistemological problems. In the mid-sixteenth century, for example, the Spanish explorer Coronado, searching for gold in present-day Kansas, found only grass and buffalo--the prairie in its natural state. The area was like nowhere else he had ever been, and Coronado was vexed to find that the only way he could keep his party to-

gether was by collecting piles of buffalo dung and sun-bleached bones and using these as markers. In adapting in this way, Coronado and his party began a process which was to continue for centuries: the creation of landmarks in a region which hitherto had been without them. In turn, the records left by these Spaniards constitute the beginning of a series of documents which reflect the imaginative adaptation required of those who attempted to come to terms with the prairie.

During the period of exploration and expansion into the region, stretching from 1534 through 1884, numerous explorers left written records of what they saw, heard about, and surmised while on the prairie. These records take the form of journals, narratives, and letters; some are elegantly written while others are mere factual descriptions in terse language. But all are colored to a certain extent by the nature of the writer's overall purpose: the attention an individual pays to the prairie landscape depends upon his reason for being there in the first place. Thus Coronado found the place confounding: not only did it contain no gold, but he could not keep his party together properly and, to further his vexation, the expedition was lost much of the time. Coronado's own letters, which were written while he was in the midst of the prairie, complement the observations of the expedition's chronicler, Castañeda; together their writings provide the first extended description of the effect of the prairie landscape on Europeans.

As the first attempts to write about the prairie landscape, to fit and frame its vastness within the confines of the written page, commentaries such as Castañeda's constitute a necessary point of departure for any study of technique in modern prairie fiction. Stretching as they do from the mid-sixteenth through the late-nineteenth centuries, such

first-person accounts--written by travelers, traders, missionaries, and tourists, as well as explorers--establish the ways in which the prairie landscape, both practically and imaginatively, affected those who traveled through it. Largely without any avowed literary intentions, these writers record directly the interaction of the European mind with the prairie landscape--at first impression, at initial comprehension, and at eventual understanding. Together, these accounts define the means by which European man attempted to transform the prairie from a strange, wild land into a familiar, human landscape.

Although the non-literary accounts provide the basis for this transformation, they do not delimit its accomplishment--that phase lies within the realm of art. But because the prairie was no more a conventional subject for art than it was a familiar landscape to the European, its use in both painting and literature produced conflicts between conventional aesthetic assumptions and the actual nature of the land. Just as early commentators were hesitant to pronounce a prairie vista sublime, so early literary and pictorial artists were reluctant to focus directly upon the vastness of the land, preferring more conventional subjects and methods, and only gradually did they adapt their techniques to its imaginative demands.

This study will explore the nature of that adaptation--and will trace its development--from its background as reflected in the commentaries of sixteenth-century explorers and their successors to its maturity as reflected in the work of twentieth-century writers like Willa Cather and Sinclair Ross. It will also be argued that the individual's gradual understanding of the strange new environment is paradigmatic of the landscape's incorporation within the larger tradition. Like Coronado,

who had to devise means of finding his way through a land which was (to his mind) without landmarks, authors had to devise techniques designed to articulate the vast essence of the prairie landscape; they had to develop a set of prairie landscape conventions. Also like Coronado they found these lying, as it were, at their feet: prairie landscape conventions and techniques of symbolic depiction, as this study seeks to demonstrate, were derived from the essential elements of the land itself.

* * *

Perhaps with poetic justice, the attempt to trace the development of prairie landscape depiction is fraught with as many complications as the actual confrontation with this area itself. The area upon which I wish to focus, for example, is variously called "prairie," "plains," and "Great Plains," depending on individual background and local usage. The situation is compounded further by the fact that the northern extension of the area referred to by geographers as "The Great Plains"--that is, the Canadian section--is called "the prairies" by Canadians. Conversely, Americans frequently refer to the Dakotas as "The Great Plains." Accordingly, for the sake of consistency I have opted to employ the term "prairie" throughout this study, and I take it to mean the area delineated in my opening paragraph.

A second problem pertains to the fact that the 49th parallel intersects the North American prairie, with the result being that strictly speaking there are two prairies. Topographically, however, the prairie is one region, and this is the way in which it will be treated in this study. This is not to say that I will refrain from mentioning which area

of the prairie is in question in a given case, but rather that I will not group commentators in terms of nationality.

How a study like this should be structured, in turn, poses the third problem. Since my general approach is developmental, a chronological structure might seem the most logical. If adhered to with too much rigor, however, such a method could serve to weaken the major line of my argument and also result in the post hoc, ergo propter hoc fallacy. My decision, therefore, is to employ a combination of the chronological and common-denominator approach.

Thus Chapter One, "'We nowhere saw mountains': First European Impressions of the Prairie, 1534-1807," begins with the Spanish explorers and extends to Zebulon Montgomery Pike, who traveled the prairie during the first decade of the nineteenth century. What the figures in this group have in common is the virgin nature of their encounter with the land: such was the state of knowledge of the western interior of North America at the time, that these commentators had little, if any, prior information regarding the land they were entering.

Those accounts treated in Chapter Two, "'terrible grandeur': First-Person Reactions to Prairie Landscape, 1811-84," constitute a less homogeneous group. Owing to to the publication in 1810 of Pike's Account of his travels, which was followed in 1814 by the publication of the Biddle History of the Lewis and Clark expedition, the travelers, traders, and missionaries treated in the second chapter most likely had prior knowledge of the western landscape. Considered in this chapter, too, are men such as H. M. Brackenridge and John Bradbury, whose background and education lend a polish to their prose not seen in the writings treated in the first chapter. And because like Brackenridge, some of these commentators trav-

eled west for the express purpose of seeing the area, and so were not just passing through on some errand, their writings reflect a greater sensitivity to the qualities in the landscape than in previous accounts. Additionally, there are treated in this chapter figures whose experience on the prairie was extended and various, men like Josiah Gregg and Pierre-Jean De Smet, S. J. What the figures in this group have in common, however, is their generally non-artistic orientation, and this, in turn, is the rationale for excluding in this chapter those literary and pictorial artists who fall into this chronological period.

Chapter Three, "'strange, too, and striking to the imagination': Landscape into Art," considers the first appropriation of the prairie landscape by artists, and covers the relatively short period from the early 1820s through 1860. During this time painters and illustrators traveled west and sought to incorporate the prairie and its scenery within their work. Because George Catlin and Paul Kane described their experiences with words as well as through their illustrative work, they fall logically within the scope of this study. But because the conventions of pictorial art were as much at odds with the prairie landscape as were those of literature, I decided to broaden my scope to include all significant illustrators who used the prairie as setting prior to the middle of the nineteenth century. Examples of their work, included at the end of this study as an Appendix, provide numerous analogues to the literary treatments of the landscape and show that painters and writers often confronted similar problems when they adopted the prairie as their setting. A discussion of The Oregon Trail concludes the chapter, because Francis Parkman's travelogue, when compared to his Oregon Trail journal on which it was based, reveals that he experienced the same difficulties

and hesitations seen among the painters who sought to give the landscape artistic form.

Chapter Four, "'breathing life and fire into a circle of imagery': Literary Visitors," focuses on the first attempts to employ the prairie in purely literary works, and encompasses the period from 1827 through 1866. As it happens, these attempts are the result of both literal and imaginative visitations made by some of the most prominent American literary figures of the day. The Prairie constitutes the first deliberate use of the landscape as a fictional setting, although Cooper had never seen the prairie. In writing A Tour on the Prairies, Washington Irving faced an opposite task; he did not have to imagine his landscape, but he had to make an interesting tale out of an uneventful trip. In these works the prairie landscape is treated in a purely literary manner for the first time and, because of the previous accomplishments of their respective authors, they granted that landscape a certain respectability, as well as a wider currency. This chapter also considers the use of the prairie landscape by the writers of the American Renaissance, most notably Melville in Moby-Dick.

Chapter Five, "'throwing a man back upon himself': Prairie Romances and the Beginnings of Realism," treats the fiction in which the prairie is the actual or nominal setting, from the publication of Albert Pike's Prose Sketches and Poems in 1834 through the popular novels of Arthur Stringer which appeared during and just after the First World War. Much of this writing took the form of the popular romance and, while such romances persisted into the twentieth century, by the 1880s realistic accounts of the prairie became dominant. None of those treated writers was of the first rank, although with one exception each had personal

experience of the prairie landscape; some, like Hamlin Garland, had extended prairie experience. Thus I have selected examples from both the popular romances and the realistic accounts to show the various ways in which the landscape was used as setting by writers who fall chronologically between the literary figures of antebellum America and the acknowledged prairie writers of this century.

In the final chapter, "'the great fact was the land itself': Modern Prairie Fiction," I consider the recognized authors whose work constitutes the flowering of the prairie literature tradition. Foremost among them is Willa Cather; after her, in order of importance, are Sinclair Ross, O. E. Rölvaag, Frederick Philip Grove, W. O. Mitchell, Conrad Richter, and Wallace Stegner. Contemporary writers such as Wright Morris and Margaret Laurence (and to a lesser extent, Robert Kroetsch and Rudy Wiebe) are examined briefly to suggest the continuity of the tradition and the new directions it seems to be taking.

My overall objective in this study, finally, is to demonstrate the recurrence of certain motifs and the persistence of certain responses to the prairie, and to argue in turn that it is only when our classic writers of prairie fiction are seen in the context of their predecessors and across national boundaries that the nature of their respective achievements can be properly evaluated.

CHAPTER ONE

"We nowhere saw mountains":

First European Impressions of the Prairie, 1534-1807

The first Europeans to glimpse the prairie were motivated by a variety of impulses, the least of which was to appreciate the aesthetic character of this new world. Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca, who traversed a corner of the prairie about 1534 and is the first European on record to have seen it, came because he was lost. Having been treasurer of the ill-fated Narváez expedition to Florida in 1528, he spent eight years wandering from the expedition's landfall at Tampa Bay--and for a time was held in slavery by local Indians--before he met up with some Spanish slave traders in Sonora, northern Mexico.[1] Published in 1542, his Narrative contains, amid a welter of detail involving the practices of the natives he met and lived among, a few descriptive passages concerned with the prairie. Because of his disorientation, historians have had difficulty deciding upon his exact route; he probably traveled through the prairie, however, just inland from Galveston along the Texas Gulf coast. Cabeza de Vaca's descriptions are of the most general order: "Throughout the country are extensive and beautiful plains with good pasturage; and I think it would be a very fruitful region were it worked and inhabited by civilized men. We nowhere saw mountains."[2]

Cabeza de Vaca's descriptions of the buffalo were also the first to be published. He compares them to "the cows of Morocco" and observes:

"They come as far as the seacoast of Florida, from a northerly direction, ranging through a tract of more than four hundred leagues; and throughout the whole region over which they run, the people who inhabit near, descend and live upon them, distributing a vast many hides into the interior country."[3] Apart from recording his impression of the beauty of the plains, de Vaca's comments regarding the character of the land do little more than verify that he did indeed travel the prairie. His description of the range of the buffalo, however, is more significant. Apparently those Indians among whom he was dwelling knew of the vast size of the prairie-plains, for such a knowledge is implied in de Vaca's estimate of the extent of the buffalo range. Although such estimates of distance should be viewed skeptically, it is interesting that, if the Spanish league is equal to three English miles, his evaluation of the northward extent of the buffalo--and of the prairie-plains region--is remarkably accurate.[4]

The next Spaniard to travel through the prairie was Coronado, seeking gold in an area the Spaniards had been told was called Quivera (present-day Kansas). Traveling there, Coronado sent patrols off in various directions. Pedro de Castañeda, who wrote the most extensive narrative of the expedition, states that one such group returned only to report to "the general that in the twenty leagues they had been over they had seen nothing but the cows and the sky."[5] The trackless quality of the land, its lack of landmarks, draws considerable attention from Castañeda since it causes numerous problems: "It was impossible to find tracks in this country, because the grass straightened up again as soon as it was trodden down" (p. 331). He reports that one man who went off to hunt was entirely lost because of the tracklessness of the prairie, and many others were

nearly lost:

> Many fellows were lost at this time who went out hunting and did not get back to the army for two or three days, wandering about the country as if they were crazy, in one direction or another, not knowing how to get back where they started from . . . . Every night they took account of who was missing, fired guns and blew trumpets and beat drums and built great fires, but yet some of them went off so far and wandered about so much that all this did not give them any help, although it helped others. . . . It is worth noting that the country there is so level that at midday, after one has wandered about in one direction and another in pursuit of game, the only thing to do is to stay near the game quietly until sunset, so as to see where it goes down, and even then they have to be men who are practised to do it. (p. 336)

Castañeda's exasperated tone may result as much from the fact that the expedition was in the midst of the prairie in mid-July as from the nature of the landscape itself.

Coronado clearly shared Castañeda's frustration, however. Writing to his king on October 20, 1541--while still on his expedition--the General's mystified response to the landscape is marked:

> After nine days' march I reached some plains, so vast that I did not find their limit anywhere that I went, although I traveled over them for more than 300 leagues. . . . I traveled five more days as the guides wished to lead me, until I reached some plains, with no more landmarks than as if we had been swallowed up in the sea, where they [the guides] strayed about, because there was not a stone, nor a bit of rising ground, nor a tree, nor a scrub, nor anything to go by. There is much very fine pasture land, with good grass. And while we were lost in these plains . . . .[6]

Antedating as it does Castañeda's <u>Narrative</u>, Coronado's letter provides an immediate, on-the-spot reaction to the prairie environment by one of the first Europeans to experience it. Coronado's rhetorical role in this letter is that of translator; through his descriptions he presents the prairie in European terms, terms which the king and his ministers at court can understand. Thus the trackless quality of the prairie is likened to the

ocean, and Coronado's litany of absent landmarks is made up of things a European expects to use for landmarks: things not found on the prairie. The prairie is singular for what it does not have, and for what it is like, not for what it is. In the same letter Coronado describes the number and extent of the buffalo herds, and this leads to his comment on the suitability of the prairie as pasture lands, but this appreciative comment is far outweighed by the General's knowledge that he has found no gold and cannot, moreover, keep his bearings in this strange land. Coronado recognizes, indeed, that he is lost a good part of the time.

Whereas Cabeza de Vaca had passed through only the southern fringe of the prairie, Coronado and his men marched directly into its center. Seeking stone dwellings with rooms full of gold in Quivera, Coronado found only grass huts inhabited by Wichita Indians. Upon hearing the true nature of conditions in Quivera, Coronado expressed his disappointment: "This news troubled me greatly, to find myself on these limitless plains, where I was in great need of water. Here the guides confessed to me that they had not told the truth in regard to the size of the houses, because these were of grass . . . ."[7] Having realized that he was not going to find any gold, Coronado was clearly despondent, and, since gold was the unit of measure of a Spanish expedition's success, he had every reason to consider himself a failure. Indeed, upon his return to Spain he was treated as such. But as this letter suggests, Coronado's disappointment was also aggravated by the prairie environment's singular strangeness: his mind was unable to assimilate it.

Another member of the expedition comments that Coronado and his men were forced "to mark the road by which they went with cow dung, so as to return, since there were no stones or [sic] anything else."[8] Castañeda,

when he notes the same action, does so in a chapter which is curiously out of place within the chronological pattern of his Narrative. This chapter, which significantly contains his most descriptive passages concerning the prairie, has been added toward the end of the work. Another anomaly in this respect is that here Castañeda felt compelled for some reason to inflate the size of Coronado's party. His own attempt to explain the situation is as follows:

> My silence was not without mystery and dissimulation when, in Chapter 7 of the second part of this book [the proper place of the prairie in the chronology], I spoke of the plains and the things of which I will give a detailed account in this chapter, where all these things may be found together; for these things were remarkable and something not seen in other parts. I dare to write of them because I am writing at a time when many men are still living [c. 1565] who saw them and who will vouch for my account. Who could believe that 1,000 horses and 500 of our cows and more than 5,000 rams and ewes and more than 1,500 friendly Indians and servants, in travelling over these plains, would leave no more trace where they had passed than if nothing had been there--nothing--so that it was necessary to make piles of bones and cow-dung now and then, so that the rear guard could follow the army. The grass never failed to become erect after it had been trodden down and, although it was short, it was fresh and straight as before. (pp. 381-82)

Although Herbert E. Bolton, in his standard history of the expedition, Coronado, Knight of Pueblos and Plains, provides some pragmatic reasons for Castañeda's earlier omission of these details,[9] the style of the passage suggests that a major factor was Castañeda's awe in the presence of the landscape and his concurrent feeling of insignificance. Hence the mystery, the special treatment of the subject, the exaggerated numbers, the rhetorical question and, of course, his emphatic repetition of "nothing."

Later in the same chapter, Castañeda returns to his discussion of the extent and habits of the buffalo. Again he is at pains to communicate

his response in arithmetical terms: "Another thing worth noticing is that the bulls travelled without cows in such large numbers that nobody could have counted them, and so far away from the cows that it was more than forty leagues from where we began to see the bulls to the place where we began to see the cows" (p. 383). Castañeda's previous descriptions of the prairie landscape, in the earlier sections of his Narrative, were literal and factual; as he here continues his description of the buffalo on the prairie, however, he seems compelled to resort to symbolism and metaphor:

> The country they travelled over was so level and smooth that if one looked at them the sky could be seen between their legs, so that if some of them were at a distance they looked like smooth-trunked pines whose tops joined, and if there was only one bull it looked as if there were four pines. When one was near them, it was impossible to see the ground on the other side of them. The reason for all this was that the country seemed as round as if a man should imagine himself in a three-pint measure, and could see the sky at the edge of it, about a crossbow shot from him, and even if a man only lay down on his back he lost sight of the ground. (pp. 383-84)[10]

Conveying his own amazement over the extent and character of the prairies, Castañeda's metaphors also represent his attempt to make himself clear to readers who have never seen such a landscape--and may have difficulty imagining one; his description is designed to anticipate the same incredulity on the part of readers that Castañeda himself experienced and expressed in his rhetorical question: "Who could believe . . . ."

Since approximately twenty-five years elapsed between the expedition and his composition of the Narrative, Castañeda's account attests in another way to the impact which the prairie landscape had on its author. Even after almost a quarter of a century, his impression of the prairie remained vivid, and the landscape emerges as mysterious, yet compelling.

The primary effect of the prairie on the Spaniards--disorientation--is mentioned by many who left accounts of their experiences during the expedition,[11] but while to Coronado it posed as yet another practical problem, to Castañeda it constituted a phenomenon which challenged the mind. In turn, however much his detachment must be attributed to his distance from the actual experience, in Castañeda's account we have the first disinterested and incipiently aesthetic account of the prairie. The picture he paints--of trackless expanses, of herds of buffalo darkening the distances, and especially of a sky ringed round seemingly close enough to touch--has much in common with far more recent fictional treatments of the same landscape.

On the whole, however, the Coronado expedition illustrates what Bernard De Voto describes as "the paradox of minds which were as logical as any today and, further, were here working not with myth but with the most concrete realities but were betrayed by sheer strangeness." As De Voto also explains, compounding the problem of imaginative adjustment for the early Spanish explorers was the problem of nutritional adaptability: "The principal reason why Coronado went no farther than he did but turned back was that his supplies of corn were short and his men and horses might starve. For the horses there was only buffalo grass, the most nutritious grass in the New World, and for the army only buffalo meat, the most complete single food that mankind has ever known."[12] Hence Coronado turned back, fearing starvation, when all he needed was staring him, quite literally, in the face.

Coronado and his men were using land-routes, however, and to judge by the journals and letters of French exploration of the Mississippi basin during the latter half of the seventeenth century, this is an important

factor to take into consideration. When the prairie is mentioned in these writings it is usually seen through gaps in the trees along a riverbank, and often buffalo herds receive more detailed consideration than the landscape. The expeditions of Jolliet and Marquette and that of La Salle, too, passed through the prairies in a less arid region--today's Iowa, Missouri, and Illinois--than that seen by Coronado and his men--what is now western and central Kansas. This, in addition to the vantage point which the rivers afforded the French explorers, combines to make their overall view of the prairies at once more cursory and positive. Coronado and his men experienced the prairie; the French simply saw it.

In a journal which is ostensibly Marquette's but was actually written from his notes and a copy of Jolliet's lost journal by Fr. Claude Dablon, their Jesuit superior, the prairie is first described simply as "beautiful lands."[13] The site referred to is a point along the Mississippi between the present states of Wisconsin and Iowa; just below this point, the narrator observes, "we plainly saw that [the land's] aspect was completely changed. There are hardly any woods or mountains; the islands are more beautiful and are covered with more finer trees." Later Jolliet and Marquette see buffalo for the first time--"scattered about the prairies in herds" (p. 238)--and, some days later, they notice human tracks along "a narrow and somewhat beaten path leading to a fine prairie" (p. 238). After they discover the Missouri River in late June 1673, the narrator immediately pins all hopes for a water route to the Pacific on that stream; his musings result in the most extended passages concerned with the prairie in the journal. From talking to local Indians he has learned that "by ascending this river for five or six days, one reaches a fine prairie, twenty or thirty leagues long. This must be crossed in a northwesternly

direction, and it terminates at another small river on which one may embark, for it is not difficult to transport canoes through so fine a country as that prairie" (p. 249). The second small river, the Indians assure them, will lead eventually to the Pacific. What is significant here, of course, is that the prairie is given the greatest consideration in a passage which is totally hearsay, and in which the facts prove ultimately to be erroneous--like the idea that the "fine prairie" is a mere twenty to thirty leagues broad.

One document from the Jolliet and Marquette expedition is a letter written by Fr. Dablon to his superior in France in which he quotes Jolliet's comments on the settlement prospects for the prairie. Prior to actually seeing it, Jolliet admits his misgivings: "'At first, when we were told of these treeless lands, I imagined that it was a country ravaged by fire, where the soil was so poor that it could produce nothing.'"[14] In doing so, he articulates a feeling which is associated with the prairies and the plains throughout the period of exploration: that treeless land is inferior land.[15] This notion was not the basis for public discussion until the 1870s in the United States and little over a decade later in Canada; but at this time it took the form of a vague suspicion, a prejudice against lands unlike those of Europe and the St. Lawrence Valley. Jolliet's misgivings were allayed, however, when he saw the prairie for himself:

> "But we have certainly observed the contrary; and no better soil can be found, either for corn, for vines, or for any other fruit whatever."
>
> . . . . . .
>
> "There are prairies three, six, ten, and twenty leagues in length, and three in width, surrounded by forests of the same extent; beyond these, the prairies begin again, so that there is as much of the one sort of land as the other. Sometimes we saw

the grass very short, and, at other times, five or six feet high; hemp, which grows naturally there reaches a height of eight feet.'

"A settler would not there spend ten years in cutting down and burning the trees; on the very day of his arrival, he could put his plow into the ground."[16]

Judging by the trees and the varying lengths of grass, Jolliet was describing a fertile and well-watered area along the Mississippi--perhaps a region along the present-day Arkansas or southern Missouri riverbanks. Such, however, is the different perspective of the prairie provided by river travel. As a better-drained area, the prairie immediately adjacent to rivers--especially major streams like the Mississippi and the Missouri--presented a very different prospect from that seen by Coronado farther to the west. Here there was no want of wood, nor of water--the problems that impeded the Spanish over a century before. And broken by occasional clumps of trees along these same watercourses, the prairie as seen by the French from their canoes also presented a more European prospect than that seen by the Spaniards.

Like the documents left by Jolliet and Marquette, those which record the La Salle expedition of less than a decade later treat the prairie briefly and only in passing. Tonty, who was La Salle's trusted lieutenant on their trip to the mouth of the Mississippi, comments only that "a league or two from the river, is the most beautiful country in the world, prairies, open woods of mulberry trees, vines, and fruits that we are not acquainted with."[17]

Fr. Louis Hennepin's extremely popular _A New Discovery of a Vast Country in North America_ treats the whole of La Salle's voyage. Though a good portion of the _Discovery_ is held to be apocryphal, historians agree that Hennepin reached the Mississippi and traveled as far as the mouth of

the Illinois river. Describing a point at which he was supposedly south of the Illinois, Hennepin states: "The Country beyond these Hills is the finest that I ever saw, it being a Plain, whose Bounds I don't know, adorn'd now and then with some Hills and Eminences cover'd with fine Trees, making the rarest Prospect in the World. The Banks of the small Rivers flowing through the Plain, are planted with Trees, which look as if they had been disposed into that curious Order by the Art of Men; and they are plentifully stock'd with Fish, as well as the Meschasipi."[18] Hennepin later comments that in the country "there are vast Meadows, which need not to be grubb'd up, but are ready for the Plow and Seed."[19] The view presented here could have been seen from the mouth of the Illinois north along the Mississippi, an area he is known to have traveled. La Salle too spoke of "'vast fields of the best land in the world, all ready for cultivation.'"[20]

Thus the "beautiful prairies" seen by the seventeenth-century French explorers constitute a very different landscape from that seen by their Spanish precursors, a difference which may be attributed in part to each group's specific point of view. The French had the advantage of traveling through a better-watered area; the flora was both more frequent and more lush. Coronado, on the other hand, traveled overland across the High Plains. In addition, Coronado was looking for gold and did not find any; he was directed by Indian guides whom he did not understand very well and trusted even less. And by his own admission he was lost for extended periods of time. The French, however, were exploring the lush Mississippi river basin in order to open it up for eventual settlement, and they followed a predetermined route; one cannot become very lost on a river. It appears, then, on the basis of these two groups of explorers, that their

impression of the prairie varied according to their purpose, direction, and expectations; the French documents convey positive reactions to the landscape because the land meets their expectations. The Spanish under Coronado, who wandered about the Southwest and the High Plains without real direction, getting lost and following rumors while they sought a goal which was unobtainable, are negative about the prairie because of the very disorientation the landscape seemed to engender. Castañeda claims virtue for having seen strange sights, and tries to translate them for the benefit of his readers, but his tone is still one of a man who, even after twenty-five years, is still not very sure of what he has seen.

In striking contrast, therefore, is the following passage from the Jesuit Relations: "We proceeded, continuing always to coast along the great prairies, which extend farther than the eye can reach. Trees are met with from time to time, but they are so placed that they seem to have been planted with design, in order to make avenues more pleasing to the eye than those of orchards. The base of these trees is often watered by little streamlets, at which are herds of stags and hinds refreshing themselves, and peacefully feeding upon the short grass. We followed these vast plains for 20 leagues and repeated many times, 'Benedicite opera Domini Domino.'"[21] The speaker here is Fr. Allouez, a Jesuit missionary, and the scene he is describing is the field of his mission. In keeping with the other descriptions of the prairie written by French explorers, such accounts played a part in the growth of the notion, which stood in opposition to the conception of central North America as the Great American Desert, of this same area as the garden of the world. This Jesuit is able to describe the scene in this manner, to see the prairie as a garden, because he is traversing it at one of its most well-watered points, and

as well, because he knows where he is going and has only to watch the scenery drift by. In no small way are the attitudes toward the prairie landscape governed by the expectations and experiences of the writer, and prairie seen from the water is vastly different than prairie seen from horseback in mid-July. Accordingly, the prairie landscape emerges from the narratives and documents of the French explorers as a type of garden--prairie, after all, literally means "meadow" in French--and this passage typifies these accounts. Indeed, the prairie in Allouez' description is like a work of art, neatly arranged by its sublime proportions to reflect its creator.

While the Spaniards were exasperated by the prairie and the French were awed by it, the first recorded Englishman to travel through the area was by comparison laconically factual. In 1690, at the behest of his employer, the Hudson's Bay Company, twenty-year old Henry Kelsey traveled southwest up the Hayes River - Nelson River complex from York Factory on Hudson Bay. He accompanied a group of Indians and for two years traveled with them as the only European. His exact route cannot be traced, but his journals reveal that he reached the Canadian prairie, was the first Englishman to see a buffalo hunt, and traveled in the area of both the South Saskatchewan and Assiniboine Rivers. Because he was sent inland not to explore but to encourage Indian travel to the Bay for trading, Kelsey's descriptions of landscape are quite vague. At the same time, curiously, Kelsey's record of his first year's travel is in verse.

His first reference to the prairie echoes the words of Coronado's returning scouts a century and a half earlier: "This plain affords nothing but Beast & grass/ getting unto ye woods on the other side/ It being about forty sixe miles wide." Though in keeping with his purpose Kelsey then

goes on to note that "there is beavour in abundance but no Otter/ with plains & ridges in the country throughout,"[22] like Coronado's scouts, what first impresses him is "Beast & grass"; the Spaniard's scouts reported they had seen nothing for twenty leagues but "cows and the sky."[23] In another instance, however, Kelsey seems to have more in common with the French explorers. Thus while traveling through--in all likelihood--the park country west of the upper Assiniboine in present-day Saskatchewan, he describes both wooded and unwooded areas together: "August ye 12th Now we pitcht again & about noon ye ground/ begins to grow <u>barren</u> heathy & barren in fields of about/ half a Mile over Just as if they had been Artificially/ made with fine groves of Poplo growing round y^{m} we/ went to day by Estimation 10 Miles/" (p. 11).[24] Here Kelsey marvels over the relationship between the wooded areas and those without wood; and like the French he wonders over the symmetry of the scene: "Artificially/ made".

But there is also something both original and uniquely English in Kelsey's observation here, since he first calls the grasslands "barren," then, crossing the word out, substitutes "heathy & barren." John Warkentin, remarking on this passage, maintains that Kelsey "used barren in the sense of the plains being without trees, not a lifeless wasteland," but by 1690 the connotation of "barren," when applied to land, was "not fertile, sterile, unproductive" and "bare." Kelsey, moreover, compounded this impression by adding to his description the "English" word "heathy," replete with its connotations of "waste land."[25] Thus just as Jolliet, after hearing of treeless lands, expected to find a country "ravaged by fire, and Coronado looked in vain for some landmark of the sort found in Europe, so Kelsey's use of this "English" word also suggests the way in

which his attitude toward the prairie is conditioned here by his previous European background.

That Kelsey preferred wooded country to the prairie--probably because he considered it better land--is implied by the rest of his journal. He repeatedly places his camps along the "outtermost Edge of ye woods" since "this plain affords Nothing but short/ Round sticky grass & Buffillo & a great s or sort of a Bear . . . ." He notes as well the distance that had to be covered before reaching properly wooded areas, and in the entries from August 22nd through the 27th, 1691, he observes that they "could not see ye woods on y^{e}/ other side . . ." (p. 13) of the plain they were crossing just then; despite 40 miles traveled they had "yet not reacht ye woods on ye other side of this plain/. . ." (p. 14). Five days spent crossing a plain 46 miles wide made Kelsey uneasy.

Kelsey's papers did not come to light until 1926 and thus had no effect on other early travelers into the Canadian prairies. His impression that the prairie was "barren," however, was shared by those who followed him and was to foster, in part, the debates over the Great American Desert in the early nineteenth century and that over Palliser's Triangle in the latter half of the same century.

Almost fifty years passed before another European ventured into what is now the Canadian prairie. In 1738 Pierre Gaultier de Varennes de La Vérendrye and his sons traveled up the Assiniboine and overland to the Mandan Indian villages on the Missouri River. They were seeking the Western Sea, a hypothetical body of water thought to be located in central North America, through which passage might be made to the Pacific. Traveling up the Assiniboine by canoe, La Vérendrye notes that the river "is bordered with good timber along its banks and with prairies as far as the

eye can reach, where there are many buffalo and deer."[26] Once they have struck out overland, he complains: "The march never ceased to be fatiguing, ascending and descending many times a day. There were magnificent plains, three or four leagues in extent." Not all writers used "prairie" and "plain" interchangably, although usage is often idiosyncratic; La Vérendrye here designates as "prairie" a landscape that allows sight "as far as the eye can reach"; landscape which is open but rolling--"ascending and descending"--he describes as a "plain."

Though La Vérendrye shares Henry Kelsey's prejudice against open prairie, he states a practical reason for his attitude. Noting the marching practices of the nomadic Assiniboine Indians, he implies his preference for wooded lands: the Assiniboine "even make the dogs carry wood for fires, frequently being obliged to camp in open prairie, where the islands of timber are distant from each other."[27] In thus designating wooded areas on the prairie "islands," La Vérendrye--like Coronado before him--is translating the unknown into the known; the prairie landscape becomes, implicitly, analogous to an ocean or other large body of water.

Anthony Henday, another employee of the Hudson's Bay Company sent inland to drum up business, followed Kelsey's presumed route to the prairie and is recognized as the first European to see the Rocky Mountains. Like Kelsey, too, he traveled as the sole white man among Indians. His journal, however, while actually quite terse and laconic, seems almost copious when compared to Kelsey's. Leaving the French trading post at the location of the Pas, Manitoba, in late July 1754, Henday followed the Saskatchewan River for a short while before heading southwest into the prairie along the present Manitoba-Saskatchewan border, traveling overland. The daily entries in his journal are notable when taken as a whole,

rather than individually. In the entry dated August 11, Henday notes in a style which is quite representative: "Travelled 11 Miles S. W. b. W. Level lands, short grass; no woods; and no water but what is salt." Two days later, the entry reads: "Tuesday. Travelled 7 Miles W. S. W. Level land, short Grass, Dry-woods, and several salt water lakes. We are now entered the Muscuty plains, and shall soon see plenty of Buffalo, and the Archithinue [Blackfoot] Indians hunting them on horseback."[28] Entries for the next two months are similar, and include observations concerning the "Level land," the amount and type of wooded areas about, the incidence of buffalo, and comments on the Indians and their habits.

Like Kelsey, Henday is struck by the scope of the prairie and its barrenness: "Level Barren land, not one stick of wood to be seen, & no water to drink" (p. 330).[29] But whereas a reader must infer Kelsey's exasperation at traveling across the vast flatness of the prairie, there is no mistaking Henday's; he keeps noting "Level land" and, more importantly, keeps repeating "We are yet in the Muscuty plains" (pp. 331 [two entries], 335). On October 5th he exclaims: "We are still in the Muscuty Country" (p. 336) and on the 29th he is finally able to note "Left Muscuty plains, which I have been in since the 13th of August . . ." (p. 341). Thus, though Henday's journal lacks any literary flair, his numerous repetitions in themselves reflect the apparent sense of strangeness a European felt when traveling across the prairie.

* * *

The next significant figure to venture into the prairie stands quite alone. David Thompson, for twenty years employed by both the major fur-trading companies--first the Hudson's Bay Company, then the North West

Company--was an explorer, geographer, cartographer and, as has been claimed more recently, a literary figure. His travels between 1784 and 1812 gave him an unequalled understanding of the country from the upper Great Lakes to Hudson Bay and west to the mouth of the Columbia River. Thompson's Narrative, which he began when he was over seventy and which was not published until 1916, is a synthesis of a lifetime of travel, work, and knowledge; it is unequalled in breadth by any other work of the fur trade and exploration period of North American history. While other works--like Mackenzie's Voyages or the Biddle Lewis and Clark--present a particular expedition, Thompson's Narrative is the product of twenty years of experience in the west. So broad is Thompson's understanding, furthermore, that it seems unfair to compare his work with the journals not only of Kelsey and Henday, but also Alexander Henry the Younger and even those of Lewis and Clark. Howsoever thorough, their works are mere records of facts and impressions; Thompson's is a synthesis.

Thompson's book, moreover, reveals a literary artist at work; his prose may not be as polished as some, but he clearly structured his Narrative with his audience, and with the desire to produce particular effects upon that audience, in mind. As one commentator explains, Thompson sought "to convey an understanding of the large regions into which the American Northwest was divided, and to evoke the life of the distinctive tribes which inhabit each region," a fact which he accomplished by concentrating on two themes: "The land and its peoples . . . ."[30] Because Thompson was drawing upon literary techniques as he worked his journals into his Narrative, furthermore, his work is of central importance to this study. With the possible exception of Castañeda's Narrative, in previously considered accounts we have been able only to

infer effects in the journals and extrapolate as to their causes. But Thompson is deliberately trying, by the manner in which he presents his materials, to create particular effects. As T. D. MacLulich observes, the Narrative is characterized by "a unity of vision" whereby Thompson allows himself the freedom to shift his authorial point of view as long as it accords with his understanding of the land and its peoples. He notes, as well, that Thompson "does not view space as the narrow ribbon of landscape he passes through on his journeys; he does not view distance merely as so many miles of obstacles to be overcome. Instead he tries to present the pattern which the land's features form in space . . . ."[31]

As a geographer who for twenty years traveled across the prairie in a variety of directions and at different times of the year, Thompson is able to describe this land with great accuracy, as he himself explains: "I shall not at present attempt to describe the great plains, having had opportunities for the space of twenty years after this to traverse them in many directions . . . ."[32] In Chapter XI of the Narrative (pp. 141-42) he provides a short analysis of the size, extent and other factual matters relating to the plains--which he calls them throughout--and two chapters later he describes his journey to the Mandan villages along the Missouri River in late 1797. After describing the circumstances surrounding the trip, Thompson states: "As my journey to the Missisourie is over part of the Great Plains, I shall give it in the form of a journal, this form, however dull, is the only method in my opinion, that can give the reader a clear idea of them" (p. 161). In view of the fact that Thompson was writing at least forty years after the trip, and was working from his journals, it is apparent that the effect upon his imagination of the prairie landscape, and of travel across such a landscape,was still clear in

his mind. Thus this comment indicates that he is here attempting to obtain that same effect for his reader. In Thompson's opinion, then, the best way to recreate "the pattern which the [plains] form in space" is the dullingly repetitious form of the journal. That his technique is thus deliberate and organic is also underscored by the fact that this is the only extended use of the journal form in the entire Narrative.

Thompson's use of the journal form is effective; the reader never forgets that his party is traveling across the prairie in the dead of winter. They depart for the Mandan villages on November 28, 1797; they do not reach their destination until December 30. So the reader traverses some thirty daily entries, each of which is designed to remind him of the temperature, the exposed quality of the party, and the strength and direction of the wind. On November 30, for example, they set off when the temperature was -32 F. (p. 161). Thus by using the journal method Thompson, like Sinclair Ross some 100 years later, recreates the tedium and frustration of prairie experience.

One entry, describing a time after his party has become lost, particularly illustrates the way in which Thompson is able to evoke the frustration and anxiety of those who crossed the prairie overland:

> we now came on a rising ground at 1 PM. but the Turtle Hill was not in sight; and all before and around us a boundless plain; and Monsr Jussomme [their guide] could not say where we were; the weather appeared threatening and preparing for a Storm; our situation was alarming: and anxiety [was] in the face of every man, for we did not know to which hand to turn ourselves for shelter: I mounted My Horse and went to the highest ground near us, and with my telescope viewed the horizon all around, but not the least vestige of woods appeared; but at due North West from us, where there appeared the tops of a few Trees like Oaks. They anxiously enquired if I saw Woods. I told them what I had seen, and that with my old Soldier I should guide myself by the Compass, and directly proceed as the Woods were far off; McCrachen and a Canadian joined us; the other six conferred

> among themselves what to do, they had no faith in the Compass on land, and thought best to march in some direction until they could see woods with their own eyes; but had not proceeded half a mile before all followed us, thinking there would be better safety by being all together. The Gale of Wind came on, and kept increasing. The Snow was four to six inches in depth with a slight crust on it. (p. 162)

At 7 pm Thompson and his party managed to reach the woods, marching six hours in order to cover the distance his telescope covered in an instant. Here then is Thompson's presentation of travel across a "boundless plain," complete with its dangers, not the least of which is disorientation. The Canadians who accompany the explorer ironically do not trust "the Compass on land" (apparently they have faith in it while afloat); the irony lies, of course, in that they do not see the similarity between a snow-swept prairie and a body of water. Thompson's entry also illustrates another reason for the European preference for wooded areas, already seen in the observations of Kelsey, La Vérendrye, and Henday: not only do such "islands" provide fuel, they also provide shelter.

A final aspect of this passage needs to be discussed. Once Thompson realized that they were lost, his first reaction was to seek out the nearest roll in the surface of the prairie and, upon attaining its height, scan the horizon in order to locate a clump of trees. Natural enough in itself, this also becomes the European's characteristic action when he wants to understand his position in relation to the prairie environment. Whenever a European explorer or traveler wanted to understand the prairie scene before him, to encompass it visually, and to describe it in any specific detail, he sought out the local height of land so that he could get above the prairie. Not only does this search for an elevation become a characteristic feature of prairie landscape depiction, for, the

technique was carried into fictional accounts set on the prairie, and so eventually became a convention of prairie fiction. Just as Thompson sought an eminence in order to assess his situation, numerous artists have sought heights in order to encompass the landscape imaginatively--to avoid, perhaps, the danger of being imaginatively lost or, worse still, of being forced to recognize their own insignificance in a land of buffalo, grass, and sky--the big sky.

Elsewhere in his Narrative David Thompson notes other practical adjustments required for life on the plains. At one point he puts forward the opinion that "The whole of this country may be pastoral, but except in a few places, cannot become agricultural," citing the lack of wood and continual prairie fires among his reasons; he concludes that "These great Plains appear to be given by Providence to the Red Men forever, as the wilds and sands of Africa are given to the Arabians" (p. 181). At another point Thompson holds that "These fine plains will in time become the abode of Mankind, probably some civilized leading pastoral life . . . . The farmer must place himself on the north side of these plains where he will have an abundance of wood, and extend his farm into the plains as far as he pleases, say two miles. All the rest of these plains of 350 miles in length by about 38 [?] miles in breadth will be pastoral and inhabited by herdsmen and shepherds dwelling in round leather tents . . ." (p. 54; editor's parenthetical question).[33] Thus despite noting that some of the prairie lands were well-watered, Thompson still holds out for the farmers' need of wood; he cannot envision farming in the midst of the prairie.[34]

Concerning the adaptation of the Plains Indians to local conditions, Thompson notes that "these great Plains place them [the Peeagans] under different circumstances, and give them peculiar traits of character from

those that hunt in the forests," and he continues to compare and contrast the Piegans--as being representative of all plains tribes--in terms of their different modes of life (pp. 252-70). During a discussion of the tribe's beliefs, he also describes how their life on the plains has affected their thinking: "Living in the wide open plains, where everything is visible and can be brought within the range of their reason, they are free from the superstitions of the natives of the forests, and seldom address the Great Spirit but on public occasions as on going to War . . ." (p. 264). In thus suggesting the impact of the prairie on religious attitude, Thompson once again appears as a forerunner of Sinclair Ross in As For Me and My House.

* * *

Just as the fur trade brought Kelsey, Henday, and Thompson into the prairie, so at the outset of the nineteenth century the need for new posts brought traders like Alexander Henry the Younger. In 1800 Henry, the nephew of the other fur-trading Henry who is usually referred to as "the Elder," established a North West Company trading post at the confluence of the Park River and the Red River of the North, just south of the present-day U. S. - Canadian border in North Dakota. After a year there, he removed his post down the Red to its junction with the Pembina River, where he remained until 1808 when he was sent to a Saskatchewan River post.

Henry kept one of the most voluminous journals of the fur trade and his references to the surrounding prairie are both frequent and detailed. While he was leading his party up the Red River from its junction with both Lake Winnipeg and the North West Company's usual canoe route, Henry caught his first glimpse of the prairie: "We have reached the commencement

of the great plains of Red river, where the eye is lost in one continuous level westward. Not a tree or rising ground interrupts the view."[35] Once they had established a site at the Park River confluence, Henry and his party set to work building their shelter; since they had arrived comparatively late in the season, they had to work with some speed. Among the tasks Henry assigned was the trimming of a large oak tree:

> Sept. 11th. I climbed up a tall oak, which I had trimmed for that purpose, at the entrance of the plain, from the top of which I had an extensive view of the country. Buffalo and red deer were everywhere in sight, passing to and fro. The weather being perfectly serene, I could distinguish the Hair hills on the W., though they were scarcely perceptible--nothing more than a blue stripe, running N. and S. The interval is a level meadow, with nothing to attract the eye but the winding course of the Park river, whose wood is lost to the sight long before it reaches the hills. The distance may be between 12 and 15 leagues. (I: 94)

As in the case of Thompson, Henry seeks an elevation in order to gain perspective, but his description of what he sees is also structured in terms of pictorial "perspective." Thus first he alludes to the foreground scenery, which is made up of buffalo and deer; their numbers are such that they may be just in the foreground, immediately around the post, or they may well stretch off into the distance; "everywhere in sight" seems to imply the latter. Then Henry moves to the distance with his description of the Hair hills and, after that, he fills in the middle distance before moving away again into the far distance by describing the woods along the Park River.

In contrast to Thompson, Henry probably was not trying to recreate this scene in any artistic manner. Indeed, if we believe his editor, Elliot Coues, in Henry we have a man bereft of imagination, a man who insisted in his journal "upon bare fact through sheer infertility of

invention . . . ."[36] Other commentators have not been as harsh as Coues, although they agree that Henry was a man of practical matters; he was organized and got things done. His journals were, indeed, a part of his responsibilities as head of the trading post; they do not reveal a man given to imaginative flights. His descriptions have an air of straightforward transcription: factuality with a minimum of subjectivity. Thus in the passage above, the pictorial presentation of the scene is followed by his attempt to estimate the distance in practical terms. But given the fact that he was a realist by nature, his occasional recourse to imaginative expression becomes all the more significant, and passages like the above are to be found throughout Henry's journals, especially those covering his eight years on the Red River.

A week after the previous entry was written, for example, Henry remarks over the almost unfathomable number of buffalo surrounding the post, and this subsequently becomes a favorite theme of his: "Sept. 18th. I took my usual morning view from the top of my oak and saw more buffaloes than ever. They formed one body, commencing about a half a mile from camp, whence the plain was covered on the W. side of the river as far as the eye could reach. They were moving southward slowly, and the meadow seemed as if in motion" (I: 99). Though he begins prosaically enough, he finally becomes alliterative and metaphoric.

Also characteristic in this passage is the vantage point from which Henry surveys the scene: repeatedly in his journals he records having climbed a tree. Thus while on a side trip down the Red River, he notes: "we allowed our horses another half hour's rest and feed. Here I climbed a high tree, and, as far as the eye could reach, the plains were covered with buffalo in every direction" (I: 117-18). Similarly, some thirty pages

later he again observes: "I sent all hands for meat, and my negro went to his traps, so that I was alone. I climbed my oak as usual for a view of the plains; bulls and red deer were passing. Suddenly I saw to the S. W. a person coming on horseback. I supposed it to be somebody on Crow's mare who had made an unusual turn southward on a hunting excursion. But soon after I perceived a second person on horseback, and then a third, coming full speed, raising a cloud of snow" (I: 159-60). And again some thirty more pages later he records:

> Jan. 14th. [1801] At daybreak I was awakened by the bellowing of buffaloes. I got up, and was astonished when I climbed into the S. W. bastion. On my right the plains were black, and appeared as if in motion, S. to N. Opposite the fort the ice was covered; and on my left, to the utmost extent of the reach below us, the river was covered with buffalo moving northward . . . . I dressed and climbed my oak for a better view. I had seen almost incredible numbers of buffalo in the fall, but nothing in comparison to what I now beheld. The ground was covered at every point of the compass, as far as the eye could reach, and every animal was in motion. (I: 167)

As these examples suggest, if on the one hand Henry's tree climbing was prompted by practical motives, on the other hand, the result was a heightening of the impact of the prairie and awe at its vastness.[37]

Other aspects of the prairie environment affected Henry as well, although such effects relate indirectly to the imaginative perception of the prairie and must also be attributed to the virgin state of the land rather than to the landscape itself. Thus judging by the length, tone, and detail of Henry's comments, one of the major discomforts experienced by his party was caused by porcupine grass: "Our shoes were entirely worn out," Henry writes, "and we had no more leather to put under the soles. The short, pointed grass annoyed us very much as we crawled along in great misery and pain, almost every third step being upon a blade of this grass,

which grows all over these meadows. It is not more than two inches high, about the thickness of an awl, and fully as sharp; it even penetrates strong leather and socks, and when it pierces the skin the point breaks off and remains in the flesh" (I: 115-16). Not aesthetic in themselves, such observations nevertheless illustrate the way in which the newness of the experience gives rise to analogies derived from the familiar world.

Two other passages from Henry's journals illustrate the shock experienced by Europeans upon witnessing the cruelty of the forces of nature on the prairie. After noting the first breakup of ice on the Red River, for example, Henry writes: "Wednesday, Apr. 1st. The river clear of ice, but drowned buffalo continue to drift by entire herds. Several are lodged in the banks near the fort. The [Indian] women cut up some of the fattest for their own use; the flesh appeared to be fresh and good. It is really astonishing what vast numbers have perished; they formed one continuous line in the current for two days and nights. One of my men found a herd that had fallen through the ice in Park river and all been drowned; they were sticking in the ice, which had not yet moved in that part. The women had excellent sport in raising the back fat and tongues" (I: 174).[38] Even Henry, whose store of descriptive adjectives does not extend much beyond "delightful" and "beautiful," is moved to pronounce the scene "astonishing," and clearly some of his amazement derives from the non-amazement of the natives.

Two years later, Henry is similarly overawed by the spectacle of buffalo caught in a prairie fire: "Plains burned in every direction and blind buffalo seen every moment wandering about. The poor beasts have all their hair singed off; even the skin in many places is shriveled up and terribly burned, and their eyes are swollen and closed fast. It was

really pitiful to see them staggering about, sometimes running afoul of a large stone, at other times tumbling down hill and falling into creeks not yet frozen over. In one spot we found a whole herd lying dead. The fire having passed only yesterday these animals were still good and fresh, and many of them exceedingly fat . . . . At sunset we arrived at the Indian camp, having made an extraordinary day's ride, and seen an incredible number of dead and dying, blind, lame, singed, and roasted buffalo" (I: 253-54).[39] Aside from his incredulity, what is also noticeable in this observation is Henry's sympathy for the plight of these animals.

The significance of Alexander Henry's journals lies in their presentation of the first-person impressions of a man who, once he entered the prairie, lived for an extended period of time in one locale. Unlike Thompson and those who came before him, both in the northern part of the region and in the southern, Henry was not just passing through. Though he frequently resorted to stock phrases ("as far as the eye could reach"), "his sharp eye [also] caught the detail necessary to bring out varieties in the flat land."[40] His journals reflect none of the artistry of Thompson's Narrative; nor do they present a national odyssey like Lewis and Clark's Journals, but they reveal a European becoming gradually accustomed to life on the prairie. Concretely indicative of this acclimatization is the fact that his tree-climbing became progressively less frequent as his familiarity with the prairie increased, and near the end of the journals such activities disappear altogether.

* * *

No single expedition into western North America received more attention, praise, and comment than Lewis and Clark's trip overland to the

Pacific during the years 1804-06. Essentially the result of a charge by President Jefferson to keep a specific daily journal in which precise accounts of the land, distances traveled, and so on, were to be duly noted, the Original Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, 1804-1806 (1904-05) runs to eight volumes. Having been published in the form in which they were written, they have none of the stylized polish of the Biddle History nor of Coues' edition of Henry's journals.[41] By the same token, however, the Original Journals provide a more unadulterated record of early responses to the prairie.

Like the French who traveled the Mississippi by canoe during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Lewis and Clark traveled by boat on the Missouri and their view of the prairie reflects this perspective--the high bluffs on the lower river often precluded a direct view of the surrounding land. Captain Clark, however, would often travel on foot along the bank of the river and frequently ascended the bluffs to walk through the surrounding prairies. In his first significant reference to the Missouri prairie on June 10, 1804, he states: "I walked out three miles, found the prairie composed of good Land and plenty of water roleing & interspursed with points of timber land." He goes on to compare these lands with the "barrens" of the east: "[These] Praries are not like those, or a number of those E. of the Mississippi void of every thing except grass, they abound with Hasel Grapes & a wild plumb . . . ."[42] With respect to the fertility of the land, Lewis and Clark apparently agreed with their sponsor, Thomas Jefferson. The president, who was also their mentor regarding what they should expect on their travels, argued that the reason the trans-Mississippi west was treeless was because the soil was too fertile for the growth of forests. In addition, Lewis and Clark did not travel through the

more arid areas of the west and, consequently, they saw the west largely as a garden.[43]

As the expedition moves farther up the Missouri references to both prairie and plains become more numerous; they do not, however, become more extensive nor more detailed when the commentator--usually Clark--is speaking of the view from the river. Two days after he compared the Missouri prairie to the barrens of the east, Clark writes: "Capt Lewis and myself walked to the hill, from the top of which we had a butifull prospect of Serounding countrey . . ." (I: 47-48). Throughout the entries written between June 13 and July 12, 1804, while the party was between the Dubois and Platte Rivers, Clark repeatedly comments on the "butifull" prairie or plain alongside.[44] At times he is on shore while at other times the prairie is viewed from the river--either through a gap in the bluff or when no bluff blocks the view. On the 22nd of June, for example, Clark notes seeing "a large & extensive Prarie on the Lab^{d}. Side. This Prarie is butifull a high bottom for 1 1/2 mile back and rises to the Common leavell of the Countrey (about 70 or 80 feet) and extends back out of view" (I: 55). While detailed enough to indicate that this view is seen from a gap in the surrounding river bluff, Clark's comments offer little as to its effect. Although in the course of less than a month's time Clark is sufficiently moved to pronounce a prairie scene "butifull" a half dozen or more times, he never extends his reaction beyond that single descriptive adjective.

Clark's descriptions of the prairie landscape vary only when, as was the case on June 13, he is able to get above the surrounding landscape. On July 12, he ascends a tributary stream and walks out onto the prairie, where he finds several artifical mounds: "from the top of the highest of

those Mounds I had an extensive view of the Serounding Plains, which afforded one of the most pleasing prospect I ever beheld, under me a Butifull River of Clear Water of about 80 yards wide Meandering thro: a leavel and extensive meadow, as far as I could See, the prospect much enlivened by the fiew Trees & Srubs which is bordering the bank of the river, and the Creeks & runs falling into it. The bottom land is covered with Grass of about 4 1/2 feet high, and appears as leavel as a smoth surfice . . ." (I: 75). Thus like Alexander Henry's, Clark's imaginative grasp of the surrounding prairie landscape is greatly enhanced by the simple expedient of getting above it.

Lewis, whose entries in the journal are less frequent, also evidences a similar need for elevation in order to appreciate the landscape. At one point he states that he "ascended to the top of the cutt bluff this morning, from whence I had a most delightfull view of the country, the whole of which except by the valley formed by the Missouri is void of timber or underbrush, exposing to the first glance of the spectator immence herds of Buffaloe, Elk, deer, & Antelopes feeding in one common and boundless pasture" (I: 329). Later in the trip Lewis notes that he and Captain Clark "stroled out to the top of the heights in the fork of these rivers from whence we had an extensive and most inchanting view; the country in every derection around us was one vast plain in which innumerable herds of Buffalow were seen attended by their shepperds the wolves; the solatary antelope which now had their young were distributed over it's face; some herds of Elk were also seen; the verdure perfectly cloathed the ground . . . to the South we saw a range of lofty mountains . . ." (II: 113).

As the reference here to "mountains" suggests, because their expedition

traveled the Missouri from its mouth to its source, Lewis and Clark had occasion to survey a wide array of different landscapes. And significantly, although the party had been traveling through the prairie and living on it for the better part of a year, it was not until they were in sight of the mountains that either noticed an optical effect peculiar to the prairie --that distant objects appear closer than they really are. Observing that "the air is so pure in this open country that mountains and other elivated objects appear much nearer than they really are; these mountains do not appear to be further than 15 M." (II: 68), the explorers send a man toward the mountains; he goes over ten miles only to report that he did not think himself more than halfway there. That such an optical effect would have escaped the notice of both explorers is odd (especially in the case of Lewis, since in the Journals he appears to be, as is generally conceded, the more imaginative of the two). One explanation might be that the party did not travel the prairie on foot enough to notice it, although Lewis does find the need at one point to order "stakes to be cut to stick up in the prairie to show the way for the party . . ." (II: 175) during a portage. In turn, that the need for these artificial landmarks, which excited so much comment in Castañeda's Narrative, produces no reaction in Lewis at all suggests that the better explanation is that neither explorer considered the prairie landscape worthy of sustained aesthetic contemplation.

In this context, it is profitable to observe that the only time in the first two volumes of the Journals that Clark uses a "literary" term to define a scene is in connection with his view of the river valley as they are approaching the Great Falls of the Missouri: "This countrey has a romantick appearance river inclosed between high and steep hills cut to

pices by revines but little timber and that confined to the Rivers & creek, the Missouri has but a few scattering trees on its borders . . ." (II: 187). In Clark's mind, apparently, "romantick" is a term to be reserved for scenes of vertical impressiveness and for scenes that are "inclosed"--in short, European rather than North American vistas.

It is similarly the sight of the Great Falls themselves which occasions Lewis to employ the phrase "sublimely grand" (II: 54), and to use it in the sense of "great height, lofty, and towering."[45] Looking back over his attempt to describe the Falls, furthermore, Lewis expresses his dissatisfaction in ways which at once suggest that he was certainly capable of extended imaginative response and that his inability to appreciate the sublimity of the prairie must be traced to the aesthetic premises of his time:

> after wrighting this imperfect discription I again viewed the falls and was so much disgusted with the imperfect idea which it conveyed of the scene that I determined to draw my pen across it and begin agin, but then reflected that I could not perhaps suceed better than pening the first impressions of the mind; I wished for the pencil of Salvator Rosa [a Titian] or the pen of Thompson, that I might be enabled to give to the enlightened world some just idea of this truly magnificent and sublimely grand object, which has from the commencement of time been concealed from the view of civilized man; but this was fruitless and vain. I most sincerely regreted that I had not brought a crimee [camera] obscura with me by the assistance of which even I could have hoped to have done better but alas this was also out of my reach; I therefore with the assistance of my pen only indeavoured to trace some of the stronger features of this seen by the assistance of which my recollection aided by some pencil I hope still to give the world some faint idea of an object which at this moment fills me with such pleasure and astonishment; and which of it's kind I will venture to ascert is second but to one in the known world. (II: 149-50; the interpolations are Thwaites')

Thus instead of concentrating on a landscape which may be unique--the prairie--Lewis devotes his energies to depicting a sight which is "second

but to one in the known world."

The sole instance in which either explorer does focus aesthetically upon a scene containing plains country occurs when they reach the Three Forks of the Missouri. There Lewis notes that "at the junction of the S. E. fork of the Missouri . . . the country opens suddonly to extensive and bea[u]tifull plains and meadows which appear to be surrounded in every direction with distant and lofty mountains . . . ." Lewis halted the party for breakfast and ascended a nearby limestone cliff, from which he "commanded a most perfect view of the neighbouring country." He notes an "extensive green meadow" and, beyond it, "a high wide extensive plain," and describes all the while the disappearing courses of the three rivers which converge to form the Missouri; the whole scene is ringed round by the distant mountains (II: 275-77; the interpolation in "beautiful," above, is by Thwaites). Here the beauty Lewis perceives arises from the relation of the plains and the meadows to his obtained height and, as well, to the mountains beyond the plains and converging streams before him.

Whatever beauty Lewis appreciates, furthermore, is subordinate to his awareness of an impending decision: gazing at these streams, he has to decide which of the three forks to follow in order to strike closest to the upper Columbia River; the success or failure of the expedition hung on that decision. Similarly, upon first sighting the Rockies Lewis explains that "while I viewed these mountains I felt a secret pleasure in finding myself so near the head of the heretofore conceived boundless Missouri . . ." (II: 79). Thus the only extended description of the plains to be found in the entries recording the outward journey of the expedition involves an appreciation of the plains in contrast to other, more perpendicular landscapes, and is subordinated by other concerns.

Beyond the comments recorded during the first few months of the expedition, the Journals of Lewis and Clark do not include any prolonged or explicit analyses of or reactions to the flat expanse of prairie-plains through which the expedition passed. Viewing a scene on the upper Missouri, which he describes as "entirely desittute of trees or brush," Lewis comments: "nothing remarkable in the appearance of the country" (II: 227), and this blasé attitude is typical of the reaction for the latter part of the trip up the Missouri.

* * *

Lewis and Clark's expedition marks the end of the period of occasional incursions into the prairie-plains. By the end of the first decade of the nineteenth century, white men were continually pushing into the prairie. And because of general interest in western North America, as well as the contemporary predilection for travel literature, those who went on such trips often published some account of their travels and exploits.

One of these accounts was by Zebulon Montgomery Pike, a young U. S. army officer who made a trip up the Mississippi from St. Louis while Lewis and Clark were still on their expedition (1805-06) and who later embarked on a trip to the Rocky Mountains as they were returning (1806-07). It was on this second trip that Pike lent his name to the mountain, which bears his name, although there is some question as to whether or not he even saw it; he certainly never climbed it. His An Account of Expeditions to the Sources of the Mississippi . . .[46] was published in 1810; it is poorly written and Pike is less than truthful about many facts (he was captured by the Mexican government and held for a time as a spy, though he makes

little of this). It does, however, present several key reactions to the prairie-plains region, and the historical significance of his account is unquestionable: for by way of it Pike becomes one of the first to advance the idea of a Great American Desert.[47]

Pike's reactions to the prairie landscape are of three general types. The first takes the form of broad descriptions which are of the same sort as those found in the records of all the exploration accounts considered thus far, with the exception of the Spaniards'. In them, Pike simply notes the extensiveness of the plain--"as far as the eye can extend, now and then interrupted by a grove of trees"--or describes it as "an elegant prospect."[48] Such assessments pertain to the early stages of his second expedition, while his party is traveling across the Kansas plains in late summer, 1806. Somewhere near the present site of Iola, Kansas, for example, Pike observes: "The Prospect from the dividing ridge to the east and south-east is sublime. The prairie rising and falling in regular swells, as far as the sight can extend, produces a very beautiful appearance" (I: 315). Unlike Lewis, who found no sublimity in a prairie prospect, however, Pike finds this scene to be sublime. The difference between the two, quite probably, relates as much to individual temperament as it does to their different modes of travel. Once again, the more direct appraisal of the prairie comes from a man who was traveling across it. Pike, moreover, is the first to record the rolling quality of the land in any detail and to look directly at the land's character itself, since Thompson did not write the work which became his Narrative until the 1840s.

But while Pike showed some ability to look at the land objectively, he was concerned with the effect of the environment on living creatures. During both expeditions Pike commented upon the effect of travel on the

plains during the warm months. On the first trip his dogs were prostrated by the heat of the prairie, the constant exposure to the sun, and the high grass (I: 16); on the second trip he notes the effects of the sun and the heat, coupled with a lack of available water, on his party as a whole (I: 316). But Pike's most telling observation about man's position on the prairie is made, not when he is traveling across such a plain, but rather when he is crossing a frozen lake in what is now Minnesota during January 1806. Looking for houses on the other shore after night had set in, Pike comments: "I was fearful of loosing ourselves on the Lake (the consequence of which, can only be imagined by those who have been exposed on a Lake, or naked plain--a dreary night of January, in the Latitude 47°N.--where the Mercury of Reamour stood at 27 below 0.)" (I: 78-79). Whether written immediately after the incident in question, or after he had traveled across the plains to the Rocky Mountains and then down to Mexico and back, Pike's analogy between a frozen lake and a frozen prairie is of the same order as Coronado's prairie-sea analogy in his letter to the Spanish king and La Vérendrye's view of trees on the prairie as islands. And like Thompson in his record of his overland journey to the Mandan villages in the winter of 1797 (Narrative, p. 166), Pike articulates the fear of exposure on the plains in winter.

The second sort of description found in Pike's Account concerns the animals living on the plains, especially buffalo, wild horses, and the black-tailed prairie dog. Pike has the distinction of publishing what was probably the first extended description of the latter, and his accounts of buffalo and wild horses, while not unlike those written by others, were among the first to be published and to achieve a wide audience. Just downstream from the site of Dodge City, Kansas, Pike describes his first

glimpse of a large herd of buffalo. Though the party had seen and killed individual animals throughout their trip from St. Louis, and Pike had seen individual buffalo on his previous western trip, as they moved west into Kansas they came upon large herds: "In the afternoon discovered the northern side of the river [the Arkansas] to be covered with animals; which, when we came to them, proved to be buffalo cows and calves. I do not think it an exaggeration to say there were 3000 in one view. It is worthy of remark, that in all the extent of country yet crossed, we never saw one cow, and that now the face of the earth appeared to be covered with them" (I: 343). Here Pike moves in his description from the general and the already known (the river, then versus now) to the unknown and the new--the view of thousands of calves and cows when hitherto they had seen none. Pike presents the buffalo, indeed, as if they had appeared out of nowhere. And like Castañeda over 250 years earlier, Pike marvels over the numbers and habits of the buffalo, noting that the bulls would ring the great herds of cows and calves. His incredulous tone also echoes Castañeda's "Who could believe . . .": "I will not attempt to describe the droves of animals we now saw on our route," he concludes; "suffice it to say, that the face of the prairie was covered with them, on each side of the river; their numbers exceeded imagination" (I: 343).

As these passages show, although Pike does not focus upon the way these sights made him feel, his emphasis upon the magnitude of such scenes reflects their impact. The reader is called upon to imagine a vast expanse, black with movement, like that described by Henry at his post on the Park and Red Rivers. Pike may have refrained from more exact description out of a fear of inability--like Lewis above the Great Falls--to do the sight justice, or he may have thought embellishments like Castañeda's

unnecessary, or he may have simply been disinclined. Or he may have felt that the phrase, "exceeded imagination," was all that could be said.

Pike's treatment of the wild horses the party saw a few days prior to their sighting of the buffalo herds, curiously, is more detailed and in one instance he employs an analogy. Having spotted a herd of these horses on the prairie, Pike, along with two companions, goes off to view them, and "when within a quarter of a mile, they discovered us, and came immediately up near us, making the earth tremble under them (this brought to my recollection a charge of cavalry). They stopt and gave us an opportunity to view them, among them were some very beautiful bays, blacks and greys, and indeed of all colours. We fired at a black horse, with an idea of creasing him, but did not succeed; they flourished round and returned to see us, when we returned to camp" (I: 342).[49] The next morning, for the sake of an experiment, they attempted to capture some of the herd: "we equipped six of our fleetest coursers with riders and ropes, to noose the wild horses if in our power, to come among the band. They stood until they came within forty yards of them, neighing and whinnowing, when the chase began, which we continued about two miles, without success." This was something less than success, actually, since two of their own horses joined the wild herd. Pike then says that he has since laughed at his party's folly, because their method is "scarcely ever attempted," even by expert ropers (I: 342). Pike's greater detail in describing the wild horses may be attributed to the fact that they presented a more familiar sight than the buffalo; as his analogy indicates, he saw them in terms of cavalry, just as the loss of two of their own horses to the herd suggests a basic kinship. In addition to this general familiarity, it should also be recalled that Pike was a soldier.

Trips up the mountains in the Pueblo, Colorado area resulted in the third, and most poetic, sort of reaction to the prairie landscape in Pike's Account. Like his precursors, Pike wrote far more evocative descriptions of the prairie when he was able to get above it and, when, like Lewis and Clark, he saw the prairie juxtaposed with other topographies. In his first description from the perspective of a mountain-side, Pike compares the mountains with the prairie below. After spending a night on the side of the mountain with no shelter, he explains that the party "Arose hungry, dry, and extremely sore, from the inequality of the rocks . . . ." But, he says, they were "amply compensated for toil by the sublimity of the prospects below. The unbounded prairie was overhung with clouds, which appeared like the ocean in a storm; wave piled on wave and foaming, whilst the sky was perfectly clear where we were" (I: 350). Although Pike's response is to the sight of the tops of the clouds, not the surface of the prairie, he nevertheless reflects the inclination to resort to metaphor in the presence of the landscape--and the metaphor he selects is that of the "unbounded" ocean seen earlier. Like his precursors, Pike also took to climbing above the landscape with regularity. At one point he reports: "About ten o'clock [I climbed] the highest summit of the mountain, when the unbounded space of the prairies again presented themselves to my view, and from some distant peaks, I immediately recognized [a distant river issuing from the mountains] to be the outlet of the Arkansaw, which we had left nearly one month since!" (I: 365). On the one hand, Pike's exclamation here is pragmatically explicable: he was searching for the upper reaches of the Red River of the South, in order to follow it back toward the United States, and he thought he had left the Arkansas behind him a month before; sighting it once again, Pike is chagrined to realize

that he has made no progress in the last thirty days. On the other hand, the "facts" could be described as Pike's way of emphasizing the scope of the land, the extent of his view.

A similar ambivalence characterizes another of Pike's views, this one from "a high hill":

> we had a view of all the prairie and rivers to the north of us; it was at the same time one of the most sublime and beautiful inland prospects ever presented to the eyes of man. The prairie lying nearly north and south, was probably 60 miles by 45.
>
> The main river bursting out of the western mountains, and meeting from the north east, a large branch, which divides the chain of mountains, proceeds down the prairie, making many large and beautiful islands, one of which I judge contains 100,000 acres of land, all meadow ground, covered with innumerable herds of deer; about six miles from the mountains which cross the prairie, at the south end, a branch of 12 steps wide, pays its tribute to the main stream from the west course. Due W. 12°. N. 75°. W. 6°. Four miles below is a stream of the same size, which enters on the east; its general course is N. 65°. E. up which was a large road; from the entrance of this down, was about three miles, to the junction of the west fork, which waters the foot of the hill on the north, whilst the main river wound along in meanders on the east. In short, this view combined the sublime and the beautiful; the great and lofty mountains covered with eternal snows, seemed to surround the luxuriant vale, crowned with perennial flowers, like a terrestrial paradise, shut out from the view of man. (I: 375-76)

Although Pike appreciates the vastness of the prairie in this scene, he nonetheless feels compelled to frame it by reference to the surrounding mountains and to domesticate it by referring to the serpentine rivers and streams running through it; the latter, apparently, constitute in his mind those elements of the vista necessary for aesthetic appreciation. Recalling Pike's earlier application of "sublime" to the prairie landscape when he and his party were traveling overland (I: 315), it is significant that, when juxtaposed against the mountains, the prairie is merely "beautiful"; "sublime" is reserved for the peaks.

Thus like Lewis in his awe of the Great Falls of the Missouri and of the three forks that form the river, Pike reserves his unqualified admiration for the more familiar and "vertical" formations of the west. At the same time, the "prairie" fared considerably better at Pike's hand than the more arid areas of what is called the Great Plains. Flat areas which appear well-watered Pike designates "prairies"; those which do not he calls "plains." In his often-quoted appraisal of the latter he states: "Those vast plains of the western hemisphere, may become in time equally celebrated as the sandy deserts of Africa; for I saw in my route, in various places, tracts of many leagues, where the wind had thrown up the sand, in all the fanciful forms of the ocean's rolling wave, and on which not a speck of vegetable matter existed" (II: 27). This comment, included as an appendix to the Account proper, was probably written after Pike's return to the United States; he had been taken and held by the Mexican government for a time, and traveled as far south as central Mexico. His return trip, through the plains of Texas from the Rio Grande to the present Louisiana state border, was through an area drier than the Kansas and Arkansas River basins through which he had made his outward trip. His return route doubtlessly affected his overall impression of the prairie-plains, since in the records of the outward journey through the buffalo prairie Pike makes little mention of aridity. But having passed through the drier areas of the southwest on his return journey, the dryness of the region, rather than its flatness, was predominant in his mind. Thus his comment illustrates the same sort of problem which presents itself when one compares the French explorers' view of the landscape with that of Coronado and his men: imaginative reactions to the prairie landscape often arise only when other, more pressing, considerations are not a factor.

Taken collectively, Pike's various descriptions of the prairie environment reveal the most comprehensive account, excepting Henry's, written up to the end of the first decade of the nineteenth century. That his Account was published in 1810, and received considerable circulation, establishes the work as one preeminent in influencing the popular image of the American west. It stands at the head of the various first-person accounts which contributed to the depiction of the prairie in subsequent literary works and ultimately to the development of a series of prairie literature conventions.

* * *

With the publication of Pike's Account in 1810 and the Biddle Lewis and Clark in 1814, knowledge of the prairie began to become part of the general consciousness, and thus subsequent explorers and travelers were to a certain extent prepared for what they saw. To the commentators treated in this chapter, however, the prairie was a totally new experience, requiring not only physical but also epistemological adaptation. In some cases, this situation resulted in a feeling of inadequacy, in others inventiveness and recourse to analogy, and in others a blindness to the real qualities of the landscape. In turn, these early commentators pose a kind of reverse epistemological problem for the modern reader: we have to struggle to see the prairie as they saw it and to envision what it was like to be confronted with a landscape without any landmarks.

CHAPTER ONE: Notes

[1] The standard history of exploration in North America is still John Bartlet Brebner, The Explorers of North America 1492-1806 (1933; rpt. New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1955); Brebner treats Cabeza de Vaca pp. 57-62. Another account, more recent and equally factual but more readable, is Bernard De Voto, The Course of Empire (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1952), pp. 9-21. The immediate effect of Cabeza de Vaca's return to the Spanish settlements is treated in Herbert E. Bolton, Coronado: Knight of Pueblos and Plains (Albuquerque: Univ. of New Mexico Press, 1949), pp. 9-22, passim.

[2] Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca, The Narrative of Alvar Nunez Cabeça de Vaca, trans. (Thomas) Buckingham Smith (1851), rpt. in Spanish Explorers in the Southern United States 1528-1543, ed. Frederick W. Hodge and Theodore H. Lewis (1907; rpt. New York: Barnes and Noble, 1946), p. 72.

[3] Cabeza de Vaca, p. 68.

[4] The Oxford English Dictionary notes a statement published in England in 1594 to the effect that a Spanish league is equal to three English miles (OED, 1933 ed. I: 148). Thus, Cabeza de Vaca's 400 leagues would equal 1200 miles. Houston, Texas, is about 1500 miles from Winnipeg, Manitoba, a distance roughly equal to the northward extent of the buffalo range before settlement.

[5] Pedro de Castañeda, of Najera, The Narrative of the Expedition of Coronado by Castañeda, trans. George Parker Winship (1896), rpt. Spanish Explorers in the Southern United States, p. 331. All quotations from Castaneda are from this edition of Winship's translation; page numbers will appear in parenthesis after the passage cited (this will be the method of documentation throughout). Another translation has appeared since Winship: George P. Hammond and Agapito Rey, Narratives of the Coronado Expedition, 1540-1542 (Albuquerque: Univ. of New Mexico Press, 1940). The latter is a more literal translation than Winship's; I prefer his for its superior literary quality, and so have used it here. I have, however, compared both renderings for all cited passages.

[6] Francisco Vazquez Coronado, "Translation of a Letter from Coronado to the King, October 20, 1541," in The Journey of Coronado 1540-1542, trans. and ed. George Parker Winship (New York: A. S. Barnes, 1904), p. 214. For Hammond and Rey's translation of the same letter, see Hammond and Rey, pp. 185-90.

[7] Coronado, p. 216.

[8] "The Latest Account of Cibola, and of More than Four Hundred Leagues Beyond," in The Journey of Coronado 1540-1542, pp. 195-96; commenting on the document from which this passage was translated, Winship says "This appears to be a transcript from letters written, probably at Tiguex, on the Rio Grande, during the late summer early fall of 1541"; Winship, Journey, p. 190, n. 1. See also Hammond and Rey, pp. 308-12, for their translation of the same document.

[9] Bolton, p. 255; because Castañeda observes that "men are still living who saw" the strange sights of the plains, Bolton suggests here that the annalist avoided going into much detail about the plains in the earlier chapter because he feared being discredited "for telling such whoppers." Later, however, Castañeda reconsidered his previous decision and elected to write a special chapter on the plains; such indecision might also account for his amazed tone and approach to the prairie landscape: "Who could believe . . . ." Bolton also suggests that Castañeda may have been waiting for someone's death before he wrote of the true nature of the plains environment. Another possibility is that the annalist was simply dissatisfied with his earlier chapter, and so rewrote the plains material to sharpen it, which he does. The earlier chapter, too, contains no account of the buffalo.

[10] Hammond and Rey's translation of the final sentence is "This was because the earth was so round, for, wherever a man stood, it seemed as if he were on the top and saw the sky around him within a crossbow shot. No matter how small an object was placed in front of him, it deprived him of the view of the land" (Hammond and Rey, p. 280). It is not clear here what a man is "on top" of; the "three-pint measure," however, appears to be Winship's metaphor. There is no question, though, that the comparison of buffalo to pine trees is Castaneda's metaphor.

[11] In addition to Castañeda's Narrative, there are eleven letters and reports which relate to the Coronado expedition, of which nine are translated and included in Winships' volume. Their extent and histories are recounted in the introduction to Spanish Explorers, Hodge and Lewis, pp. 275-80. They are also translated and included in Hammond and Rey. Of the four commentators who deal directly with the plains region (those cited above plus Captain Juan Jaramillo's Narrative [Winship, pp. 222-40]) only Jaramillo does not discuss the disorientating effect of the landscape. Bolton quotes an unidentified member of Coronado's expedition who agreed with his general's estimation of the plains: "'Traveling in these plains is like voyaging at sea . . . for there are no roads other than cattle trails. Since the land is so level, without a mountain or a hill, it was dangerous to travel alone or become separated from the army, for on losing sight of it one disappeared'" (Bolton, pp. 254-55).

The Spanish impression of the plains does not rest entirely with Coronado's expedition. Two other expeditions visited the prairie, one under Vincente Zaldivar Mendoza in 1598 and another under Juan de Onate in 1601. At one point in the report of the first group, the narrator notes that buffalo "roam over some extremely level mesas that extend for many leagues. After we reached them, over a slight rise of low hills, we traveled for thirty leagues, over land covered with an infinite number of cattle. We never came to the

end of these plains; nor do they have sierras, trees, or shrubs. While we traveled over them we guided ourselves only by the sun"; "Discovery of the Buffalo," in Don Juan de Oñate: Colonizer of New Mexico 1595-1628, ed. and trans. George P. Hammond and Agapito Rey (Albuquerque: Univ. of New Mexico Press, 1953), p. 405. In the report of the second group, the secretary records that "The army strayed somewhat from its course, which is not surprising, because the land is so level that people traveling over it got lost the moment they separated a little from us"; "Expedition to the North, 1601," in Don Juan de Oñate, pp. 750-51. Thus the impressions of those who traveled with Coronado are corroborated by the impressions of their countrymen who came to Quivera some fifty years later.

12 De Voto, p. 45.

13 "The Mississippi Voyage of Jolliet and Marquette, 1673," in Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents, ed. Reuben Gold Thwaites, LIX (Cleveland: Burrows Brothers, 1899), 87-163; rpt. Early Narratives of the Northwest, 1634-1699, ed. Louise Phelps Kellogg (1917; rpt. New York: Barnes and Noble, 1959), p. 236. Brebner treats the voyage of Jolliet and Marquette, p. 213, and De Voto, pp. 115-22. Each mentions the controversy as to the author of the Marquette journal (Brebner, p. 209, n. 2; De Voto discusses it at length, p. 572, n. 11); I have elected to follow De Voto. Subsequent references to this journal are from Kellogg's edition.

14 Thwaites, Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents, LVIII, p. 105. Hereafter cited as JR.

15 Henry Nash Smith, Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1950), provides the best single treatment of varying imaginative views of the American West; Smith considers the relationship thought to exist between trees and fertilty, pp. 174-80, and discusses the Great American Desert and the search for the Great River of the West. Regarding these, the best single treatment of the Great American Desert concept is W. Eugene Hollon, The Great American Desert: Then and Now (New York: Oxford, 1966); the Great River of the West is treated in John Logan Allen, Passage Through the Garden: Lewis and Clark and the Image of the American Northwest (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1975). De Voto treats at some length the various misconceptions which brought explorers into the west, and a passage by water to the Pacific is foremost among them.

16 JR, LVIII, pp. 105, 107.

17 "Memoir of La Salle's Discoveries, by Tonty, 1678-1690 [1693]," On the Discovery of the Mississippi, etc., trans. Thomas Falconer (London, 1844); rpt. Early Narratives of the Northwest, 1634-1699, p. 302.

18 Fr. Louis Hennepin, A New Discovery of a Vast Country in America, 2 vols., ed. Reuben Gold Thwaites (1903; rpt. Toronto: Coles, 1974), p. 210. Both Thwaites, in his introduction to this volume, and Dorothy Dondore, The Prairie and the Making of Middle America (Cedar Rapids, Iowa: The Torch Press, 1926), pp. 14-17, discuss Hennepin's impossible claims; De Voto, pp. 142-43 presents the best description of his personality.

[19] Hennepin, p. 213.

[20] As quoted by John Logan Allan, Passage Through the Garden, p. 3.

[21] This passage, by Fr. Claude Jean Allouez, is printed in JR; Dondore quotes it, however, as being representative of Jesuit landscape description in the Mississippi basin--and it is that sense being used here. See Dondore, pp. 12-13.

[22] Henry Kelsey, The Kelsey Papers, ed. Arthur G. Doughty and Chester Martin (Ottawa: Public Archives of Canada and The Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, 1929), p. 3. All references to Kelsey are from this edition.

[23] Castañeda, p. 331.

[24] The slashes indicate the endings of lines in the transcript copy of the papers held by the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland. Doughty and Martin maintain, in their introduction to the Papers, that these documents are transcript copies, "and the probable inference is that they were copied by Kelsey for his own private use, the originals going into the files of the Hudson's Bay Company" (p. x). In this quotation from Kelsey, "barren" is underlined to indicate that it was stroked out--as if Kelsey reconsidered his meaning--and is replaced by "heathy & barren." That is one possibility; another is that the "barren" which was stroked out was simply an error in transcription.

[25] The Western Interior of Canada: A Record of Geographical Discovery, 1612-1917, ed. John Warkentin (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1964), p. 27. Here Warkentin reprints those passages of Kelsey's journal that deal with landscape. Regarding the meaning of "barren" as "not fertile, unproductive, bare," the Oxford English Dictionary lists this as a literal meaning applying to land as established in 1377; likewise its figurative meanings, "Bare of intellectual wealth" and "unproductive of results," were established by 1549. The meaning to which Warkentin is alluding, "A tract of barren land; spec. applied in N. America to: a. elevated plains on which grow small trees and shrubs, but no timber, classed as oak-barrens, pine-barrens, etc., according to the trees growing on them," is not cited as current until 1784 when used by Thomas Jefferson (OED, 1933 ed. I: 681). Similarly, because Kelsey uses "barren" as a parallel term for "heathy," a word whose English meaning as "waste land, or marginal land" was equally well established at the time he was writing, it appears most likely that he meant the word barren to mean "sterile."

[26] G. Hubert Smith, The Explorations of the La Verendryes in the Northern Plains, 1738-43, ed. W. Raymond Wood (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1980), pp. 44-45. Smith includes a new translation of what has been called the La Vérendrye "journal"; it is not in fact a journal, but rather the draft of a letter. It is not signed by La Vérendrye, so while its authenticity as a record of the journey is verified, it is not an autograph. Smith's translation should supercede the three others in print, because it was made from the original manuscript; its predecessors were taken from the nineteenth-century Margry manuscripts. See Smith, pp. 67-94 for a discussion of the problems related to the "journal."

[27] Smith, p. 50.

[28] Lawrence J. Burpee, ed., "York Factory to the Blackfeet Country; The Journal of Anthony Hendry [sic], 1754-55," Proceedings and Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada, 3rd ser., I (Ottawa, 1907), sec. II, p. 328. All references to Henday's journals are from this edition. Not until after the publication of this journal did historians decide that the man's name was Henday, not Hendry.

[29] Another Hudson's Bay man sent inland some seventeen years later concurred with both Kelsey and Henday, for he too called the Saskatchewan prairie country barren. See Lawrence J. Burpee, ed., "An Adventurer from Hudson Bay: Journal of Matthew Cocking, from York Factory to the Blackfeet Country, 1772-73," Proceedings and Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada, 3rd ser., II (Ottawa, 1908), sec. II, pp. 104-07. It was during the latter half of the eighteenth century that the interior portions of the North American continent were described in English in print for the first time. Jonathan Carver pronounced the area west of the Mississippi to be one promising to "produce a sufficient supply of all the necessaries of life for any number of inhabitants," though he was not particularly descriptive; Travels through the Interior Parts of North America in the Years 1766, 1767, and 1768, 3rd ed. (London, 1781), p. 536. Edward Umfreville, a former Hudson's Bay employee, in 1790 published a book highly critical of the company; in it he describes the country in which he worked. Having been in charge of one of the westernmost posts on the Saskatchewan River, Umfreville describes the "boundless" country bordering the river, its weather, buffalo, and open spaces. His descriptions, however, are matter-of-fact and not very detailed; see Edward Umfreville, The Present State of Hudson's Bay, Containing a Full Description of that Settlement, and the Adjacent Country; and Likewise of the Fur Trade, with Hints for its Improvement, ed. W. Stewart Wallace (London, 1790; rpt. Toronto: Ryerson, 1954).

[30] T. D. MacLulich, "The Explorer as Sage: David Thompson's Narrative [sic]," JCF, No. 16 (1976), p. 97.

[31] MacLulich, p. 98.

[32] David Thompson, David Thompson's Narrative, 1784-1812, ed. Richard Glover (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1962), p. 141. All references to Thompson's work are from this edition.

[33] Thompson was not alone in his opinion that the plains were suited for the pastoral life of shepherds, with farms clustered around the wooded rims of the region. John Bradbury, in his Travels in the Interior of America, comments: "Whenever this region shall commence to be peopled, the first settlements will be made at the edge of the woody region, or on the borders of the rivers, where a little timber may be found, probably the first wave in the tide of population will be formed of shepherds and herdsmen." John Bradbury, Travels in the Interior of America in the Years 1809, 1810, and 1811; including a description of Upper Louisiana, together with the States of Ohio, Kentucky, Indiana, and Tennessee, with Illinois and Western Territories, and containing Remarks and Observations useful

to Persons emigrating to those Countries, 2nd Ed. (London, 1819), rpt. Early Western Travels, 1748-1846, ed. Reuben Gold Thwaites, V (Cleveland: Arthur H. Clark, 1904), 267. Zebulon Montgomery Pike, after his tour of the southern prairie-plains, agreed; see The Journals of Zebulon Montgomery Pike, ed. Donald Jackson (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1966), II, 26.

[34] The lack of trees on the prairie is also responsible for the invention of the six-shooter, according to Walter Prescott Webb, The Great Plains (Boston: Ginn, 1931), pp. 167-79; Webb discusses the invention of the six-shooter as "the first radical adaptation made by the American people as they moved westward from the humid region into the Plains country." The gist of his argument is that, since there were no trees for cover while loading a long rifle, a weapon such as the six-shooter was imperative on the plains. Webb's book, while superceded by other work, is still central to an understanding of the region.

[35] Elliot Coues, ed. New Light on the Early History of the Greater Northwest, the Manuscript Journals of Alexander Henry, Fur Trader of the Northwest Company, and of David Thompson, Official Geographer and Explorer of the Same Company, 1799-1814 (New York: Francis P. Harper, 1897), I, 64. All references to Henry's journals are from this edition.

[36] Coues, "Editor's Preface," I, xix. In this context, one or two matters relative to the Coues edition of Henry's manuscripts need to be considered. In his preface (pp. xi-xv) Coues sets forth his editorial procedures; the work represents about two-thirds of the bulk of the original manuscript, the other third having been removed by Coues' editing. He states, further, that his text is true as to matters of fact, that he has only made Henry's prose more direct and excised the trader's grammatical infelicities. In view of the charges of editorial tampering leveled against Coues because of his handling of the Lewis and Clark manuscript journals while he was preparing a reissue of the Biddle History of the Expedition Under the Command of Lewis and Clark (1893), charges which are justified, Coues' disclaimers regarding Henry's journals might well be questioned. For a discussion of these charges, see Paul Russell Cutright, A History of the Lewis and Clark Journals (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1976), pp. 73-103; especially pp. 96-98. It should also be noted that, despite the title of Coues' volume, the text of the whole is made up of Henry's journals alone; Coues felt the need to give equal credit to Thompson because his papers, which had not yet been edited and published at the time Coues was working, lent a great deal of information to Henry's journals, clarifying many matters and corroborating others.

[37] The literature describing the range, extent of herds, and other facts of buffalo lore are well known and need not be repeated here; suffice it to say that virtually every explorer or traveler who came upon large herds of buffalo found it necessary to comment on the experience; witness, for example, Castañeda and the other men who accompanied Coronado, as well as the Spanish explorer himself. There has been little comment, however, on the means by which such impressions were obtained. The flat expanse of prairie allowed those who traveled across it to glimpse vast numbers of buffalo in a manner that other landscapes did not, and the two entities--land and buffalo--become intertwined in the various accounts.

Numerous commentators, moreover, complained of the animals as an impediment; their numbers were such that travelers had to detour around, since they could seldom prevail upon the beasts to move. See, for example, Henday, p. 333.

[38] Here Coues cites another account which corroborates Henry's: in 1795 John McDonnell, on a journey down the Qu'Appelle River, spent an entire day counting buffalo carcasses in the river and mired along the banks. By the end of the day he had counted 7,360 (I: 174, n. 39). Captain Clark, moreover, describes the same occurence along the upper Missouri after their party's winter with the Mandan Indians. In perhaps the most imagistically striking scene described in the Lewis and Clark journals prior to reaching the Great Falls of the Missouri River, Clark describes the Indians "jumping from one cake of ice to another, for the purpose of Catching the buffalow as they float down" while the prairie on either side of the river is on fire. Clark treats the scene, however, in a matter-of-fact manner. See Original Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, 1804-1806, ed. Reuben Gold Thwaites (1904-05; rpt. [intro. Bernard De Voto] New York: Arno Press, 1969), I, 278-79.

[39] These fires were set by the Plains Indians, who used them to herd buffalo about the prairies and, as well, because they believed that the fires renewed the grass, which was thought to grow back greener. The fires also started spontaneously. Comment on these fires in the literature of exploration and adventure is so pervasive that virtually any journal or narrative will yield a suitable description. In addition to the passage from Lewis and Clark's Original Journals cited above, see also I, 151 in the same volume, Thompson's Narrative, p. 186, and Pike's Journals, I, 50 and 56. Lewis and Clark believed that the prairies were created by these fires, which burned all the timber; see Letters of the Lewis and Clark Expedition with Related Documents, 1783-1854, ed. Donald Jackson (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1962), pp. 506-07.

[40] Warkentin, p. 106.

[41] History of the expedition under the command of Captains Lewis and Clark, to the sources of the Missouri . . . [ed. Nicholas Biddle], 2 vols. (Philadelphia, 1814); for a complete account of the background and various editions of this book, see both Cutright, A History of the Lewis and Clark Journals, pp. 53-103, passim, and Jackson, ed., Letters of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, passim.

[42] Original Journals, I, 45-46. Here and throughout I am referring to the 1969 reprint of the Original Journals which retail the same pagination as Thwaites' 1904-05 edition.

It should be noted that Clark is using "barren" here in its particularly eastern North American sense, as with "pine-barrens" and "oak-barrens."

[43] Allen, Passage Through the Garden, p. 188. The notion of the west as garden, of course, is recurrent throughout American history and literature. The countervailing view, that the plains were sterile--the Great American Desert--is usually attributed to Zebulon Montgomery Pike's

observations, published in 1810. Such opinions, however, were actually common prior to Pike; in 1796, for example, a French-Canadian voyageur, Jean Baptiste Truteau, wrote of the upper Missouri: "These large prairies, or great waste lands are completely sterile; scarcely grass grows there." Before Lewis and Clark: Documents Illustrating the History of the Missouri 1785-1804, ed. A. P. Nasatir (St. Louis: St. Louis Historical Documents Foundation, 1952), II, 377.

[44] Neither explorer uses the terms "prairie" or "plains" with any exactness. At times they are used interchangeably, while other contexts suggest that "plain" was used in its generic, European sense, the same sense in which Kelsey, for example, used it; that is, as a flat area of relatively small size, perhaps enclosed by higher land or trees. More frequently, "prairie" seems to suggest country which is not enclosed, the higher country above the river banks, dotted here and there by clumps of trees--the French use of prairie as "meadow." Overall, though, neither Lewis nor Clark uses either term with precision.

[45] OED, 1933 ed., VIII: 769; X: 30-31.

[46] Zebulon Montgomery Pike, An Account of Expeditions to the Sources of the Mississippi, and through the Western Parts of Louisiana, to the Sources of the Arkansaw, Kans, La Platte, and Pierre Jaun, Rivers; Performed by Order of the Government of the United States during the Years 1805, 1806, and 1807. And a Tour through the Interior Parts of New Spain, when Conducted through these Provinces by order of the Captain-General in the Year 1807 (Philadelphia, 1810).

[47] See Hollon, The Great American Desert, and Smith, Virgin Land, especially Chapter XVI: "The Garden and the Desert," pp. 174-83.

[48] The Journals of Zebulon Montgomery Pike with Letters and Related Documents, ed. Donald Jackson, 2 vols. (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1966), I, 15. All references to Pike are from this edition. This is the standard scholarly edition of Pike's work; it contains material not included in Pike's own 1810 edition plus material unavailable to Elliot Coues when he edited the Account in the late nineteenth century.

For an account of the critical attention accorded Pike's book on first publication, see W. Eugene Hollon, The Lost Pathfinder: Zebulon Montgomery Pike (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1949), pp. 176-78. An English edition was published in 1811, and French and Dutch translations appeared during the next two years; Hollon claims there was a German translation as well, but Jackson (II: 406) does not list one.

[49] "Creasing" was a common method of capturing wild horses on the prairie. It required an expert marksman; he tried to hit a horse along the nape of the neck, close to the vertebra at the head of spinal column. If the marksman was successful the horse was stunned temporarily and so could be captured; frequently, however, this technique yielded only a dead horse.

CHAPTER TWO

"terrible grandeur":

First-Person Reactions to Prairie Landscape, 1811-84

A few years after Pike's second expedition onto the prairie a number of curious travelers ventured into the region and later published accounts of their experiences, among them Henry Marie Brackenridge, John Bradbury, and Gabriel Franchère. Distinguishing their writings from those treated in the previous chapter is first of all their literary cast: both Brackenridge and Bradbury were men of letters, and Franchère, who worked as a clerk for three years for the Pacific Fur Company at Astoria on the northwest Pacific coast, allowed his manuscript to be revised prior to its publication in 1820 by the historian and poet Michel Bibaud. As a result, each of them looks at the prairie landscape--along the Missouri in the case of Brackenridge and Bradbury, and in Saskatchewan in Franchere's case--with a spectator's eye only. Unconcerned with the responsibilities of exploration or fur trading, each responded primarily to the aesthetic qualities of the landscape. Given their leisure and backgrounds, furthermore, Brackenridge and Bradbury were able carefully to articulate their reactions. Franchère, whose account no doubt owes much to Bibaud's revision, probably did not record his responses as specifically as his fellow-travelers on the Missouri, but because of Bibaud's intersession the published account appears as if he did.

As he begins his journey up the Missouri, Brackenridge's observations

are very general: "There is an extent of prairie on both sides of the river . . . . an immense level plain stretches out, bounded only by the horizon. The hunter informs me that it extends nearly a hundred miles with little variation."[1] When he is able to alight from the boat, and walk out onto the prairie by himself, however, his descriptions become at once more detailed and poetic: "Passed through a most delightful prairie, the grass short and close, of a deep blue, and intermixed with a great variety of beautiful flowers. With what delight could I roam over these lovely meads, if not under restraint from the fear of meeting some party of Indians, who may be lurking about. The plain was strewed with the ordure of the buffaloe, which gave it the appearance of an immense pasture field" (p. 91). Brackenridge, who was the son of Hugh Henry Brackenridge, the novelist, is like some English squire here--off to taste nature's delights, roaming at will, and this passage clearly reflects the conventions of eighteenth-century European landscape appreciation. Equally indicative of an _a priori_ frame of mind, however, is his fear that there "may" be Indians "lurking about," a fear which derives from the eastern American colonial experience.[2]

Like Fr. Allouez on the Mississippi and Alexander Henry on the Red River of the North, Brackenridge also describes the prairie in pictorial or compositional terms: "The scenery this evening is beautiful beyond any thing I ever beheld . . . . The sky as clear as that represented in Chinese painting. The face of the country enchanting. The flowery mead, the swelling ground, the romantic hill, the bold river, the winding rivulet, the groves, the shrubberies, all disposed and arranged in the most exquisite manner" (pp. 91-92). Such a "classical" description, however, soon gives way to a "romantic" response and a very ambivalent comparison of the old

world with the new:

> No idea can be conveyed to the mind, but by recurring to one which would be as sad as this is pleasing. Suppose for a moment, the most beautiful parts of France or Italy should at once be divested of their population, and with it their dwellings and every vestige of human existence--that nothing but the silent plains and a few solitary groves and thickets should remain, there would be some resemblance to the scenery on the Missouri; though the contemplation would produce grief instead of pleasure. Yet even here, I could not feel as if there existed a painful void--something wanting--'a melancholy stillness reigns over the interminable waste'--no animated beings--
>
> ----scarce an insect moves
> Its filmy wing--and o'er the plain, naught breathes
> But scouling blasts, or th' eternal silence
> Breaks--save when the pealing thunder roars.
>
> In fact, I saw no living thing in the course of my evening ramble, except a few buzzing insects. (p. 92)[3]

Significantly, the ambivalence totally disappears as Brackenridge then goes on to use his imagination and to envision the future of the prairie:

> But there is a pleasure in giving wing to fancy, which anticipates the cheerful day when the virgin soil will give birth to millions of my countrymen. Too happy, if my after fame might but survive on the plains of the Missouri. If the vast expanse of ocean is considered a sublime spectacle, this is even more so; for the eye has still greater scope, and, instead of its monotony, now reposes on the velvet green, or feeds on the endless variety of hill and dale. Instead of being closed up in a moving prison, deprived of the use of our limbs, here we may wander at our will. The mind naturally expands, or contracts, to suit the sphere in which it exists--in the immeasurable immensity of the scene, the intellectual faculties are endured with an energy, a vigor, a spring, not to be described. (p. 92)

Thus having shifted from a classical eighteenth-century stance to a European romantic one, Brackenridge now becomes romantic in the American epic vein, with his prairie-ocean analogy anticipating Melville's metaphors and his comments on the effect of the prairie on the mind anticipating Emerson's theories of correspondence and self-reliance. Similarly, although he

continues to see the present uninhabited landscape as a problem, the problem now is essentially one of trying to describe such a situation: "Herds of buffaloe could be seen at such a distance as to appear like black spots or dots. How different are the feelings in the midst of this romantic scenery, from those experienced in the close forests of the Ohio? . . . . but there is something strange in thus passing day after day without meeting any human beings. A vast country inhabited only by buffaloes, deer, and wolves, has more resemblance to the fictions of the 'Arabian Nights Entertainments' than to reality" (pp. 109-10). As this passage also indicates, not only did the prairie challenge Brackenridge's aesthetic sense; as in the case of the first explorers and traders, it also forced him to reassess his concept of "reality."[4]

This situation, in turn, may explain the interesting combination of aesthetic appreciation and scientific reasoning in Brackenridge's attempts to come to terms with prairie phenomena. After comparing the deep blue of the prairie sky to that seen in "Chinese painting," for example, he takes up the possible causes for the sky's hue at some length: "I could not help remarking the clearness of the air, and the enchanting blue of the sky. Whether it is to be attributed to the Alpine height, to which we have attained, or to the openness of the country, which permits every breeze to have its full scope, and thus chase away the vapors, I am not able to say" (pp. 135-36). He continues by estimating his elevation above sea level and then states: "It is said, that on the high plains of Switzerland, between the mountains, the sky is observed to possess a deeper azure; the same cause may produce a like effect on these plains. Here, we are elevated above the fogs and mists of lakes and rivers, and the sun does not transmit his rays through the white medium of clouds" (p. 136).

Using this general knowledge, he then attempts to account for the particular case in question: "The light dress of vegetation, with which these plains are clothed, may likewise be considered. Where the vegetation is luxuriant, dense vapours arise during the night; and noxious gases are produced, which floating into the atmosphere, lessen its brightness as well as its purity" (p. 136). Ultimately, however, he turns from a consideration of cause back to a statement of effect: "But whatever may be the cause of the superior beauty of the azure in the heavenly vault, I experienced a particular pleasure in contemplating it" (p. 136).

Similar to this tendency to introduce factual explanations in the midst of aesthetic appreciation is Brackenridge's frequent reader-conscious asides. As the party was approaching a particular island in the river, for example,

> our ears were assailed by a murmuring noise. As we drew near it grew to a tremendous roaring, such as to deafen us. On landing we discovered the grove crowded with buffaloe, the greater part engaged in furious combat--the air filled with their dreadful bellowing. A more frightful sight cannot easily be imagined. Conceive several thousand of these furious animals, roaring and rushing upon each other, producing a scene of horror, confusion, and fierceness, like the fight of armies: the earth trembled beneath their feet, the air was deafened, and the grove was shaken with the shock of their tremendous battle. I am conscious that with many, I run the risk of being thought to indulge in romance, in consequence of this account: but with those who are informed of the astonishing number of the buffaloe, it will not be considered incredible. We soon discovered that a herd of males had broken in amongst a number of females and that these were the cause of a conflict, which raged with unparallelled fury. (pp. 149-50)

Brackenridge's vivid description, indicative of his wonder over the scene itself (and by extension, with wonder at a land which contains such sights), might well be criticized as romantic hyperbole by those who had never been to such a place. As numerous other first-person accounts attest, however, during the buffalo mating season such sights were quite common.[5] "We fired

amongst them but without producing much effect," Brackenridge continues; "we then embarked and proceeded upon our voyage. On the hills in every direction they [buffalo] appeared by thousands. Late in the evening we saw an immense herd in motion along the sides of the hill, at full speed: their appearance had something in it, which, without incurring ridicule, I might call sublime--the sound of their footsteps, even at the distance of two miles, resembled the rumblings of distant thunder" (p. 150). Again, his defensive syntax indicates his uneasiness over whether his audience will share his opinion that such a scene might legitimately be called "sublime." Among the cultured of the Eastern United States and of England, for whom Brackenridge's Journal was being written, the image of thousands of hairy, wild cattle stomping down a hillside might not be thought deserving of such an adjective. To some of them, indeed, Lewis' description of the Great Falls of the Missouri probably seemed closer to "sublimity." But through his defensive syntax, too, one sees Brackenridge himself readjusting his assumptions to fit the imaginative demands of the new world into which he had ventured. His tone is that of the amazed Miranda--only here instead of the "brave new world" of The Tempest, it is the "strange new world" of the North American prairie.[6]

Unlike Brackenridge, John Bradbury was not just passing through the prairie. An English naturalist and traveler, he was commissioned in 1809 by the Botanical Society at Liverpool to research plant life in the Western United States. In 1810 he spent the spring and summer on short excursions from St. Louis and the following year agreed to accompany the Astorians into the interior of the continent by way of

the Missouri River. After traveling with them as far as the Mandan villages--near Bismarck, North Dakota--Bradbury met Brackenridge and decided to return down river rather than proceed overland with the Astorians. His Travels in the Interior of North America does not go much beyond Brackenridge's Journal (each describes many of the same scenes and events, for example), but two of his observations deserve particular comment. Speaking of the prairie-plains as an area, he notes that "the extent of this region is not accurately known" and continues: "But although the general surface corresponds almost exactly with the convexity of the earth, the agency of water has produced innumerable shallow valleys; and of the elevated places which separate them, those termed dividing ridges are the highest. From the top of any of these ridges the limits of the visible horizon are exactly defined, and the view as extensive as at sea, the undulations on the surface of the earth here bearing no greater proportion in the scale than the waves of an agitated ocean."[7] As in the accounts of previous commentators, we see here the need to obtain the elevated height of the ridge--very often called "divides" because of their role in drainage--in order to see as fully as possible. But in his observation that the plains' surface corresponds generally with the convexity of the earth's surface, and in the particular nature of his ocean analogy, we also have here, as in Brackenridge's discussion of blue in the prairie sky, another instance of an observer attempting scientifically to understand peculiar aspects of the prairie perspective.

Apart from a description of buffalo bulls in combat, there is only

one scene in Bradbury's Travels which reflects a perceptible aesthetic reaction to the prairie landscape:

> About two o'clock we arrived on the summit of a ridge more elevated than any we had yet passed. From thence we saw before us a beautiful plain, as we judged, about four miles across, in the direction of our course, and of similar dimension from east to west. It was bounded on all sides by long ridges, similar to that which we had ascended. The scene exhibited in this valley was sufficiently interesting to excite even in our Canadians a wish to stop a few minutes and contemplate it. The whole of the plain was perfectly level, and, like the rest of the country, without a single shrub. It was covered with the finest verdure, and in every part herds of buffaloe were feeding. I counted seventeen herds; but the aggregate number of the animals it was difficult even to guess at: some thought upwards of ten thousand. (p. 149)

In this neatly-arranged scene Bradbury finds sublimity, just as the French missionaries had responded to the prairie when they viewed it from their canoes. But, significantly he also feels compelled to confirm his reaction, offering as proof the fact that "even" the apparently unaesthetic Canadians were moved by the scene. Bradbury's description here, furthermore, is in striking contrast to his earlier description of the unenclosed prairie, which he treats in the most general terms, calling it "beautiful" or "charming," but never describing it at any length. Thus like Captain Lewis, he required certain things from a landscape in order for it to deserve aesthetic commentary: primarily an encompassing vantage point and defined boundaries. Unlike Brackenridge, he was not apparently inclined either to adapt his conventions or even to put any real pressure on them.

A single passage from Gabriel Franchère's Narrative further illustrates how literary conventions and a "literary" style can affect landscape description, especially when the landscape being described has not been actually seen by the person responsible for the conventions employed and

the style exhibited. Leaving the employ of the Pacific Fur Company on the northwest coast, Franchère returned to Montreal overland in 1814, whereupon the poet Michel Bibaud revised the clerk's account of his fur-trading years and travels.

The Narrative was published in 1820 in French, and along with Brackenridge's and Bradbury's accounts, served as a major source for Washington Irving's Astoria.[8]

The exact extent of Bibaud's contributions to the form and style of the finished book are not known, but judging from the fact that Franchère sought a collaborator because he was "Unaccustomed to literary effort," and in view of the welter of literary effusions which surround the descriptions of the prairie landscape, they were probably quite considerable. Consider, for example, the following passage:

> The river Saskatchawine flows over a bed composed of sand and marl, which contributes not a little to diminish the purity and transparency of its waters, which, like those of the Missouri, are turbid and whitish. Except for that it is one of the prettiest rivers in the world. The banks are perfectly charming, and offer in many places a scene the fairest, the most smiling, and the best diversified that can be seen or imagined: hills in varied forms, crowned with superb groves; valleys agreeably embrowned, at evening and morning, by the prolonged shadow of the hills, and of the woods which adorn them; herds of light-limbed antelopes, and heavy colossal buffalo - the former bounding along the slopes of the hills, the latter trampling under their heavy feet the verdure of the plains; all these champaign beauties reflected and doubled as it were, by the waters of the river; the melodious and varied song of a thousand birds, perched on the tree-tops; the refreshing breath of the zephyrs; the serenity of the sky; the purity and salubrity of the air; all, in a word, pours contentment and joy into the soul of the enchanted spectator. It is above all in the morning, when the sun is rising, and in the evening when he is setting, that the spectacle is really ravishing. I could not detach my regards from that superb picture, till the nascent obscurity had obliterated its perfection. Then, to the sweet pleasure that I had tasted, succeeded a triste, not to say, a sombre, melancholy. How comes it to pass, I said to myself, that so beautiful a country is not inhabited by human creatures? The songs, the hymns, the prayers, of the laborer and the artisan, shall they never be heard in these fine plains?[9]

While the original impression in this scene may have been Franchere's, the language, imagery, and syntax are clearly Bibaud's, and one editor, in reprinting a longer passage from which this has been quoted, notes that Bibaud's revisions more than tripled the length of Franchère's draft description.[10]

Because Bibaud had never seen the landscape being described, his revisions represent a conventional response only; that is, as a collaborator he simply took the landscape Franchère described and plugged it, through his embellishments, into the existing tradition of literary landscape description--a tradition developed in Europe. Hence his descriptions here stand in contrast to Brackenridge's, too, because the latter realized that his conventional literary responses were somehow not equal to the land he was describing, and also that his readers, who were versed in the tradition out of which those responses sprang, might not find the sight of buffalo marching down a divide to be so very "sublime." But Bibaud, unencumbered by any actual experience of the landscape itself, simply fitted Franchère's descriptions into conventional forms--zephryrs, champaign beauties, and the like. Accordingly, the prairie is presented as a lush garden, and Bibaud's excitement gives way to a triste only when he, like Brackenridge, realizes that there are no Europeans about to taste of its delights. Thus, though like the commentaries, Bibaud's emendations serve to translate the prairie into familiar terms, his method of accommodation is almost the opposite of other interpreters: whereas they tended to search for appropriate analogies, he transformed the prairie and made it conform. Untrammeled as he was by fact, by any memory of personal experience, however, Bibaud could give his imagination free rein, and if purple passages are the result of that freedom so also is a lack of self-

consciousness and qualification. Other writers, like Lewis, Brackenridge, or Bradbury, were confined by their notions of beauty or of sublimity, on the one hand, and by their experience of the prairie, on the other. As a result, they respond to the land somewhat ambivalently--as if the very strangeness of the prairie environment, especially in terms of perception, stood as a very real imaginative impediment. None of these factors weighed on Bibaud.

* * *

Exploratory expeditions continued to venture into the prairie after those of Lewis and Clark, and of Pike. The record left by one of these, Edwin James's _Account of an Expedition from Pittsburgh to the Rocky Mountains, performed in the Years 1819, 1820 . . . under the Command of Maj. S. H. Long_ (1823),[11] is among the most significant. James, who was botanist and geologist to the expedition, which was itself essentially scientific in character, wrote the account in consultation with Major Long and other members of the party. Perhaps because the expedition struck out overland from the Missouri toward the Rocky Mountains, James repeatedly complains of the monotony of the view as they cross "the same uninteresting and dreary country as before," although he is constantly amused at observing the motions of the "countless thousands of bisons" which usually surrounded the party (XV: 255). At other points in his description James agrees with Pike as to the desert character of much of the region (XVII: 147-48); he was, moreover, the first person to designate the area "The Great American Desert."[12] He concurred with the French missionaries and Brackenridge regarding the prearranged appearance of the prairies and trees along rivers (XIV: 164) and also shared Lewis and Clark's opinion that the treelessness of the prairie

was caused by its frequent fires (XIV: 161).

But Jame's Account is most revealing in its comments on the interaction of the whiteman and the prairie. Thus after explaining that their "path lay through extensive and fertile meadows, stretching away to the distant horizon, and bounded sometimes by the margin of a forest," he goes on to observe: "The elk, the deer, and the bison, the indiginous inhabitants of these delightful meadows, had been long since driven away by the incursions of the white settlers, scattered at remote intervals on the borders of the forests. The dense and uniform growth of grass had risen untrodden and uncropped, and was now waving with ceaseless undulations, as the wind swept lightly over the surface of the plain" (XV: 171). Conversely, he records how the same day the expedition was overtaken by a thunderstorm which included, for a time, hail: "the wind soon rose to a tempest; and hailstones of uncommon magnitude began to fall, accompanied by thunder and lightning. Our first thought was to dismount from our horses, and shelter ourselves from the hail on the leeward side of their bodies. We were in the middle of an extensive prairie, where no other protection could be looked for" (XV: 172). As the prairie is rendered barren by man's incursions, in short, so it also exposes man to the force of the elements.[13]

As we have seen, Pike and his party, and Lewis and Clark, too, noticed that the vast line of sight afforded by the prairie made objects appear much closer than they in fact were; James notes this same phenomenon and another as well:

> Nothing is more difficult than to estimate, by the eye, the distance of objects seen on the plains. A small animal, as a wolf or a turkey, sometimes appears of the magnitude of a horse, on account of an erroneous impression of the distance. Three elk, which were the first we had seen, crossed our path at some distance before us. The effect of the mirage, together with our indefinite idea of the

> distance, magnified these animals to a most prodigious size. For a moment we thought that we saw the mastodon of America, moving across these vast plains, which seem to have been created for his dwelling place. An animal seen for the first time, or any object with which the eye is unacquainted, usually appears much enlarged, and inaccurate ideas are formed of the magnitude and distance of all surrounding objects; but if some well-known animal, as a deer or a wolf, comes into the field of vision so near as to be recognized, the illusions vanish, and all things return to their proper dimension. (XV: 184)

James is the first commentator to note the manner by which unfamiliar animals or objects are apprehended on the prairie: through the commingling of previous experience (both personal experience and that store of acculturated experience embodied in conventions) with new experience. As he states, "illusions vanish" upon recognition; that is, they vanish upon the establishment of a correspondence--in the mind--between what one is seeing and what has been seen previously. But until that correspondence is established in a new landscape like the prairie, the uninitiated are forced to suffer the discomfort of their "illusions."

This same situation is reflected, but in a more threatening aspect, when James later notes an alarm caused when some of the party reported that they had seen Indians on horseback, traveling at a distance: "but of this there could be no certainty, the imagination often representing a herd of antelopes, or other animals, seen at a distance, and perhaps distorted by the looming of the prairie, as so many mounted Indians. We had often found ourselves more grossly abused by our eyesight, than is supposed in this instance, having mistaken turkies for bisons, wolves for horses, &c" (XV: 259). Like Brackenridge's reference to "lurking" Indians, James here reflects the way in which the illusions that vexed travelers often took the form of imported and projected fears. Ironically, James's comments here also parallel Michel Bibaud's imaginative freedom when he was revising

Franchère's account of his travels. Because human eyesight was "abused," and true visual perspective unavailable to the uninitiated prairie traveler, his imagination (allowed a free rein) often filled in the gaps left vacant by the inability to see: hence James's Indians on horseback and, before them, his vision of the "mastodon of America" off in the distances.

Like most other observers, James also provides his most extensive description of the buffalo when he is able to view them from above. After climbing a local height, an "undulation," in one instance he describes them as "obscuring . . . the verdant plant" and covering the entire field of vision. He notices small clouds of dust here and there, raised by both playful and earnest scuffles between individual bulls, and finally concludes: "On the distant bluffs, individuals were constantly disappearing, whilst others were presenting themselves to our view, until, as the dusk of the evening increased, their massive forms, thus elevated above the line of other objects, were but dimly defined on the skies" (XV: 239). Both Castañeda and Alexander Henry describe similar sights; unlike them, however, James registers his impressions largely in terms of visual perspective rather numerical estimates of the herd's population. Although he mentions numbers of buffalo, saying "at least ten thousand here burst on our sight in the instant," he emphasizes the panoramic view of the herd. And because he describes individual buffalo at the horizon line, moving in and out of sight, his description dramatizes the spectacle of buffalo "as far as the eye could reach." The party, moreover, was moved by this view afforded them by their vantage point and the prairie landscape: "We retired to our evening fare, highly gratified with the novel spectacle we had witnessed, and with the most sanguine expectations" for the next morning's buffalo hunt. But in the morning when they "again sought the living picture" James and his fellows are shocked to find that "not one remained" (XV: 239). James's

dismay over such a radical change is evident in his vivid diction.

Yet only striking scenes such as this--the panoramic sweep of buffalo wherever he looked--prompted James to recreate his subjective impressions with descriptive fidelity. Elsewhere in his Account, James's reactions must be largely inferred. Once the Rocky Mountains have been sighted, for example, James's recurrent references to their proximity indicate his anticipation; he notes that the prairie makes the mountains look closer than they actually are, and with each succeeding reference his impatience with prairie travel becomes more evident. James's actual feelings are confirmed when, upon reaching the mountains, he is able to report: "At eleven o'clock we arrived at the boundary of that vast plain, across which we had held our weary march for a distance of near one thousand miles, and encamped at the base of the mountain" (XV: 285). So, like Henday on the far side of the "Muscuty plains," James's weariness upon reaching the mountains is registered through his tone and a single word, "weary."

Perhaps because James was a scientist, the Account provides one of the best single objective narratives of a march directly across the prairie-plains. Though he was affected by the landscape, he generally kept his personal reaction in the background--excepting when he notes his frustration over the dreariness of the landscape. And, because the Account was shaped by the collaboration of the various scientists on the expedition in addition to James himself, the work presents a type of objective consensus on the prairie region.

* * *

For the most glowing account of the prairie during this period one must turn to Commerce of the Prairie (1844) by Josiah Gregg, who from 1831

to 1840 was a Sante Fe trader, traveling from the United States across the prairie-plains into Mexican territory. Gregg originally came to the prairie seeking relief from an illness, and according to his own testimony, found it. "Most chronic diseases" are often, he says, "radically cured" on the prairie "owing, no doubt, to the peculiarities of diet, and the regular exercise incident to prairie life, as well as to the purity of the atmosphere of those elevated unembarrassed regions. An invalid myself, I can answer for the efficacy of the remedy, at least in my own case."[14] The effect of this atmosphere on Gregg's health undoubtedly accounts in part for his "passion for prairie life" (XIX: 162).

Unlike Bibaud's enthusiasm, however, Gregg's "passion" is founded on direct experience. He made eight round trips through the prairie, and throughout the Commerce he speaks as one who is intimately acquainted with the area:

> Our route had already led us up the course of the Arkansas river for over a hundred miles, yet the earlier caravans often passed from fifty to a hundred [miles] further up before crossing the river; therefore, nothing like a regular ford had ever been established. Nor was there a road, not even a trail, anywhere across the famous plain, extending between the Arkansas and Cimarron rivers, a distance of over fifty miles, which now lay before us--the scene of such frequent sufferings in former times for want of water. It having been determined upon, however, to strike across the dreaded desert the following morning, the whole party was preparing for the "water scrape," as these droughty drives are very appropriately called by prairie travellers. (XIX: 218-19)

What should also be noticed in this description is the way in which Gregg combines his previous knowledge and experience with the action taking place immediately before him. The area Gregg is describing is along the Arkansas River--where Coronado bemoaned the lack of water and complained over the quality of that which was available--and his perception of the land itself

is the same as the Spaniard's: "This tract of country may truly be styled the grand 'prairie ocean'; for not a single landmark is to be seen for forty miles--scarcely a visible eminence by which to direct one's course. All is as level as the sea, and the compass was our surest, as well as our principle guide" (XIX: 219). The analogy with the ocean, which Coronado first used, had, however, become a literary commonplace by the time Gregg was writing,[15] and his dependence on his compass recalls in inverted fashion the Canadians who accompanied Thompson to the Mandan villages in 1797--they, of course, did not trust the compass "on land."

Like other travelers, too, Gregg uses the scaling of an eminence for his most prolonged and detailed analysis of the prairie and its effects upon those who travel through it. Both as a landmark and as a perch, a hill Gregg calls "the 'Round Mound'" serves as his vantage point for analysis of the surrounding landscape:

> We were yet at least three miles from this mound, when a party set out on foot to ascend it, in order to get a view of the surrounding country. They felt confident it was but half a mile off--at most, three-quarters; but finding the distance so much greater than they had anticipated, many began to lag behind . . . . The optical illusions occasioned by the rarified and transparent atmosphere of these elevated plains, are often truly remarkable, affording another exemplification of its purity. One would almost fancy himself looking through a spy-glass, for objects frequently appear at scarce one-forth of their real distance--frequently much magnified, and more especially elevated. (XIX: 241)

Gregg continues to attest, like James, that objects and animals seen from a distance on the prairie are taken for much larger things or beings: antelopes for elks or wild horses, ravens for Indians or for buffalo, and weeds or tufts of grass or buffalo bones, for human beings. A herd of buffalo, moreover, "upon a distant plain often appear so increased in bulk that they would be mistaken by the inexperienced for a grove of trees. This

is usually attended with a continual waving and looming, which often so writhe and distort distant objects as to render them too indistinct to be discriminated" (XIX: 242). Like James, too, Gregg observes that this illusion has the greatest effect on those who are inexperienced, and that it vanishes when one recognizes familiar objects and is less likely to recur as one gains more prairie experience. Gregg's observation that the inexperienced might mistake a group of buffalo for a grove of trees is also especially significant in light of Castañeda's previous description; the Spaniard had written that the buffalo "looked like smooth-trunked pines whose tops were joined . . . ."[16]

The "continual waving and looming, which often so writhe and distort distant objects" reflects Gregg's recognition of the optical effects of heat rising from the surface of the prairie: the phenomenon "seems to be occasioned by gaseous vapours rising from the ground while the beaming rays of the sun are darting upon it" (XIX: 242). As he also notes, however, the increased density of the air along the surface of the earth creates another optical illusion: "false ponds" or the desert mirage. "Even the experienced traveller," Gregg maintains, "is often deceived by these upon the arid plains, where a disappointment is most severely felt. The thirsty wayfarer, after jogging for hours under a burning sky, at length espies a pond--yes, it must be water--it looks too natural for it to be mistaken. He quickens his pace, enjoying in anticipation the pleasure of a refreshing draught: but lo! as he approaches, it recedes or entirely disappears; and when upon its apparent site, he is ready to doubt his own vision--he finds but a parched plain under his feet" (XIX: 242). Aside from his mention of the phenomenon itself, what is interesting here is Gregg's effective method of narration: he dramatizes his telling by adopting the point of view of the "experienced traveller."

After his lengthy digression concerning the optical illusions caused by the prairie landscape, Gregg allows some of his party to experience the view from the summit of the Round Mound--"a full and advantageous view of the surrounding country, in some directions to a distance of a hundred miles or more" (XIX: 243). After so doing, Gregg launches into a description of the plains themselves: "These immense bordering plains, and even the hills with which they are interspersed, are wholly destitute of timber, except a chance scattering tree upon the margins of the bluffs and ravines, which but scantily serves to variegate the landscape. Not even a buffalo was now to be seen to relieve the dull monotony of the scene; although at some seasons (particularly in the fall) these prairies are literally strewed with herds of this animal. Then, 'thousands and tens of thousands' might at times be seen from this eminence" (XIX: 243-44). Like others before him, Gregg uses the view from the summit to unify and encompass the whole of the prairie landscape spread before him, but because of his experience he also provides a larger content for each individual scene. To the same effect, after concluding his comments on the buffalo, Gregg continues to take advantage of the view from atop Round Mound, and describes the appearance of his caravan as it heads farther into the prairie, moving in four parallel columns (XIX: 246-47).

Conversely, Gregg's method in the Commerce as a whole is to collapse eight round trips into one, whereby he takes his readers on a "typical" trip in the middle 1830s from the frontiers of the United States to Sante Fe in Mexico. As a result of this combination of techniques, the prairie emerges from his work as an entity and not just as the incidental topography seen in other narratives and accounts.[17]

Another who knew the prairie intimately was Fr. Pierre-Jean De Smet,

S. J., who traveled and lived throughout the West from 1838 until his death in 1873. As in the case of Gregg, his extensive contact with the prairie allowed him to condense and structure his experiences and in certain of his descriptive passages synthesize numerous trips into a single observation. Whereas Gregg concerned himself most often with matters of perspective and was scientifically oriented, however, De Smet was more literary and concerned with the emotional impact of the prairie.

Representative of De Smet's method throughout his writings is his description of the first herd of buffalo he saw. Having left camp early in the morning, alone, to view the nearby herd, De Smet first recounts the caution he exercised in approaching the buffalo, because of their keen sense of smell, explaining that the odor of humans, and especially of white men, they find to be "insupportable":

> I gained, without being perceived, a high bluff, resembling in shape the Waterloo monument; from it I enjoyed a view of perhaps a dozen miles. This vast plain was so covered with animals, that the markets or fairs of Europe could give you only the feeblest idea of it. It was indeed like a fair of the whole world assembled in one of its loveliest plains. I looked with wonder upon the slow and majestic walk of these heavy wild cattle, marching silently in single file, while others cropped with avidity the rich pasturage, which is called the short buffalo grass. Whole bands were lying amidst flowers on the grass; the scene altogether realized in some sort the ancient traditions of the holy scriptures, speaking of the vast pastoral countries of the Orient, and of the cattle upon a thousand hills.[18]

Like other observers, De Smet resorts to analogy to describe the unfamilar scene and to a certain extent sees it only in terms of what he knows. Significantly, he also tries to "Christianize" the scene by evoking a biblical precedent just as he tries to overcome its newness by referring to an ancient prototype.

The "pastoral" allusion, however, quickly gives way to military metaphor and finally factual description:

> I could not weary of gazing upon this delightful scene, and for two hours I watched these moving masses in the same state of astonishment. Suddenly the immense army seemed startled; one battalion gave the panic to another, and the whole multitude was in flight, running in every direction. The buffalo had caught sight of their common enemy; the hunters had rushed among them on the gallop. The earth seemed to tremble under their steps, and the dull sounds that came back were like the mutterings of distant thunder. The hunters shot to right and left; they made a great slaughter among the fattest of these animals . . . . They had a number of horseloads of tongues, humps, ribs, etc., all the rest being left to the wolves and vultures. (I: 206)

As with Brackenridge, De Smet here reveals the way in which reality puts an end to European and romantic notions of the sublime and in turn begins to engender more appropriate analogies. Thus after he recounts the buffalo hunt, De Smet notes that his party "camped not far from the scene of the butchery" and that "In the middle of the night frightful sounds, howlings and barkings awoke me; one would have thought the four tribes of the Pawnees were assembled to dispute our passage over their territory" (I: 206-07). Alarmed, De Smet awoke his guide, who laughed and told him that prairie wolves were only celebrating their feast on the abandoned buffalo carcasses.

More frequently, however, it is the lifelessness of the prairie which strikes De Smet, occasioning him to resort to personification and a communal form of address. "Let us descend the Missouri together"[19] is, for example, the way he begins a section which includes the following description of a three-hundred mile area of the river between the Cheyenne River and Fort Randall (in present-day South Dakota and Nebraska).

> the physiognomy of the country, on both sides of the Missouri, is so monotonous as in the end to depress the observer and weary the sight. Wooded points are rare, and with the exception of some bottom lands, the land is generally dry and arid. Large herds of buffalo, antelope and deer are seen from time to time at a great distance, and seem then to animate the sad desert and lend it a

> fleeting interest. Take away the animals, and for days and weeks together there is nothing to be seen but an endless succession of plateaus, bluffs, and hills, which all resemble one another and seem drawn up like a long file of brothers and sisters, representing the same types. (IV: 1382)

The prairie landscape evokes a feeling of sadness because of its very emptiness; yet, as with Brackenridge's melancholy and Bibaud's triste, part of the attraction of the prairie landscape to the European imagination was its very emptiness--the fact that it was devoid of humanity. It was this fact which served to make the landscape unique, this and the unobstructed line of sight which allowed its very emptiness to be seen so fully.[20]

In contrast to this negative reaction to the "monotony" of the prairie, however, is De Smet's later observation: "I have traversed these regions in all seasons of the year. I have seen the prairies in spring, covered with a rich and supple mantle of verdure, waving and bowing under every breeze; they were enameled with flowers, as varied in form as in color. But at every bend or twist of the river, you see the same prairie, the same bluffs and the same hills, following the same type and the same positions, and in spite of their uniformity, they are beautiful yet" (IV: 1382-83). Thus in surveying the various explorers and travelers' accounts, it is necessary to remember that their reactions were formed not only by their angle of vision, mode of travel, and reason for being on the prairie initially, but also by the season of the year in which they glimpsed the prairie. Brackenridge, for example, would probably not have been as unconstrained had he seen the same prairie in winter.

The changes in the external appearance of the prairie--as a result of fire and winter--are significantly the very things which De Smet goes on to describe, and in these changes he reads the message of "The Preacher":

> I have admired them [the prairies] after the burning summer sun had transformed the vivacious green into a greyish yellow and the supple plant had become hard, dry and crisp, waiting only for the match of a careless hunter or a spark from the lightning to become the prey of flames. These aspects are disagreeable to the sight. I have seen this country on fire by day. The sun seemed to intensify the flame, and thick clouds of smoke rose above hills, uplands and bottoms, until the light of day was obscured. By night the spectacle is very different. The column of smoke becomes a column of fire; you see fire in all of its forms. Here, it is solitary brasiers and snaky flames winding from branch to branch; there, it is a moving wall, a long train of fire, which lengthens, advances, and devours everything upon its line of passage. I have passed these places again after the fire had devastated them, leaving not the slightest trace of verdure. These plateaus, these prairies, these bluffs and hills then offered the image of a land of desolation, which it makes one sick to look at. Finally the snows of winter come and cover with a mournful shroud all this strange nature. This is its last and gloomiest transformation; it gives us an idea of the instability of all worldly things. (IV: 1383)

Though De Smet thus draws a universal moral from the situation, his reference to "this strange nature" also suggests a puzzlement over the uniqueness of the "worldly things" of the prairie.

* * *

Less concerned with last things and more concerned with how to articulate the "strange nature" of the prairie was Edmund Flagg, whose <u>The Far West</u> (1838) was the first book he published in a career as a miscellaneous writer, newspaper man, and diplomat. Flagg, who was in his early twenties (and just graduated from Bowdoin College) when he toured the west, reflects both his East coast origins and college education in his observations, concluding the following description, indeed, with a quotation from William Cullen Bryant's "The Prairies":

> I was struck, as is every traveller at first view of these vast plains, with the grandeur, and novelty, and loveliness of the scene before me. For some moments I remained stationary, looking out upon the boundless landscape before me. The tall grasstops waving in the billowing beauty

> in the breeze; the narrow pathway winding off like a serpent over the rolling surface, disappearing and reappearing till lost in the luxuriant herbage; the shadowy, cloud-like aspect of the far-off trees, looming up, here and there, in isolated masses along the horizon, like the pyramidal canvass of ships at sea; the deep-green groves besprinkled among the vegetation, like islets in the waters; the crimson-died prairie-flower flashing in the sun--these features of inanimate nature seemed strangely beautiful to one born and bred amid the bold mountain scenery of the North, and who now gazed upon them 'for the first.'[21]

Flagg's approach and reaction to the prairie landscape is reminiscent of Bibaud's convention-laden rendering of Franchère. Unlike the poet, however, Flagg never loses sight of the physical scene before him: his flowery outpourings take the forms of interpretive analogies (again, the prairie likened to the sea) and contrasts (the prairie versus "the bold mountain scenery of the north"). Bibaud, having never seen the landscape he was describing, lapses into his "triste" over the absence of humans and spends the bulk of his description on a conventional reverie. His descriptions represent the application of conventions only, while Flagg, however saccharine his sentiments, is at least applying those same conventions to a perceived landscape.

Flagg, like James before him, was at one point caught in a thunder-storm on the prairie; his description, which begins by chronicling the dusty, rainless forty days which preceded the storm, leads up to it by way of foreshadowing. His description of the storm itself is replete with literary allusions and, after recounting his impression of it, Flagg concludes: "I have witnessed thunder-storms on the deep, and many a one among the cliffs of my native hills; but a midnight thunder-gust upon the broad prairie-plains of the West is more terrible than they. A more sublimely magnificent spectacle have I never beheld than that, when one of these broad-sheeted masses of purple light would blaze along the black-bosom of the cloud,

quiver for an instant over the prairie miles in extent, flinging around the scene a garment of flame, and then go out in darkness" (XXVI: 217-18). Flagg does not hesitate--as Brackenridge did earlier--to assign the term "sublime" to a prairie scene; moreover, he amplifies its meaning by yoking it to the adjective "magnificent." Brackenridge, however, was describing a herd of buffalo; he thought the view was sublime, but hesitated to pronounce it so, since the scene was so intrinsically unlike any other which had been so designated. In Flagg's case, however, the scene was not outside of conventional assumptions regarding sublimity--indeed the awesome power of nature is all the more visible to Flagg on the prairie--since his view is untrammeled and he is surrounded by neither trees nor buildings. Thus whereas in some instances the prairie landscape challenged the conventional aesthetic criteria of these travelers, in others the landscape served to reaffirm them.

In another instance Flagg pointedly addresses the question of the aesthetic potential of the prairie landscape--though again significantly in the context of a conventional subject, the sunset: "The blue heavens of Italy have tasked the inspiration of an hundred bards, and the warm brush of her own Lorraine has swept the canvass with their gorgeous transcript! But what pencil has wandered over the grander scenes of the North American prairie? What bard has struck his lyre to the wild melody of loveliness of the prairie sunset?" In turn, with a nationalist flair, he inverts the typical expression of unfamiliarity: "I cannot tell of the beauties of climes I have never seen; but I have gazed upon all the varied loveliness of my own fair native land . . . and in vain have tasked my fancy to image a fairer" (XXVI: 251). Clearly Flagg has been struck by the natural beauties of the prairie scene.

Similarly, in describing the prairie in moonlight, Flagg first begins by employing the typical analogy--"One can hardly persuade himself that he is not upon the ocean shore"--but he then goes on to mention the literary genre most frequently associated with such scenes: "There was a clash of fascinating romance about the scene" (XXVI: 331-32). And finally he concludes by claiming for America an exotic setting comparable to those most fabled throughout the world; while northern Asia may boast of her "boundless pastures and steppes" and "India her jungles" and Africa "her Bedoin sands," the "vast regions of the 'Far West'" may boast of their "broad-rolling prairies" (XXVI: 343).

Not all of Flagg's contemporaries were as unqualified in their comparisons of the prairie with other settings, but many evidenced the shift to an American basis of comparison which he had employed. Thus Thomas J. Farnham, another commentator from the East who traveled through the prairie in 1839, evaluates the landscape in the following manner:

> There is indeed a wide difference in the surface and the productions of these regions. In the plains are none of the evergreen ridges, the cold clear springs, and snug flowering valleys of New England; none of the pulse of busy men that beats from the Atlantic through the great body of human industry to the western border of the republic; none of the sweet villages and homes of the old Saxon race; but there are the vast savannahs, resembling molten seas of emeralds sparkling with flowers, arrested while stormy and heaving, and fixed in eternal repose. Nor are lowing herds to be found there, and bleating flocks, which dependence on man has rendered subservient to his will; but there are thousands of fleet and silent antelope, myriads of bellowing buffalo, and perpetual patrimony of the wild, uncultivated red man.[22]

Just as Flagg contrasted the prairie with "the mountain scenery of the North," so in addition to the conventional Old World comparisons, Farnham uses the New England landscape. Just as America and Americans came to be seen and understood without dependence on Europe from the late eighteenth-

century onward (witness the "translations" of Crèvecoeur and Tocqueville, among other such explanatory writings), the prairie landscape can be seen as undergoing a parallel process: as its unique characteristics became known, the frame of reference became the rest of North America, without reference to Europe. In turn, as the century progressed travelers became less embarrassed to record their subjective reactions to the landscape.

John Palliser, who led the most famous exploratory expedition into the Canadian prairie in the late 1850s, earlier undertook a hunting trip into the American prairie during 1847 and 1848. His book, Solitary Rambles and Adventures of a Hunter on the Prairies (1853) is largely a guidebook for hunters and his perspective is slightly different from those examined thus far. Because hunting is a sport which requires a keen attention to the terrain as habitat for the animals sought, Palliser pays closer attention to the terrain than did some of his predecessors. Like some of them, Palliser notes the optical effects engendered by the prairie, "almost like looking through a telescope."[23] Like many of them, too, he remarks upon the difficulty of a land without landmarks: "The eye ranges over a sea of short waving grass without a single intervening object to afford it the accustomed means of estimating relative distance" (p. 106).

Palliser's most telling comments, however, relate to how the prairie makes him feel. Though he begins with a discussion of the local vegetation, he concludes by revealing his personal reaction to the prairie itself: "The vegetation in this part of the prairie was very rank, and in some places gigantic, the grass growing over thousands of acres from five to eight feet high. For two days we travelled through this without intermission, occasionally meeting with willows and small spots of timber. Everything around--the huge coarse grass--weeds that I never saw before, rank and tangled in

their unchecked growth--and the eternal illimitable sweep of the undulating prairie, impressed on me a sense of vastness quite overwhelming" (p. 87). Similarly, while later struggling still through this landscape, Palliser remarks: "I know not when I have felt so forcibly conscious of my own insignificance, as when struggling through this immense waste, and feeling as though I were suddenly carried backward into some remote and long past age, and as though I were encroaching on the territories of the Mammoth and the Mastodon" (p. 88). The prairie, according to Palliser, is a primordial landscape--it makes him feel small and insignificant. Unlike Farnham, therefore, Palliser does not describe the prairie mainly in terms of comparison with known things--his strange feelings of insignificance seem to require the unknown, so he alters his allusions accordingly. Similarly, so overpowering is the impact of the prairie that it overrides any conventional landscape notions Palliser may have had before he ventured into it. Instead of accommodating the prairie to literary convention, he searches for the appropriate words.

Another description from this period shows the same sort of direct dealing with the effect of the prairie on the imagination, and in this case the writer is conscious of the fact that his text is essentially mute regarding the vastness of the region. John Lambert, topographer to the American expedition led by I. I. Stevens in 1853-54, shows a degree of imagination not usually found in official government reports. After having traveled through the American territory west of the Red River of the North as far as present-day Idaho, in order to evaluate the land as a possible railroad route, Lambert reports:

> The eye grows weary travelling over the naked outlines of the successive plateaux . . . . It is difficult to convey an adequate

> idea of these dreary solitudes. Let it be remembered that a few minutes reading embraces sections which require tedious weeks to traverse; and that even travelling over and observing them with the patient labor of months, leaves but a feeling of their vastness, which baffles the effort to express it. The impressive silence of succeeding days is broken at rare intervals by the crack of some stray hunter's rifle, or perchance by the yell of painted warriors on a foray; but when the twilight wanes over the peaceful camp, when the evening meal is over, and the incidents of the march are recounted, then the "drowsy ear of night" is roused to listen to the prolonged and melancholy cry of prowling wolves.[24]

Even Lambert, after months of travel, has but a "feeling" of the prairie's vastness, "which baffles the effort to express it." He knows that description summarizes, so any description reduces the impression of the prairie left with the reader to one which is--because of the attendant reduction--essentially inaccurate. Lambert's details, like Palliser's, present images which reinforce his feeling of vastness--solitary rifles and howling wolves--and also give a romantic cast to the scene. Ironically, it is as if Lambert feels that the only hope of describing the prairie accurately is by pointing up the difficulty in doing so: details can be pointed to and feelings described, but the prairie is a landscape which eludes definition. That someone traveling over the prairie in the mid-nineteenth century would hold such an opinion is not surprising, but that a topographer would focus upon his imaginative impression, rather than discussing the fine differences in the land which his trained eye could isolate, reflects the strong, perhaps overwhelming impact of the land; in this passage, at least, his imaginative response took priority over his scientific objectivity.

Lambert was objective, however, in offering his opinion regarding the aridity of the upper Great Plains. Writing while the idea of the Great American Desert still had currency, Lambert is careful not to use the term "desert." The possibility of barrenness, he wrote, "must be greatly

qualified, if not removed, by the fact that all these regions are the pasture-grounds of frequent herds of various kinds of deer, particularly of the graceful antelope, with quantities of inferior game and species of vermin, and, last and greatest, the unfailing millions of the uncouth and ponderous buffalo."[25] Because during the pre-Civil War period Americans, as Henry Nash Smith has observed, "were used to judging the fertility of new land by the kind of trees growing on it," Lambert's observation is carefully couched so as to combat this prejudice by suggesting another litmus test for fertility: the animals supported by the land.[26]

Horace Greeley, perhaps the most famous commentator on the prairie during the 1850s, also had an opinion regarding the Great American Desert and he held resoundingly in the affirmative. His letters, written during his "overland journey" to California in the summer of 1859, were published in the newspaper he edited, the New York Tribune. Writing from somewhere in Western Kansas, at station 18 on the Pike's Peak Express stage-coach line (which had only just begun operations), Greeley states: "I would match this station and its surroundings against any other scene on our continent for desolation. From the high prairie over which we approach it, you overlook a grand sweep of treeless desert, through the middle of which flows the Republican [River], usually in several shallow streams separated by sandbars or islets--its whole volume being less than that of the Mohawk at Utica though it has drained above this point an area equal to that of Connecticut."[27] Thus utilizing comparison to the East, Greeley holds that his impression of the land is not dependent on local or seasonal variations in rainfall: "We have not passed a drop of living water in all our morning's ride . . . . Yet there has been much rain here this season, some of it not long ago. But this is a region of sterility and thirst. If

utterly unfed, the grass of a season would hardly suffice, when dry, to nourish a prairie fire." Following this, Greeley sardonically encapsulates his impression of the land with the sentence "Even the animals have deserted us" (p. 82).

As a newspaperman, Greeley tends more to the factual than the imaginative--his tour is, after all, fulfilling a real need for his readership, since curiosity regarding the West was high throughout the 1850s. He does, however, occasionally make comments which reflect the awe with which he looks at the land. For example, after explaining that because of the prairie winds the custom is "to stake down the wagons encamped on the open prairie," he exclaims: "[these winds] which sweep the high prairies of this region are terrible; and the few trees that grow thinly along the creek bottoms rarely venture to raise their heads above the adjacent bluffs, to which they owe their doubtful hold on existence" (p. 81). Similarly, Greeley's imagination appears to be overwhelmed when he contemplates the number of buffalo to be seen; he is able to offer his reader only "some approach to an idea of their countless myriads" (pp. 72-73).

One of the most telling passages in Greeley's account, however, involves his recapitulation and reevaluation of various attitudes and expectations concerning the prairie from the vantage point of his location in central Kansas:

> Margaret Fuller long ago observed that the Illinois prairies seemed to repel the idea of being new to civilized life and industry--that they, with their borders of trees and belts of timber, remind the traveler rather of the parks and spacious fields of an old country like England--that you were constantly on the involuntary lookout for the chateaux, or at least the humbler farmhouses, which should diversify such a scene. True as this is or was of Illinois, the resemblance is far more striking here, where the grass is all so closely pastured and the cattle are seen in such vast herds on every ridge . . . . It is hard to realize that this is the center of a

> region of wilderness and solitude, so far as the labors of civilized man are concerned--that the first wagon passed through some two months ago. But the utter absence of houses or buildings of any kind, and our unbridged, unworked road, winding on its way for hundreds of miles without track other than buffalo intersecting or leading away from it on either hand, bring us back to reality. (p. 73)

Though he ends by acknowledging "reality," Greeley shares the same expectations and melancholy articulated by Brackenridge, Franchère (presumably), De Smet, and Flagg; and like Fr. Allouez along the Mississippi and Lewis and Clark along the Missouri, it is the symmetry of the scene which attracts him.

As his reference to "our unbridged, unworked road" suggests, however, Greeley did not come west without a practical motive: a desire to see if the transcontinental railroad he had been advocating for over ten years was feasible.[28] Similarly, as the most famous newspaper editor of one of the most widely-read papers of the time in the United States, he was conscious of the need to set the matter straight. Accordingly, in contrast to the foregoing immediate and personal response, one finds passages wherein he specifically addresses his expectations and those which informed contemporary opinion concerning the prairie in particular and the west in general--based on, one assumes, some of the same accounts we have been examining. Referring to the prairie lying between the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers--in north-central Missouri--Greeley observes:

> Though the day was dreary, I noted with deep interest the country through which we passed, which disappointed me in these respects:
> 1. The land is better than I had supposed.
> 2. It is of more uniform grade--hardly anything worth calling a hill being seen after rising the bluff from the Mississippi till we come in sight of the bluffs which enclose the Missouri
> 3. There is more prairie and less timber than I had expected.
> 4. There is definitely less population and improvement. (p. 10)

Greeley's dispatches thus both confirmed and denied the preconceptions of his readers, and for the period prior to large-scale settlement--that is, before the Civil War--Greeley is an apt embodiment of knowledge and conjecture concerning the prairie. He is also, however, typical of all recorders to his time in that his interpretations are combinations of what he sees and what he expected to see. Near Atchinson, Kansas, for example, Greeley writes: "I went out three or four miles on the high prairie this afternoon, and the furthest thing I could see was the white canvas of a moving train [prairie schooners]. I have long been looking for the West, and here it is at last" (p. 14). Such a sight, certainly, is one which Greeley expected to see--having read the numerous accounts of trips over the Oregon Trail--and through it he knew he had arrived in the West. He may also, as a man concerned with political policies to encourage westward expansion (he saw a Pacific Railroad as "'a National necessity'"), have seen in this single wagon train a harbinger of the future.

* * *

No such expectations pertained to the Canadian West--not, however, because the area was better known, but just the opposite. The rate of settlement, as well as the time at which it was accomplished, varied throughout the prairie. While settlers crossing the prairie on their way to Oregon and California were frequent from the late 1840s on, such movement into the Canadian prairie did not come until the late 1880s. So when Greeley was noting the settlement in Kansas, British North Americans were virtually ignorant of the prairie region of the British possessions. Fur traders had operated in the area for well over a century, but since settlement was extremely limited, the Canadian North West was virtually an

unknown region. The first official forays into the area were not undertaken until the late 1850s, when two separate expeditions under Palliser and Henry Youle Hind, respectively, were accomplished. With the transfer of the Hudson's Bay territories to Canada in 1869 and the first Riel (Manitoba) uprising which resulted from the transfer, however, attention became focused on the northern prairie --and official and autobiographical accounts began to appear in increasing numbers.

Of the two initial expeditions, only Hind's report reflects an imaginative reaction (perhaps because Palliser's earlier experience on the Missouri prairie had occasioned him to become accustomed to the landscape). Describing White Horse Plain (just west of present-day Winnipeg)--"a vast, slightly undulating prairie, bounded by the horizon in every direction but the south, where the distant woods of the Assiniboine [River] afford some relief to the eye"[29]--Hind expressed the same monotony experienced by James and Flagg, among others, to the south. At the same time, however, he registers his aesthetic appreciation of the novelty of the scene:

> The vast ocean of level prairie which lies to the west of Red River must be seen in its extraordinary aspects, before it can be rightly valued and understood in reference to its future occupation by an energetic and civilized race, able to improve its vast capabilities and appreciate its marvellous beauties. It must be seen at sunrise, when the boundless plain suddenly flashes with rose-coloured light, as the first rays of the sun sparkle in the dew on the long rich grass, gently stirred by the unfailing morning breeze. It must be seen at noon-day, when refraction swells into the forms of distant hill ranges the ancient beaches and ridges of Lake Winnipeg, which mark its former extension; when each willow bush is magnified into a grove, each distant clump of aspens, not seen before, into wide forests, and the outline of wooded river banks, far beyond unassisted vision, rise to view. It must be seen at sunset, when, just as the huge ball of fire is dipping below the horizon, he throws a flood of red light, indescribably magnificent, upon the illimitable waving green, the colours blending and separating with the gentle roll of the long grass in the evening breeze, and seemingly magnified to toward the horizon into the distant heaving swell of a parti-coloured sea. It must be seen, too, by moonlight, when the summits of the low

> green grass waves are tipped with silver, and the stars in the west disappear suddenly as they touch the earth. Finally, it must be seen at night, when the distant prairies are in a blaze, thirty, fifty, or seventy miles away; when the fire reaches clumps of aspen, and the forked tips of the flames, magnified by refraction, flash and quiver in the horizon, and the reflected lights from rolling clouds of smoke above tell of the havoc which is raging below.

Hind's description neatly encompasses the various sights of the prairie other commentators have noticed: the wind, the sunset, and moonlight noticed by Flagg; the effects upon eyesight caused by the prairie as seen in James, Gregg, and Palliser; and finally the unconstrained line of sight touched upon by virtually every commentator. Like the other commentators, Hind also employs the ocean analogy, but significantly he does so for the purpose of contrast: "These are some of the scenes which must be witnessed and felt before the mind forms a true conception of the Red River prairie in that unrelieved immensity which belongs to them in common with the ocean, but which, unlike the ever-changing and unstable sea, seem to promise a bountiful recompence to millions of our fellow-men."[30] A possible explanation for this narration lies in the fact that Hind was a geologist, investigating and describing the country with an eye toward settlement.

Other observers, with equally practical motives, however, were less impressed than Hind, as evidenced by documents which resulted from the border survey along the forty-ninth parallel (1873-74) and the work in preparation for the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway. George Mercer Dawson, one of the members of the British Border Commission, wrote in a letter while at Dufferin (near Emerson, Manitoba) that: "for a picture of desolation . . . burnt prairie covered with snow" cannot "be surpassed." In another letter, he elaborates on this negative quality of the prairie landscape:

> You say my letters merely relate to facts and don't say anything as to what I am thinking about and I suppose this is true, but really I think travelling over the plains does not conduce to much thought . . . subjects for reflection being few and but often repeated become monotonous . . . having once worked out a train of thought about a buffalo skull, a burnt prairie, an unburnt prairie, a tuft of grass, a prairie chicken; one has to begin and go over the list again, otherwise one has to either ponder some abstract question not at all connected with this place, or rest content to go along without thinking at all.[31]

As suggested with regard to Brackenridge, Bradbury, and Flagg, personal temperament affects an observer's view of the prairie, as with any vista. Dawson has traversed an area not unlike that described by Hind, yet he sees nothing to think about in the prairie scenery. This reaction, then, can be attributed either to a lack of imagination on Dawson's part or, perhaps, to his implicit assumptions that there was nothing offered by a prairie scene about which to be imaginative. Given this latter possibility, Dawson's reaction would be like Lewis's and Clark's, each of whom saw nothing sublime in a prairie vista; like them, Dawson might be here indicating that imaginative beauty exists elsewhere, in more "normal" scenes.

Sandford Fleming, Chief Engineer for the C. P. R., published several documents dealing with the topography of the prairie; most of these are by way of progress reports and deal, mainly, with engineering problems offered by the terrain and with the potential adaptability of the region to farming.[32] In 1884, however, he published a personal narrative of his travels, entitled <u>England and Canada</u>, and in doing so he introduces a new perspective from which to view the prairie: that of the window of a speeding railway car.

> We continue through a genuine prairie without tree or shrub. Our point of vision is really and truly the centre of one vast, grassy plain, the circumference of which lies defined in the horizon. As we look from the rear, the two rails gradually come closer until they are lost, seemingly, in one line; the row of telegraph poles recedes with the distance to a point. I should estimate the horizon

> to be removed from us from six to eight miles. The sky, without a cloud, forms a blue vault above us; nothing around is visible but the prairie on all sides gently swelling and undulating, with the railway forming a definite diameter across the circle. Looking along the track in the distance there us a small cloud of vapour visible, indicating that an engine is following us . . . . There is certainly no little monotony in a railway journey over the prairie. The landscape is unvaried: a solitude, in which the only sign of life is the motion of the train.[33]

Despite the novelty of his vantage point, there is in Fleming's description that same quality of frustration seen in Henday's "We are still in the Muscuty plains," James's "weary march," and Lambert's reference to "tedious weeks": although the traveler is moving, the vastness of the prairie makes it seem as if he is making little progress. Nor, as Fleming's observation suggests, does mechanized transport do anything to mitigate the sense of endlessness; on the contrary it serves to accentuate it.

George Monro Grant's Ocean to Ocean (1873) was one of the first traveler's accounts published which included a European's reaction to the Canadian prairie landscape. Grant was attached to Fleming's first exploratory journey for what became the Canadian Pacific Railway, accomplished in 1872 by way of an entirely Canadian route from Toronto to Vancouver Island. Like many others, who came to the Canadian west both before and after him, Grant is primarily concerned with the future of the country, not its topography. Thus he concentrates, while describing the prairie, on its agricultural and settlement prospects--for he was anxious to encourage Canadian settlement to fill the "great lone land" since American designs on British territory were generally feared. And like many others before him, Grant is specific about the prairie landscape only when he is able to climb some hill and encompass it within his sight. Together with James and Flagg, Grant is struck by the sheer spectacle of a thunderstorm on the

prairie. But, apart from corroborating the impressions of others, Grant's book yields little that has not been noted previously; his observations are of the same order as those of Brackenridge, Bradbury, and other travelers who visited the American prairie. Both Ocean to Ocean and Picturesque Canada (1882) are significant mainly in that they were among the first to articulate the vision of Canada as another nation stretching from the Atlantic to the Pacific.[34]

Sir William Francis Butler's The Great Lone Land (1872), like Ocean to Ocean, recounts a personal trip into the Canadian prairie, and like Grant's book, his was well known. Having traveled through the United States in order to rendezvous with the Wolseley expedition at Red River, Butler first confronted the prairie as he was traveling northwest from St. Cloud, Minnesota. He describes approaching a log hut "which stood out upon the level sea of grass and was visible miles and miles before one reached it," and later, describes the appearance of the Red River seen from a distance: "the windings of the river are marked by a dark line of woods fringing the whole length of the stream--each tributary has also its line of forest--a line visible many miles away over this sea of grass."[35] Despite his use of the ocean-prairie analogy, Butler's descriptions here are mainly factual; he soon turns, however, from such factual descriptions to matters of perspective on the prairie: "As one travels on, there first rise above the prairie the summits of the trees; these gradually grow larger, until finally, after many hours, the river is reached. Nothing else breaks the uniform level" (p. 94). Hence Butler presents to his reader the effect of approaching a river from the prairie: its trees are continually in sight, but the river takes "many hours" to reach. Butler's impression corresponds to those of other prairie travelers, as we have seen, and especially De Smet's comment

that the connection between rivers and trees on the prairie is so apparent that he noticed his party's "beasts of burden" "exult and quicken their pace at the sight of some trees . . ." (De Smet, IV: 1437).

Not only does Butler thus reiterate the comments of other travelers with regard to the appearance of rivers from a distance, however; his next comment encapsulates the basic European impulse in the face of the prairie landscape: "Standing upon the ground the eye ranges over miles of grass, standing on a wagon, one doubles the area of vision, and to look over the plains from an elevation of twelve feet above the earth is to survey at a glance a space so vast that distance alone seems to bound its limits" (pp. 94-95).

Like Brackenridge and others, however, Butler too sees that there are aspects of prairie life which are by no means pleasing, aesthetic or otherwise. Heading toward the Red River, his traveling companion comments that they should make good time "'If the mosquitoes let us travel'" (p. 97). Butler responds to this remark with some incredulity, but that evening he is amazed to discover that his companion was quite serious: the mosquitoes swarm around them so thickly that they are unable to travel and must lie down on the ground in order to avoid their tormentors. No less amazing, as Butler presents it, is the fury of a prairie thunderstorm:

> Then came the crash; the fire seemed to pour out of the clouds. It was impossible to keep the blanket on, so raising it every now and again I looked out from between the spokes of the wheel [of the wagon under which he is sleeping]. During three hours the lightning seemed to run like a river of flame out of the clouds. Sometimes a stream would descend, then, dividing into two branches, would pour down on the prairie two distinct channels of fire. The thunder rang sharply, as though the metallic clash of steel was about it, and the rain descended in torrents upon the level prairies. (p. 99)

Butler has recently been called the "first eloquent prairie traveller";[36]

as we have seen, however, the experience of a thunderstorm on the prairie evoked equally dramatic if not so eloquent responses from others as well.

After spending some time in Red River, Butler was commissioned by Lieutenant-Governor Archibald of Manitoba and the North West territories to travel to the Rockies and report on the Indians and the conditions he encountered. His journey, accomplished during the harshest conditions of the prairie winter, took 119 days and covered nearly three thousand miles. At one point in the account of his trip, Butler devotes a lengthy paragraph to an evaluation of the tendency among early geographers to represent the interior of the North American continent as a vast inland sea:

> an ocean there is, and an ocean through which men seek the treasures of Cathay, even in our own times. But the ocean is one of grass, and the shores are the crests of mountain ranges, and the dark pine-forests of the sub-Arctic regions. The great ocean itself does not present more infinite variety than does this prairie-ocean of which we speak. In winter, a dazzling surface of purest snow; in early summer, a vast expanse of grass and pale pink roses; in autumn too often a sea of raging fire. No ocean of water in the world can vie with its gorgeous sunsets; no solitude can equal the loneliness of night-shadowed prairie; one feels the stillness, and hears the silence, the wail of the prowling wolf makes the voice of the solitude audible, the stars look down through infinite silence upon a silence almost as intense. This ocean has no past--time has been nought to it; and men have come and gone, leaving behind them no track, no vestige, of their presence. (pp. 199-200)

Thus Butler brings the prairie-ocean analogy full circle, arguing that the legend of the inland sea was literally wrong but imaginatively correct.

* * *

If the significance of the first phase of prairie commentary lies in the unprecedented nature of the encounter, therefore, the significance of the second phase lies in the extent to which such accounts identify the problems which confronted those who attempted to depict the prairie in art. In

particular, these second-phase accounts reflect the clash between conventional notions and the reality of the prairie and suggest the way in which the landscape impinged upon the techniques used to describe it.

Butler's response to the vast featurelessness of the prairie is similarly revisionist and paradoxical. Focusing in The Wild North Land (1873) upon "around four hundred miles of horizon," for example, he describes "a view so vast that endless space seems for once to find embodiment, and at a single glance the eye is satiated with immensity. There is no mountain range to come across the skyline, no river to lay its glistening folds along the middle distance, no dark forest to give shade to foreground or fringe perspective, no speck of life, no track of man, nothing but the wilderness." Whereas this was the very situation which made it difficult for Lewis to respond aesthetically to the prairie, Butler continues "Reduced thus to its own nakedness, space stands forth with almost terrible grandeur."[37] In one of his letters Fr. De Smet observes that "when one travels over the plains, he feels more inclined to prayer, meditation, [and] confidence in God . . . ."[38] Butler's reaction to "the vague dark immensity around" him is similarly religious, although it leads him to focus on "that strange mystery called death" (p. 206). And in The Wild North Land Butler concludes his response to the "terrible grandeur" of the prairie in Melvillian fashion: "One is suddenly brought face to face with that enigma which we try to comprehend by giving to it the names of endless, interminable, measureless; that dark inanity which broods upon a waste of moorland at dusk, and in which fancy sees the spectral and the shadowy."[39]

Also to be found in these accounts is the growing sense of nationalism and the championing of the prairie as a uniquely American phenomenon. As such, these second-phase commentators could be said to stand in the same re-

lation to their artistic contemporaries and successors that Emerson stood in relation to the artist he called for in "The Poet."

CHAPTER TWO: Notes

[1] H. M. Brackenridge, Journal of a Voyage up the River Missouri; performed in Eighteen Hundred and Eleven, 2nd. Ed. (Baltimore, 1816), rpt. Early Western Travels, 1748-1846, ed. Reuben Gold Thwaites, VI (Cleveland: Arthur H. Clark, 1904), 75, 89. All references to Brackenridge are from this edition. Hereafter the multivolume Early Western Travels series, which reprinted all of the significant narratives and accounts written during the period it surveys, will be abbreviated EWT.

This journal was originally published in Brackenridge's Views of Louisiana (Pittsburgh, 1814); thus while the title page of the Baltimore edition states that it is a second edition, the book published in 1816 constitutes the first publication of the Missouri journal as a separate volume. Between the separate editions Brackenridge revised and expanded the work.

[2] The literature of Indian-European relations in colonial America, and of the incidence of Indian raids on outlying settlements is widespread; one summary overview is Howard Mumford Jones, O Strange New World (New York: Viking, 1952), pp. 50-67.

[3] I have been unable to locate a source for Brackenridge's verse in this passage, and so have concluded that it is of his own composition.

[4] My references to eighteenth-century aesthetics throughout this study, and to the sublime in particular, owe much to Samuel H. Monk, The Sublime: A Study of Critical Theories in XVIII-Century England (New York: MLA, 1935), especially pp. 164-232. And though perhaps too broadly conceived, Christopher Tunnard's A World with a View: An Inquiry into the Nature of Scenic Values (New Haven: Yale, 1978) is useful for the overview it provides.

[5] John Bradbury, Travels in the Interior of America in the Years 1809, 1810, and 1811 . . . (London, 1819), rpt. EWT, V, 189-90. Here Bradbury describes the same scene in much the same terms; the two had met and were traveling together. Such sights as this, the prairie black with buffalo, bulls bumping and rutting about (especially if a traveler happened upon the herd, as here, during mating season), are quite common in the literature of exploration. Indeed, the herds often transform the landscape for the travelers, animating it by their presence. Such is the case with Henry, Brackenridge, Bradbury, and later, with James and De Smet. The animals lend an air of strangeness, of mysteriousness, to the land by their presence and by their numbers. At the end of his description of this scene, for example, Bradbury agrees that an immense herd was seen running at least a mile from them; the sound of their feet rumbled, he says, "like distant thunder" (p. 190). Fr. De Smet, a longtime missionary among the Indians of

the upper Missouri, once noted the tormented bellowings of a herd which had been accosted by droves of mosquitoes: "During a whole week we heard their bellowings like the noise of distant thunder, or like the murmers of the ocean-waves beating against the shore." These descriptions, and others like them, show that travelers and explorers were attracted to the buffalo for their numbers (since many depended on them for food), and also by way in which most plains Indian tribes revered the animal. They were also attracted to the animals by their size, mannerisms, and the sounds they made--the buffalo made the land exotic, at times almost unreal by their stampings and snortings. Indeed, it is virtually impossible to discuss the imaginative impression the prairie landscape had on white travelers without considering the buffalo--imaginatively, the two were often seen as symbiotic elements of that landscape. P. J. De Smet, S. J., Western Missions and Missionaries: A Series of Letters (New York, 1859; rpt. [introd. William L. Davis, S. J.] Shannon: Irish University Press, 1972), p. 83.

[6] I have borrowed this phrase from Howard Mumford Jones's book of the same title.

[7] Bradbury, Travels, EWT, V, 239, 240-41. All references to Bradbury are from this edition.

[8] Edgeley W. Todd, Introd. Astoria, or Anecdotes of an Enterprise Beyond the Rocky Mountains, by Washington Irving (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1964), pp. xxvii-xxxii, and passim.

[9] Gabriel Franchère, Narrative of a Voyage to the Northwest Coast of America in the years 1811, 1812, 1813, and 1814; or the First American Settlement on the Pacific, trans. and ed. J. V. Huntington (New York, 1854), rpt. EWT, VI, 372-73. In his preface, Thwaites describes Franchère's need for a collaborator, p. 15.

[10] John Warkentin, in The Western Interior of Canada, p. 109, notes the increased length of the passage.

[11] Edwin James, Account of an Expedition from Pittsburgh to the Rocky Mountains, Performed in the Years 1819, 1820. By Order of the Hon. J. C. Calhoun, Secretary of War, Under the Command of Maj. S. H. Long, of the U. S. Top. Engineers, 3 vols. (London, 1823), rpt. EWT, XIV-XVII. All references to James's Account are from this edition.

[12] W. Eugene Hollon, The Great American Desert, p. 65.

[13] When Coronado's party was caught in a hailstorm before they entered the plains, Castañeda could only remark that the extensive damage the storm exacted would have been far greater had it struck them while they were on the plain. Indeed, he suggests that they would have lost all of their horses. See Castañeda's Narrative, in Spanish Explorers in the Southern United States, 1528-1543, p. 333.

[14] Josiah Gregg, Commerce of the Prairies; or, the Journal of a Santa Fe Trader, during Eight Expeditions Across the Great Western Prairies and a Residence of Nearly Nine Years in Northern Mexico, 2 vols., 2nd Ed. (New

York, 1845), rpt. EWT, XIX-XX, 189. All references to Gregg are from this edition.

[15] The commonplace nature of the prairie-ocean analogy is attributable, by the time Gregg was writing, to the spate of books dealing with the prairie-plains which were printed since the publication of Pike's Account in 1810, most of whose authors drew the analogy, as did Brackenridge, Bradbury, and James. By the time Gregg's Commerce appeared in 1844 the general flat, treeless character of the prairie-plains was widely known.

[16] Castañeda's Narrative, p. 383.

[17] In his editorial preface, Thwaites states that Gregg's Commerce "judiciously mingles history, description, and narrative in such proportions that the interest is maintained throughout" (XIX: 16).

[18] Pierre-Jean De Smet, S. J., Life Letters and Travels of Father Pierre-Jean De Smet, S. J., 1801-1873, ed. Hiram Martin Chittenden and Alfred Talbot Richardson, 4 vols. (New York: Francis P. Harper, 1905), I, 206. Unless otherwise noted, all references to De Smet's writings are from this edition. It should be noted that De Smet borrowed often from Irving's various books concerned with the West, especially Astoria; at several points in the Chittenden and Richardson edition the editors point out these "borrowings," such as I, 207. These passages often deal with geographical overviews and De Smet's context usually indicates that a borrowing has been made.

[19] See Note, IV, 1365. The section from which the following passages have been taken was headed by De Smet: "'On board the Yellowstone, June 4, 1864, in the Cheyenne river country, 1,515 miles from the mouth of the Missouri.'"

[20] Such reactions to the wild prairie landscape were ubiquitous; in addition to those commentators discussed here, see also Victor Tixier, Travels on the Osage Prairies, ed. John Francis McDermott, trans. Albert J. Salvan (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1940), pp. 158-59 and passim. This work was originally published in French in 1844 as Voyage aux prairies osages, Louisiane et Missouri, 1839-40. Viewing the prairie, Tixier writes that "A vague, sad emotion filled my heart at the sight of this solitude" (p. 158). Another European traveler came to the prairies about this time and also found them to be lonely, but Maximilian, Prince of Wied-Neuwied, was truly unique in that he compared the region to the jungles of Brazil; there, he says, "nature is so infinitely rich and grand" and he heard "from the lofty, thick, primeval forests on the banks of the rivers, the varied voices of the parrots, the macaws, and many other birds, as well as of the monkeys, and other creatures . . . ." On the prairie, conversely, he notices that "the silence of the bare, dead, lonely wilderness is but seldom interrupted by the howling of wolves, the bellowing of the buffaloes, or the screaming of the crows . . ."; it is a landscape which "scarcely offers a living creature, except now and then, herds of buffaloes and antelopes, or a few deer and wolves." Travels in the Interior of North America in the Years 1832, 1833, and 1834, trans. H. Evans Lloyd (London, 1843), rpt. EWT, XXII-XXV; XXIII, 42.

[21] Edmund Flagg, The Far West; or A Tour Beyond the Mountains, 2 vols. (New York, 1838), rpt. EWT, XXVI, 214. All references to Flagg are from this edition.

[22] Thomas J. Farnham, Travels in the Great Western Prairies, the Anahuac and Rocky Mountains, and in the Oregon Territory (London, 1843; rpt. New York: De Capo Press, 1973), pp. 93-94. Farnham's Travels was also reprinted in EWT, XXVIII.

An exploratory party led by John C. Frémont was sent into the prairie by the United States government during the 1840s. Frémont was especially vexed by the lack of wood in the region, and notes in his journal each time his party was forced to use dried buffalo dung as a substitute; this he always calls "bois de vache." Regarding the prairie itself, he notes that its uniformity is "never sameness" and whenever an object breaks the distant horizon "there is always the suspense of the interval needed to verify the strange object" as the eyesight seems to play tricks. He too climbs the nearest eminence in order to encompass the prairie visually, and his descriptions of the number and extent of buffalo along the Platte River are like those of Henry and James, among others. See The Expeditions of John Charles Frémont, ed. Donald Jackson and Mary Lee Spence (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1970), I, 56-57, 191, 195.

[23] John Palliser, Solitary Rambles and Adventures of a Hunter in the Prairies (London, 1853; rpt. Edmonton: Hurtig, 1969), p. 106. All references to Palliser are from this edition. Palliser's was one of numerous books of hunting lore concerned with the North American west; another, for example, is James C. Southesk's Saskatchewan and the Rocky Mountains: A Diary and Narrative of Travel, Sport, and Adventure, During a Journey Through the Hudson's Bay Company's Territories, in 1859 and 1860 (Toronto: James Campbell and Son, 1875).

[24] [John Lambert], United States: Pacific Railroad Reports. 33rd Cong., 2nd Sess., Senate Exec. Doc. 78, 1855, I, Papers Accompanying Governor I. I. Stevens' Reports, pp. 166-67; rpt. Warkentin, The Western Interior of Canada, pp. 151-52.

[25] Pacific Railroad Reports in Warkentin, p. 152.

[26] Smith, Virgin Land, p. 175.

[27] Horace Greeley, An Overland Journey From New York to San Francisco in the Summer of 1859 (1860; rpt. [ed. Charles T. Duncan] New York: Knopf, 1964), p. 82. All references to Greeley are from this edition.

[28] Charles T. Duncan, Intro., An Overland Journey from New York to San Francisco, by Horace Greeley (1964), pp. xii-xiii.

[29] Henry Youle Hind, Narrative of the Canadian Red River Exploring Expedition of 1857 and of the Assiniboine and Saskatchewan Exploring Expedition of 1858, 2 vols. (London: Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1860), I, 147. For the record of the Palliser expedition see The Papers of the Palliser Expedition, 1857-1860, ed. Irene M. Spry (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1968).

[30] Hind, I, 134-35.

[31] The Life of George Mercer Dawson, 1849-1901 ([Canada]: n. p., [1962?]), pp. 70, 71.

[32] Several progress reports were published under Fleming's name; each of which dealt with a certain part of the country surrounding the projected route. See, for example, Sanford Fleming, Report on Surveys and Preliminary Operations on the Canadian Pacific Railway up to January 1877 (Ottawa: MacLean, Roger & Co., 1877).

[33] Sandford Fleming, England and Canada: A Summer Tour between Old and New Wesminster (Montreal: Dawson Brothers, 1884), pp. 216-17.

[34] George M. Grant, Ocean to Ocean: Sandford Fleming's Expedition Through Canada in 1872, Rev. Ed. (Toronto: The Radisson Society, 1925), pp. 72, 88, 92-93, 114, 137, 144-47. In these descriptions Grant describes a prairie storm, climbs a hill to obtain perspective, and uses the ocean analogy for the prairie.

[35] William Francis Butler, The Great Lone Land: A Tale of Travel and Adventure in the North-West of America (1872; rpt. Toronto: Macmillan, 1910), pp. 92-94. All references to The Great Lone Land are from this edition.

[36] Dick Harrison, Unnamed Country: The Struggle for a Canadian Prairie Fiction (Edmonton: Univ. of Alberta Press, 1977), p. 5.

[37] Sir William Francis Butler, The Wild North Land (London, 1873; rpt. Toronto: Musson, 1924), p. 30.

[38] De Smet, Western Missions, p. 73.

[39] Butler, The Wild North Land, pp. 30-31.

CHAPTER THREE

"strange, too, and striking to the imagination": Landscape into Art

Given the frontier conditions on the prairie during the pre-Civil War years, the landscape moved very slowly into the realm of art, just as the pioneers in this respect tended to be illustrators and painters rather than literary artists. As one would also expect, a major difference between the two types of artists is that the former typically drew from direct experience, whereas the latter frequently relied on the records of travelers and explorers. At the same time, however, the problems faced by these early painters were not ultimately different from those faced by literary artists, and this situation--in conjunction with the fact that many of these painters also left written records--makes the consideration of their work a necessary part of the study of the development of prairie literature conventions.

In an appendix to Across the Wide Missouri (1947), in which he is among the first to consider seriously the painters and illustrators of the West, Bernard De Voto maintained that George Catlin "was the first painter of the West who had any effect."[1] De Voto could not call Catlin the first without qualification because of the presence in the West during the 1820s of Samuel Seymour, who accompanied the Long expedition up the South Platte in 1818-20, and also Peter Rindisbacher, who lived for five years in the Red River settlement before heading south for St. Louis. Seymour's "views," claimed at one time to be over a hundred and fifty, were seen by Maximilian in 1832 before his western trip; few are available today. They are, as De Voto claims, "crude

but authentic" in that they represent western landscapes accurately, without romanticizing them. Rindisbacher, however, is a slightly different case. His figures all have a stylized formality about them, an air of unreality, but his depiction of the prairie landscape as a background has a realistic quality. His point of view and arrangement of figures, which in later and more sophisticated painters tended to block or otherwise obscure the extent of the vista, very often creates an accurate impression of the prairie landscape as it is seen from a slightly raised angle. Three such works are Blackfeet Hunting on Snowshoes, Blackfeet Hunting on Horseback, and The Method of Crawling up to a Herd of Buffaloes (see Appendix, pp.342-44). In the first two instances perspective is obtained, like Alexander Henry in his tree, by raising the artist's point of view slightly above the height of the figures in the foreground. In the last example Rindisbacher placed his foreground figures on an undulation in the prairie surface.

Rindisbacher had some training from a Swiss painter before he came to North America but, judging from the improvement in his works once he arrived, his development is more readily attributable to self teaching. Thus his direct treatment of the prairie landscape might well be the result of his lack of knowledge of painterly convention, since he makes no attempt to close out the prairie vista through intervening scrubs or knolls; indeed, his very youth and lack of sophistication, while they are decried by art historians (who call Rindisbacher a peintre naif), probably served to allow his direct treatment of the prairie landscape. A more academically-trained painter, like Alfred Jacob Miller, refrained from opening the whole of his canvas to the prairie vista; another, George Catlin, also refrained from doing so, either because of convention or because he lacked

the requisite talent in landscape depiction.[2]

George Catlin's significance lies mainly in his role as the first recognized illustrator of the West, but his book, Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Conditions of the North American Indians (1841) is prominent within the travel literature of the period, all the more so because it is the first book dealing with the West which was copiously illustrated. Unable to interest a publisher in his book as he envisioned it--that is, well-illustrated--Catlin had it privately printed and used as illustrations line drawings he personally made from his own paintings. The book ran through numerous reprintings and editions; like Gregg's Commerce of the Prairies, Catlin's Letters and Notes was one of the most widely-known books dealing with the American West during the pre-war period.[3]

Catlin was a man who embarked on a romantic quest. After, during the 1820s, establishing himself as a portrait painter of some reputation, first in Philadelphia and then in Albany, Catlin abandoned his position, left his wife and family, and traveled to St. Louis in the spring of 1830. Such a resolve stemmed, in part, from Catlin's experiences with the Indians of the East, whom he had painted on their reserves in western New York; seeing their adaptation to white ways he realized that the Indians of the far West, a group of whom he had seen passing through Philadelphia on their way to Washington, were equally doomed. In recalling his purpose in setting out, Catlin emphasizes the need to capture the Indian life style in art, while he paradoxically praises the absence of art as the primary attraction of the native:

> Man, in the simplicity and loftiness of his nature, unrestrained and unfettered by the disguises of art, is surely the most beautiful model for the painter,--and the country from which he hails is unquestionably the best study or school of the arts in the world:

> such I am sure, from the models I have seen, is the wilderness of North America. And the history and customs of such a people, preserved by pictorial illustrations, are themes worthy of the life-time of one man, and nothing short of the loss of my life, shall prevent me from visiting their country, and of becoming their historian.[4]

Typical of Catlin's approach throughout his work is his tendency to see the Indian and the prairie as existing in a kind of symbiotic relationship--a tendency which explains in part why Catlin actually painted so few prairie landscapes *per se*.

At the same time, it is in his paintings that Catlin best serves as historian of the prairie environment. Whereas his pictorial work--despite certain limitations--could be described as realistic, his prose is characterized by romantic excesses. A possible pragmatic explanation--which might account for the pictorial limitations as well--is that whereas Catlin's paintings were done on the spot, in great haste and under extremely difficult conditions, he wrote much of the book while he was living in London, displaying his "Indian Collection" (made up of his paintings, drawings, sketches, assorted memorabilia and, later, Indians acting out pantomimes of scalping, skulking, and other colorful activities). Thus, despite the fact that in passages such as the following he used the present tense, a double kind of nostalgia may have been operating as he penned his responses:

> No man's imagination, with all the aids of description that can be given to it, can ever picture the beauty and wildness of scenes that may be daily witnessed in this romantic country; of hundreds of these graceful youths, without a care to wrinkle, or a fear to disturb the full expression of pleasure and enjoyment that beams upon their faces--their long black hair mingling with their horses [sic] tails, floating in the wind, while they are flying over the carpeted prairie, and dealing death with their spears and arrows, to a band of infuriated buffaloes; or their splendid procession in a war-parade, arrayed in all their gorgeous colours and trappings, moving with most exquisite grace and manly beauty, added to that bold defiance which man carries on his front, who acknowledges no

superior on earth, and who is amenable to no laws except the laws of God and honour. (I: 15)

As is evident here, Catlin's perception of the Indian, like that of many of his contemporaries, was in the tradition of Rousseau. Similarly, though it is to the country that he applies the term "romantic," it is the presence of the "noble savage" who inhabits it which clearly prompts his usage. Attracted by the western Indians and a way of life which he knows is "melting away at the approach of civilization," Catlin sees the "boundless prairies" (I: 16) mainly as context for the Indians he has come to paint. Presented as visual observations, such passages are imbued with an air of triste, and they evidence the painter's conventionally romantic presentation of both himself and his subject in Letters and Notes.

After spending two years in and around St. Louis painting Indians who visited the city and traveling up the South Platte, Catlin embarked for the upper Missouri in March of 1832. Like many others who were to follow, Catlin made the up-river journey on board the Yellowstone. As the steamboat operated by the American Fur Company, and since it provided the easiest and most regular means of travel into the far West, the Yellowstone is ubiquitous in the travel literature of the 1830s and 40s. Recounting his voyage, Catlin describes the shoreline with a painterly eye; after remarking over some cottonwood trees growing along the banks, he comments that "The greater part of the shores of this river, however, are without timber, where the eye is delightfully relieved by wandering over the beautiful prairies; most of the way gracefully sloping down to the water's edge, carpeted with the deepest green, and, in distance, softening into velvet of the richest hues, entirely beyond the reach of the artist's pencil" (I: 18). Without question, Catlin's sheer joy over having embarked finally

upon his quest colors this passage; but his artistic predilection is apparent as well. Whereas Lewis and Clark saw such scenes from their boats but simply made mention of a "beautiful" prairie or plain, Catlin dissects the nature of that beauty and employs the synecdoche of the observer becoming his eyes only. In turn, whereas other travelers, most notably Brackenridge, responded imaginatively and aesthetically to the prairie, Catlin is the first to describe it in terms which suggest a relation between the landscape and the artist. Finally, whereas commentators like Lambert had expressed the inadequacy of words to describe the prairie, Catlin is the first to mention the limitations of the visual artist's medium. Catlin is conscious as well of being one of the first to have come west for artistic purposes, and it is from this vantage point that he criticizes the accounts of his predecessors:

> It has been, heretofore, very erroneously represented to the world, that the scenery on this river was monotonous, and wanting in picturesque beauty. This intelligence is surely incorrect, and that because it has been brought perhaps, by men who are not the best judges in the world, of Nature's beautiful works; and if they were, they always pass them by, in pain or desperate distress, in toil and trembling fear for the safety of their furs and peltries, or for their lives, which are at the mercy of the yelling savages who inhabit this delightful country. (I: 18)

Though, on the one hand, Catlin here seems to take into account the extent to which practical considerations conditioned early responses to the prairie, his last curious observation also seems to suggest that the artist sees dangers in a different light than does the ordinary man.

At the same time, however, to judge by another of Catlin's observations, no human being is to be excused for failing to appreciate the beauties of the prairie--since even animals do. When he is near Fort Gibson, in the area of the Red River of the South (now southern Oklahoma), Catlin's

"attention was rivetted to the tops of some of the prairie bluffs, whose summits I approached with inexpressible delight. I rode to the top of one of these noble mounds, in company with my friends Lieut. Wheelock and Joseph Chadwick, where we agreed that our horses instinctively looked and admired. They thought not of the rich herbage that was under their feet, but, with deep-drawn sighs, their necks were loftily curved, and their eyes widely stretched over the landscape that was beneath us." It is well that Catlin mentions that his "friends" corroborated this remarkable example of the impact of the prairie vista, since no other commentator appears to have witnessed such a reaction. The only observation which even remotely approximates Catlin's is De Smet's remark that his party's animals seemed to quicken their pace when they sighted trees along a water-course in the prairie distance. But concentrating on what Catlin--rather than his horses--sees from the summit, his description of a caravan may be positively contrasted with the more factual report by Gregg which we examined earlier:

> From this elevated spot, the horizon was bounded all around us by mountain streaks of blue, softening into azure as they vanished, and the pictured vales that intermediate lay, were deepening into green as the eye was returning from its roamings. Beneath us, and winding through the waving landscape was seen with peculiar effect, the 'bold dragoons,' marching in beautiful order forming a train of a mile in length. Baggage waggons and Indians (engagés) helped to lengthen the procession. From the point where we stood, the line was seen in miniature; and the undulating hills over which it was bending its way, gave it an appearance of a huge black snake gracefully gliding over a rich carpet of green. (II: 45-46)

Catlin's painter's eye is upon the visual here (colors changing, movement from background to middle distance, line, and symmetry) and his aesthetic background informs the whole description. As in the case of "the yelling savages who inhabit this delightful country" there is also in Catlin's final analogy

the curious appreciation of what would normally be thought sinister, although at the same time his likening of the caravan to a "huge snake" may be an unconscious registering of his negative feelings about western expansion and the "fall" of the Indian which he sensed would be the result.

Catlin's enthusiasm for the West was not enough to keep him perpetually enthused over the prairie landscape, however. Traveling overland from the mouth of the Teton River on the upper Missouri, he admits to the depressing effects of a particularly level stretch of land; significantly he does so, however, not only in terms of the by now almost clichéd analogy but with a certain self-conscious awareness of its conventionality:

> For two or three of the first days, the scenery was monotonous, and became exceedingly painful from the fact, that we were (to use a phrase of the country) 'out of sight of land,' i.e. out of sight of anything rising above the horizon, which was a perfect straight line around us, like that of the blue and boundless ocean. The pedestrian over such a discouraging sea of green, without a landmark before or behind him; without a beacon to lead him on, or define his progress, feels weak and overcome when night falls; and he stretches his exhausted limbs, apparently on the same spot where he has [sic] slept the night before, with the same prospect before and behind him; the same canopy over his head, and the same cheerless sea of green to start upon in the morning. (I: 218)

Whereas previously Catlin had criticized those who allowed practical issues to interfere with aesthetic response, here he seems to admit their interrelationship: "It is difficult to describe the simple beauty and serenity of these scenes of solitude, or the feelings of feeble man, whose limbs are toiling to carry him through them--without a hill or tree to mark his progress, and convince him that he is not, like a squirrel in his cage, after all his toil, standing still" (I: 218). Whereas other commentators had expressed the difficulty of describing the prairie, Catlin also observes the difficulty of describing the physical and the moral frustration it engenders.

As frustrating as the lack of landmarks, according to Catlin are the spectral images the traveler's mind conjures up in their stead: "One commences on peregrinations like these, with a light heart, and a nimble foot, and spirits as buoyant as the very air that floats along by the side of him; but his spirit soon tires, and he lags on the way that is rendered more tedious and intolerable by the tantalizing mirage that opens before him beautiful lakes, and lawns, and copses; or by the looming of the prairie ahead of him, that seems to rise to a parapet, and decked with its varied flowers, phantom-like, flies and moves along before him" (I: 218). To a painter like Catlin, mirages are especially disconcerting since they serve to remind him that his eyesight is not always to be trusted.

For some, the experience of a prairie fire would be equally if not more disconcerting; to Catlin, however, this is a sight which deserves the highest aesthetic accolade: "The prairies burning form some of the most beautiful scenes that are to be witnessed in this country, and also some of the most sublime" (II: 16). On one occasion, he and his party were almost enveloped by one, but warned by an Indian that "'The Fire Spirit [was] awake'," they followed him toward a distant bluff which "was yet blue." Finally obtaining its height, Catlin describes the scene spread before them: "We had risen from a sea of fire! 'Great God (I exclaimed) how sublime to gaze into that valley, where the elements of nature are so strangely convulsed!' Ask not the poet or painter how it looked, for they can tell you not; but ask the naked savage, and watch the electric twinge of his manly nerves and muscles, as he pronounces the lengthened 'hush_____ sh_____' his hand on his mouth, and his glaring eyeballs looking you to the very soul!" After thus dramatically confessing the inability to convey such a sight, Catlin then goes on to employ every

available superlative: "I beheld beneath me an immense cloud of black smoke, which extended from one extremity of this vast plain to the other, and seemed majestically to roll over its surface in a bed of liquid fire; and above this mighty desolation, as it rolled along, the whitened smoke, pale with terror, was streaming and rising up in magnificent cliffs to heaven" (II: 20-21).

On the one hand, therefore, unlike Brackenridge who was tentative about labelling a prairie scene "sublime," Catlin not only bestows the term without reservation but he uses every possible synonym as well. On the other hand, however, like Brackenridge, who applied the term to the thundering hoofbeats of a buffalo herd, Catlin reserves the word "sublime" for a spectacular dramatic phenomenon found <u>in</u> the landscape, and not for the landscape itself. And such a limitation, we might now notice, characterizes Catlin's paintings and other pictorial scenes as well: his greatest weakness as a painter involved landscape depiction.

The portraits Catlin made from his experiences in the West are generally well-rendered and accurate, and he painted buffalo so effectively that one critic has maintained that "the individual Catlin buffalo" became "the buffalo of American iconography for a generation."[5] His landscapes, however, reveal, in the main, very little depth or sense of perspective and hence fail to do justice to the definitive feature of the prairie.

In his depiction of buffalo, and the hunting thereof, Catlin was forced to present them in their native habitat--the prairie. In those scenes where he uses a prairie uninterrupted by a hill or some other obstruction, however, his pictures have no real depth; in fact, in one, <u>Moving Camp</u> (see Appendix, pp. 345-47) his Indians look like figures moving across the top of a slightly curved table. Often, Catlin appears to have avoided this

problem by blocking the view of background, and this is especially so in his depiction of hunting scenes. An example is Buffalo Chase in Winter, Indians on Snowshoes (see Appendix, p. 348), where two hills or bluffs, one in the left foreground and the other in the right middle distance, sandwich a line of buffalo traveling indian file into the distance. To the extent that such hills or bluffs could have been seen along the upper Missouri or other rivers, this is not directly to criticize Catlin but to emphasize that such a device became common in his depictions of western landscapes, especially those showing hunting scenes.

In four other hunting scenes, Buffalo Chase of the Sioux, Sioux Indians Hunting Buffalo, Catlin Hunting Buffalo for Food, and Buffalo Chase, Upper Missouri (see Appendix, pp. 349-52), Catlin employs the same device; in each canvas, hills block the background so that the viewer's eye cannot extend farther than the middle distance. This strategy is especially apparent in Buffalo Chase, Upper Missouri, for the scene is definitely that of a prairie-plains landscape; but Catlin has depicted his Indian hunters from an angle which is only slightly raised above the landscape itself. As a result, the undulations in the prairie are given a greater prominence than they would have had if he had shown the scene from a sharper angle; indeed, his lower angle of vision accentuates the undulations so that they loom in the middle distance, enclosing the foreground scene. At the deepest point in the background, closing off the line of sight, Catlin has placed a vaguely-defined hill.

Whether such techniques indicate that Catlin was compensating for his weakness with perspective or, and perhaps less knowingly, reacting to the vast space of the prairie by curbing it in this manner[6] is difficult to say. It is less problematic to observe the way in which these same techniques

are used in other types of scenes. His portrait of a Crow chief, BA-DA-AH-CHON-DU, He Who Outjumps All (see Appendix, p. 355), is a good example. The chief is pictured in profile on a horse which is standing on its hind legs, and the scene is depicted from eye level. The chief is situated in the foreground with, apparently, an unvaried prairie, dotted here and there with orange wildflowers, behind and around him. Looking behind the chief to the extreme background, it is impossible to tell where the land ends and the sky begins, although there is a definite cloudbank on the right edge of the background, and there may be either another cloudbank or a line of hills directly behind the chief, appearing beneath his right foot. All of these various elements prompt the viewer to focus on the mounted Indian and tend to obscure the nature of the surrounding landscape. Indeed, the clouds both behind the chief and those on the horizon (which cannot be distinguished from the far-distant prairie) preclude precise and direct treatment of the prairie landscape. Had Catlin pictured the chief against a cloudless prairie sky there would have been no obscuring the nature of the landscape. This is not to suggest that Catlin should have so pictured the chief, even had he been able to do so; the conventions of portraiture were well-established and, certainly, the obscured background helps to make Catlin's painting a more effective portrait. Apart from such considerations, however, this portrait can be described as providing another instance in which he deferred in his painting from presenting prairie landscapes as he described them in his book.[7] At the same time, it should be noted that Catlin was not above including a more-detailed landscape as backdrop for a portrait. His likeness of HA-NA-TA-NU-MAUK, The Wolf Chief, the head chief of the Mandans, includes a view of (presumably) the Missouri River as background, curving gently away from the foreground. Here Catlin felt no

need to obscure his background, perhaps because of its familiarity, since it is both clear and identifiable (see Appendix, p. 356).

A final example in this regard is Catlin's famous painting of the Mandan villages on the upper Missouri (in what is now North Dakota). Catlin observed and painted virtually every aspect of the Mandan culture and, since the tribe was almost entirely exterminated by an outbreak of smallpox in 1837, five years after his visit, his paintings have extreme importance from an ethnohistorical standpoint. In depicting the Mandan village, made up of large circular huts, Catlin employed an elevated perspective. The village itself, teeming with activity and surrounded by a wooden pallisade, occupies two-thirds of the canvas, while a flat area behind the village stretches off to some hills which enclose the scene; the sky takes up the top quarter of the picture (see Appendix, p. 357). Thus despite the fact that his raised angle of vision would allow him to do so, Catlin does not reveal the prairie landscape adjacent to the village, preferring instead once again to enclose his scene by the use of hills. Catlin used the same scene for two other works, both of which depict the "O-KEE-PA," or Mandan torture ceremony. In each case, portions of the ceremony are shown taking place in front of the village proper, but also in each case Catlin lowered his angle of vision, so the viewer cannot see over the tops of the huts to the surrounding landscape (see Appendix, pp. 358-59).

In turn, one begins to appreciate more fully the significance of those sights which Catlin described as depressing: "The pedestrian over such a discouraging sea of green, without landmark before or behind him; without a beacon to lead him on, or define his progress, feels weak and overcome when night falls . . ." (I: 218). What he could admit in words, apparently, Catlin could not accommodate in his paintings--a situation which suggests an

interesting postscript to Lessing's Laocoon: An Essay Upon the Limits of Painting and Poetry, as well as Freud's theory of art as wish-fulfillment.

* * *

Unlike Catlin, who was emotionally attracted to the West and who came out of a personal desire to record the native way of life, many other painters came because it was their job, attached as they were to an exploratory expedition. Two such painters were Karl (or Charles) Bodmer and Alfred Jacob Miller, the first formally-trained painters to depict the West, both of whom traveled west during the 1830s immediately after Catlin. Bodmer had been retained by Maximilian, Prince of Wied-Neuwied to illustrate his trip up the Missouri in 1833. The Prince was a scientist, and so demanded scientific precision from his illustrator. Accordingly, as De Voto observes, Bodmer's Mandan Indian portraits have "the force and selectivity of medical art . . . a clarity, emphasis, and separation of parts beyond the capacity of the camera lens" (see Appendix, p. 360). De Voto also suggests that Bodmer was not much excited by the job assigned to him and therefore sought solace in painting a subject which was not required by the prince: the surrounding landscape. In his independent depiction of landscape, Bodmer was freed from the Prince's demand for literal representation, and could paint as he wished. Bodmer's landscapes, which are mainly concerned with scenes along the upper Missouri prairie and badlands, depict the western landscape, again according to De Voto, "at the level of art for the first time."[8] Bodmer painted approximately a dozen landscapes and, of those reproductions I have seen--about half, none treats the prairie directly. In those instances where a prairie landscape might be an element in the painting, Bodmer chose to paint from the vantage point of a bluff

above the river valley. In View of the Junction of the Missouri and Yellowstone Rivers, for example, the upper-right-hand corner may show a prairie landscape but, such is its distance in the background, it is not definitely so (see Appendix, p. 361). Nor, according to Thomas Flexner, was this accidental: Bodmer's "sophisticated eye," he says, "bothered by the weird hues of the plains and the badlands, fled from such unacceptable reality into formulas, often keyed to the salmon-pink skies beloved of the European romantics."[9] Flexner's observation complements De Voto's assertion that when artists reached the far West "they had to deal with vaster spaces and greater intensity of light than American painters had been accustomed to work with before."[10] Some, like Bodmer, simply refrained from depicting such realities.

While Bodmer left only a few western landscapes, Alfred Jacob Miller left scores and, very often, several different versions of the same composition. Formally trained in Paris after some rudimentary training in his native Baltimore, Miller was hired to illustrate one of Captain (later Sir) William Drummond Stewart's hunting trips up the Platte River to the Rockies in 1837. Miller had neither Catlin's sense of mission nor Bodmer's commission to be scientifically accurate; as one critic has noted, his task "was to record, for future transcription into large oils, a miraculous holiday."[11] Upon his return Miller dutifully traveled to Scotland and transcribed his western work into large oils to adorn his patron's castle. He later established himself as a portrait painter in Baltimore and did a brisk business in producing copies of his western works. For one such commission Miller wrote a series of notes to accompany his pictures and to serve as authorial commentary on the scenes of western life they depict.[12]

Unlike Bodmer, whose depiction of the prairie (if it may be so called)

is circumspect, Miller depicted the prairie landscape in numerous paintings. In keeping with his formal training, however, he did not often present the prairie as his central subject: instead, it is most often a portion of the picture (usually the background) and serves to provide perspective to the foreground scene. A representative example of this approach is to be found in a painting entitled Noon-day Rest (see Appendix, p. 362). Here Miller's fellow-travelers are reclining on a knoll on the prairie and, in addition to the trees which serve as a backdrop for their figures, they fill the immediate foreground and the left diagonal portion of the canvas; that is, the foot of the knoll, and hence the foreground scene, begins its incline in the lower-right corner of the picture and its bushes and trees continue to the upper-left corner. The prairie, stretching off to the horizon, and speckled with the middle-distant figures of other reclining figures, followed by the far-distant figures of wagons and grazing horses, makes up but a small portion of the remaining right triangle of the picture. The bulk of this area is a blue-orange sky. Thus, though Miller's composition, when considered as a whole, is a pleasing one, it is also one which effectively nullifies the vast spaces of the prairie.

Noon-day Rest is representative of Miller's usual treatment of the prairie landscape. His formalized arrangement of figures against the prairie, with a prominent foreground stretching through the middle distance to the background, is, of course, entirely to be expected, given his training and background. But that is exactly the point. With Catlin there is an open question as to whether his repeated use of knolls and other obstructions to obscure the background distance was the result of his attempt to hide his failure to depict perspective adequately or whether it was the result of a personal preference. With Miller, however, we have a

painter who could depict the reality of a prairie landscape directly and, as will be seen presently, did so on a few occasions but who by and large chose to play down its vastness by devoting only a portion of his space to the prairie, filling the rest of the frame with his foreground scenes. Like Catlin, too, he often enclosed his scene by showing mountains and hills in the far background (see, for example, Pierre and the Buffalo, Appendix, p. 363); on other occasions, he combined the foreground eminence and background mountain conventions in order to frame the intermediate prairie (see Scene at "Rendezvous," Appendix, p. 364). Finally, in such paintings as Indians on the War Path (see Appendix, p. 365) Miller shows his figures on the open prairie and obscures the background distance through the use of a certain vague shape behind his figures. In this particular work, the obscuring shape may be intended as a dust cloud raised by the Indians' horses, but its exact nature is unclear; whatever these vague shapes are taken to be, they block the view of the distant horizon.

Taken together, Miller's various techniques suggest that, like Bodmer, there was a tendency within him to flee the "unacceptable reality" of the prairie-plains, which took the form of adapting his landscape to the conventions of his art, not the reverse. That is, these various techniques use the prairie not as vast space, but rather as space, properly viewed--so as to produce a particularly balanced effect. In turn, the conventions which these artists are using belong to what William Gilpin would call the tradition of the "beautiful" rather than the sublime. In one description of the Scottish landscape, Gilpin wrote: "When the landscape approaches nearer simplicity, it approaches nearer the sublime; and when variety prevails, it tends more to the beautiful. A vast range of mountains, the lines of which are simple; and the surfaces broad, grand, and extensive,

is rather sublime than beautiful." Given the variety which Miller incorporates in his scenes--foreground eminence, prairie, and background hill or mountain--his paintings must be described as "beautiful" only. Also according to Gilpin's dicta, a prairie viewed alone should be the height of the sublime.[13]

The adherence of these artists to the tradition of the "beautiful," moreover, is evidenced by their choice of landscape as subject since they tended to depict the prairie in relation to other, more impressive, landscape elements. Both Catlin and Bodmer painted the confluence of the Yellowstone and Missouri Rivers, viewed from above, and Miller's Snake Indians (see Appendix, p. 366) is a representative example of this particular mode of treatment. Miller pictures a plain in the middle distance, sandwiched between a background mountain and a foreground promontory, on which the Indians stand. Thus ringed round and framed by background and foreground, Miller's viewpoint is exactly the sort which prompted Lewis to call a plain "beatifull": when "surrounded in every direction with distant and lofty mountains" (Original Journals, II: 275). Samuel Seymour, the first illustrator of the far West, employed this same landscape configuration in a view of the Rockies published in the Account of the Long expedition, and Catlin used it in his Fort Pierre, With Sioux Camped Around (see Appendix, pp. 367-68). The pervasiveness of this configuration confirms the very conventional "beauty" which Gilpin defined.

In about a half dozen separate works, however, Miller did treat the prairie directly, giving it central importance within his composition, although in each case the depiction of the prairie is dictated by his choice of subject. In one of these, Buffalo Turning on his Pursuers, Miller shows three hunters, two of whom have dismounted to finish off two adjacent,

wounded buffalo; against the far horizon is the herd from which they have been separated. If he is to portray the hunting of buffalo, in short, Miller has to give attention to the setting. In the notes to accompany two other works, The Lost "Green-Horn" and Prairie Scene: Mirage, Miller himself suggests how this rationale operated (see Appendix, pp. 369-71). With respect to the former, he recounts an incident in which the party's cook, an Englishman named John, boasted of his great skill as a buffalo hunter; Captain Stewart, upon hearing these boasts, allowed him a chance to go off and make good his claims. The man thereupon got lost for three days on the prairie, was unable to kill any buffalo he found, and subsisted on berries until he was found by the party's hunters. Miller's painting accordingly shows a man on a horse standing upon a rise, looking off into the distance, surrounded only by the outspreading prairie and the sky.[14] In the second such scene, Miller depicts a caravan setting out on the prairie and, in the distance, he shows a prairie mirage. In his note he explains:

> The caravan is proceeding at its usual steady pace, both men and horses suffering for want of water,--the day is hot and oppressive. Suddenly in the distance, an extensive Lake looms up,--delightful to the eye, the surface reflecting islands, and trees on its borders;--but what is the matter with the horses?--they neither raise their ears, quicken their motion, or snort, as is their wont on such occasions.
>
> Poor brutes!--well do they know there is no water for them. It is the mirage, an optical delusion;--the deception is so perfect that you can scarcely credit your senses.[15]

That in the accompanying painting Miller does justice to the vast spaces of the prairie may be attributed to the fact that a prairie mirage requires an uninterrupted line of sight. In any case, it is significant that when Miller pictures three other scenes peculiar to the prairie, a buffalo "jump,"

a prairie fire, and a buffalo "surround" (see Appendix, pp. 372-74), his landscape treatment is similarly direct.

At the same time, however, these prairie subjects also seem to have had the effect of engendering in Miller an appreciation of the prairie in its own right. Thus in his note describing the surround he seems to be suggesting that these subjects owe their impressiveness to the landscape: "the dexterity and grace of the Indians and the thousands upon thousands of Buffalo moving in every direction over the illimitable prairie form a scene altogether, that in the whole world beside, cannot be matched" (Note facing Plate 200). Just as the first travelers on the prairie often required the impetus of the sight of a vast buffalo herd at mating season, or of the shock of a prairie mirage to startle them into an imaginative reaction to the prairie landscape, Alfred Jacob Miller apparently required the same sights to shock him out of his conventional concept of landscape. But while their recognition can be gauged only by the tone and nature of their descriptions, Miller's recognition may be gauged by the altered technique evident in his art.

There is evidence, moreover, that Miller continued to adjust his technical presentation of the prairie landscape throughout his lifetime. As indicated above, Miller repeatedly painted versions of his western work long after his trip. The body of <u>The West of Alfred Jacob Miller</u> is made up of a set of water-color copies of his on-the-spot sketches which he made for William T. Walters from July 1858 through August 1860. Several years later Miller made another set for Sir Alexander Hargreaves Brown. While I do not intend to embark on protracted comparisons of the various versions of each subject, it should be noted that in nine selected scenes Miller's subsequent treatment has altered the view of the prairie landscape.

The changes he made, usually by lowering the angle of vision and moving in closer, by making the prairie background clearer, or by moving a foreground knoll out of the picture, do not have any effect, really, on the major subject--only upon its context. Thus it seems that long after he visited the prairie Miller was still experimenting with alternative methods of depicting its vast spaces.[16]

* * *

The next artist to venture into the West and leave a written description of his impressions was the famous ornithologist, John James Audubon, who ascended the Missouri in the spring of 1843. His trip was the last such excursion of his life, and his descriptions of the prairie are as remarkable for his attitude toward George Catlin as they are for his impressions of the landscape itself. Unlike Catlin, Audubon saw the Indian not as any sort of noble savage, but rather as a brute. They were in his words "a thieving and dirty set, covered with vermin."[17]

Perhaps because he came west primarily because of his interest in new species of birds and animals for his illustrations, or because he traveled the Missouri River route, Audubon's journal does not provide a great deal of landscape description. In fact, many of his references to the prairie are by way of disagreeing with Catlin: "Ah, Mr. Catlin," he writes at one point, "We saw here no 'carpeted prairies,' no 'velvety distant landscape'; and if these things are to be seen, why, the sooner we reach them the better" (p. 282). When Audubon does directly comment on the prairie, it is usually in connection with local animal population, as when he remarks repeatedly over the vast numbers of buffalo tracks to be seen (pp. 284-86). Like other travelers, he is awed by the sight of a buffalo chase (pp. 308-

09), although he later decries the wanton destruction of the buffalo and describes the prairie as "literally covered with the skulls of the victims" (p. 310). This is a recurrent theme in the journal and Audubon ends his western writings by observing, "In fact it is impossible to describe or even conceive the vast multitudes of these animals [buffalo] that exist even now, and feed on these ocean-like prairies" (p. 319). This concern with the animals living on the prairie, rather than with the landscape itself, carried into his art; his portrait of the American Bison or Buffalo, for example (see Appendix, p. 375), reveals a prairie dotted with buffalo to the middle distance. In the background the line of sight is blocked by a vague mass, probably either a cloudbank or a distant hill.

As I already mentioned, much of Audubon's commentary seems designed to impugn Catlin's impressions. At one point he notes that Mandan huts (which he saw after the tribe had been all but wiped out by smallpox) "are very far from looking poetical, although Mr. Catlin has tried to render them so by placing them in regular rows . . ." (p. 292). He also pointedly refers to "this wild and, to my eyes, miserable country, the poetry of which lies in the imagination of these writers who have described the 'velvety prairies' and 'enchanted castles' (of mud), so common where we now are" (p. 294). As his final thrust at Catlin, Audubon dismisses him with "We have seen much remarkably handsome scenery, but nothing at all comparing with Catlin's descriptions; his book must, after all, be altogether a humbug. Poor devil! I pity him from the bottom of my soul . . ." (p. 298).

However much prompted by jealousy--and one of his editors thinks a very great deal[18]--there is some truth to Audubon's estimation of Catlin's romantic descriptions of the prairie. As the above discussion of Letters and Notes indicates, Catlin's enthusiasm for the prairie landscape owed

something to the fact that he associated it with the Indians. In that sense, then, the "poetry" of the prairie landscape did lie within Catlin's "imagination." Audubon concludes one protracted gibe at his predecessor by saying "But different travellers have different eyes!" (p. 292), and his journal proves this maxim abundantly true. In Audubon we have an artist who was little taken by the landscape of the upper Missouri River, and indeed, one who often appears to scorn it; while Catlin saw "velvety prairies" Audubon saw only "these boundless wastes called prairies . . ." (p. 315).

Paul Kane, the next artist to travel through the prairie, is the Canadian counterpart to George Catlin; like the American, he recorded the land and its people before large-scale settlement. His book, Wanderings of an Artist among the Indians of North America (1858), was inspired at least in part by the success of Catlin's Letters and Notes, the author of which he had met and made friends with in London just prior to his return to Canada in 1843. At the time of his arrival in Toronto, Kane was resolved to undertake his trip west, but his plan was not effected until 1845.[19] As Kane expressed his mission himself, his intention was to "represent the scenery of an almost unknown country" and to "sketch pictures of the principal chiefs" (p. 51). He departed from Toronto in the early summer of 1845 but did not reach the prairie until a year later; in the meantime he had lived among and painted the Indians living in the Great Lakes region, and also had the enormous good fortune to meet and be befriended by Governor Simpson of the Hudson's Bay Company, who authorized him free transportation on all company boats and "hospitalities" at all posts. In effect, this gave Kane carte blanche to travel at will throughout the west.

Initially, Kane was not much taken with the prairie landscape; describing

the country around present-day Winnipeg, he writes: "The country here is not very beautiful; a dead level plain with very little timber, the landscape wearing more the appearance of the cultivated farms of the old country with scarcely a stick or stump upon it" (p. 68). After he had become accustomed to the prairie, however, Kane is more positive; recording his travels along the banks of the North Saskatchewan River, heading toward present-day Edmonton, he writes: "It was the commencement of Indian summer; the evening was very fine, and threw that peculiar soft, warm haziness over the landscape, which is supposed to proceed from the burning of the immense prairies. The sleepy buffaloes grazing upon the undulating hills, here and there relieved by clumps of small trees, the unbroken stillness, and the approaching evening, rendered it altogether a scene of most enchanting repose" (p. 80). Kane proceeds here in the same painterly manner as Catlin, presenting the scene as if he were describing a picture. First, he is concerned with the visual nature of the scene, then he turns to its component parts--buffalo, hills, and trees--and only then does he evaluate it subjectively.

Kane was especially conscious of the wild prairie flowers, and he often included them in his pictures; Camping on the Prairies features a foreground of wild roses (see Appendix, p. 376). The presence of flowers also occasioned Kane to describe the prairie as "presenting more the aspect of a garden than of uncultivated land" (p. 81).

Kane's talents were more adaptable to the prairie landscape than were Catlin's. He also traveled through more of the West than did Catlin, eventually reaching the Pacific coast, and thus he sketched the prairie within a larger context of various landscapes. Notwithstanding some indication of directness, however, like Catlin Kane also used certain

pictorial conventions, especially those of composition, to play down the effect of the prairie's vastness. In The Man that Always Rides (see Appendix, p. 377), Kane composed his canvas almost exactly as Catlin had in his portrait of BA-DA-AH-CHON-DU, He Who Outjumps All (see Appendix, p. 355), depicting his Indian also on horseback, looking out over the outstretching prairie. But Kane benefited from his European study, and so his means of emphasizing his central figure at the expense of the prairie context is more sophisticated than is Catlin's. While Catlin set his Indian against a vague cloudbank, Kane pictures his just after dusk, and accentuates his figure by means of a light source shining down on the Indian and his horse from above like a spotlight. Thus the prairie's vastness is apparent in the painting, but it is de-emphasized, darkened by the painter's use of chiaroscuro. Similarly, a portion of the prairie is closed off by a foreground obstruction which rises immediately behind the horse; it also blocks the view to Kane's dusky horizon, his distant light source.[20] In another of his paintings, Winter Travelling (see Appendix, p. 378), Kane minimizes the vastness of the prairie by arranging his foreground hills and trees in the same manner as Catlin did in his various hunting scenes.

J. Russell Harper's catalogue raisonné (pp. 287-88) lists some thirteen sketches and paintings in which Kane depicted the buffalo, all of which, significantly, feature individual studies of two or three buffalo. In addition, there are also works done on the buffalo hunt and at a buffalo pound. But there are no depictions of extensive buffalo herds. This is remarkable because Kane himself at one point described a prairie black with buffalo "as far as the eye could reach, and so numerous were they, that at times they impeded our progress, filling the air with dust almost

to suffocation" (p. 82). Given Kane's vexation over these buffalo, it is surprising that he did not attempt to depict such a scene. In Métis Chasing a Buffalo Herd (see Appendix, p. 379), the reproduction which depicts the greatest buffalo population in those of Kane's works I have seen, scarcely more than one hundred are visible. Apparently he either did not find this a pictorial subject, or else he considered such a scene beyond his talents.[21]

While Kane's treatment of the prairie is direct and accurate in paintings like Camping on the Prairies, two of his paintings in particular, Assiniboine Hunting Buffalo and Brigade of Boats, reflect his retreat into conventions, an escape which parallels Bodmer's use of color in a formulaic manner and Miller's methods of composition (see Appendix, pp. 381-82). The horses depicted in the former painting are known to have been modeled upon those in an Italian engraving, and the trading boats in the latter, which are supposedly plying the Saskatchewan River, "have the dignity of Roman galleys" according to one critic.[22] The skies in these paintings, as in most of Kane's prairie oils, glow above the expansive landscape amid billowing clouds, reflecting a rainbow of colors, and shine upon the scenes below--buffalo hunts, Indian rituals, and portraits. They do so in a manner quite European and, also, quite unreal.

Paul Kane is in many respects a mirror image of George Catlin. While Catlin's romanticism is more apparent in his writing than in his painting, romanticism characterizes Kane's painting more than his writing. As a document, Wanderings of an Artist provides a record of Kane's reaction to the prairie landscape which is descriptive without being very subjective. At the same time, however, Kane's on-the-spot sketches stand in a similar relation to his later renditions of these scenes in oils. Commenting on Kane's first showing of his western work, mounted immediately upon his

return to Toronto in late 1848 and so containing only his immediate sketches and watercolors, J. Russell Harper writes in Paul Kane's Frontier that these "Landscapes bloom with the glow of the clear Canadian atmosphere":

> All of the sketches in the exhibition were painted with a factual and objective approach which could not fail to speak directly to those who saw them. By contrast, a similar show of Catlin's works would have revealed a nervous, romantic air. Curiously, when Kane painted up his sketches into canvases, he altered his approach, losing the lucid freshness of his first impressions by introducing subjective overtones. These were intended to make his canvases into more profound works of art, but by present-day standards they quite failed to do so. (p. 28)

Thus, with Kane, the initial impression can be separated from the subsequent artifice. Camping on the Prairies, a sketch with oil on paper, and Métis Chasing a Buffalo Herd (see Appendix, pp. 376, 379), a watercolor, both depict the prairie landscape as it is--with its vast space and fully-illuminated qualities intact. Thus the unreal qualities of the romantic paintings discussed earlier--the sky, light, incongruous horses, and so on--can be attributed to Kane's later application of convention. Kane, who had seen the landscape and sketched and painted it as it was, tried after the fact to make that landscape and its inhabitants fit a conventional, preconceived, idea of what constitutes "profound" art.

While illustrators and artists continued to troop into the West after Kane--among them Albert Bierstadt, Charles Russell, and Frederic Remington in the United States and William G. R. Hind, Sydney Prior Hall, and Edward Roper in Canada--an analysis of their depiction of the prairie will not be attempted here.[23] To varying degrees their work suggests the same sort of collision between actuality and artifice, or between the facts of the prairie landscape and the European conventions which characterizes the work of the artists I have considered. In addition, by the time they were painting the

prairie, a tradition had been established--mainly by Catlin--and the work of Russell and Remington, in particular, largely served to popularize it. What remains to be done here is to explore the work of a writer who was familiar with many of these pictorial renditions of the prairie and who--though he was not the first literary artist to depict the prairie--was the first to combine the qualities of stature, direct exposure, and extensive consideration.

* * *

When he headed onto the prairie in the spring of 1846, Francis Parkman was newly graduated from Harvard and had written none of the volumes on which his reputation now rests, although he had begun to plan the first of these, and came west in part to see Indians in their native habitat. But Parkman and his cousin Quincy Adams Shaw traveled west primarily for adventure and the joy of a summer spent "out of bounds," and a holiday air often permeates The Oregon Trail (1849). Historians such as Mason Wade and Bernard De Voto have lamented Parkman's inexperience in 1846; in his travels he saw first-hand many of the important players of the westward movement at a crucial time and was himself among the emigrants on the Oregon Trail; but because of his youth, they claim, he did not realize what he was looking at.[24] He was, however, most "experienced" in another way: prior to his trip he had read Gregg's Commerce of the Prairies, Maximilian's Travels, and Frémont's Report, among the first-person accounts; he had seen Catlin's paintings in London and read his book (through Maximilian's book, of course, he knew Bodmer's paintings), and he had read all of Irving's western works. Perhaps most importantly, he knew Cooper's Leatherstocking novels "by heart" and could quote Bryant's western poems from memory.[25]

Thus in Francis Parkman we have an individual steeped in contemporary western description confronting the West for the first time. His expectations, as do his notions of literary convention, accordingly, come into play as he describes the prairie landscape in The Oregon Trail. And, as with a comparison of Kane's on-the-spot sketches and watercolors with his large, after-the-fact oils, the availability of Parkman's Oregon Trail journal allows a comparison between his immediate reaction to the prairie landscape and the "worked-up" version which is The Oregon Trail.[26] As a well-educated person, moreover, Parkman had distinct ideas about the nature of literature; indeed, before turning to his histories, he wrote not only The Oregon Trail but also a critical essay on Cooper, and Vassal Morton (1856), a novel.

Parkman and his party left Westport, Missouri--the traditional "jumping off" point for both the Oregon and Santa Fe Trails--in early May of 1846 and traveled up the Platte to Fort Laramie; they then traveled south along the eastern side of the Rocky Mountains before turning east and following the Arkansas River back to the settlements, returning in late September to the area about Westport. Parkman first caught sight of the prairie just outside of Westport, and his immediate impression was as follows: "we had a sight of the great green ocean of the prairies; for the forest terminates at this place, where also is the boundary of the State of Missouri. A lofty forest, all fresh and verdant in the spring--then a tract of shrubbery and crab-trees full of fragrant blossoms--and then the great level expanse of prairie."[27] In The Oregon Trail, Parkman's rendering of the same description places a greater emphasis on the visual: "Looking over an intervening belt of bushes, we saw the green, ocean-like expanse of prairie, stretching swell beyond swell to the horizon" (p. 10). This description also emphasizes the

spreading vastness of the prairie but, after describing the blossoming trees, he interjects a new element: "I was half inclined to regret leaving behind the land of gardens, for the rude and stern scenes of the prairie and mountains" (p. 10). Implicitly, Parkman is equating the settlements and forests of the East with "gardens"--the tamed and the known--while the prairie equals a strange new landscape--wild, untamed, and unknown. This was, in fact, its aspect for Parkman, but by interjecting this consideration--a longing to stay--he is preparing his reader for what lies ahead on the trail.

Such is the usual technique to be found when passages in The Oregon Trail are compared to their precursors in Parkman's journals. In the best literary fashion, he often took the germ of an idea in the journals and, through elaboration, explanation, and amplification, produced a passage which is far more detailed and articulate. These passages, too, often take on a larger structural significance within the whole of The Oregon Trail. Writing in the journals some two weeks after they had left Westport, Parkman notes that "the expanse of prairie stretched for mile after mile without tree or bush--we ascended swell after swell and could see nothing but the vast, green level. At last, turned aside from the road to a clump of trees in the distance" (Journals, II: 424). This observation is quite similar to those made by others; but, when writing (or rather dictating) the book which became The Oregon Trail, Parkman seized upon this descriptive passage as his occasion for the parallel consideration of the real prairie versus its literary reputation. Thus he writes in a protracted preliminary to the passage just quoted:

> Should any one of my readers ever be impelled to visit the prairies, and should he choose the route of the Platte (the best, perhaps, that

> can be adopted), I can assure him that he need not think to enter at once upon the paradise of his imagination. A dreary preliminary, a protracted crossing of the threshold, awaits him before he finds himself fairly upon the verge of the "great American desert,"--those barren wastes, the haunts of the buffalo and the Indian, where the very shadow of civilization lies a hundred leagues behind him. The intervening country, the wide and fertile belt that extends for several hundred miles beyond the extreme frontier, will probably answer tolerably well to his preconceived ideas of the prairie; for this it is from which picturesque tourists, painters, poets, and novelists, who have seldom penetrated farther, have derived their conceptions of the whole region. If he has a painter's eye, he may find his period of probation not wholly void of interest. The scenery, though tame, is graceful and pleasing. Here are level plains too wide for the eye to measure; green undulations, like motionless swells of the ocean; abundance of streams, followed through all their windings by lines of woods and scattered groves. (pp. 34-35).

Because he is writing in retrospect, Parkman knows what lies ahead of this fertile tract of land--the High Plains; when he wrote the entry in his journal he did not. Thus this passage provides the reader with a distillation of Parkman's own experience; presumably, the "fertile belt" he describes answered his own "preconceived ideas of the prairie" but in retrospect he is aware that those ideas--garnered, no doubt, from his readings and the paintings he had seen--are severely limited. Thus while he understands the aesthetic reaction to the fertile prairies ("If he has a painter's eye"), Parkman is conscious that the aesthetic reaction is only a part of prairie experience; coupled with it are a variety of more pressing--and elemental--considerations:

> But let him be as enthusiastic as he may, he will find enough to damp his ardor. His wagons will stick in the mud; his horses will break loose; harness will give way; and axle-trees prove unsound. His bed will be a soft one, consisting often of black mud of the richest consistency. As for food, he must content himself with biscuit and salt provisions; for strange as it may seem, this tract of country produces very little game. As he advances, indeed, he will see, mouldering in the grass by his path, the vast antlers of the elk, and farther on the whitened skulls of the buffalo, once swarming over this now deserted region. Perhaps, like us, he may

> journey for a fortnight, and see not so much as the hoof-print of a deer; in the spring, not even a prairie-hen is to be had.
>
> Yet, to compensate him for this unlooked-for deficiency of game, he will find himself beset with "varmints" innumerable. The wolves will entertain him with a concert at night, and skulk around him by day just beyond rifle-shot; his horse will step into badger-holes; from every marsh and mud-puddle will arise the bellowing, croaking and trilling of legions of frogs, infinitely various in color, shape, and dimensions. A profusion of snakes will glide away from under his horse's feet, or quietly visit him in his tent at night; while the pertinacious humming of unnumbered mosquitoes will banish sleep from his eyelids. When, thirsty with a long ride in the scorching sun over some boundless reach of prairie, he comes at length to a pool of water and alights to drink, he discovers a troop of young tadpoles sporting in the bottom of his cup. Add to this that, all the morning, the sun beats upon him with a sultry, penetrating heat, and that, with provoking regularity, at about four o'clock in the afternoon a thunderstorm rises and drenches him to the skin. (pp. 35-36)

Clearly, some of Parkman's romantic expectations--he knew Cooper's Leatherstocking tales, after all, "by heart"--were exploded by the hard edge of the reality he found on the prairie. Thus the two views of the landscape and its qualities he provided here--the preconceived and the actual--are by way of a corrective for his readers. Having read much of what was in print at the time concerning the prairie West himself, Parkman is visibily conscious that such descriptions provided a partial picture only, partial both in terms of the extent of the travels these works delineate and partial in the view which they take.

Like those travelers who preceded him onto the prairie and plains, Parkman comments over the strange sights he found; like them, he notes huge buffalo herds (p. 82), optical illusions (p. 310), the clarity of the air (p. 369) and takes advantage of hilltop views. As we have seen, also, he used the ocean metaphor for the prairie. But the fact that he noticed these elements is not as important, for the purposes of this discussion, as his literary use of them in <u>The Oregon Trail</u>.

One such instance concerns a thunderstorm, which he describes in his journal as follows:

> May 20th. Last night, were awakened by tremendous peals of thunder, quite different from any in our part of the country--beginning with a tremendous burst, they ran reverberating around the whole firmament. The rain that followed was like a cataract, and beat through the tent in a thick drizzle, wetting everything. The lightning was very intense and brilliant. Lay by today until afternoon, when the restlessness of Romaine impelled his party to move. We, against our judgment, consented to follow, not caring to appear obstinate--so broke up camp and moved off. Intensely sultry and oppressive, and when the sun came out it was terribly hot. The sky was hung with clouds, and thunder muttered incessantly. As we rode on, things grew worse, till the whole prairie and the grove grew almost black in the stormy shadow, and the lightning kept flashing vividly. The masses of cloud in front grew blacker and more ragged--and thunder more and more threatening--till both horses and men took alarm, and we all rushed forward in a medley, running or gallopping, and the muleteers lashing and shouting. We wheeled round behind a line of trees--tore off our saddles--hobbled the frightened brutes--seized the tent and thrust the pole into the ground. No sooner was this done than a sharp flash and a crashing peal came upon us, and the rain descended like a torrent. (Journals, II: 425)

In rewriting this incident for The Oregon Trail, Parkman passes quickly over the initial storm so that, by this shift of emphasis, his party is racing dramatically against the impending storm at the end of a long march:

> Not a breath of air stirred over the free and open prairie; the clouds were like light piles of cotton; and where the blue sky was visible, it wore a hazy and languid aspect. The sun beat down upon us with a sultry, penetrating heat almost insupportable, and as our party crept slowly along over the interminable level, the horses hung their heads as they waded fetlock deep through the mud, and the men slouched into the easiest position upon the saddle. At last, towards evening, the old familiar black heads of thunder-clouds rose fast above the horizon, and the same muttering of distant thunder that had become the ordinary accompaniment of our afternoon's journey began to roll hoarsely over the prairie. Only a few minutes elapsed before the whole sky was densely shrouded, and the prairie and some clusters of woods in front assumed a purple hue beneath the inky shadows. Suddenly from the densest fold of the cloud the flash leaped out, quivering again and again down to the edge of the prairie; and at the same instant came the sharp burst and the long rolling peal of the thunder. (p. 48)

As in the journal entry, the party rushes to the shelter of a clump of trees and hurriedly sets camp and they sit through the storm in their tents, which Parkman considers but ineffectual shelters. He then notes that "Towards sunset . . . the storm ceased as suddenly as it began. A bright streak of clear red sky appeared above the western verge of the prairie, the horizontal rays of the sinking sun streamed through it, and glittered in a thousand prismatic colors upon the dripping groves and the prostrate grass" (p. 49). Parkman concludes his description in The Oregon Trail by emphasizing the point at which the journal entry began--the description of a thunderstorm at night on the prairie:

> Scarcely had night set in when the tumult broke forth anew. The thunder here is not like the tame thunder of the Atlantic coast. Bursting with a terrific crash directly above our heads, it roared over the boundless waste of prairie, seeming to roll around the whole circle of the firmament with a peculiar and awful reverberation. The lightning flashed all night, playing with its vivid glare upon the neighboring trees, revealing the vast expanse of the plain, and then leaving us shut in as if by a palpable wall of darkness. (pp. 49-50)

By passing over the previous night's thunderstorm, Parkman makes the situation more dramatic--the race against the swirling cloudbanks. Likewise, by leading up to the description of the prairie landscape at night by the party's movements during the day, Parkman is able to accentuate a visibly striking aspect of the landscape: the darkened prairie suddenly, momentarily illuminated and then followed by "a palpable wall of darkness." When compared to a similar description in James's Account of the Long expedition (EWT, XV: 172), Parkman's is more vivid, more visual, and more direct.

To a certain extent, therefore, The Oregon Trail stands in a different relation to Parkman's journal than Kane's large oils to his on-the-spot sketches. Instead of merely applying literary conventions to his immediate observations, Parkman in The Oregon Trail questions their very validity in

describing the West. Thus his overview of the well-read traveler's expectations and the reality he finds (pp. 34-36). Certainly, the holiday air that infuses the book has all the trappings of romance (Parkman frequently refers to his guide as "another Leatherstocking"), but Parkman's writings most often amplify and embellish sentiments expressed in his journal, and hence improve their clarity.

This is especially so with regard to the prairie landscape. As with the thunderstorm, when Parkman recalled his experiences on the prairie while dictating The Oregon Trail he developed his impressions (as seen in the journal); he made them clearer and more precise. For example, after traveling for several days overland prior to striking the Platte River, Parkman is understandably anxious to reach it; game had been scarce and the travel monotonous: "hour after hour over a perfect level" (Journals, II: 430). After traveling a good part of the day with the buttes of the Platte in sight, Parkman writes: "and after a long and gradual ascent, saw the Platte from the summit--apparently one vast, level plain, fringed with a distant line of forest--the river ran invisible in sluices through the plain, with here and there a patch of woods like an island" (Journals, II: 431). Parkman's rendering of the same scene in The Oregon Trail is both more detailed and concerned with his emotional and aesthetic response:

> At length we gained the summit, and the long-expected valley of the Platte lay before us. We all drew rein, and sat joyfully looking down upon the prospect. It was right welcome,--strange, too, and striking to the imagination; and yet it had not one picturesque or beautiful feature; nor had it any features of grandeur, other than its vast extent, its solitude, and its wildness. For league after league, a plain as level as a lake was outspread beneath us; here and there the Platte, divided into a dozen threadlike sluices, was traversing it, and an occasional clump of wood, rising in the midst like a shadowy island, relieved the monotony of the waste. No living thing was moving throughout the vast landscape, except the lizards that darted over the sand and through the rank grass and prickly pears at our feet. (p. 65)

While the journal entry provides the bare bones of the incident, Parkman here recalls his emotional response and analyzes it. He knows that his reaction is both strong and imaginative, but at the same time he is uneasy because he is aware that this particular vista includes none of the conventional "features of grandeur" associated with either beauty or the picturesque. Finally, too, he is aware that his imagination has been struck by a landscape which contains no living things to animate the scene.

Another example of this technique involves an incident in which Parkman became lost. Describing it in his journal, Parkman writes: "Got separated from the others--rode for hours westwardly over the prairie--saw the hills dotted with thousands of buffalo. Antelopes--prairie dogs--burrowing owls--wild geese--wolves, etc. Finding my course wrong, followed a buffalo-track northward, and about noon came out on the road. Awkward feeling, being lost on the prairie" (Journals, II: 434-35). Parkman's last sentence (with which Coronado would have agreed) becomes the basis for a lengthy passage of description and analysis in The Oregon Trail:

> I looked about for some indications to show me where I was, and what course I ought to pursue; I might as well have looked for landmarks in the midst of the ocean. How many miles I had run, or in what direction, I had no idea; and around me the prairie was rolling in steep swells and pitches, without a single distinctive feature to guide me. I had a little compass hung at my neck; and ignorant that the Platte at this point diverged considerably from its easterly course, I thought that by keeping to the northward I should certainly reach it. So I turned and rode about two hours in that direction. The prairie changed as I advanced, softening away into easier undulations, but nothing like the Platte appeared, nor any sign of a human being: the same wild, endless expanse lay around me still; and to all appearance I was as far from my object as ever. I began now to think myself in danger of being lost, and, reining in my horse, summoned the scanty share of woodcraft that I possessed (if that term be applicable on the prairie) to extricate me. It occurred to me that the buffalo might prove my best guides. I soon found one of the paths made by them in their passage to the river: it ran nearly at right angles to my course; but turning my horse's head in the direction it indicated, his freer gait and erected ears assured me that I was right. (p. 81)

Here Parkman makes plain to his reader the nature of his "awkward" feeling: on the prairie, he realizes, none of the conventional means of orientation applies. One who is lost in a landscape without landmarks must re-think his assumptions regarding the nature of "landmark," just as he must re-think the applicability of the term "woodcraft" to such a landscape. Instead of, like Catlin, looking for a "distinctive feature" in a landscape which is largely without such things, Parkman eventually realizes that he must work with those features which do exist on the prairie--instead of looking up for some upright thing in order to obtain orientation, Parkman realizes that on the prairie one is better served by looking down and following the way of a buffalo trail. Palpable in this passage is Parkman's growing frustration over his disorientation along with his growing awareness that he must adapt imaginatively in order to find his way. Thus the passage in The Oregon Trail is articulate and dramatic while the journal entry, taken immediately after the incident, suggests only the nascent feeling: awkwardness. Through subsequent consideration and reassessment of the event, Parkman was able to define and articulate the exact nature of the imaginative effect of the prairie (thus his use of repeated descriptions of the surrounding vastness, the extent of his disorientation, and attention to the applicability of the term "woodcraft"). A comparison of the two passages, indeed, makes the extent of the prairie's effect on Parkman's imagination all the more apparent; just as earlier he was uncertain about why the prairie around the Platte struck him as beautiful, now he is forced to probe the nature of his "Awkward feeling" at being lost on the prairie.[28]

Parkman's use and evaluation of prairie phenomena is of a similar order. For example, in two instances he employs the setting sun (and its resulting mirage effect of making objects look larger) as a descriptive tool; in the

first of these he describes a boy who was traveling with an emigrant group. The boy, Parkman says, "was short and stout, but his legs were of disproportioned and appalling length. I observed him at sunset, breasting the hill with giant strides, and standing against the sky on the summit, like a colossal pair of tongs" (p. 76). This combination of back-lighting and the mirage illusion, increasing the figure's apparent size, is directly the result of the prairie landscape. Similarly, while leaving an Arapahoe Indian camp, Parkman views it against a glowing western sky: "When about a mile from the village, I turned and looked back over the undulating ocean of grass. The sun was just set; the western sky was all in a glow, and sharply defined against it, on the extreme verge of the plain, stood the clustered lodges of the Arapahoe camp" (p. 352).

In addition to providing strikingly visual details made possible by the prairie landscape, these descriptions are also a verification of a preconceived expectation created in Parkman by Cooper's The Prairie. Since Parkman knew Cooper's Leatherstocking Tales well, he could not have missed the author's use of the figure against the setting sun as his means of introducing Natty Bumppo in The Prairie. Hence Parkman's use of this phenomenon is different from its discussion in Gregg's Commerce of the Prairie or James's Account of the Long expedition. When each of these men discussed the mirage effect on the prairie, they were simply describing a natural phenomenon and providing examples. When Parkman uses the same phenomenon here, however, he is using it as a literary device, at least in some sense, one appropriated from Cooper, who had himself appropriated it from the James Account.[29] Accordingly, with The Oregon Trail, topography is translated into the literary landscape that is setting, just as with Parkman prairie description can be said to have passed from the logs of travel into travelogue.

* * *

Like the first explorers and travelers, to summarize briefly then, the first artists were imaginatively struck by the prairie landscape, but their problem was more acute. The explorers and travelers had only to learn to travel and live within the environment and, perhaps, to describe it; the artists, on the other hand, had to do this and accomplish their art within this context. Accordingly, they had to adapt and accommodate the conventions of their art--both technical and conceptual. Some were more successful than others, but even those who failed practically to contend with the challenge it posed evidence the extent to which the prairie was "strange, too, and striking to the imagination."

CHAPTER THREE: Notes

[1] Bernard De Voto, Across the Wide Missouri (Cambridge: Houghton Mifflin, 1947), p. 373.

[2] Because the paintings discussed in this chapter are reproduced in the Appendix, and the sources from which they have been taken are there identified, in these notes I shall not duplicate the source citations. However, by way of information, Seymour and Rindisbacher are discussed briefly in De Voto, pp. 393-94 and, for further discussion of the latter, see 150 Years of Art in Manitoba: Struggle for a Visual Civilization (Winnipeg, Manitoba: The Winnipeg Art Gallery, 1970) and Alvin M. Josephy, Jr., The Artist Was a Young Man: The Life Story of Peter Rindisbacher (Fort Worth: Avon Carter Museum, 1970).

In addition to De Voto's work, relevant texts which consider the artists of exploration are: Robert Taft, Artists and Illustrators of the Old West, 1850-1900 (New York: Scribner's, 1953); Larry Curry, The American West: Painters from Catlin to Russell, fwd. Archibald Hanna (New York: Viking, 1972); and, most recently, Barbara Novak, Nature and Culture: American Landscape and Painting 1825-1875 (New York: Oxford, 1980). And, barring those works from which I quote directly below, Harold McCracken's George Catlin and the Old Frontier (New York: Dial Press, 1959) must be cited here as both a source of information and a source of reproductions. These works, plus the individual volumes on Miller, Kane, and Audubon cited below comprise the sources for the Appendix; they have also provided biographical information.

[3] De Voto makes the point that through Letters and Notes and North American Indian Portfolio (1844), as well as his Indian galley, which was widely seen in the eastern United States and in England, Catlin established "the first set of conventions of Western painting" (De Voto, p. 392). The reception accorded Letters and Notes, as well as a list of the various editions and reprints, may be found in McCracken, pp. 192, 212-13.

[4] George Catlin, Illustrations of the Manners, Customs, and Condition of the North American Indians with Letters and Notes, 2 vols. (1841; rpt. London: Henry G. Bohn, 1866), I, 1. All references to Catlin are from this edition. Catlin tended to be over-emphatic in his prose; unless noted otherwise, all italics in passages from Catlin's Letters and Notes are his. The title for Catlin's book, as cited here, is slightly different from the original; it was used frequently in the various nineteenth-century reprints. The accepted short title, Letters and Notes, however, is based on the 1841 title; I have chosen to use it for my textual allusions to the book.

[5] De Voto, p. 396.

[6] Since I have not undertaken any sort of thorough analysis of all of Catlin's paintings, sketches, and line drawings available in published sources, my assertion regarding Catlin's landscapes and his placement of hills is confirmed by those illustrations available in McCracken, Catlin's Letters and Notes, and a recent abridgement of the latter work, Letters and Notes on the North American Indians, ed. [and abridged] by Michael Macdonald Mooney (New York: Clarkson Potter, 1975). McCracken, for example, includes (in addition to those I have already mentioned) eleven other works which reveal hills placed so as to block the background. Two in particular, Comanche Feats of Horsemanship and Comanche War Party Meeting Dragoons (see Appendix, pp. 353-54), depict scenes taking place on the prairie; in the first the background is obscure and there is a slight rise or hillock behind the central figures. In the second Catlin has his war party approaching over the crest of a hill, so the viewer's line of sight is again circumscribed.

[7] Catlin's use of the cloud-strewn background is a commonplace in his Indian portraits, just as it is in portraiture generally; another ten portraits in which this technique is evident appear in McCracken.

[8] De Voto, pp. 404-06.

[9] James Thomas Flexner, That Wilder Image: The Painting of America's Native School from Thomas Cole to Winslow Homer (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1962), p. 89.

[10] De Voto, p. 405.

[11] Flexner, p. 91.

[12] My sources for the biographical material on Miller are: De Voto, 302-39, passim; pp. 406-15, and Marvin C. Ross, ed. The West of Alfred Jacob Miller, Rev. Ed. (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1968), pp. xiii-xxxvi, passim, and Flexner, pp. 91-94.

[13] William Gilpin, Observations Relative Chiefly to Picturesque Beauty, Made in the Year 1776, On Several Parts of Great Britain, Particularly the High-lands of Scotland (London, 1789), I, 122; as quoted by Monk, The Sublime, p. 225.

[14] In this painting Miller places his mounted "Green-Horn" against a large cloudbank overhanging the prairie, using a convention employed by Catlin in his portrait of BA-DA-AH-CHON-DU, the Crow chief. In both cases this device lessens the viewer's sense of vast distance behind the central figure.

[15] The West of Alfred Jacob Miller, n. facing Plate 149. All references to Miller's descriptive notes are from this edition.

[16] The water colors painted for Sir Alexander Hargreaves Brown were published in Braves and Buffalo: Plains Indian Life in 1837, introd. Michael Bell (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973) along with Miller's notes. The nine subjects I have selected for comparison are as follows:

The West of Alfred Jacob Miller (Plate Number)	Title	Braves and Buffalo (Page Number)
76	Pawnee Indians on Warpath	149
84	Approaching Buffalo	145
106	Approaching the Buffalo	19
117	Medicine Circles	77
142	Breaking Camp at Sunrise	121
151	Yell of Triumph	133
190	Buffalo Rift	23
198	Prairie on Fire	141
200	A "Surround"	160

[17] John James Audubon, Audubon's America: The Narratives and Experiences of John James Audubon, ed. Donald Culross Peattie (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1940), p. 283. All references to Audubon are from this edition.

[18] Donald Culross Peattie, Introd., to "Up the Missouri," in Audubon's America, p. 275. Peattie, who adopts a most understanding attitude toward Audubon throughout, suggests that the ornithologist was piqued to find the Indians to be nothing like Catlin's descriptions of them; he saw the prairie, says Peattie, "with eyes of one fast aging." Ultimately, however, he concludes that Audubon was professionally jealous of Catlin mainly because the latter "saw the Mandan country first."

[19] Paul Kane, Wanderings of an Artist among the Indians of North America From Canada to Vancouver's Island and Oregon Through the Hudson's Bay Company's Territory and Back Again (London, 1859), rpt. in Paul Kane's Frontier, ed., introd., and catalogue raisonné by J. Russell Harper (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1971). All references to Kane's Wanderings and to Harper's introd. and catalogue raisonné are from this edition. Harper discusses the friendship between Kane and Catlin in his introduction to the book, pp. 13-14.

[20] In his entry for this painting in his catalogue raisonné, Harper writes: "As in other cases, the composition for this canvas would appear to have a European prototype (or possibly to be after a painting by George Catlin," entry IV-105, p. 284. While he does not name the Catlin painting to which he is referring, Harper may well have in mind the portrait of BA-DA-AH-CHON-DU, discussed above.

[21] While Kane did not paint or sketch such a scene, another famous illustrator of the West, John Mix Stanley, did. Stanley traveled throughout the West from the late 1830s and was a friend of Kane's; the two may have met again at Fort Vancouver in 1847. Stanley later accompanied the I. I. Stevens expedition (that described by John Lambert) which explored the possibility of a northern route to the Pacific during the early 1850s. Stanley's illustrations were published (in color) in the government's

Reports (pub. 1855-61), which have been called "the single contemporary source of knowledge on western geography and history." Stanley's scene is taken from an eminence, and presents the sort of depiction that Edwin James described in his Account of the Long expedition, buffalo as far as the eye can see, winking in and out of view at the farthest horizon (James, XV: 239).

Governor Stevens, writing in the Report of the scene, stresses the need both for the visual and, in fact, for Stanley's illustration:

> we ascended the top of a big hill, and for a great distance ahead every square mile seemed to have a herd of buffalo upon it. Their number was variously estimated by the members of the party--some as high as half a million. I do not think it any exaggeration to set it down at 200,000. I had heard of the myriads of these animals inhabiting these plains, but I could not realize the truth of these accounts till today, when they surpassed anything I could have imagined from the accounts which I had received. The reader will form a better idea of this scene from the accompanying sketch, taken by Mr. Stanley on the ground, than from any description.

As for Stanley himself, he later talked to a writer, who recorded his comments in the following manner: "The artist in sketching this scene, stood on an elevation in advance of the foreground, whence, with a spyglass, he could see fifteen miles in any direction, and yet he saw not the limit of the herd. Who can count the multitude? You may only look and wonder! Or, if you seek to estimate the 'numbers without number,' what sum will you name, except 'hundreds of thousands'?" Hence Stanley's technique in recording this scene corresponds to that of other painters and, moreover, to that of most Europeans on the prairie, whatever their purpose. He needed to get above the landscape. His Herd of Bison Near Lake Jessie (see Appendix, p. 380) was first printed in The United States Pacific Railroad Reports of Explorations and Surveys: 47th and 49th Parallels, Vol XII, plate X; rpt. Novak, fig. 72, p. 142. My quotations from Stevens and from Stanley's Western Wilds are from Taft's Artists and Illustrators of the Old West, 1850-1900, p. 16.

22 J. Russell Harper, Painting in Canada: A History, 2nd. Ed. (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1977), p. 123. See Harper's Fig. 106 in Paul Kane's Frontier for a reproduction of Kane's putative Italian source for Assiniboine Hunting Buffalo.

23 For a discussion of these various illustrators and artists, see Taft's Artists and Illustrators of the Old West, 1850-1900, which can be augmented by Curry's The American West from Catlin to Russell. Regarding those who painted the prairie in Canada during the nineteenth century, especially Hind, Hall, and Roper, see Painters in a New Land, ed. Michael Bell (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1973) and Ronald Rees, "Images of the Prairie: Landscape Painting and Perception in the Western Interior of Canada," Canadian Geographer, 20 (1976), 259-78.

24 Mason Wade, Francis Parkman: Heroic Historian (New York: Viking, 1942), pp. 220-25; Mason Wade, Introd., "The Oregon Trail Journal, 1846,"

in The Journals of Francis Parkman, ed. Mason Wade (New York: Harper, 1947), II. 385-95. Here Wade details his rationale for seeing The Oregon Trail as severely diluted history, both because of the background and age of its author and the circumstances of his composition. As history, he much prefers the journals. As literature, however, the finished book is preferable, Wade's objections notwithstanding. See also Bernard De Voto, The Year of Decision: 1846 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1943), passim. At one point De Voto describes a moment in The Oregon Trail when Parkman almost rises above his class prejudices and understands a party of migrants he was viewing; but his prejudice proves too strong. Says De Voto: "The historian succumbed to a parochialism of his class and we lost a great book," (p. 176).

[25] See E. N. Feltskog's editorial notes to his scholarly edition of The Oregon Trail for an account of Parkman's reading prior to his western trip: Francis Parkman, The Oregon Trail (1849; rpt. [ed. E. N. Feltskog] Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1969), pp. 460-61, n. 16. The phrase "by heart" is Feltskog's. All references to The Oregon Trail are from this edition. Mason Wade also discusses Parkman's reading; Journals, II: 397.

[26] Some comment must be made regarding the circumstances surrounding the composition of The Oregon Trail, which Wade describes as having been composed under "singular difficulties," (Journals, II, 385). Parkman's eyes, which were to trouble him for the rest of his life, were adversely affected by his western trip; so much so that he dictated The Oregon Trail to others, who would read a journal entry and, once Parkman had framed his passage, copy that one down. Wade, however, speaks of the composition of the book as "triple distillation," (Francis Parkman, p. 295). The third element he attributes to "the revision of the manuscript by the staid and proper Charles Eliot Norton--of all people!" (p. 287); Wade claims that Norton bowdlerized Parkman's text while reading proof for the first book publication by revising it in accordance with his notion of literary decorum. Wade's thesis is disputed and effectively rebuffed by Feltskog (pp. 57a-64a), who thinks it more likely that the differences between the serial version and the 1849 edition are attributable to Parkman himself. Judging from Feltskog's carefully-annotated text, none of these variants bear on the extended prairie passages.

[27] Journals, II, 417. All references to Parkman's journals are from the Wade edition.

[28] Here too Parkman changed his emphasis, giving his feelings over being lost greater emphasis. While in his journal entry he notes the local fauna before mentioning his "Awkward feeling," in The Oregon Trail he inverts the presentation, so that he discusses the animals and vegetation only after he has presented his analysis of his feelings.

[29] Orm Øverland, The Making and Meaning of an American Classic: James Fenimore Cooper's The Prairie (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, and New York: Humanities Press, 1973), pp. 76-77.

CHAPTER FOUR

"breathing life and fire into a circle of imagery": Literary Visitors

During the nineteenth century and in part owing to the westward growth of the nation, and culminating in the period known as the American Renaissance, the prairie became as central to American literary tradition as it is to the geography of the country. The emergence of the prairie as a subject for serious literary treatment, however, was spearheaded by a writer who had never visited the area, and furthermore, whose pioneering work in this respect was largely penned during his residence in Paris. Having never seen the Great Plains region of the far West, James Fenimore Cooper made it the setting and to a certain extent the subject of a novel which he boldly titled The Prairie (1827).

Critics have long noted the effect of prairie landscape on the whole of The Prairie. Speaking of Ishmael Bush's intrusion west of the Mississippi, D. H. Lawrence saw "Great Wings of vengeful doom . . . spread over the west, grim against the intruder"; Richard Chase comments that in the book "We are always aware of the dark, foreboding panorama that surrounds us."[1] There are also numerous discussions of the pictorial in Cooper, both in The Prairie and his other work, beginning with Henry Nash Smith's comment that setting in this novel is treated "as if it were an Elizabethan stage, a neutral space where any reader may be brought at a moment's notice," and extending to the work of such critics as Donald A. Ringe, Blake Nevius, and H. Daniel Peck.[2]

All of these critics elaborate on Cooper's visual mode of presentation: his connection with the Hudson-River School of painters, his use of eighteenth-century aesthetic terms, and his use of space, light, and shadow.[3] Regarding the landscape in The Prairie, however, such criticism does not go much beyond a comment made by James Franklin Beard: that the setting of the novel "is not simply a backdrop to the action, and hence incidental to the meaning: it is an integral part of the action and the meaning."[4] As Donald A. Ringe states, "the degree to which the various characters perceive that relation determines their moral standing in the tale."[5]

Because of the symbolic function of the landscape in the novel, critics have largely avoided the question of Cooper's realistic depiction of the landscape.[6] As his contemporaries were quick to point out, however, the West Cooper depicts in The Prairie is inaccurate; his factual mistakes led those acquainted with the region, such as Lewis Cass, Timothy Flint, and Daniel Drake, to dismiss his novel altogether, an attitude which still persists.[7] Thus while most Cooper critics have avoided the question of his realistic depiction of the prairie landscape, those who harbor a "true" vision of the West prefer to disregard him entirely as a presumptuous know-nothing. Neither answer is, of course, entirely satisfactory; for the purposes of this study, Cooper's The Prairie is the transitional work between the factual records treated in previous chapters and the wholly fictional depictions to be considered in those that follow.

By borrowing (some would say stealing) heavily from the James Account of the Long expedition, Cooper transformed the prairie landscape from an actual, experienced one, into a symbolic, mythic one. In The Prairie, meaning resides not only in the experience or perception of the characters

who are on the prairie, but rather, it lies within their understanding of the meaning given to the landscape by Cooper. In previous accounts, the authors revealed subjective reactions to prairie landscape; the landscape itself is passive, static. But in The Prairie, for the first time, Cooper's art charges the landscape with symbolic meaning, so that within the novel perceiver and thing perceived form a symbiosis.

Cooper's use of the prairie as the organic setting for a moralistic tale is evident from the very first page of the novel, where he speaks of the region as "a barrier of desert to the extension of . . . population to the West."[8] Defining this theme more concretely, the trapper sees the "'barren belt of prairie behind the States'" as a warning, a bitter jest of God: "'Look around you, men; what will the Yankee choppers say when they have cut their path from the eastern to the western waters and find that a hand, which can lay the 'arth bare at a blow, has been here and swept the very country in very mockery of their wickedness'" (pp. 24, 79).

Thus the concept of the Great American Desert,[9] current at the time through the records of Pike and Long, is immediately appropriated for thematic purposes, just as the demands of his theme led Cooper to emphasize the treeless quality of the prairie and to downplay other features. For example, his single buffalo stampede notwithstanding, Cooper makes little of the vast herds which James described. Perhaps he thought a land which supported such herds might not be as much a barrier as he assumed; in any case, it is the treeless character of the plains which emerges as the most striking element of the setting in the novel, not other elements discussed by various explorers and travelers.

After providing his summary account of both the Louisiana Purchase and the Westward Movement, Cooper describes the Bush caravan as it heads west

over the plains in the fall of 1805. Having abandoned "the fertile bottoms of the low country," the Bushes are far beyond the Mississippi: "many long and dreary miles in their rear foamed the swift and turbid waters of La Platte" (p. 11). Although the trapper and Ishmael Bush contrast in virtually every other respect, both have been driven into the prairie over differences with eastern law. After Bush presents his ideas concerning the legal points of ownership, Natty replies: "'I cannot say that you are wrong.'" Moreover, Cooper continues to state that Bumppo's opinions on the equitable distribution of land, "though drawn from very different premises, were in singular accordance with those . . ." of Bush (p. 64). Thus Cooper's protagonist as well as his antagonist have been driven into the desert by the vicissitudes of the East.

As it is pictured at the outset of the novel, the prairie landscape is a wasteland for Cooper's latter-day Ishmael and, as well, a place of exile for his hero, who in old age has sunk from hunter to trapper:

> The appearance of such a train in that bleak and solitary place was rendered all the more remarkable by the fact that the surrounding country offered so little that was tempting to the cupidity of speculation, and if possible, still less that was flattering to the hopes of an ordinary settler of new lands.
>
> The meager herbage of the prairie promised nothing in favor of a hard and unyielding soil over which the wheels of the vehicles rattled as lightly as if they traveled on a beaten road, neither wagons nor beasts making any deeper impression than to mark that bruised and withered grass which the cattle plucked from time to time, and as often rejected as food too sour for even hunger to render palatable. (pp. 11-12)

As in this passage, Cooper's impression of the landscape is reflected throughout in his adjectives; and as the book proceeds the reader becomes so accustomed to certain phrases ("interminable tracts") that they have the quality of chichés by its end.

After describing Ishmael Bush and selected members of his party, Cooper turns his attention once more to the landscape, noting after the fashion of

Lewis the "little valleys" between the divides which partially enclose the view; on the sides which remain open, the "meager prospect" runs "off in long, narrow, barren perspectives but slightly relieved by a pitiful show of coarse though somewhat luxuriant vegetation." Then, like almost every explorer or traveler who ever walked the prairie, Cooper obtains his best vantage point from the height of an undulation, and the subsequent description echoes all of the basic elements observed by previous travelers and explorers:

> From the summits of the swells, the eye became fatigued with the sameness and chilling dreariness of the landscape. The earth was not unlike the ocean when its restless waters are heaving heavily after the agitation and fury of the tempest have begun to lesson. There was the same waving and regular surface, the same absence of foreign objects, and the same boundless extent to the view. Indeed, so very striking was the resemblance between the water and the land that however much the geologist might sneer at so simple a theory, it would have been difficult for a poet not to have felt that the formation of the one had been produced by the subsiding dominion of the other. Here and there a tall tree rose out of the bottoms, stretching its naked branches abroad like some solitary vessel; and to strengthen the delusion, far in the distance appeared two or three rounded thickets looming in the misty horizon like islands resting on the waters. (p. 14)

Because he had never seen the Great Plains region, Cooper relied almost totally on the James Account of the Long expedition for his landscape data. Orm Øverland has convincingly argued, furthermore, that this passage was lifted virtually whole from the Account, Cooper being content to add a detail or two--the appearance of the tall trees and the ocean-prairie "theory."[10]

That Cooper cribbed from the Account, or stole from it, is not the issue, however. Having never seen the plains, he could hardly be expected to do otherwise; as Øverland comments, he was simply striving to be accurate by consulting the most up-to-date, official information. What is more significant is the process which took place. We have seen that James's imagination was affected by the prairie landscape; Cooper, while reading the James Account was similarly, although vicariously, struck. Affected by James's descrip-

tions, Cooper used those elements in them which served his artistic purposes.

That Cooper was conscious of what he was doing, furthermore, is suggested first by his pointed reference to the fact that though the geologist might sneer at the ocean-prairie analogy, to the poet it is inescapable. Second, having adopted the prairie-ocean analogy (his novel played some considerable part in making this comparison a cliché), Cooper uses it repeatedly, and although direct landscape descriptions recede into the background as Cooper becomes caught up in his plot, his repetition reminds the reader of the setting. Thus when Middleton approaches the trapper, Paul Hover, and Dr. Bat while they are feasting on a buffalo, Cooper comments that "the meeting of two hunters on the American desert . . . was consequently somewhat in the suspicious manner in which two vessels draw together in a sea that is known to be infested with pirates" (p. 112). Similarly, as Natty, Paul, Middleton, and Dr. Bat make their escape from Bush's rock citadel, along with Inez and Ellen, whom they have liberated, Cooper contrasts the trapper's assurance with the disorientation of the rest of his party by using the ocean-prairie analogy: "To most of the fugitives their situation was as entirely unknown as is that of a ship in the middle of the ocean to the uninstructed voyager, but the old man proceeded at every turn and through every bottom with a decision that inspired his followers with confidence . . ." (p. 185). Cooper also keeps this association alive through light, passing references, as when he refers to "a bold vessel leaving its haven to enter the trackless field of the ocean" (p. 26).

Cooper's reasons for keeping the analogy before his reader were various.

Not only is it an apt means of making a strange landscape imaginatively available, but it is thematically connected with his notion of the prairie as a barrier to settlement. A final reason could be the implicit convention of the ship as microcosm; the novel's characters, as has been often noted, are from various social classes and, as the disparate groups maneuver about the prairie landscape, they are often likened to fleets and ships (for example, p. 223).

Another element apparent in Cooper's first prairie landscape depiction requires comment. After comparing Cooper's description to the relevant passage in James, Överland concludes: "Cooper added the fanciful 'theory' of the origin of the plains and the simile 'like some solitary vessel,' but for the rest he was faithful to the Account."[11] This is not entirely accurate. James speaks of "here and there an insular grove of trees," but Cooper retained this and added: "Here and there a tall tree rose out of the bottoms, stretching its naked branches abroad like some solitary vessel" (p. 14). So while Överland is correct when he holds that Cooper added the simile, he fails to notice that Cooper also contributed the "naked" solitary trees. Abiram White, at the end of the novel, after all, is sentenced to carry out his own execution from a dead and solitary willow tree. Thus Cooper foreshadows one of his starkest images in his first extended description of the landscape which made that image available; in so doing he used one single element of prairie landscape--uninterrupted line of sight--dramatically. Imagining the vista as James described it, Cooper saw how its various elements could be used dramatically, and he structured his tale accordingly.

No single scene in The Prairie makes this more apparent than when, as the Bushes trudge across the "interminable tracts" toward the setting

sun, they are confronted by Natty Bumppo. Backlighted by the setting sun, Cooper's hero presents to them "a spectacle as sudden as it was unexpected." Cooper continues:

> The sun had fallen below the crest of the nearest wave of the prairie, leaving the usual rich and glowing train on its track. In the center of this flood of fiery light a human form appeared, drawn against the gilded background as distinctly, and seemingly as palpable, as though it would come within the grasp of any extended hand. The figure was colossal, the attitude musing and melancholy, and the situation directly in the route of the travelers. But embedded as it was in its setting of garish light, it was impossible to distinguish its just proportions or true character. (p. 15)

This is perhaps the single most memorable, and symbolic, scene in the whole of the Leatherstocking series; and like Cooper's initial description of the prairie, it was inspired by James's Account. James had noted "Nothing is more difficult to estimate, by the eye, the distance of objects seen on the plains. A small animal, as a wolf or a turkey, sometimes appears of the magnitude of a horse, on account of an erroneous impression of the distance . . . . Three elk, which were the first we had seen, crossed our path at some distance before us. The effect of the mirage, together with out indefinite idea of the distance, magnified these animals to a most prodigious size." James then comments that for a moment they thought these animals to be "the mastodon of America" since the plains appeared "to have been created for his dwelling place" (XV: 184). Immediately after his first description of the landscape, Cooper prepares the reader for Natty's entrance by commenting "the sameness of surface and the low stands of the spectators exaggerated the distances . . ." (p. 14), another fact taken from the Long expedition Account. But he appears to have saved most of the details regarding the optical effects of the prairie for Natty's first appearance, where they could be used to best advantage.

James, it will be recalled, wrote that he and his party "had often found ourselves more grossly abused by our eyesight" (XV: 259) while traveling the prairie. Cooper seized upon such optical effects in presenting Natty Bumppo at the outset of The Prairie, for the Bush caravan is brought to a grinding halt by the "spectacle" they find before them; like James's eyesight, theirs is being similarly, and dramatically, abused. The colossal figure of Natty, standing "directly in the route of the travelers," represents Cooper's adaptation of James's observations. For James, who was a botanist and geologist (and perhaps Cooper's model for Dr. Bat), the optical illusions of the prairie are notable phenomena, data for science. Adapted by Cooper, they are a basis for a symbolic presentation of character. As his author's ideal, Natty is alone, huge, palpable, and bathed in a golden light, standing as an impediment to western settlement. Ultimately, too, it is a feature of the prairie landscape which allows Cooper to write "But embedded as it was in its setting of garish light, it was impossible to distinguish its just proportions or true character" (p. 15). This is, of course, just what The Prairie is about. Whether one is Ishmael Bush, casual reader, or literary critic, each must tackle Natty's "just proportions or true character" in order to understand the novel. Thus a central fact of the prairie landscape, attested to by James, Pike, Gregg, and numerous other travelers, presented Cooper with a strikingly visual means of presenting Natty symbolically, stripped of all but his essential meaning, at the beginning of The Prairie.

The Bushes, like the reader, are immediately affected by this vision; its result, Cooper writes, "was instantaneous and powerful. The man in front of the emigrants came to a stand and remained gazing at the mysterious object with a dull interest that soon quickened to superstitious awe" (p. 15).

As with Cooper's "naked" trees dotting the prairie, suggestive of Abiram White's mode of death, Cooper here foreshadows the direction his narrative will take since, like many of the characters and the reader as well, Ishmael Bush fluctuates between "interest" and superstitious awe" as he attempts (and is sometimes forced) to understand Bumppo and his values.

Cooper's introduction of Natty at the beginning of the The Prairie or of Bush or White at the end is not the sole instance of his use of the mirage effect in the novel. In Chapter 6 he uses the phenomenon as a basis of comedy, since Dr. Bat assumes he has seen a horrible, uncatalogued, monster of the prairie when in fact the animal is his own jackass (another "mastodon of America"?). Later, too, Natty comments on the optical effects of the prairie landscape himself; speaking to Middleton, the trapper says: "' afore you had passed a year in these prairies you would find yourself taking a turkey for a buffalo or conceiting fifty times that the roar of a buffalo bull was the thunder of the Lord. There is a deception of natur' in these naked plains which the air throws up the images like water, and then it is hard to tell the prairies from a sea'" (p. 205). Cooper's source here is doubtlessly James's observations, quoted above, at least as regards the optical effects; Brackenridge and Bradbury, among others, could have served as a basis for Natty's comment on the audio effects of the prairie.

Cooper's use of the prairie sunset as a technical device therefore allows him to lend symbolic and thematic significance to Bumppo before he has actually been introduced to the reader. This accomplished, Cooper turns the sunset off, as it were: "In the meantime the hues of the heavens had often changed. In the place of the brightness which had dazzled the eye, a gray and more sober light had succeeded, and as the setting lost its brilliancy, the proportions of the fanciful form became less exaggerated, and finally distinct" (p. 16). By moving from a "fanciful form" to a figure which is

distinct by turning down the light, Cooper lays bare his technique--he has employed the sunset illusion to create a particular dramatic effect. Once this has been done, he moves on to his plot, but always defining the trapper in terms of this initial colossal, metaphorically larger-than-life, presentation. Thus, before answering Bush's polite request for "necessities for the night," Bumppo insists that his own--and thematically more signifucant--query be answered first: "'Is the land filled on the other side of the big river . . . or why do I see a sight I had never thought to behold again?'" (p. 17). Then, this question answered to the best of Ishmael's ability, Natty moves into the role he play throughout: guide and mediator between the various characters and, as well, guide and mediator between the whites and the strange prairie landscape.

All of Cooper's characters, with the exceptions of the trapper and the Indians, are buffeted by the vastness of the land and are puny figures within it. Like the Bushes at the beginning of the novel, they need Bumppo's "prairie-craft," and all continue to need him throughout. Only he is able to sense the presence of Hard-Heart, to lead the captive Inez away from Bush's rock tower without being detected, and to know the difference between a brilliant sunrise and the glow of a prairie fire. Hence his character is defined by his ability to be at one with the land, even as seemingly trackless and vacant a land as Cooper's prairie. As it is used throughout The Prairie, the starkness of the landscape is exploited by Cooper to make the moral relations in the novel vivid. Natty Bumppo stands golden, colossal at the beginning (and he is bathed in the same glow when he dies) while Abiram White's quivering form stands upon its perch at the farthest extreme of the prairie horizon, symbolizing his reformed brother-in-law's new knowledge. The setting prairie sun highlights both men, but to radically different moral conclusions.

Cooper's use of the prairie landscape to underscore the moral relations

between his characters is seen particularly when the Bushes are forced to move to their rock tower due to the Sioux raid of the previous night. Here and throughout the novel Cooper's emphasis is on the pictorial qualities in his scenes; interestingly, he borrowed not only landscape descriptions from the James Account--he also used the Seymour illustrations which accompanied James's text. His description of the Sioux camp seen from a distance, which opens Chapter 25, is almost exactly the same as Seymour's Oto Encampment in James.[12] The morning after the raid, Bush and several of his party walk "in profound and moody silence to the summit of the nearest swell, whence they could command an almost boundless view of the naked plains." Here they saw only "a solitary buffalo," which Ishmael assumes is one of his animals left by the Sioux to mock him (p. 77). Then

follows a discussion between Bush and Bumppo over the quality of the prairie land and the growth of the country; Leatherstocking tells the emigrant: "'If you have come in search of land, you have journeyed hundreds of miles too far, or many leagues too little'" (p. 78). Despite the inauthentic manner of Cooper's presentation of the land (which allows him his desert images while, at the same time, his characters hide in tall grass and many major events take place in thickets of woods), the prairie as a metaphor--treeless land--makes his ideas on the exploitation of America far more effective, especially to an audience which had never seen such a landscape. And, while Cooper's prairie may not be literally authentic, it echoes the imaginative reactions of many explorers and travelers--Castañeda, Brackenridge, Flagg, Greeley, and others--who were forced to reconsider their notion of the word "landscape." As Asa Bush says during this discussion, "'A crow would shed tears if obliged by its errand to fly across this district'" (p. 78). Cooper's view that the prairie is a landscape inhospitable to settlement is entirely consistent, furthermore, with many first-person accounts, such as those of Thompson and Bradbury, both of whom thought the region would support settlement along its rims only. Thus his imaginative invocation of the region as a literary setting is, in many points at least, an amplification and ordering of views held by actual prairie travelers.

Natty, telling the emigrant that the open prairie "'is but a naked spot for a dozen men to make head in ag'in five hundred,'" prevails upon Bush to take his advice and repair to another, more defensible, spot three "'long miles from this place'" (p. 83). Cooper then tells the reader that the move is to be effected as follows: "The loaded vehicles were to be drawn by hand across a wide distance of plain without any track or guide of any sort except that which the trapper had furnished by communicating his

knowledge of the cardinal points of the compass" (p. 83). When presenting Bush's decision to move elsewhere, however, Cooper is careful not to provide an immediate description of the party's destination. Instead he describes the landscape they must traverse in order to move from one encampment to the other:

> The heavens were clothed in driving clouds, piled in vast masses one above the other, which whirled violently in the gusts, opening occasionally to admit the transient glimpses of the bright and glorious sight of the heavens, dwelling in a magnificence by far too grand and durable to be disturbed by the fitful efforts of the lower world. Beneath, the wind swept across the wild and naked prairies with violence that is seldom witnessed in any section of the continent less open. It would have been easy to have imagined, in the ages of fable, that the god of the winds had permitted his subordinate agents to escape from their den and that they now rioted in wantonness across wastes where neither tree, nor work of man, nor mountain, nor obstacle of any sort opposed itself to their gambols. (pp. 88-89)

For mythic creatures, the prairie is a playground, where they may "gambol" at will; for man, however, the essence of the land is his exposure amid the vastness of nature. Sky and land only. Thus Cooper concentrates on the swirling clouds above while, below, upon the "wild and naked prairies," the wind sports about with unchecked violence. And his final sentence, cataloguing as it does those elements which are not present to provide man's comfort, echoes the descriptions of a multitude of prairie travelers and explorers. Doubtlessly, the passage has its source in James's description of being caught in a hailstorm on the prairie, when he and the members of his party were forced to seek shelter in the lee sides of their horses (XV: 172). Yet as Cooper uses it--especially through his placement of it--this passage's meaning far exceeds James's immediate landscape description. Through it, the reader sees the essentially exposed quality of all the characters who have ventured into "the wild and naked prairies."

As previously stated, this passage is placed so that the reader has to traverse it in order to follow the Bushes from their first camp to their rock tower, which they inhabit during most of the action. And once the Bushes have left, Bumppo tarries and muses over the abandoned camp-site; looking at the "deserted logs at his feet," which the day before had been standing trees:

> "Aye," he muttered to himself, "I might have knowed it--I might have knowed it! Often I have seen the same before; and yet I brought them to the spot myself, and have now sent them to the only neigbor-hood of their kind within many long leagues of the spot where I stand. This is man's wish, and pride, and waste, and sinfulness! He tames the beasts of the field to feed his idle wants, and having robbed the brutes of their natural food, he teaches them to strip the 'arth of its trees to quiet their hunger." (p. 87)

Natty's soliloquy links The Prairie to the earlier Leatherstocking Tales, for immediately afterwards Paul Hover appears and makes comments which prompt the trapper's recollection of his early manhood in New York. But Bumppo's statement on "pride, waste, and sinfulness" is a fitting prelimin-ary to Cooper's introduction of Bush's own monument to his hubristic pride, his own Tower of Babel.

While he is in the midst of the prairie--an elemental landscape of wind, earth, and sky, only--Ishmael Bush needs Natty Bumppo. Once safely ensconced in his rock tower, which permits him to rise above the landscape and so "control" his knowledge of it, Bush scorns the trapper's help--and proceeds on his own course. That course, however, is one which involves pacts with the Sioux, further involvement with Abiram White, and the lat-ter's murder of Bush's eldest son. Only when he recants and recognizes Natty's true character is Bush able to cease his wandering and, as the final trial scene dramatizes, become a just man.

Speaking of Cooper's use of the rock tower, one critic has remarked that through its use Cooper decided "to play fast and loose with geological probability."[13] Be that as it may, Cooper's placement of a "single naked and ragged rock," "at least two hundred feet above the level of the plain" (pp. 89, 92) allows Ishmael Bush to command a good part of the novel's action. Its height can be seen from any vantage point in the area of the action and, at night, the fire at its summit serves as a beacon. Natty must guide his fellows carefully as they make their getaway from the tower after rescuing Inez, for he knows the danger of detection by anyone standing on its summit. Likewise, as the Bushes return after discovering Asa's corpse, they strain to espy Ellen standing at its pinnacle. As Cooper describes their view from the prairie: "The hill had gradually risen as they approached, like some tower emerging from the bosom of the sea, and when within a mile, the minuter objects that crowned its height came into view" (p. 150). The tower, according to Natty, is "'the only neighborhood'" of the Bushes' kind for miles, too (p. 87), and Bush, ironically is unaware that the threat to him is not from without, to be repelled from the tower, but within the bosom of his family: Abiram White.

Structurally and dramatically, the tower is the fixed point in Cooper's composition, and most of the action takes place within its radius. But its symbolic and technical use is made possible, and demanded, by the landscape itself. While Cooper was not a writer always limited by facts, his radical decision to insert a monumental upright tower into an essentially flat landscape must have been motivated by a need to encompass the landscape imaginatively (as had prairie travelers from Coronado onward). Throughout The Prairie Cooper stresses the "monotony of view" afforded by prairie landscape and, in the passage which defines and describes the "interminable" in oft-repeated "interminable wastes" he notes "neither tree, nor work of man, nor mountains, nor obstacle of any sort" to impede the force of prairie winds. Blake Nevius, in discussing Cooper's use of the tower, attributes it to the author's need for a "base of operations" spatially to order his actions.[14] Cooper's need may have been ultimately less aesthetic than Nevius alleges, however. As a first-time visitor to the prairie, albeit in imagination, Cooper might have been affected as many actual visitors were; Alexander Henry the Younger climbed a tree--James Fenimore Cooper created a tower.

Cooper's ability to take the basic elements of the prairie landscape, as noted by those who had actually been there, and to charge those elements with relevant meaning reaches its apex in the death of Abiram White. Held as a prisoner for the murder of Asa Bush, White is taken east with the caravan when "the squatter turned his back toward the setting sun" (p. 369). Bush, who has recanted and become a just man, is now

described in contemplation as a figure analogous to Bumppo himself; this is underscored through the repetition of elements of Cooper's first symbolic presentation of Natty. Bush is seen, ahead of his caravan: "his huge figure was seen standing on the summit of some distant swell, with the head bent towards the earth as he leaned on his rifle. . ." (p. 369). While not backlighted, Bush is like Natty in that he is seen from the top of a swell and is also huge.

When Cooper introduces the means for White's eventual execution, he again draws upon the landscape. He first notes that the country had improved--through the incidence of hillocks and trees--as the party moved east; then he describes "A solitary willow" beside a large rock. This tree is clearly symbolic, for though still standing it is dead and "In all things it proclaimed the frailty of existence and the fulfillment of time" (p. 370). After his discussion with his wife concerning White's execution, Bush intends to shoot him, just as White shot Asa. In response to White's pleas for time, however, Bush relents and, after noticing the configuration of willow and rock platform, leaves White to decide the time of his own death by hanging. Bush turns and departs across the plain without looking back. He does not look until he reaches "the boundary of the visible horizon from the rock." Looking west once again, he sees another figure against the setting sun, but it has none of Natty's heroic proportions: "The sun was near dipping into the plains beyond, and its last rays lighted the naked branches of the willow. He saw the ragged outline of the whole drawn against the flowing heavens, and he even traced the still upright form he had left to his misery" (p. 376). Thus just as the prairie landscape allows Ishmael a symbolic glimpse of Natty's

character, it also allows him a symbolic glimpse of what he has learned from the trapper.

To underscore the bleak image of his ogre-against-the-sky, Cooper makes White's figure a part of the chillingly threatening landscape which has defeated--yet enhanced--Ishmael Bush: "For the first time, in a life of so much wild adventure, Ishmael felt a keen sense of solitude. The naked prairies began to assume the forms of illimitable and dreary wastes, and the rushing of the wind sounded like the whisperings of the dead. It was not long before he thought a shriek was borne past him on a blast. It did not sound like a call from earth, but swept frightfully through the upper air, mingled with the hoarse accompaniment of the wind" (p. 377). Just as Bumppo's prairie-craft is a symbolic counterpoint to his character, here the natural forces of the prairie symbolize what Ishmael has come to learn--he has recognized his own puniness in nature. To do so he had to move, symbolically, from his own tower of rock to that from which White falls. And, as the harsh prairie wind carries Bush's intimation of White's shriek to his ears, it emphasizes the squatter's new knowledge of his social responsibility.

Thus James's observations in the Account regarding the effect upon the imagination of the landscape--monotony, mirage, and the rolling quality of the prairie--are, within Cooper's novel, the major elements in a symbolic landscape. Just as Francis Parkman amplified and embellished a single journal entry ("Awkward feeling, being lost on the prairie") into a page of description in The Oregon Trail, and Paul Kane worked up massive oils from on-the-spot sketches, so Cooper ordered, embellished, and dramatized the landscape materials which he took from the James Account. In doing so, he provides the reader with an image of the prairie not unlike that to be found

in Melville's work.

* * *

Cooper's immediate successor in the prairie literature tradition, however, was William Cullen Bryant, who traveled to Illinois in 1832. On the whole, his immediate response to the aesthetic potential of the prairie was not favorable. Writing to his wife in a letter which, according to one of his biographers could have been published in the New York Evening Post, he summarizes his reaction to the landscape: "I believe this to be the most salubrious, and I am sure it is the most fertile, country I ever saw; at the same time I do not think it beautiful."[15] Implicit in Bryant's denial of beauty in the prairie is his eastern bias, the aesthetics celebrated in the painting of the Hudson-River School (in fact, Bryant was himself later painted in such a landscape, communing with nature and Thomas Cole in Asher Durand's Kindred Spirits [1849]).[16] Significantly, though, Bryant does go on to qualify his negative responses: "Some of the views, however, from the highest parts of the prairies are what, I have no doubt, some would call beautiful in the highest degree, the green heights and hollows and plains blend so softly and gently with one another" (II: 16). Insofar as he is able to admit to the possibility of beauty in a prairie vista, therefore, Bryant like other prairie travelers requires an elevated perspective.

What Bryant also required, apparently, was first a different medium of expression, for he concludes his first Illinois travel sketch with what is possibly an attempt to account in part for his lack of imaginative response in his prose: "What I have thought and felt amid these boundless wastes and

awful solitudes I shall reserve for the only form of expression in which it can be properly uttered" (p. 22). That form, for Bryant, was poetry, and in "The Prairies" (1834) he does effectively evoke the vast spaces of the western landscape. The difference between his prose sketches (written as they were on the spot in 1832) and the poem (written in 1833) suggests that distance in time and space may also have been an important factor. Perhaps the most important requirement, however, was literary precedent--such as provided by Cooper's The Prairie--a book which Bryant reviewed shortly after its publication and which he praised as a work of genius.

In his review, Bryant had observed that "the prairie is, to be sure, a new scene . . . it is the wilderness still," and he continued: "the store of images and situations it offers is soon exhausted."[17] In his own poem, ironically, Bryant calls up this same store of images: he speaks of the prairie as ocean, its "airy undulations," its constant movement, of the play of cloud and wind over its surface, and of "that advancing multitude/ Which soon shall fill these deserts." The bee, moreover, is the harbinger of this "multitude" as the latter pushes into the "verdant waste," and pushes the "red man" and bison before it. Bryant also notes, echoing Natty Bumppo, that "The hand that built the firmament hath heaved/ And smoothed these verdant swells, and sown their slopes/ With herbage, planted them with island groves . . . ."[18]

Since Bryant reviewed Cooper's novel in 1827 and did not go to Illinois until 1832, however, we are left with explaining why the influence of The Prairie did not manifest itself in his prose sketches as well--why his responses there were not of the positive kind to be found in his poem. And paradoxically, one explanation may be that Bryant was seeing the prairie through Cooper's eyes. Having read The Prairie, Bryant encountered the landscape with preconceived notions of the sort to which Francis Parkman drew

attention to at the outset of The Oregon Trail. And here one should note that when Bryant does qualify his negative response in his letter to his wife, he does so by saying that "some [i. e. Cooper?] . . . would call [certain scenes] beautiful" (emphasis mine). What should also be noticed, finally, is that in his poem it is actually the vastness of the prairie rather than its beauty (or lack of it) which Bryant emphasizes.

Whatever the explanation, the fact remains that "The Prairies" echoes the The Prairie much more so than it does Bryant's sketches; the parallels are so numerous that they suggest that Bryant's notions of literary treatment of the prairie were formed by Cooper's novel--a situation which suggests in turn that with "The Prairies" we have the beginnings of a literary tradition in prairie landscape depiction.

The next literary visitor to the prairie was America's most celebrated contemporary author, Washington Irving, who returned to his country in 1832 after seventeen years in Europe. Eager to see something of the changes which had taken place during his absence, Irving traveled into the West and, quite by accident, met Henry L. Ellsworth on a Lake Erie steamboat. Ellsworth, who had just been appointed Indian commissioner, invited Irving to accompany him to Fort Gibson in the Oklahoma territory, and the author agreed. As he later wrote to his brother Peter, "The offer was too tempting to be resisted: I should have an opportunity of seeing the remnants of those great Indian tribes, which are now about to disappear as independent nations, or to be amalgamated under some new form of government. I should see those fine countries of the 'far west,' while still in a state of pristine wildness, and behold herds of buffaloes scouring their native prairies, before they are driven beyond the reach of a civilized tourist."[19] "Civilized tourist" is an apt description of Irving on the prairie because, like Brackenridge and Flagg, he had no urgent business

to transact there; after so long an absence, he wanted only to experience the "pristine wildness" of his country's frontier. After his arrival at Fort Gibson Irving wrote to his sister that he was "completely launched in savage life" and "extremely excited and interested by this wild country and the wild scenes and people . . ."(p. 727). Ellsworth, Irving, and the author's two traveling companions accompanied a party of mounted rangers on the tour; Irving and his group left Fort Gibson on October 8 and returned on November 9, 1832.

The direct result of the trip was Irving's A Tour on the Prairies, which was published in 1835 as the first volume of the Crayon Miscellany. It had been long awaited by the American public, even from the time Irving started west, and its reviews were glowing. Writing at length in the North American Review, Edward Everett praised the book's presentation of "the whole unhackneyed freshness of the West,--life beyond the border,--a camp outside the frontier,--a hunt on buffalo ground, beyond which neither white or Pawnee, man nor muse, can go." Everett's actual subject in this review was Irving's grand stature within contemporary American letters, and he celebrated the author's homecoming:

> We are proud of Mr. Irving's sketches of English life, proud of the gorgeous canvass upon which he has gathered in so much of the glowing imagery of Moorish times. We behold with delight his easy and triumphant march over these beaten fields; but we glow with rapture as we see him coming back from the Prairies, laden with the poetical treasures of the primitive wilderness,--rich with spoil from the uninhabited desert. We thank him forturning these poor barbarous steppes into classical land;--and joining his inspiration to that of Cooper, in breathing life and fire into a circle of imagery, which was not known before to exist, for the purposes of the imagination . . . .[20]

Everett's "rapture" stems from his implicit assumption of the particularly American quality of the prairie landscape; by turning his attention

to the prairie, Irving is utilizing and memorializing what is uniquely American. Thus with nationalist fervor Everett proclaims that "a better day is dawning on American letters."[21]

Like Cooper's The Prairie, A Tour did transform the land by "breathing life and fire" into a subject which had previously been treated only in explorers and travelers' first-person accounts. But the nature of that transformation was essentially different from Cooper's, and ultimately inferior. Cooper took those elements in the landscape which had struck James and developed them for literary purposes. Irving visited the prairie but, because of his background, inherently romantic temperament, and addiction to literary convention, he adamantly refused to see it. In fact, on the basis of the non-literary accounts, Cooper's is a "truer" presentation of the prairie landscape than Irving's; Cooper strove to present it as James described it while Irving looked at the land before him and transformed it to something else. Like Everett, Irving saw not the prairie: rather he saw a "steppe," or a "glen," or a "glade," or a "dell." Everett's assertion,then, is correct: Irving turned "steppes into classical land"--that is, he saw America through the conventions of old-world literature and thus found "Moorish castles," "champaign countries" and so forth. Given his background, the spontaneous decision to undertake the tour, and the public's demand for some account of his experiences, Irving could hardly have been expected to produce a book radically different from A Tour; but as the first sustained literary work by an author who had traveled the prairie, Irving's description of that landscape is vague, unimpressive, and ultimately disappointing.

Not surprisingly, criticism of A Tour has concentrated on Irving's ability to portray the West realistically, or on his ability to lend to this

material the aura of romance found in The Sketch Book and his other works. Henry Seidel Canby, writing fifty years ago, presented an evaluation of A Tour which still has validity: "But here Irving is too close to his subject. . . . There is a camp scene, firelight flickering on wild faces, psalm-singing, alarms, rough humor of the frontier, which is Irving at his best, but he could not sustain it." Canby then alludes to Everett's classical land comment and concludes "That was the trouble: they [the prairies] would not turn, ought not to be turned, and Everett was ridiculous in thinking that they could be turned into the kind of romance that Irving practised. Nor were they poor either to the right imagination, as Cooper showed in his admirable 'Prairie,' but Irving was not the man."[22] On the other hand, one recent critic, Donald A. Ringe, has held that in A Tour "Irving is obviously deeply impressed with the expansiveness of the prairie landscape, and . . . he has a strong feeling of aloneness amidst the vast sweep of prairie and sky." This may be, momentarily, but Irving never allows such pensive moments to alter the conventional flow of his narrative. Kathryn Whitford argues that Irving found the materials he used in A Tour to be "intractable": "The reader watches Irving trying one literary device after another and then abandon each, until the last quarter of the book becomes an increasingly matter of fact narrative and he condenses the arduous week of the return journey into three brief chapters which represent one fourth of the entire time of the expedition."[23] While some critics have argued that this falling off is a matter of style reflecting a personal transformation, that Irving becomes acclimatized to the prairie, Whitford's assertion is the more tenable one; there is a noticeable trailing off toward the end of A Tour, as well as the various inconsistencies she discusses. But the intractability of Irving's material is as much a function of the landscape as it is, as Whitford suggests, one

of Irving's inability to find a unifying technique or motif.[24] He could not adapt it to his conventions, so he largely ignores it.

These conventions, furthermore, also colored the way in which he first saw the prairie. For example, writing to his sister while in Independence, Missouri on the outward trip, he explains: "Many parts of these Prairies of the Missouri are extremely beautiful, resembling cultivated countries, embellished with parks and groves, rather than the savage rudeness of the wilderness. Yesterday I was out on a deer hunt in the vicinity of this place, which led me through some Scenery that wanted a castle, or a gentlemans seat here and there interspersed, to have equalled some of the most elaborate park Scenery of England" (p. 725). Thus even before Irving had embarked on the tour which served as the basis of his book, he had already adapted the prairie to his preconceptions.

In his journal of the trip, as well as in A Tour itself, Irving displays a natural proclivity for seeing the landscape in terms of his previous experience. He writes on one occasion, for example: "Scale a hill--limestone rock & stones full of shells and miniature basalt like Giant's Causeway--boundless view of silent Prairies--distant hill like Paté de Strasburg."[25] Later, he writes: "Oct. 6. Left encampt this morning and rode through mist which gradually cleared up & showed wide prairie--with distant line of green wood and hills that looked like cultivated country. It seemed as if we could distinguish fields of grain, leaves, partridges, glades,&c" (p. 107). Similarly, when he celebrates camp life on the prairie, Irving's emphasis is not on the land itself, but on various elements in the scene and how they make him feel: "The weather is in its perfection--golden sunshine--not oppressive but animating--

skies without a cloud--or if there be clouds, of feathery texture and lovely tints--air pure, bland, exhilarating--an atmosphere of perfect transparency--and the whole country having the mellow tint of autumn. How exciting to think that we are breaking into a country hitherto untrodden by white man, except perchance the solitary trapper--a glorious world spread around us without an inhabitant (p. 131). Thus while Irving is keen to pick up on the effects of the prairie landscape--the vivid way in nature's elements are available here--he does not consider the landscape itself as the causal agent of such effects. Indeed, Irving's emphasis here and throughout A Tour is upon human feeling and human society, an emphasis which is reflected in his romantic conception of himself as a pathfinder--a role which is derived from his relation to the society in the East.

In an understanding of A Tour and especially Irving's presentation of the prairie landscape in that work, however, the Journals play a key role. In the case of Paul Kane, the painter's on-the-spot sketches of the prairie landscape are preferable because they are without the conventional clichés of his later, and larger, oils. And in Francis Parkman's case, The Oregon Trail reveals his amplification, with a minimum of distortion, of the on-the-spot reactions recorded in the Journals. But Irving's Journals reveal that he had already become accustomed to think in literary clichés when he arrived on the prairie; his Journals are more direct than A Tour, certainly, but they suggest that he was constitutionally almost incapable of seeing the prairie without reference to conventional verities.

Irving begins A Tour by whisking his reader off to a remote land: "In the often vaunted regions of the Far West, several hundred miles beyond the Mississippi, extends a vast tract of uninhabited country, where there is neither to be seen the log home of the white man, nor the wigwam of the

Indian. It consists of great grassy plains, interspersed with forests and groves of trees, and watered by the Arkansas, the grand Canadian, the Red River, and all their tributary streams."[26] Thus in keeping with his "civilized" background, Irving emphasizes the lack of human habitation, while in keeping with his romantic proclivities he later muses over the freedom of the animals, especially the wild horses, they encounter on the prairie: "Over these fertile and verdant wastes still roam the Elk, the Buffalo, and the wild horse in all their native freedom" (p. 9). As with Cooper and Bryant before him, Irving characterizes the land as a "waste," a desert which is ironically "verdant" and "fertile."[27] Yet unlike Cooper, certainly, and even Bryant, Irving does not attempt to come to terms with the landscape he is presenting: instead, he summarizes it through a few phrases ("vast tract," "great grassy plains" and "fertile and verdant wastes") and moves on to his far more detailed presentation of various western Indian tribes.

Irving is not moved to comment on the landscape again until his sixth chapter; and then, moreover, his focus is not on the prairie itself but rather on a vista in which the prairie is but one element: "After resuming our march we came in sight of the Arkansas. It presented a broad and rapid stream bordered by a beach of fine sand, overgrown with willows and cotton wood trees. Beyond the river the eye wandered over a beautiful champaign country, of flowery plains and sloping uplands, diversified by groves and clumps of trees, and long screens of woodland; the whole wearing the aspect of complete, and even ornamental cultivation, instead of native wildness" (p. 22). As with other contemporary observers, such as Meriwether Lewis, George Catlin, and Alfred Jacob Miller, Irving's delight in this scene stems from its diversity--its accordance with the

eighteenth-century concept of "the beautiful." More than that, however, Irving here presents the same impressions he offered to his sister in his letter from Independence, Missouri--that the scenery presents the impression of complete cultivation and so looks like "champaign country." Irving's personal reaction is thus a very conventional one, and his repetition of "diversified by groves and clumps of trees," essentially the same phrase he used in his initial description, suggests that he did not lavish much attention to details in "working up" his Tour.

When he is more detailed in his observations, furthermore, it is as means to an end which has little to do with the prairie per se, as his description of his impressions as he travels through a forest suggests:

> We were overshadowed by lofty trees, with straight smooth trunks, like stately columns, and as the glancing rays of the sun shone through the transparent leaves, tinted with the many coloured hues of autumn, I was reminded of the effect of sunshine among the stained windows and clustering columns of a Gothic cathedral. Indeed there is a grandeur and solemnity in some of our spacious forests of the West that awaken in me the same feeling I have experienced in those vast and venerable piles, and the sound of the wind sweeping through them, supplies occasionally the deep breathing of the organ. (p. 25)

Thus he here seems more interested in the opportunity which the prairie provides for analogy and in the elaboration of the analogy than in its appropriateness.

Irving's concern with the elemental forces of the prairie also appear to be in evidence only when he has some other, and usually more literary, purpose in mind. His experience of being caught in a thunderstorm on the prairie, for example, is presented in the following manner: "The rain came rattling upon us in torrents and spattered up like steam along the ground; the whole landscape was suddenly wrapped in gloom that

gave a vivid effect to the intense sheets of lightening, while the thunder seemed to burst over our very heads, and was reverberated by the groves and forests that checquered and skirted the prairie" (p. 58). This passage recreates the imaginative effect of a storm in a manner superior to James's rendering of a similar event, but unlike James, Irving does not dwell upon it, but moves on to its logistical effect and in turn to a related analogy: "Man and beast were so pelted, drenched and confounded that the line was thrown in complete confusion . . . . [the] scattered cavalcade looked like a tempest tost fleet . . ." (p. 58). He then continues to narrate the events of the day. When he later returns to this thunderstorm, and to its imaginative impact, he does so merely by way of prefacing his presentation of Indian beliefs and legends concerning such phenomena: "A thunder storm on a prairie as upon the ocean derives grandeur and sublimity from the wild and boundless waste over which it rages and bellows" (p. 59).

Irving's evocation of the prairie thunderstorm is a part of a larger dramatic context which is clearly more important to him than landscape description. Before noting the effect of the storm and summarizing the tales of the natives, he had described his group sitting around the campfire: "The grove thus fitfully lighted up by the ruddy glare of the fires resembled a vast leafy dome, walled in by opaque darkness; but every now and then two or three quivering flashes of lightning in quick succession would suddenly reveal a vast champaign country where fields and forests and running streams, would start as it were into existence for a few brief seconds, and, before the eye could ascertain them, vanish into gloom" (pp. 58-59). Thus the prairie, Irving's "champaign country," is given scant attention, just as the impact of the storm is subordinate to the

romantic effect he is trying to create. And after summarizing his Indian beliefs and tales, he goes on to observe: "These are simple and artless tales, but they had a wild and romantic interest heard from the lips of half savage narrators round a hunter's fire, in a stormy night with a forest on one side and a howling waste on the other; and, where peradventure savage foes might be lurking in the outer darkness" (p. 59). The "howling waste" is therefore simply an element in Irving's dramatic rendering of fear of the unknown; if the prairie is symbolic, it operates mainly to evoke the conventional emotion of fear. Unlike Cooper's symbolism, which is derived from and accentuates the force of the landscape, Irving's is imposed from without, and obscures the actual qualities of the land.

Some of this imposition seems to have been the result of afterthought, as certain differences between his Journal and A Tour suggest. For example, whereas in the former Irving simply refers to the lack of human habitation on the prairie, in the latter he goes on to explain: "It was as if a ban hung over this fair but fated region. The very Indians dared not abide here but made it a mere scene of perilous enterprise, to hunt for a few days and then away" (p. 48). Irving cannot accept the notion that the land is simply wild, uninhabited, and different from the East; he infers some presumably dire and mysterious reason for the land's lack of human inhabitants.

At the same time, however, Irving's tendency to impose his values on the landscape is so pervasive throughout A Tour that it must on the whole be described as a congenital disposition rather than as the result of recollection. Thus in describing an instance in which he was greatly pleased to come upon a prairie--having emerged from a more difficult (and wooded) terrain--he writes:

> Here one of the characteristic scenes of the Far West broke upon us. An immense extent of grassy undulating, or as it is termed, rolling country with here and there a clump of trees, dimly seen in the distance like a ship at sea; the landscape deriving sublimity from its vastness and simplicity. To the south west on the summit of a hill was a singular crest of broken rocks resembling a ruined fortress. It reminded me of the ruin of some Moorish castle crowning a height in the midst of a lonely Spanish landscape. To this hill we gave the name of Cliff Castle. (p. 61)

Irving begins his description by treating the prairie landscape directly: his "here and there a clump of trees" and the ocean-prairie metaphor present the same sort of direct image apparent at the beginning of The Prairie. He quickly passes over the prairie landscape, however, to concentrate on the "crest of broken rocks" he sees in the distance. Without further reference to the landscape which made such a view possible, Irving retreats into the conventional and familiar.

It is hardly surprising that Irving should resort to familiar analogies. But passages like this reveal that he did far more than simply interpret the prairie landscape in terms of his previous experience; he substituted his own values and conventions. He did not really, as Everett suggests in his 1835 review, transform the prairie into "classical land"; Irving saw a classical land, a land in which man dominates nature, instead of the prairie. Hence Irving's "Moorish castle" is metaphorically the ironic equivalent of the tower in which Ishmael Bush in his hubris takes refuge in order to "control" the surrounding prairie.

In similar ironic fashion, just as Cooper traces changes in Ishmael as a result of his experience on the prairie, so Irving's attitude toward the landscape and toward nature in general fluctuates throughout A Tour in accordance with the various situations in which he finds himself. At

one point in the tour the party's route took them through a heavily wooded area, called "cross timbers." In his Narrative of the trip, Henry Ellsworth says of Irving: "I never saw a man more impatient, to be out of them [the cross timbers], than Mr. Irving--and well he might complain. He had nothing but cloth gloves to defend his hands--His frock surtout, was in a moment, shorn of its beauty and use."[28] Frustrated by this area, Irving is in a position to appreciate the prairie landscape. Looking across the cross timbers from the top of a hill, he writes: "the eye stretched beyond this rugged wilderness of hills, and ravines and ragged forests, to a distant tract of tranquil ocean. Unluckily our route did not lie in that direction, we still had to traverse many a weary mile of the 'cross timber'" (p. 86). Irving's vexation is like that of Anthony Henday, who decried his continual weary march across the Muscuty plains. Henday, however, longed for wooded country; Irving longs for prairie: "After proceeding about two hours, in a southerly direction, we emerged towards midday from the dreary belt of the Cross Timber, and to our infinite delight beheld 'The Great Prairie' stretching to the right and left before us . . . . The landscape was vast and beautiful. There is always an expansion of feeling in looking upon these boundless and fertile wastes; but I was doubly conscious of it after emerging from our 'close dungeon of innumerous boughs'" (p. 97). Not only is delight apparent in his description, but Irving admits that his delight is caused by the prairie landscape, and this

constitutes his most effusive comment on that landscape in the whole of A Tour. Although he clothes his feelings in the hackneyed "boundless and fertile wastes," and gravitates at once to an allusion to Milton's Comus, and although his feelings may have been prompted by the contrast which the prairie provided to the scene of his discomfort, his response here is to the landscape itself.

On another occasion, Irving was similarly forced to confront the full force of prairie vastness when he was separated from his companions while chasing buffalo. Like Parkman later, Irving experienced the prairie landscape most acutely when he was lost.

> I now found myself in the midst of a lonely waste in which the prospect was founded by undulating swells of land, naked and uniform, where, from the deficiency of land marks and distinct features an inexperienced man may become bewildered and lose his way as readily as in the wastes of the ocean. The day too was overcast, so that I could not guide myself by the sun; my only mode was to retrace the track my horse had made in coming, though this I would often lose sight of, where the ground was covered with parched herbage. (p. 100)[29]

Irving is admirably direct in his description here, including only the "waste" of his ocean-prairie metaphor as a literary word choice. In fact, this passage embodies the same sort of disorientation noted by Castañeda when he described members of Coronado's party who were forced to wait by their killed game in order to see the direction of the setting sun. And Irving's subsequent observation embodies the same sentiments as those expressed in Parkman's journal entry, "Awkward feeling, being lost on the prairie": "To one unaccustomed to it there is something inexpressibly lonely in the solitude of a prairie. The loneliness of a forest seems nothing to it. There the view is shut in by trees, and the imagination is left free to picture some livelier scene beyond. But here we have

an immense extent of landscape without a sign of human existence. We have the consciousness of being far, far beyond the bounds of human habitation; we feel as if moving in the midst of a desert world" (p. 100). Bereft of human companionship for the first time on his trip, Irving is forced to experience the prairie landscape rather than simply look at it, and in the process, significantly, he admits the way in which such direct apprehension prevents one from indulging in escapist flights of fancy.

Describing himself retracing his steps, Irving's diction also has a suitability not seen elsewhere in A Tour:

> As my horse lagged slowly back over the scenes of our late scamper, and the delirium of the chase had passed away, I was peculiarly sensible to these circumstances. The silence of the waste was now and then broken by the cry of a distant flock of pelicans stalking like spectres about a shallow pool. Sometimes by the sinister croaking of a raven in the air, while occasionally a scoundrel wolf would scour off from before me and having attained a safe distance, would sit down and howl and whine with tones that gave a dreariness to the surrounding solitude. (p. 100)[30]

Because he is lost, Irving quite legitimately sees the landscape as bleak and threatening, and though his personification of the menacing creatures are melodramatic, they could be described as deriving from his genuine dismay over his disorientation. His description therefore grows directly out of his subject here; his impressions have not been imposed on the landscape, but rather, it has imposed itself upon his imagination.

Irving's "lapse," however, was only momentary. Immediately afterward he discovers another of his party and all sense of isolation vanishes. The two men decide to continue their hunt and, glimpsing a herd of buffalo two

miles off, Irving reverts to a socially-oriented perspective; the buffalo are "scattered apart and quietly grazing near a small strip of trees and bushes. It required but little stretch of fancy to picture them so many cattle grazing on the edge of a common and that the grove might shelter some lowly farmhouse" (pp. 100-01). When lost on the prairie, even for a short time, Irving could not deny the hegemony of nature--he was forced to confront the "inexpressibly lonely" quality "in the solitude of a prairie." Returned to society, Irvings forgets this unpleasant experience and imagines a "common" domestic scene in which man dominates nature.[31]

* * *

Margaret Fuller, the next literary visitor to the prairie, took a more accommodating view of the landscape than Irving, although when she first glimpsed it during her western trip in 1843, her immediate reaction was negative. As she recalls in Summer on the Lakes (1844): "At first the prairie seemed to speak of the very desolation of dullness. After sweeping over the vast monotony of the lakes to come to this monotony of land, with all around a limitless horizon--to walk, and walk, and run, but never climb, oh! it was too dreary for any but a Hollander to bear."[32] Fuller's reaction is, like Irving's, governed by her Eastern and European values; but upon inspection she is willing to reconsider: "But after I had ridden out and seen the flowers, and observed the sunset with that calmness seen only in the prairies, and the cattle winding slowly to their homes in the 'island grove'--most peaceful of sights--I began to love because I began to know the scene, and shrank no longer from 'the encircling vastness'" (p. 26). That she couches her new-found appreciation in language borrowed from Bryant's "The Prairies" suggests that she had a foreknowledge of the landscape, although significantly she herself goes on

to address the problem of expectation:

> It is always thus with the new form of life; we must learn to look at it by its own standard. At first, no doubt, my accustomed eye kept saying, if the mind did not, "What!.no distant mountains? no valleys?" But after a while I would ascend the roof of the house where we lived and pass many hours, needing no sight but the moon reigning in the heavens or starlight falling upon the lake, till all the lights were out in the island grove of men beneath my feet, and felt nearer heaven that there was nothing but this lovely, still reception on the earth; no towering mountains, no deep tree-shadows, nothing but the plain earth and water bathed in light. (pp. 26-27)

From the vantage point of her elevated perspective, here Fuller shows an adaptability akin to Cooper's, and unlike Irving, who had to be forced into seeing the prairie landscape directly, only ultimately to recoil from it, she learned "to look at it by its own standard."

Fuller wrote that she came "to the West prepared for the distaste" she "must experience at its mushroom growth," and she hoped to "foresee the law by which a new order, a new poetry, is to be evoked from this chaos" of growth (p. 22). Such fervor and interest also affected those writers who stayed in the East and one result is that many of the classical works of nineteenth-century American literature abound with western allusions.[33] To the writers of the American Renaissance, however, as to Cooper, the appeal of the prairie had mainly to do with its availability as a symbol. Two comments by Fuller's contemporaries, neither specifically about the prairie, help to explain this situation. Speaking of landscape depiction, Thoreau observes:

> Not only has the foreground of a picture its glass of transparent crystal spread over it, but the picture itself is a glass or transparent medium to a remoter background. We demand only of all pictures that they be perspicious, that the laws of perspective have been truly observed. It is not the fringed foreground of the desert nor the intermediate oases that detain the eye and the imagination, but the infinite, level, and roomy horizon, where the sky

> meets the sand, and heavens earth, the ideal and the actual, are coincident, the background into which leads the path of the pilgrim.[34]

Thoreau's notion of the far distance--on the horizon, where the ideal and actual meet--neatly presents how he and the other leading writers of the time used the prairie landscape. For them, the prairie was both ideal and actual; it was an actual landscape which could be used metaphorically to make vivid their concept of scope. Similarly, in Nature, Emerson observes: "The health of the eye

seems to demand a horizon. We are never tired, so long as we see far enough."[35] As with Thoreau, Emerson is not speaking of the prairie landscape, yet his stress on imaginative potential seems to demand that landscape.

Thus the writers of this period were not so much taken by the prairie as a place--since only Melville had actually seen it at the time of his writing--rather, they were interested in it, and therefore used it, as an idea. Cooper was seized by the idea of the prairie and gave that idea form; Irving presents only his idealized impression of the landscape. So, too, the writers of the American Renaissance employed the prairie as metaphor and symbol--it helped to make their abstractions concrete for the reader. Thus for them the prairie is not a place, a setting; it functions as a literary device.

In this respect, it is significant that the first major author to use the prairie landscape in this manner was Edgar Allen Poe, whose unfinished Journal of Julius Rodman was published in 1840. Considered by critics to be a hoax, it blatantly "plagiarizes" from the travel and exploration accounts of Lewis and Clark, Mackenzie, and Irving (among others). And dependent as it is on accounts recording trips up the Missouri River, Poe's Journal, like those accounts, presents only occasional glimpses of the prairie landscape. A recent treatment of the Journal has argued that it is, in fact, a parody of western travel literature in the 1830s[36] and such a reading is consistent with Poe's comic presentation of Rodman's reaction to the prairie landscape. After a meditation on the enormity of the land through which he was passing, for example, Rodman exclaims: "At that moment I seemed possessed of an energy

more than human; and my animal spirits rose to so high a degree that I could with difficulty content myself in the narrow limits of the boat. I longed to be with the Greelys [typical Kentuckians] on the bank, that I might give full vent to the feelings which inspired me, by leaping and running in the prairie."[37] Through this bizarre image of a frenzied frolic, Poe satirized the conventional reaction to the prairie, just as a few pages later he satirizes the clichés of landscape description. Strolling on the prairie, Rodman observes that he "was enchanted with the voluptuous beauty of the country. The prairies exceeded in beauty anything told in the tales of the 'Arabian Nights.' On the edges of the creeks there was a wild mass of flowers which looked more like Art than Nature, so profusely and fantastically were their vivid colors blended together" (pp. 354-55).[38] Similarily, Rodman remarks over "beautiful prairies" (p. 356), notes a prairie stretching off "as far as the eye can reach" (p. 377), sees buffalo swimming and drowning in the river (pp. 404-06), and describes "an immense and magnificent country spreading out on every side into a vast plain . . ." (p. 420). Rodman's vantage point for this latter description, of course, is from the "high grounds."

In an ironic manner, therefore, Poe's Journal of Julius Rodman attests to the currency of the West as a popular subject, while the fact that Poe could indulge in parody indicates that before the late 1830s a definite set of prairie landscape conventions had developed.

One of the reviewers of Parkman's The California and Oregon Trail in 1849 was a young novelist by the name of Herman Melville, who had recently published Mardi and would later in the year bring out Redburn.[39] While he attacked Parkman's attitude toward the Indian, Melville otherwise

praised the book lavishly, pausing occasionally to point up western images he found particularly appealing. One of these was the prairie as ocean. That Melville was attracted to the prairie landscape before reading Parkman is certain, but the book reaffirmed it and, more importantly, his enthusiasm illustrates the literary currency of the prairie West in mid-nineteenth-century America. Melville, who had used western references incidentally in his earlier works, seems to have redoubled his efforts from Redburn on; in "Hawthorne and his Mosses" he tells his American reader "our own broad prairies are in [Hawthorne's] soul; and if you travel away inland into his deep and noble nature, you will hear the far roar of his Niagara."[40] The West in general and the prairie in particular constitute a major pattern of allusion in Moby-Dick; and The Confidence Man deals with a symbolic voyage up the Mississippi. Melville actually took only one trip into the far American West, to Gelena, Illinois, and that when he was twenty-one years old. Yet judging by his writing (he was still drawing upon the prairie frontier in 1888 with a book of poems: John Marr and Other Sailors), Melville visited the prairie West repeatedly through his imagination.[41]

Instead of surveying all of Melville's work, however, I will focus upon his greatest, Moby-Dick, about which Edwin Fussell has perceptively observed: "there are more references to the American West than to Polynesia (or England; or the ancient world; or the Near East; or the history of philosophy; or anything else); and all these references appear to head in one direction, as if arranging themselves along the lines of force in a pre-existing magnetic field. There are almost more allusions to the West than to whaling; and the whales themselves, we quickly learn, are as often as not buffaloes."[42]

Melville's first direct reference to the prairie, occurs in "Loomings," when Ishmael, while discussing the conducement to meditation of bodies of water, and having just described the role of a stream in the painting of a "romantic landscape," admonishes his reader to "Go visit the Prairie in June, when for scores on scores of miles you wade knee-deep among Tiger-lilies . . ."[43] There, Ishmael says, an individual will be struck by the lack of water. On many occasions, as in this first reference the allusions to the prairie serve to exemplify some general point Ishmael is making; later he speaks in this vein of the barrenness of Nantucket being such that three blades of grass constitute a prairie (p. 62).

Elsewhere, however, such allusions appear in dramatically key scenes. In "The Quarter-Deck," for example, just after Ahab gives his "pasteboard masks" speech to Starbuck, and after he nails the doubloon to the mast mast and whips up the crew's ardor in the search for Moby Dick, the captain conducts his communion service with the three harpooneers and his mates. Ahab, Melville writes, "stood for an instant searchingly eyeing every man of his crew. But those wild eyes met his, as the bloodshot eyes of the prairie wolves meet the eye of their leader, ere he rushes on at their head in the trail of the bison . . ." (p. 145). Here Melville uses the prairie to help define Ahab's quest, character, and the means he employs to obtain the crew's vigilance in his search. Melville continues the analogy, moreover, to reveal the outcome of such loyalty: "but alas! [the prairie wolves follow] only to fall into the hidden snare of the Indian" (p. 145). Much later in the novel Melville

likens Ahab to a "lone, gigantic elm" on the plains that men flee upon the coming of a hurricane (p. 418), and thus once again defines his character through a prairie allusion.

Another instance in which the prairie helps to define a particularly dramatic scene is to be found in "The First Lowering," in which Ishmael first mans a boat in pursuit of a whale. The boat is swamped although the crew remain in it: "The wind increased to a howl; the waves dashed their bucklers together; the whole squall roared, forked, and crackled around us like a white fire on the prairie, in which, unconsumed, we were burning; immortal in these jaws of death!" (p. 194). Melville's allusion to a prairie fire provides him with another landscape which accentuates the vulnerability of man in the face of elemental forces.

At the same time, the analogy operates to dramatize the Manichean nature of the universe: on the prairie--and in the case of a fire--water is the answer; on the ocean what is needed is the hot and dry, i.e., fire. Thus Melville goes on to cap off the analogy with a description of Queequeg holding a lantern aloft: "There, then, he sat, holding up that imbecile candle in the heart of that almighty forlornness. There, then, he sat, the sign and symbol of a man without faith, hopelessly holding up hope in the midst of despair" (p. 195).

In addition to his use of prairie allusions and analogies to highlight the main drama, Melville also devotes two chapters to a specific consideration to prairie phenomena. "The Whiteness of the Whale," the chapter in which Ishmael probes those considerations of which "the Albino whale was the symbol," is a long meditation on the nature of whiteness, its quality of attracting as it repels. After citing numerous pre-

eminent examples of whiteness, among them that of the Albatross, Ishmael invokes "the White Steed of the Prairies" who "was the elected Xerxes of vast herds of wild horses, whose pastures . . . were only fenced by the Rocky Mountains and the Alleghanies" (p. 165). This horse is the "most imperial and archangelical apparition of that unfallen, western world, which to the eyes of the old trappers and hunters revived the glories of those primeval times when Adam walked majestic as a god, bluff-bowed and fearless as this mighty steed" (p. 165). Here the prairie is deemed a suitable setting for this white paragon, and in his invocation of the Eden archetype, Melville implies that the relationship between horse and prairie is symbiotic: "Whether marching amid his aides and marshals in the van of countless cohorts that endlessly streamed [an apparition of the unfallen world] over the plains, like an Ohio; or whether with his circumambient subjects browsing all around at the horizon, the White Steed gallopingly reviewed them with warm nostrils reddening through his cool milkiness; in whatever aspect he presented himself, always to the bravest Indians he was the object of trembling reverence and awe" (p. 165).

The prairie only appears to be an Eden, however, and the White Steed also evokes in Ishmael "a certain nameless terror" (p. 166), a terror sensed by the Vermont colt that recoils when he smells the musk of "the black bisons of distant Oregon" (p. 169). Thus just as Melville uses prairie analogies to describe magnificent beauty so he uses prairie references to define the "demonism of the world."

One of Melville's sources for his "White Steed of the Prairies" was in all likelihood Parkman's <u>Oregon Trail</u> since, as I have noted, he reviewed it upon publication. Though Parkman makes no mention of white horses,

at several different points he notes both white buffalo and white wolves on the prairie. Melville may also have consulted some contemporary source which informed him that a "'white buffalo--that is, an albino or unusually blond one--was about the most valuable object in the world to the Plains Indians, who regarded it as having great magical power."[44] Contemporary descriptions of wild horses on the prairie were also available to Melville; one is to be found in Pike, and Irving devotes a chapter to them in A Tour ("Ringing the wild horses"; pp. 83-86) as well as alluding to them frequently throughout. Irving's description of a captive horse, moreover, is similar to Melville's: "From being a denizen of these vast pastures, ranging at will from plain to plain and mead to mead, cropping every herb and flower and drinking of every stream, [the wild horse] was suddenly reduced to perpetual and painful servitude . . ."(A Tour, p. 70).[45]

In addition to using the animals of the prairie to invoke beauty and terror, furthermore, Melville also uses the featurelessness of the prairie in winter to elaborate his response to whiteness. Thus Ishmael speaks of the mirages created by the continual whiteness of "the scenery of the Antarctic seas" and in turn of "the backwoodsman of the West, who with comparative indifference views an unbounded prairie sheeted with driven snow, no shadow of tree or twig to break the fixed trance of whiteness" (p. 168). It is after this that Ishmael considers the young Vermont colt and combines his various examples to explain his personal reaction to whiteness:

> Though thousands of miles from Oregon, still when [the colt] smells that savage musk, the rending, goring bison herds are as present as to the deserted wild foal of the prairies, which this instant they may be trampling into dust.

> Thus, then, the muffled rollings of a milky sea; the bleak rustlings of the festooned frosts of mountains; the desolate shiftings of the windrowed snows of the prairies; all these, to Ishmael, are as the shaking of that buffalo robe to the frightened colt. (p. 169)

Melville found in the snow-covered prairie that same quality which Ishmael and Ahab saw in Moby Dick: "a dumb blankness, full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows" (p. 169). The prairie, when covered with snow, furthermore, presents the same inscrutable visage as Moby Dick; though the backwoodsman might view such a scene with indifference, Ishmael does not: "It was the whiteness of the whale that above all things appalled me" (p. 163).

Melville's greatest emphasis on the featurelessness of the prairie landscape is to be found in the chapter entitled "The Prairie," in which his earlier implicit comparison between the landscape and Moby Dick constitutes his method and concern throughout. The prairie is referred to only in the chapter title, so that Ishmael's discussion of the appearance of a Sperm whale's brow takes the form of an elaborate metaphor. The point of departure for the metaphor is Ishmael's explanation that he is "but ill qualified for a pioneer" (p. 291), and he then goes on to explain the features of the whale's brow in the way in which travelers and explorers attempted to come to terms with the prairie. Just as they were struck by the lack of landmarks and required a promontory, so he notes the absence of a nose; just as they argued from the known and familiar, so he argues from human physionomy; and just as they contrasted the featureless prairie with domesticated scenes, so he draws an analogy to landscape gardening, where "a spire, cupola, monument, or tower of some sort is deemed almost indispensible to the completion of the scene; so no face can be physiognomically in keeping without the elevated open-

work belfry of the nose" (p. 291). And finally, just as some of them were able to overcome their aesthetic preconceptions and to respond imaginatively to the grandeur of the prairie, so Ishmael is able to pronounce the full frontal nose of a Sperm whale as not only "imposing" but also as "sublime" (p. 291):

> gazing on it, in that full front view, you feel the Deity and the dread powers more forcibly than in beholding any other object in living nature. For you see no one point precisely; not one distinct feature is revealed; no nose, eyes, ears, or mouth; no face; he has none, proper; nothing but that one broad firmament of a forehead, pleated with riddles; dumbly lowering with the doom of boats, and ships, and men. Nor, in profile, does this wondrous brow diminish; though that way viewed, its grandeur does not domineer upon you so. In profile, you plainly perceive that horizontal, semi-crescentric depression in the forehead's middle, which, in man, is Lavater's mark of genius. (p. 292)

As for the question of why Melville chose to keep his analogy of the prairie and Moby Dick implicit, perhaps the best answer is to be found in his sense of the profound similarity between these two majestic natural phenomena: in both equally he found "dumb blankness, full of meaning." Paradoxically, a related reason may be that he realized that both the prairie and the Sperm whale were unknown quantities which had no familiar counterparts. In any case, his description of the whale, in conjunction with his discussion of whiteness and reference to the western landscape throughout Moby Dick, make this sea-novel one of the most artistic evocations of the prairie in the tradition thus far.

* * *

But if Melville was the most thorough of the major writers of the American Renaissance in his use of the prairie as image and symbol, he was not unique in his references to the area. To begin with the more

minor allusions, it should be noted that, although in "Roger Malvin's Burial" or The Scarlet Letter Hawthorne drew upon the West as frontier and wilderness more than as prairie, "The Great Carbunkle" (1836) does include a setting suggestive of the prairie--it is barren. And in "Earth's Holocaust" (1844) he actually uses the prairie as a setting. Emerson's use of the prairie is even less pronounced, but he does refer to it, briefly, in four of his poems: "Boston," "Ode Inscribed to Ellery Channing," "The Titmouse," and "The World Soul."[46] Finally, to suggest that virtually no Eastern writer, however reclusive, seems to have been unaware of the prairie landscape during this period, one should note that Emily Dickinson refers to the prairie twice, once in "My Period Had Come for Prayer--" and again in "To Make a Prairie it Takes a Clover and One Bee."

In addition to these admittedly minor examples, there are also more major examples to be found in the work of Thoreau. In Walden, (1854), one of the most-quoted assertions Thoreau makes is "I have travelled a good deal. . . ."[47] His travels often took him onto the prairie, though he did not respond with the same enthusiasm seen in Melville. In Walden, as in the what might be called pre-Parkman Melville, the prairie is a source of syntactical allusion only; it is not accorded any of the thematic importance found in Moby-Dick. Discussing food at the beginning of "Economy," for example, Thoreau comments that all the "bison of the prairie" require is "a few inches of palatable grass, with water to drink" (p. 7). Most of his prairie allusions are of this type.

In two instances, however, the prairie landscape is presented as symbolic of aspects central to the Walden experiment. Describing the immediate area around Walden Pond in "Where I Lived, and What I Lived

For," Thoreau writes: "There was pasture enough for my imagination. The low shrub-oak plateau to which the opposite shore arose, stretching away toward the prairies of the West and the steppes of Tartary, affording ample room for all the roving families of men. 'There are none happy in the world but beings who enjoy a vast horizon,' --said Damodara, when his herds required new and larger pastures" (p.59). Here the prairie is invoked as an imaginative symbol of space and distance suitable for the habitation of man. Later, in "Solitude," Thoreau describes the neighborhood of Walden Pond and concludes: "But for the most part it is as solitary where I live as on the prairies" (p. 87). Here again the prairie is alluded to in order to provide a landscape which symbolizes an idea; in this case, solitude. Fussell comments that "Walden rests firmly on the outrageous proposition that a man can live 'at the West' or 'on the frontier' without going near either."[48] It should, however, be pointed out that Thoreau's use of the prairie, like his use of the West, is metaphoric. His concern in the above instances is with what the prairie symbolizes, not with where or what it empirically is.

Much the same may be said of Whitman's references to the prairie. While he alludes to it on numerous occasions throughout Leaves of Grass (1855; revised through 1891-92), he does not directly confront landscape until Specimen Days (1882), when he recounts his trip through the West. Significantly, he finds the landscape to be confirmation of his idea of it: "Grand as the thought that doubtless the child is already born who will see a hundred millions of people, the most prosperous and advanced of the world, inhabitating these prairies, the Great Plains, and the

valley of the Mississippi, I could not help thinking it would be grander still to see all those inimitable American areas fused in the alembic of a perfect poem, or other esthetic work, entirely western, fresh, and limitless--altogether our own . . . ."[49] He then goes on to catalog the various sights he sees along the rail line for the purposes of such a poem. And though Whitman's outpouring of sentiment here might be discounted since, at the age of sixty he was here seeing for the first time the American West of which he had sung for so long, his use of the prairie in poetry is not radically different. It is ever a representative landscape in a catalog of American scenes. A poem which resulted from his trip, "The Prairie States" (1881)[50] expressed the same sentiments as the prose passage; a "newer garden of creation" becomes home for "joyeous, modern, populous millions" (p. 402). Similarly, Whitman wrote "Night on the Prairies" (1860) before he had seen the landscape. In the poem the speaker imagines himself among a group of westward-bound emigrants; stepping away from their campfire, he muses upon the stars and death, saying nothing about the land.

A representative example of Whitman's use of the prairie in poems which are not ostensibly set there is to be found in "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" (1865-66). In the tenth section of the poem, he uses the prairie to symbolize the center of the country: "Sea-winds blown from east and west,/Blown from the Eastern sea and blown from the Western sea, till/ there on the prairies meeting . . . perfume the grave of him" he loves (p. 332, ll. 74-77). Here the prairie is invoked so that Whitman may unify Lincoln, the "great star early droop'd in the western sky" (p. 328, l. 2), with the entire mourning nation. Two other references to the prairie in the poem occur during Whitman's panoramic

view of the whole nation. He refers to "the far-spreading prairies cover'd with grass and corn" (p. 333, l. 92) as the day's light passes over the whole nation, and, later, the bird's song rises "over the myriad fields and the prairies wide" (p. 355, l. 160).

Though the effect of the westward movement is far more apparent in Whitman than in others--his references to the prairie are more promiscuous than Thoreau's and their casualness contrasts with Melville's pointed allusions--his use of the prairie thus is not essentially different in kind from that of his contemporaries.

* * *

An appropriate way of summarizing the contribution made by nineteenth-century writers to the development of a prairie literature tradition, therefore, is to quote the observation made by a travel writer of the period, George William Curtis. In his Lotus Eating (1852), Curtis observed, "The idea of the great western rivers and of lakes as shoreless to the eye as the sea, or of magnificent monotony of grass or forest, is as impressive and much less wearisome than the actual sight of them."[51] Cooper, Irving, Poe, Melville, and the other writers of the American Renaissance, each in his own way, was less concerned with the prairie as an actual phenomenon that with the state of mind it evoked and could be used to symbolize. But if this transcentental orientation results in some topographical inaccuracies, it also has the effect of "breathing life and fire into a circle of imagery which was not known to exist . . . ."

CHAPTER FOUR: Notes

[1] D.H. Lawrence, Studies in Classic American Literature (1923; rpt. New York: Viking, 1973) p. 57; Richard Chase, The American Novel and its Tradition (New York: Doubleday, 1957), p. 57.

[2] Henry Nash Smith, Introd., The Prairie: A Tale, by James Fenimore Cooper (New York: Holt, 1950), p. ix. See Howard Mumford Jones, "Prose and Pictures: James Fenimore Cooper," TSE, 3 (1952), 140-47; Donald A. Ringe, "James Fenimore Cooper and Thomas Cole: An Analogous Technique," AL, 30 (1958), 26-36; Donald A. Ringe, "Chiaroscuro as an Artistic Device in Cooper's Fiction," PMLA, 78 (1963), 349-57; Donald A. Ringe, The Pictorial Mode: Space and Time in the Art of Bryant, Irving, and Cooper (Lexington: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 1971); Blake Nevius, Cooper's Landscapes: An Essay on the Picturesque Vision (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1976); H. Daniel Peck, A World By Itself: the Pastoral Moment in Cooper's Fiction (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press. 1977)

[3] A good overview of Cooper, the pictorial, and his use of eighteenth-century aesthetics is provided by Ernest H. Redekop, "Picturesque and Pastoral: Two Views of Cooper's Landscapes," CRevAS, 8 (1977), 184-205.

[4] James Franklin Beard, "Cooper and his Artistic Contemporaries," New York History, 35 (1954), 492.

[5] Donald A. Ringe, "Man and Nature in Cooper's The Prairie," NCF, 15 (1961), 316.

[6] Ringe, "Man and Nature," p. 315, n. 7.

[7] Orm Øverland, The Making and Meaning of an American Classic: James Fenimore Cooper's The Prairie, p. 142; here Øverland summarizes contemporary criticism of The Prairie leveled by Governor Lewis Cass of Michigan, Flint and Drake on the grounds that Cooper knew nothing of the West. Their attitude persists; see Robert Edson Lee, From West to East: Studies in the Literature of the American West (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1966). His title notwithstanding, Lee dismisses The Prairie as having no place in such a study. Regarding the inaccuracy of Cooper's depiction of the West, see John T. Flanagan, "The Authenticity of Cooper's The Prairie," MLQ, 2 (1941), 99-104

[8] James Fenimore Cooper, The Prairie: A Tale (1827; rpt. [afterword by John William Ward] New York: New American Library, 1964), p. 1. All references to Cooper are from this edition.

Throughout The Prairie Cooper does not refer to his hero as either Natty Bumppo or Leatherstocking; each of these names owes to other novels in the series. This notwithstanding, the trapper's description of his youth in New York State, and also his connection with Middleton, leave no doubt that he is Bumppo. In critical discussions of The Prairie, moreover, the trapper is invariably identified as Bumppo and referred to by either that name or Leatherstocking. In keeping with this convention, I have decided to refer to the trapper as Natty Bumppo and also, on occasion, as Leatherstocking throughout my discussion.

[9] While scientific expeditions such as Long's fostered the concept of the Great American Desert on the basis of observed data, Cooper's expropriation of the idea had no such basis, as commentators such as Flanagan have noted. Speaking metaphorically, however, the very fact of the prairie-plains' treelessness is sufficient testimony to its "desert" qualities to Eastern and European eyes, to those of Cooper's readers.

[10] Överland, pp. 65-94. Överland discusses in great detail the various parallels which exist between The Prairie and the James Account of the Long expedition, leading to the inescapable conclusion that Cooper relied on the latter almost exclusively while he wrote those passages in the novel which define setting. He also used used the Biddle History of the expedition of Lewis and Clark, but to a far lesser extent; Överland doubts if Cooper brought that book to Paris, as he did his copy of the Account.

[11] Överland, p. 76.

[12] See Överland, pp. 83-87, for a discussion of Cooper's use of the Seymour illustration. For the relevant passages from James, see EWT, XV: 183-84.

[13] Nevius, p. 16.

[14] Nevius, p. 14.

[15] William Cullen Bryant, Prose Writings, ed. Parke Godwin (1884; rpt. New York: Russell & Russell, 1964), II, 16. All references to Bryant's Illinois sketches are from this edition. Regarding the possible publication of Bryant's letters in the Evening Post, see Charles H. Brown, William Cullen Bryant (New York: Scribner's, 1971), p. 204.

[16] Kindred Spirits is reproduced in Novak, Nature and Culture p. 16, fig. 9.

[17] [William Cullen Bryant], rev. of The Prairie, by James Fenimore Cooper, in United States Review and Literary Gazette, 2 (July 1827), 306-07; as quoted by Overland, p. 140.

[18] William Cullen Bryant, "The Prairies," in Poems (Philadelphia: Henry Altemus, 1895), pp. 50-55. Another of Bryant's poems, "The Hunter of the Prairies," uses the prairie as setting; here the speaker is the hunter, and the prairie, "the green desert," is where he is free. The setting is Eden-like and not treated specifically; see Poems, pp. 60-62.

[19] Washington Irving, Letters: Vol. II, 1823-1838, ed. Ralph M. Aderman et al. (Boston: Twayne, 1979), pp. 733-34. All references to Irving's Letters are from this edition.

[20] [Edward Everett], "The Crayon Miscellany, by the Author of the Sketch Book, No. 1--A Tour on the Prairies," rev. of The Crayon Miscellany, Vol. I, by Washington Irving, North American Review, 41 (July 1835); rpt. The Native Muse: Theories of American Literature, ed. Richard Ruland (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1976), pp. 266, 269. For a descriptive summary, with extensive quotation, of the contemporary response to A Tour, see Martha Dula, "Audience Response to A Tour on the Prairies," WAL, 8 (1973), 67-74. Westerners as well as easterners were pleased with the book; James Hall--who was of the same group of westerners as Flint, Cass, and Drake, each of whom had condemned The Prairie--praised A Tour unstintingly in The Western Monthly Magazine. See Edgeley W. Todd, "Washington Irving Discovers the Frontier," WHR, 11 (1957), 29.

[21] Everett, p. 269.

[22] Henry Seidel Canby, "Washington Irving," in Classic Americans (1931); rpt. A Century of Commentary on the Works of Washington Irving, ed. Andrew B. Myers (Tarrytown; New York; Sleepy Hollow Restorations, 1976), pp. 181-82.

[23] Ringe, The Pictorial Mode, p. 49; Kathryn Whitford, "Romantic Matamorphosis in Irving's Western Tour," ATQ, No. 5 (First Quarter, 1970), p. 31. In this same work, Ringe considers the prairie as setting in the work of Bryant, Cooper and Irving along with two other environments, the sea, and the forest; speaking of them he writes: "all appear in the works of Bryant, Irving, and Cooper and all serve a similar function. The scale of each is extensive enough to bear the burden of a serious theme, but each represents as well a normal environment for men" (p. 35). Regarding the prairie, Ringe is in error; the very essence of the prairie as setting in all three writers is that it is not "a normal environment for men." That is how the prairie takes on symbolic weight as setting in The Prairie; because of its characteristics, it is able to make the symbolic confrontation between Bumppo and the Bushes vivid. Irving is attracted to the prairie because of its unique and exotic status as a land out of bounds. Bryant stresses that the prairie is untouched by the hand of man. Without destracting from Ringe's fine book, his treatment of the prairie as setting fails to convince.

[24] Wayne R. Kime, in "The Completeness of Washington Irving's A Tour on the Prairies, WAL, 8 (1973), 55-65, notes that "The notion that Irving was unable to perceive or portray the West except in false terms is virtually universal . . ." (p. 56, n. 2). In the same note, Kime summarizes the sources of this negative evaluation, although he omits Whitford. Kime rejects these readings and argues that the "carefully shaped narrative framework of the book" presents Irving "as abandoning his naively conventional preconceptions about Western life and gradually achieving a clearer awareness of the West as reality" (p. 55). Without question, there is something of this in A Tour; Irving had to know more of "the West as reality" after he had been there, but that is axiomatic. Whitford's reading, that Irving was simply daunted by his material, and so brought it to a hasty conclusion, parallels my sense of the book; there are also, as she points out, too many elements and characters (such as Ryan as "Old Leatherstocking") which are introduced with a flourish and then dropped for the book to be considered artistically accomplished. Whatever the critical consensus on the book as a whole, however, Irving's presentation of the prairie landscape is one which summarizes its effects; he only occasionally describes them. Two other critics who defend A Tour are William Bedford Clark, "How the West Won: Irving's Comic Inversion of The Westering Myth in A Tour on the Prairies, AL 50 (1978), 334-47, and William J. Schieck, "Frontier Robin Hood: Wilderness, Civilization and the Half-Breed in Irving's A Tour on the Prairies," SwAL, 4 (1978), 14-21.

[25] The Western Journals of Washington Irving, ed. John Francis McDermott (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1944), p. 94. All references to Irving's Journals are from this edition.

[26] Washington Irving, A Tour on the Prairies, in The Crayon Miscellany (1835; rpt. [ed. Dahlia Kirby Terrell] New York: Twayne, 1979), p. 9. All references to Irving's A Tour are from this edition.

[27] Dahlia Kirby Terrell, Introd., The Crayon Miscellany by Washington

Irving (Boston: Twayne, 1979), p. xx, n. 13. Terrell mentions Irving's admission that he had read only The Pioneers prior to his western tour, although he was doubtlessly aware of the reputation of the other two Leatherstocking Tales in print at the time. And while critics have considered the sources consulted by Irving before writing A Tour, none has mentioned either The Prairie or "The Prairies." It seems nevertheless quite likely that Irving would have availed himself of both Cooper and Bryant before writing up his Tour; thus his use of "verdant waste," which is used by Bryant as well as Cooper. So while it cannot be argued that Irving arrived on the prairie with literary preconceptions, A Tour does contain echoes which may be attributed to Irving's consultation of sources after his trip but prior to writing his book. He refers to one of the rangers, old Ryan, for example, as a "real old Leatherstocking." See Stanley T. Williams, The Life of Washington Irving, 2 vols. (New York: Oxford, 1935), II, 72-91.

[28] Henry Leavitt Ellsworth, Washington Irving on the Prairie, or a Narrative of a Tour of the Southwest in the Year 1832, ed. Stanley T. Williams and Barbara D. Simison (New York: American Book Co., 1937), p. 88. Irving's tour was among the most abundantly recorded; in addition to his works and Ellsworth's Narrative there are two other first-person accounts. See Charles Joseph Latrobe, The Rambler in North America, 2 vols. (New York: Harper, 1835) and Count Albert-Alexandre de Portales, On the Western Tour with Washington Irving (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1968).

[29] Irving's journal for this period, which covered Chapters XVI-XXXII inclusive in A Tour is not extant, and so cannot be compared to A Tour. Scholars, in fact, are uncertain as to whether such a journal was even written but, owing to the existing journals--which chronicle virtually all of the rest of the trip--and Ellsworth's comments as to the regularity with which Irving attended to such writing (Ellsworth, pp. 70-71), it appears likely that such a journal was kept. See John Francis McDermott, introd., The Western Journals of Washington Irving for an explanation of the circumstances surrounding Irving's journals. In addition, such are the correspondences between the extant journals and the passages derived from them in A Tour, and such is the degree of correspondence regarding the daily incidents of the journey between A Tour and the narratives by Latrobe and Ellsworth (both of whom note the buffalo hunt on which Irving became lost, if not that incident itself), however, it is doubtful that Irving invented this incident. In any case, because of the absence of the relevant journal, we have no way of knowing whether or not the account presented in A Tour is an accurate reflection of Irving's immediate reaction.

[30] Ringe, The Pictorial Mode (p. 49), uses selected quotations from these two paragraphs of A Tour to support his contention that "Irving is obviously deeply impressed with the expansiveness of the prairie landscape, and. . . he has a strong feeling of aloneness amidst the vast sweep of prairie and sky." This is accurate within these two paragraphs only--not, as Ringe implies, to A Tour as a whole. Ringe also claims (p. 48), quite curiously, that Irving's use of "infinite delight" (Tour, p. 97) is on the occasion of his first glimpse of the prairies. This is ob-

viously incorrect. Ringe accords the prairie landscape a cursory look at best.

[31] As I have argued here, the prairie which Irving saw and communicated through A Tour was largely predetermined by his style, which was itself a tool of his cultural assumptions. The same can be said of both of his subsequent western books, Astoria and The Adventures of Captain Bonneville, U. S. A., where the prairie landscape figures only occasionally. For this reason, they will not be discussed here.

[32] Margaret Fuller, Summer on the Lakes (1844), in The Writings of Margaret Fuller, ed. Mason Wade (New York: Viking, 1941), p. 26. All references to Fuller are from this edition.

[33] Several critics have explored this situation, but Edwin Fussell's Frontier: American Literature and the American West (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1965) is much the best and most exhaustive treatment of the subject as it applies to the writers of the American Renaissance. Because he is concerned with the entire West, however, Fussell's treatment of the prairie is incidental, and he does not attempt to define its use as a particular landscape in the writing he examines. In addition to Fussell's book and Robert Edson Lee's From West to East, other notable works on the Westward Movement in American literature are Ralph Leslie Rusk, The Literature of the Middle Western Frontier (New York, 1925), Dorothy Ann Dondore, The Prairie and the Making of Middle America, Lucy Lockwood Hazard, The Frontier in American Literature (New York, 1927), and Henry Nash Smith's Virgin Land, by far the most influential.

[34] Henry David Thoreau, Journal, 1837-1846, in The Writings of Henry David Thoreau, ed. Bradford Torrey (Boston; Houghton Mifflin, 1906) VII, 473-74.

[35] Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nature in Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson, ed. Stephen E. Whicher (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957), p. 27.

[36] John J. Teunissen and Evelyn J. Hinz, "Poe's Journal of Julius Rodman as Parody," NCF, 27 (1972), 317-38; see also Fussell, pp. 132-74, especially pp. 155-62. Each treatment discusses Poe's plagiarism for the Journal; another is Wayne R. Kime, "Poe's Use of Irving's Astoria in 'The Journal of Julius Rodman,'" AL, 40 (1968), 215-22.

[37] Edgar Allan Poe, The Journal of Julius Rodman, in The Works of Edgar Allan Poe, ed. Edmund Clarence Stedman and George Edward Woodberry (New York: Scribner's, 1914), 5, 344. All references to the Journal are from this edition. The Journal was serially published in Burton's Gentleman's Magazine, January to June, 1840.

[38] To perhaps identify yet another source for the Journal, this passage's tone, discussion and allusion to the "'Arabian Nights'" closely parallels Brackenridge's description of the prairies along the Missouri in his Journal. EWT, VI: 91-92, 110.

[39] [Herman Melville], rev. of The California and Oregon Trail, by Francis Parkman, Literary World (4 March 31, 1849), 291-93.

[40] Herman Melville, "Hawthorne and His Mosses," Literary World, (August 17 and 24, 1850); rpt. in Herman Melville, Moby-Dick: An Authoritative Text, ed. Harrison Hayford and Hershal Parker (New York: Norton, 1967), p. 546.

[41] Herman Melville, Selected Poems of Herman Melville, ed. Henning Cohen (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1964), pp. 96-101.

[42] Edwin Fussell, Frontier, p. 259. Fussell provides a compelling argument about Melville's use of the West in this book, too; he sees a correspondence in the author's mind between "ocean" and "West," so that the two terms are interchangeable. The West, moreover, helps to make Melville's tale American, as does his central drama of the hunt: "an American hunting story, regardless of ostensible locale, was inevitably a story about the West" (p. 257).

[43] Herman Melville, Moby-Dick (1851; rpt. [ed. Harrison Hayford and Hershel Parker] New York: Norton, 1967), p. 13. All references to Moby-Dick are from this edition. It is interesting that the "romantic landscape" which Ishmael describes here just prior to his allusion to the prairie is exactly that seen in the river-valley landscapes of Bodmer, Catlin, and Miller.

[44] Mason Wade, in The Journals of Francis Parkman, II: 619, n. 76. Parkman's references to white animals are to be found in The Oregon Trail, pp. 126, 367, 390, and 393.

[45] Given his interest in the prairie, it would have been likely that Melville availed himself of A Tour; his library contained a set of Irving's Works, but he did not acquire these volumes until June 1853. See Merton M. Sealts, Jr., Melville's Reading: A Checklist of Books Owned and Borrowed (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1966), p. 70, entry 292a. Apart from Parkman, Cooper, and perhaps Irving, Sealts lists no other volumes which Melville might have used as sources for the "White Steed" passage in Moby-Dick.

[46] As Fussell suggests, the use of the prairie landscape in "Earth's Holocaust" probably owes more to the unreality of Hawthorne's parable than to any attraction to landscape. See Fussell, pp. 69-131, especially 85-88. In addition, while Fussell provides no sustained discussion of Emerson in realtion to the West, one is available in Lee's From West to East, pp. 153-56.

[47] Henry David Thoreau, Walden (1854) in Walden and Civil Disobedience: Authoritative Texts, ed. Owen Thomas (New York: Norton, 1966), p. 2. All references to Walden are from this edition.

[48] Fussell, p. 201.

[49] Walt Whitman, Specimen Days, ed. Lance Hidy (1882; rpt. Boston: G. R. Godine, 1971), p. 73.

[50] Walt Whitman, "The Prairie States," in Leaves of Grass, ed. Harold W. Blodgett and Sculley Bradley (New York: Norton, 1965), p. 402. All references to Whitman's poetry are from this edition.

[51] George William Curtis, Lotus Eating: A Summer Book (1852) in Prue and I, Lotus Eating (London: J. M. Dent, n.d.) p. 214.

CHAPTER FIVE

"throwing a man back upon himself": Prairie Romances and the Beginnings of Realism

Not until the final third of the nineteenth century did the prairie become a common fictional setting, and not until the rise of Realism, and the concomitant emergence of the farm novel, did the prairie occupy as central a position as it did in The Prairie. One way of accounting for this situation is to consider the implications of Washington Irving's observation in Astoria (1836): "The monotony of these immense landscapes, also, would be as wearisome as that of the ocean, were it not relieved in some degree by the purity and elasticity of the atmosphere, and the beauty of the heavens. The sky has that delicious blue for which the sky of Italy is renowned; the sun shines with a splendor unobscured by any cloud or vapor, and a starlight night on the prairies is glorious."[1] Typical of nineteenth-century reactions to the prairie, Irving's response consists of an initial enthusiasm for the way in which the immensity of the landscape piques the imagination followed by a sense of monotony as a result of prolonged exposure. Similarly, his comments suggest an unwillingness to co-relate his two reactions: he does not, for example, consider the extent to which the deep blueness of the prairie sky could be a significant factor in the prairie's monotony.

Even a writer who was able to co-relate the two, however, nonetheless chose not to use the prairie as setting for his fiction, and in some ways

his case is even more instructive than Irving's. Albert Pike, who was the first writer of Western fiction who had actually been in the area and who had traveled through the prairie, chose, instead of this locale, the southwest around Santa Fe as setting. The explanation for this situation is to be found in Prose Sketches and Poems (1834) wherein Pike registers three stages of response to the prairie. In the first of these his emphasis is upon the absence of life in such a setting: "Imagine yourself, kind reader, standing on a plain to which your eye can see no bounds. Not a tree, not a bush, not a shrub, not a tall weed lifts its head above the barren grandeur of the desert; not a stone is to be seen on its hard beaten surface; no undulation, no abruptness, no break to relieve the monotony: nothing, save here and there a deep narrow track worn into the hard plains by the constant hoof of the buffalo."[2] Pike then goes on to present the various animated forms his reader may imagine in such a scene: buffalo, wild horses, antelope, "white, snow-like wolves prowling about," prairie dogs, and "a band of Comanches, mounted on noble swift horses. . ." (p. 14), and concludes: "if you imagine" the Comanches "hovering about in the prairie, chasing the buffalo or attacking the enemy, you have an image of the prairie, such as no book ever described adequately to me" (p. 15). In his final response, however, it is again the "dead quiet" of the landscape which strikes him and here it is the forces of the elements which provide animation:

> I have seen the prairie, and stood long and weary in it, by moonlight and starlight and storm. It strikes me as the most magnificent, stern, and terribly grand scene on earth--a storm in the prairie. It is like a storm at sea, except in one respect--and in that it seems to me to be superior. The stillness of the desert and the illimitable plain, while the snow is raging over its surface, is always more fearful to me than the wild roll of the waves; and it seems unnatural--this dead quiet, while the upper elements are so fiercely disturbed; it seems as if there ought to be the roll and the roar of the waves. The sea, the woods, the mount-

> ains, all suffer in comparison with the prairie--that is on the whole--although in particular circumstances either of them is superior. We may speak of the incessant motion and tumult of the waves, the unbounded greenness and dimness, and the lonely music of the forests, and the high magnificence, the precipitous grandeur, and the summer snow of the glittering cones of the mountains: but still, the prairie has a stronger hold upon the soul, and a more powerful, if not so vivid an impression on the feelings. (pp. 15-16)

The problem the prairie poses, therefore, is its unprecedented character and its elusive strangeness, one which withholds a concrete impression while imparting a more powerful overall feeling. Like Zebulon Pike, who compared being lost on a frozen and storm-blown lake to being lost on the snow-blown prairie, Albert Pike is forced to confront the play and power of nature amid the prairie landscape. And like Washington Irving, Pike finds his romantic illusions vanishing when he faces the landscape directly: "Its sublimity arises from its unbounded extent, its barren monotony and desolation, its still, unmoved, calm, stern, almost self-confident grandeur, its strange power of deception, its want of echo, and, in fine, its power of throwing a man back upon himself and giving him a feeling of lone helplessness, strangely mingled at the same time with a feeling of liberty and freedom from restraint" (p. 16).

Here, then, is a likely rationale for Pike's decision to avoid the prairie as setting for his conventionally romantic tales; it has none of the conventional mystery of the Spanish southwest and is, seemingly, inimical to romance, since it both demands and eludes exact description, creating a strong impression while withholding features to which this impression may be attributed. Pike, moreover, is able to wax romantic over the prairie only by describing its inhabitants, but these as he realizes are not the essentials of the landscape. And even such action as was indigenous to the prairie would not satisfy the requirements of conventional

romance, as a review of Irving's A Tour on the Prairies suggests: "the mind becomes wearied with the monotony of a journey through the solitudes of the Western Prairies, and after we have once formed a tolerably distinct idea of a buffalo hunt, and the lasoing of the wild horse, we become tired of the repetition of adventures, which possess so little variety."[3]

Pike's experience reflects, as well, on Cooper's The Prairie, since his decision not to use the prairie landscape as setting for his fiction further defines the relationship between the prairie landscape, on the one hand, and Cooper's method of landscape depiction versus Irving's, on the other. Indeed, judging by the extended hiatus of first-rank prairie fiction between Cooper's novel and Willa Cather's O Pioneers! (1913), it might be argued that Cooper had an advantage in never having seen the landscape he depicted. Thus detached, but with suitable resource material in James's Account before him, Cooper accommodated the conventions of his romantic form to the landscape James described, and so rendered the prairie articulate and symbolic. No subsequent romancer, neither Washington Irving nor Albert Pike, was able to accomplish anything remotely similar. Nor did they try. Certainly desire, talent, and interest may have kept each of the latter from attempting to use the prairie as fictional setting, but as the above discussions of their reactions have shown, both were hampered, ironically handicapped, by their personal prairie experience. Both men discovered that their desire to see the prairie as a romantic landscape did not make it one, could not make it one; each was faced, in Pike's words, with "a feeling of lone helplessness" which forced romantic illusions to vanish. James Fenimore Cooper, aware of his personal ignorance of the prairie and undaunted by

it, consciously strove to accommodate his art to its peculiarities; had he the personal experience of an Irving or a Pike, one wonders if he would have tried.

* * *

The first writers who did use the prairie as a setting for fiction after Cooper were British tourists who, like Palliser, were sportsmen seeking game in the wilderness of North America. Their first-hand experiences are subordinated to the demands of the conventions of popular romantic fiction, with its hackneyed plots and devices, noble heroes and heroines, and dark villians. A representative example is Charles Augustus Murray's The Prairie-Bird (1844). Murray, a wealthy British sportsman, went hunting on the prairie in 1835 and, before trying his hand at fiction, wrote Travels in North America (1839). In The Prairie-Bird he simply took the ingredients of popular romance and gave them a prairie backdrop. The protagonist, Prairie Bird, is abducted by Indians as a child, raised by them and, once Murray's plot has wound its circuitous length, is returned to her home and family and is able to marry the noble hero, Reginald. The sole instance in which the prairie is given extended treatment occurs just before Reginald catches his first glimpse of Prairie Bird. Climbing to the top of a hill, Reginald sees "To the westward, the undulations of the Prairie, wrapped in heavy folds of mist, [which] rose in confused heaps, like the waves of a boundless ocean." Here the ocean analogy serves primarily to set the stage for an evocation of a Botticelli mother nature: "Reginald gazed upon the scene with wonder and delight and every moment while he gazed called into existence richer and more varied beauties. The mists and exhalations rising from

the plain curled themselves into a thousand fantastic shapes around the points and projections of the hills, where they seemed to hang like mantles which the earth cast from her bosom, as being rendered unnecessary by the appearance of the day. . . ." Murray uses the prairie scene, primarily, to prepare his hero's soul to receive his first vision of Prairie Bird; in order to see her, Reginald must first taste and contemplate the wonders of her environment. Thus he concludes by observing: "Reginald's heart was not insensible to the impressions naturally excited by such a scene; and while he admired its variegated beauties, his thoughts were raised in adoration to that almighty and beneficent Being, whose temple is the earth, and whose are the 'cattle upon a thousand hills.'"[4]

On the one hand, Reginald's response here is in keeping with Brackenridge's observation that the "mind naturally expands, or contracts, to suit the sphere in which it exists" (EWT, VI: 92), just as the technique is not different in kind from Cooper's use of the prairie to introduce Natty Bumppo. Whereas Brackenridge and Cooper depicted an essentially masculine nature, however, Murray sees a feminine one--one which may be in keeping with the conventions of British romance and landscape but which is at odds with the nature of the North American prairie itself.

Unlike Murray's The Prairie-Bird, George Frederick Ruxton's Life in the Far West (1848) does not slavishly follow the conventions of popular romance. During 1846-47, Ruxton hunted in the prairie, lived among mountain men, and spied for the British. His book follows the adventures of two fictitious heroes, La Bonté and Kilbuck, as they travel throughout the West. Ruxton does include an extraneous love affair presumably added for his sentimental readers, but unlike Murray, he does not emphasize character and plot over setting. Quite the contrary, much of Life reads

like a travel account, rather than a work of fiction. Describing the prairie, Ruxton writes that his characters passed through "the beautiful undulating scenery of this park-like country": "The grass was everywhere luxuriously green, and gaudy flowers dotted the surface of the prairie." He then contrasts this area with that farther west, "the flat monotony of the Grand Plains."[5]

Despite the incompatibility of the prairie and the conventions of popular romance to which the work of Murray and Ruxton each in its own way attests, another conventional romancer, Emerson Bennett, sensed no such problem. In The Prairie Flower (1849)--which is said to have sold over 100,000 copies--he is emphatic about the suitability of the prairie for romance purposes:

> The prairie! the mighty, rolling, and seemingly boundless prairie! With what singular emotions I beheld it for the first time! I could compare it with nothing but a vast sea, changed suddenly to earth, with all its heaving, rolling billows. Thousands upon thousands of acres lay spread before me like a map, bounded by nothing but the deep, blue sky. What a magnificent sight! A sight that made my soul expand with lofty thought, and its frail tenement sink into utter nothingness before it. Talk of man--his power, his knowledge, his greatness--what is he? A mere worm, an insect, a mote, a nothing, when brought in compare with the grand, the sublime, in nature. Go, take the mighty one of earth--the crimson-robed, diamond-decked monarch whose nod is law. . . .[6]

As this passage indicates, instead of proving his point Bennett simply highlights the fact that he has never seen the prairie. His initial description and diction seem to have been borrowed directly from Bryant's "The Prairies," and his expanding soul might be attributed to Brackenridge, Pike, or Irving, among others. As he continues, Bennett also resorts to the typical vantage point: "Similar to those were my thoughts, as I stood alone, upon a slight rise of ground, and overlooked miles upon miles of the most lovely, the most sublime, scene I had ever beheld.

Wave upon wave of land, if I may be allowed the expression, stretched away on every hand, covered with beautiful, green prairie-grass and the blooming wild flowers of the wilderness" (p. 47). Neither is Bennett able to sustain his enthusiasm nor focus on the landscape. After describing the fauna scattered about the scene, and then the setting prairie sun, he launches into a lengthy digression on the theme of motherhood. Unlike Cooper, who took James's material and fashioned it to suit the needs of his art, Bennett simply included what he had read about the prairie without incorporating it at all. His enthusiasm is artificial, and he quickly moves on to other considerations.

Yet Bennett's transparently romantic depiction of the prairie landscape attests to the existence in 1849 of conventional modes of presenting the western lands. Although the prairie landscape provided the initial impetus for these conventions, and sustained them briefly, as seen in the writings of Brackenridge, James, Lambert, Irving, Pike, Catlin, and Parkman, even the most romantic of temperaments could not render the prairie permanently romantic. Despite the azure of blue sky, monotony eventually breaks in, and when it does, romance vanishes. As such, the empty hollowness of Bennett's unfelt platitudes is deafening; he neither understands nor wishes to understand the land he is describing, preferring instead his borrowed conventions. And, having never seen the land, Bennett is unlike Irving in that he was never forced to recognize its emptiness, even momentarily.

In the popular fiction written from 1850 through the first two decades of the next century--including adventure stories, juvenile tales, the Dime Novel, and religious polemics--the prairie as setting is typically buried beneath a mound of literary conventions. Only occasion-

ally is it treated with any depth, and most frequently it serves as an exotic locale in which the action takes place, taking the form of a settlement with traces of the frontier (vast unsettled spaces and Indians) still evident. The author's focus is usually upon his characters and their actions; these plots, while not always as hackneyed as Murray's, are spun out with little reference to the landscape in which they take place.[7]

Some works set on the Canadian prairie are, like Ruxton's, mainly descriptive accounts with a fictional plot appended, as in the case of Alexander Begg's Dot It Down: A Story of Life in the Northwest (1871).[8] Begg describes the Red River settlement in great detail, and pays considerable attention to its social structures, but the plot is little more than a pretext for his descriptive asides. Similarly, the prairie landscape, while frequently alluded to as surrounding the settlement, is not evoked in any direct manner.

More representative of the popular prairie fiction of the late nineteenth century are the adventure romances written by such men as Sir William Francis Butler, R.M. Ballantyne, Gilbert Parker, and John Mackie, each of whom wrote works set in the prairie north west. Butler's Red Cloud, The Solitary Sioux (1882) draws upon his prairie experiences and his understanding of the methods of surviving there, but his romantic plot, involving hunts and escapades, is simply grafted on to those experiences. As a boy Butler's favorite author was James Fenimore Cooper, and his plot in Red Cloud is certainly modelled on that source, even if his knowledge of the locale is not. Thus Butler, who certainly reacted imaginatively to the prairie landscape--as attested to by both The Great Lone Land and The Wild North Land--is like Murray and Ruxton in that he

simply yokes the literary conventions of the popular romance to the landscape. Yet owing to his intimate acquaintance with the prairie, and his evident feelings for it, Butler was unlike most other writers of adventure tales. His prairie in Red Cloud is a setting, not the convenient backdrop found in similar tales.[9]

His more detailed evocation of the land notwithstanding, Butler did not use the prairie in a manner radically different from other authors of the adventure romance. Although at one point in Red Cloud his protagonist "felt oppressed by this vague lonely waste," this feeling lasts only "a moment."[10] Irving and Albert Pike reacted favorably to the prairie landscape initially but later reassessed the nature of that first reaction, seeing in the landscape some threatening quality. Butler also, as his travel books record, underwent this experience. Yet it is significant that his most extended dark musings over the landscape are contained in his travel books, not in Red Cloud. Like other writers' works, Butler's novel celebrates the initially romantic reaction to the landscape, its vastness, pristine wildness, and lushness. This is wholly in keeping with the conventional form of the adventure romance, and Butler, intent on a depiction of Red Cloud as the last Sioux to live the nomadic life of his ancestors, does not press on to the more considered reaction to the landscape which prompted him to see in it a "terrible grandeur."[11]

R. M. Ballantyne, a Scottish author of over eighty juvenile adventure romances set in exotic locales, drew upon his experiences as a Hudson's Bay clerk in Canada for several of these tales, and in works such as The Red Man's Revenge (1880) he employed a prairie setting. His presentation of the landscape is incidental, the only extended passage occurring as the protagonists chase an Indian who has kidnapped a young child in revenge for a slight. Like Emerson Bennett's landscape description,

Ballantyne's owes more, one suspects, to his reading than to his personal experiences: "Over the prairie waves they sped, with growing excitement as their hopes of success increased; now thundering down into the hollow, anon mounting the gentle slopes at full swing, or rounding the clumps of trees that here and there dotted the prairie like islets in an interminable sea of green; and ever, as they rounded an islet or topped a prairie wave, they strained their eyes in earnest expectation of seeing the objects of their pursuit on the horizon, but for several days they raced, and gazed, and hoped in vain."[12] Ballantyne's characters could be rushing through landscape as described by James Fenimore Cooper, so much does this passage owe to The Prairie. The reader is required to imagine only the conventionally "literary" prairie defined by Cooper. This landscape is, moreover, Cooper's landscape before the advent of Bumppo. It conveys the initial reaction so often drawn by the sensitively romantic soul, the person who relishes the prairie's vastness but does not, for one reason or another, wait around for monotony--reality--to set in.

Not all of the romantic adventure tales set on the prairie were written by Englishmen, however; the popular Canadian writer Sir Gilbert Parker used it in his tales of the Mounted Police. In Pierre and His People: Tales of the Far North (1892), Parker's use of the landscape is generally lacking in specifics; he is content simply to note that his setting is the prairie without further description.[13] At the same time, however, in two separate stories the landscape does function organically.

In "She of the Triple Chevron," Parker begins: "Between Archangel's Rise and Pardon's Drive on the Canadian Prairie there was but one house. It was a tavern, and was known as Galbraith's Place."[14] Observing that

"no traveler who crossed the lonely waste" was not glad to stop there, he concludes by alluding to Galbraith's "tales of early days on the plains, when buffalo were like clouds on the horizon, when Indians were many and hostile, and when men called the Great North-West a wedge of the American desert" (p. 74). Nothing here lends any singularity to the setting; he focuses on the loneliness and isolation of the tavern, and by employing the hackneyed literary phrase "lonely waste," moves on to allude nostalgically to the equally hackneyed romantic literary conceptions of buffalo, Indians, and the Great American Desert. In his next paragraph, however, Parker moves on to introduce his heroine:

> It is night on the prairie. Jen Galbraith stands in the doorway of the tavern sitting-room and watches a mighty beacon of flame rising before her, a hundred yards away. Every night this beacon made a circle of light on the prairie, and Galbraith's Place was in the centre of the circle. Summer and winter it burned from dusk to daylight. No hand fed it but that of Nature. It never failed; it was a cruse that was never empty. Upon Jen Galbraith it had a weird influence. It grew to be to her a kind of spiritual companion, though, perhaps she would not have so named it. This flaming gas, bubbling up from the depth of the earth on the lonely plains, was to her as mysterious presence grateful to her; the receiver of her thoughts, the daily necessity in her life. (pp. 74-75)

Though Parker's eternal prairie flame is a contrivance intended to introduce Jen, who has "that rugged poetical sense, which touches the life of all who live the life of mountain and prairie" (p. 75), it also serves as an image of man's position in the landscape: Parker's circle of light is like the prairie circle of vision, and "Galbraith's Place was in the centre of the circle." Castañeda created a similar image when he wrote that "the country seemed as round as if a man should imagine himself in a three-pint measure," and Wallace Stegner later wrote in <u>Wolf Willow</u> that the individual on the prairie is made aware by its pers-

pective that "All points on the circumference are equidistant from him; in him all radii begin; all diameters run through him; if he moves, a new geometry creates itself around him."[15]

Parker's awareness of the circular quality of the prairie horizon is even more evident in the opening of "A Sanctuary of the Plains." Father Corraine, a priest dwelling alone on the prairie, is staring at the setting winter sun:

> Where the prairie touched the sun it was responsive and radiant; but on either side of this red and golden tapestry there was a tawny glow and then a duskiness which, curving round to the north and east, became blue and cold--an impalpable but perceptible barrier rising from the earth, and shutting in Father Corraine like a prison wall. And this shadow crept stealthily on and invaded the whole circle, until, where radiance had been, there was one continuous wall of gloom, rising arc upon arc to invasion of the zenith, and pierced only by some intrusive wandering stars. (p. 288)

This passage sets the tone of the story, which concerns Fr. Corraine's sheltering of an outlaw from the Mounted Police and, when discovered by a mountie, the love entanglement which keeps the constable from arresting the culprit. Parker's description of the sunset thus seems to provide both the setting for and the symbol of the moral dilemma about to be faced by the priest. Similarly, as the mountie and his girl ride away from Fr. Corraine, they see him "looking after them; his forehead bared to the clear inspiring winds, his grey hair blown back, his hands clasped. Before descending the trough of a great land-wave, they turned for the last time and saw him standing motionless, the one solitary being in all their wide horizon" (p. 317). Though this is a romantic evocation after the fashion of Cooper, it is also one which is true to the facts of the environment.

Much the same could be said of the following description, from John

Mackie's The Prodigal's Brother (1899), of a sleigh ride on the prairie: "It filled one with an overpowering sense of the immensity and loneliness of that vast prairie-land; and had it not been for the subdued hiss of the runners over the crisp snow, resembling the steady seething of water past a ship's side, and the jangling of bells, one would have felt that the silence of this land was something appalling--a veritable presence that weighed on the soul like a nightmare, till the victim was fain to cry out to free himself from the spell."[16] To the extent that The Prodigal's Brother is a conventional romance concerning the rivalry between two brothers--one responsible, the other dissolute--in their love for the same woman, the realistic character of this passage could also be described as yet another example of the prairie overpowering literary propriety.[17]

An apt conclusion to this consideration of the prairie in romantic formula fiction is to be found in a paragraph from the paradigm of the American western, Owen Wister's The Virginian (1902).[18] After alighting from the train in Medicine Bow, Wyoming, after his trip across the prairie, Wister's eastern narrator comments: "Town, as they called it, pleased me the less, the longer I saw it . . . . I have seen and slept in many like it since. Scattered wide, they littered the frontier from the Columbia to the Rio Grande, from the Missouri to the Sierras. They lay stark, dotted over a planet of treeless dust, like soiled packs of cards. Each was similar to the next, as one old five-spot of clubs resembles another. Houses, empty bottles, and garbage, they were forever of the same shapeless pattern. More forlorn they were than stale bones. They seemed to have been strewn there by the wind and to be waiting until the

wind should come again and blow them away."[19] Though at first the squalid nature of the towns is seen to contrast with the purity of the plains, later the forlornness of the towns is seen to be occasioned by their unprotected location on this "planet of treeless dust." And thus despite the romanticism of the book as a whole, here the stark reality asserts itself. Conversely, however, despite the general starkness of this passage, Wister seems reluctant to give up his romantic illusions and thus concludes that the starkness is a mirage and that the true ambience is Edenic still: "Yet serene above their foulness swam a pure and quiet light, such as the East never sees; they might be bathing in the air of creation's first morning. Beneath sun and stars their days and nights were immaculate and wonderful" (p. 14). Similarly, if his likening of the towns to a "soiled pack of cards" suggests "foulness," the gambling analogy also suggests the possibility of a happy outcome. Finally, the way in which Wister establishes the initial contrast between the towns and the plains is through the application to the former of the very feature of the prairie which had disconcerted other travelers--"the same shapeless pattern."

With its curious tensions and reversals, therefore, this passage from The Virginian illuminates a key feature of nineteenth-century prairie fiction. Like the pioneers who came west, the writers on the prairie expected to find a new, alive, romantic country. What they found was frequently a landscape they initially found romantic, only later to recognize it as dull, monotonous, or threatening. Similarly, in the development of prairie fiction there is a strain of the romantic which exists side by side with an equally strong reaction which could be called the realistic--a duality which can be traced back to the first explorers:

the French, by reason of their mode of travel, tended toward romantic wistfulness in viewing the landscape; traveling overland, the Spaniards--and to a lesser extent, the British--were inclined to see the prairie in a harsher light. Temperament very often governed reaction to the landscape, but those with romantic tendencies usually retained their initial favorable impressions until they were deflated by prolonged prairie exposure, as with Brackenridge, Catlin, Albert Pike, Irving, and Parkman. In The Prairie the romantic conception of Natty Bumppo is made vivid by the factuality of Edwin James's observations, though Cooper is able to accomplish this, in part, because of his lack of prairie experience. And the writers of the American Renaissance took solace in the prairie as a romantic idea. The popular writers discussed above tend to see the landscape romantically, although in many of their works a darker, more realistic reaction to it is also evident. Conversely, as we shall now see, those writers who emphasized the realistic in their reactions to and depictions of the prairie equally evidenced a definite undercurrent of romanticism.

Before turning to these writers, however, some mention must be made of Mark Twain whose Roughing It (1872) stands somewhere between the puerile sentimentality of the prairie romancers and the bitter melancholy of the Realists. While the former revealed a superficial reaction to the prairie or ignored the landscape altogether, and the latter dwelt upon the harshness of life on the prairie, Twain struck a paradoxical middle course: he used realism to undercut his romanticism, while he exaggerated realism to the point of romanticism. Twain's book is based on his western trip, undertaken in July 1861 when the future author accompanied his brother Orion Clemens, who was taking up his post as Secretary of the

Nevada Territory. Only the early parts of the book deal with the prairie, since the protagonists travel by stage from western Missouri up the Platte Valley to the Black Hills and thence over the Rockies. The balance of Roughing It concerns the Nevada Territory and the rest of the far West, and includes a trip to Hawaii. For Twain's protagonists, who are traveling cross country on a newly-opened stage route, the Great Plains of Kansas lack all variety: "Just here the land was rolling--a grand sweep of regular elevations and depressions as far as the eye could reach--like the stately heave and swell of the ocean's bosom after a storm. And everywhere were cornfields, accenting with squares of deeper green this limitless expanse of grassy land."[20] This description of the landscape echoes numerous similar descriptions which preceded it, but Twain lends his particular deflating twist in his concluding exclamation: "But presently this sea upon dry ground was to lose its 'rolling' character and stretch away for several hundred miles as level as a floor! (p. 33). Twain then takes this non-romantic analogy and alludes to it repeatedly as his characters ride across the plains for several days and nights, their ride broken only occasionally by a sudden descent and then ascent of the banks of a watercourse.

At times, however, the narrator's reaction to the prairie is as positive and unqualified as Huckleberry Finn's response to nature, and gives us some idea of what Huck expected to find in "the Territories": "It was another glad awakening to fresh sunlight, an impressive solitude utterly without visible human beings or human habitations, and an atmosphere of such amazing magnifying properties that trees that seemed close at hand were more than three miles away." And in retrospect the narrator concludes: "Even at this day it thrills me through and through to

think of the life, the gladness, and the wild sense of freedom that used to make the blood dance in my veins on those fine overland mornings!" (p. 49). The emphasis here, as in the case of the other romantic commentators, is on the "uplifting" properties of the landscape as it is first seen, and the net result of such contact is similarly to make a sojourn in town "strange enough" after "such a long acquaintance with deep, still, almost lifeless and houseless solitude" (p. 57).

Nor do Twain's characters remain on the prairie long enough for its less exhilarating effects to become evident--although they do remain long enough to give Twain the opportunity to outdo his predecessors in a depiction of the realities of "roughing it" on the prairie. Their stagecoach broken down, Twain's protagonists join a buffalo hunt, where Bemis, their fellow passenger, is chased by a wounded buffalo and manages to escape him by climbing "the only solitary tree there was in nine counties adjacent . . ." (p. 59). The bull, still angry, climbs up after his prey but is killed by Bemis, who hangs him from a tree. While Twain is of course presenting a Tall Tale here he is also, incidentally, ly, poking fun at both Cooper and Irving, among others. Bemis's experience--being chased by a wounded buffalo--is fairly common in the travel literature, and a fate Irving narrowly escaped during his tour of the prairie. Similarly, Twain's buffalo, which has the ability to climb the prairie's "solitary tree" (itself an echo of The Prairie), smacks of the sort of accusations Twain later leveled at Cooper's work in "Fenimore Cooper's Literary Offences."

* * *

Twain's parody of the Romantic writers who preceded him onto the prairie reflects the growing force of Literary Realism of which he was a part in post-Civil War America. Though the role of Western writers in this movement--Edward Eggleston, E. W. Howe, Joseph Kirkland, W. D. Howells, and Hamlin Garland--is well documented,[21] critics have tended to concentrate on the shift in the depiction of character and mode of life--from the romantic yeoman living a rustic life to the actual farmer leading a hard life of isolation--without noting the extent to which this shift constituted the literary parallel to the individual's experience of the prairie landscape as seen in Irving, Albert Pike, and Francis Parkman, among others. Just as they could not sustain their initial romantic reactions to the landscape, so these trailblazing realists could not sustain the informing pioneer myths which dictated the beneficent view of life in rural America, whether on the farm or in the small town; their own experience indicated otherwise, as did Irving's and Parkman's when they found themselves lost on the prairie.

The grimness which pervades E. W. Howe's The Story of a Country Town (1883) has since been echoed in numerous similar portrayals of life in a small prairie town; Howe's Fairview, Missouri, has had more famous successors in Gopher Prairie and Horizon, yet he was the first to depict the prairie as a populated landscape. Born in Indiana and reared in Missouri and Nebraska, Howe was for over thirty years editor and proprietor of the Daily Globe of Atchison, Kansas. He wrote this, his most significant novel, in the evenings after work and, when his manuscript was rejected by several publishers, had it printed on his own press. This edition of some 1,500 copies was virtually sold out within six months. Howe sent copies of the book to both W. D. Howells and Mark Twain,

and each author gave it a careful and positive reading; Howe used excerpts from Twain's letter to help promote its sales.[22]

Early in the novel the narrator, Ned Westlock, comments: "Ours was the prairie district out West, where we had gone to grow up with the country" (p. 7). This fact, which is repeated and alluded to throughout The Story, evokes the romance of pioneering, but it is opposed by the bleak picture of small-town prairie life which Ned presents. As Henry Nash Smith states, "Howe's West offers neither color to the observer from without nor consolations to the people themselves. It is a world of grim, savage religion, of silent endurance, of families held together by no tenderness, of communities whose only amusement is malicious gossip."[23] Concerning the major thrust of the novel, Smith's assessment is accurate, but he fails to account for the countervailing romanticism embodied in Ned's "grow up with the country" refrain. Through it Howe juxtaposes the romantic hope of the pioneer with the grim bleakness which he finds on the prairie--attention which is reflected in Ned's surname: both positively and negatively Ned Westlock is locked in the West.

Howe's choice of a first-person narrator makes the bleakness of the story all the more evident, and the surrounding prairie landscape, while not a major concern, is nevertheless one of the means by which Ned's growing disillusionment is made available. Ned explains that his section of Missouri "was not a favorite, and remained new and unsettled after counties and States farther west had grown old" (p. 70); and, while he continues to explain that the primary reason for this situation was lack of advertising, at the same time Ned leaves the reader with the impression that there is some sort of blight on Fairview. Such was his own impression as a boy. Because of his reading ability, Ned was in great

demand to read letters aloud to his illiterate neighbors; and whenever he saw newcomers he thought "that at last the writers of the letters . . . had arrived and would settle some of the great tracts of prairie which could be seen in every direction . . . ." Like the travelers who saw the prairie, these fictional pioneers are romantically enthusiastic at first but, also like actual prairie travelers, their enthusiasm is followed by disillusionment, as Ned continues: "but they turned the bend in the road and went on as if a look at Fairview had frightened them, and they were going back another way" (p. 13). Ned's sense that there is some sort of blight on Fairview is similar to Irving's comment that "It was as if a ban hung over this fair but fated region. The very Indians dared not abide here . . ." (A Tour, p. 48). Irving's observation, however, is only an individual's incidental impression, whereas Ned's comment is dramatically central to The Story: it permeates the book, and all of the characters give ample evidence for it. Furthermore, Howe specifically defines the cause of the blight:

> On the highest and bleakest point in the country, where the winds were plenty in winter because they were not needed, and scarce in summer for the opposite reason, the meeting-house was built, in a corner of my father's field. This was called Fairview, and so the neighborhood was known. There was a graveyard around it, and cornfields next to that, but not a tree or scrub attempted its ornament, and as the building stood on the main road where the movers' wagons passed, I thought that, next to their ambition to get away from the country which had been left by those in Fairview, the movers were anxious to get away from Fairview church, and avoid the possibility of being buried in its ugly shadow, for they always seemed to drive faster after passing it. (pp. 8-9)

throughout the novel, an opening and closing symbol which is rooted in the book's theme of self-denial; it looms over the populace in the same manner as its minister, John Westlock, looms over his son. Both church and minister symbolically deny the positive. Ironically, too, Howe's use of the church in this fashion confirms David Thompson's observation that "living in the wide open plains" (Narrative, p. 264) affects religious attitudes. Like Sinclair Ross after him, Howe is suggesting here that imported religious beliefs have little relevance on the open prairie.

Continuing in this vein, Howe accentuates the symbolic presence of the church by describing the bell in its steeple which, owing to the prairie landscape, commands the entire district, visually and also through its sound:

> High up in a steeple which rocked with every wind was a great bell, the gift of a missionary society, and when there was a storm this tolled with fitful and uncertain strokes, as if the ghosts from the grave lot had crawled up there, and were counting the number to be buried in the coming year, keeping the people awake for miles around. Sometimes, when the wind was particularly high, there were a great number of strokes on the bell in quick succession, which the pious said was an alarm to the wicked, sounded by the devil, a warning relating to the conflagration which could never be put out, else Fairview would never have been built.
>
> When anyone died it was the custom to toll the bell once for every year of the deceased's age, and as deaths usually occur at night, we were frequently wakened from sleep by its deep and solemn tones. (p. 9)

After he tells his tale of frustrated desire and unanswered opportunity, Howe closes the novel with this same symbolic image. Thus while Howe does not directly invoke the prairie landscape in The Story of a Country

Town, his central symbol stands above and encompasses all those whose empty lives are lived below, affected only by the wind. Unlike Alexander Henry's raised perspective from his oak tree, however, Howe's steeple reverses the effect of getting above the prairie landscape; whereas Henry's tree allowed him to dominate the prairie, here the steeple dominates the lives of those below.

To a far greater degree than Howe's novel, Joseph Kirkland's Zury: The Meanest Man in Spring County (1887) juxtaposes the romantic hopes of the pioneer, and the equally romantic view of the prairie as the Garden of the World, against its stark realities. Kirkland was the son of Caroline Kirkland, who wrote sketches of backwoods life in Michigan, most notably A New Home--Who'll Follow? (1839). And while he led a varied life as an editor--for a time he edited a periodical called The Prairie Chicken--businessman, soldier, book reviewer, playwright, and historian, Kirkland is remembered chiefly as a novelist. In Zury he continues his mother's work by depicting pioneer conditions, but his frontier was Illinois, where he settled in 1855. Not a farmer himself, Kirkland traveled widely throughout the state prior to the Civil War and saw the pioneer growth he would later depict in Zury.[24]

Kirkland's Zury (short for Usury) Prouder contrasts with Ned Westlock; the former lives the pioneer experience on the prairie--since his family depends on him from the time they arrive in Illinois. Ned, on the other hand, is an observer who lives in towns and merely watches others break and transform the prairie landscape. Forced by the harshness of the first prairie winter to take over the leadership of the family from his ineffectual father, Zury throws himself into a battle with the land--and he succeeds by bending its elements to his purposes, eventually becoming the most prosperous resident of the district. This action becomes characteristic for, once he has subdued the land, Zury confronts the reality of corrupt politics and, later, the rapaciousness of his own character. Thus his initial confrontation with the land while yet a young man establishes Zury's mode of behavior throughout the novel until he is rejected by a woman he longs for; until then Zury approaches all affairs--as he did that first Illinois prairie winter--as confrontations. The prairie landscape figures directly only in the very beginning of the book, however, where Kirkland contrasts its romantic potential with its harsh realities, suggesting, in the process that its harshness produces noble men: "In the prairies, Nature has stored, and preserved thus far through the ages, more life-materials than she ever before amassed in the same space. It is all for man, but only for such men as can take it by courage and hold it by endurance. Many assailants are slain, many give up and fly, but he who is sufficiently brave, and strong, and faithful, and fortunate, to maintain the fight to the end, has his ample reward."[25] Through his description of the Prouders and their "Prairie Schooner," Kirkland presents the family as representative pioneers, a part of the larger migration. He also places considerable emphasis on the fecundity of the land, noting the

various grasses and plants which flourish and the trees which will flourish, once planted. Just before the family locates its claim on the edge of the "Grand Prairie," Kirkland comments that "Spring County is one of those highly-prized and early-sought-for localities where both prairie and timber awaited the settler" (p. 8). With both wood and open land available, the Prouders appear to be entering a type of western Eden, of the kind which would meet the expectations of David Thompson and John Bradbury, each of whom thought the prairie could support settlement only along its edges.[26] As Kirkland writes, "Lucky the pioneer who has such woods behind him and such prairie before him at the onset of his battle with the elements" (p. 9).

When the Prouders finally reach their land, Zury's mother, Selina "looked about her at forest and prairie and sky and solitude" and "heaved a deep, unconscious sigh" (p. 11), over what she has seen:

> Under the warm afternoon sun, which was already sinking in the yellow western glow of a great, cloudless sky, lay an undulating ocean of grass and flowers. In places, where an inequality of the surface brought them into perspective range, the "prairie flowers" (blue gentian) gave to the whole sward a tinge of pale azure; here and there a tall "rosin weed" would raise its spike of bloom; and again, the golden-rod gave the needed "dash of color" . . . . Among, between, and around them was the persistent, peculiar prairie grass, a hardy, seedless growth that spreads only by pushing out its intricate, interlacing roots; tenacious of life, and resisting drought and even fire with wonderful hardihood, but never deigning to reestablish itself after its chosen place has been desecrated by the plow. (pp. 9-10)

Here is the prairie in the best romantic tradition: bathed in the golden light of a setting sun, an ocean of herbage, the apotheosis of fecundity: Eden. While Selina's is the usual reaction of the settler gazing upon his

homestead for the first time, and while this description is in keeping with previous literary presentations of the landscape--as seen in Brackenridge, Irving and Flagg, among other--however, Kirkland is also employing point of view. As such, the normal first-person reaction to the landscape is here being used as a literary technique; Selina sighs over this vision of Eden, but the Prouders' actual experience on their new homestead is considerably less inviting. Zury's younger sister sickens and dies. As she is waning, Kirkland caustically describes the family's situation:

> They did break a little prairie that season, though it was too late to put in any crop. They called it twelve acres, but it wasn't. They thought they could get it fenced before frost, but they couldn't. They hoped for a mild winter, but it proved a severe one: for years afterward it was remembered, and in bitter jest was styled "the year eighteen-hundred-and-froze-to-death." They almost felt sure of sustaining their beasts till the spring grass should start, but one of the mares died. They resolved not to mortgage any of their land, but they were disappointed. (pp. 27-28)

Just as Irving and Parkman were forced to reckon imaginatively with the prairie landscape when they were lost on it, Realists like Howe and Kirkland were moved by first-hand experience to articulate a vision of the land and life on it which ran counter to the prevailing romantic myth of pioneering. They attempted to recreate for their readers the first exhilaration, followed by the deflation and ensuing struggle, of the pioneer. Owing to his negative view of life in a small prairie town, Howe's treatment of the romantic view of the prairie is embodied largely in a single phrase--"we had gone to grow up with the country"--and even in this oft-repeated phrase there is a sense of wasted potential. Kirkland, less bleak but equally realistic, recreates for his readers Selina Prouder's golden first vision of their homestead, but follows this almost immediate-

ly with the death of her daughter. Still, the Realists let go of their romantic image of the new prairie land only gradually. Their overall treatment of the landscape in fiction is like the individual's as seen in the travel and other first-person accounts: ambivalent, an alternation between imaginative ecstasy and caustic factuality--Edmund Flagg's reaction versus John Lambert's, or Brackenridges's versus Castañeda's, as it were.

* * *

Such is the case even with a writer as pessimistic as Hamlin Garland; however bitter, his writing has an undercurrent of nostalgia and, when writing of the prairie of Dakota, it is informed as well with the image of the new land, once the home of buffalo and now the site of fresh settlement. Garland was born in Wisconsin but moved to Iowa when he was nine years old; he lived there until his early twenties, when he traveled to the East and, upon his return, took up a claim in South Dakota. When he was twenty-four he moved to Boston, immersing himself in literature and embarking on a writing career.

Garland's most characteristic feature is the realistic depiction, with little romanticizing, of the life of the farmer in post-Civil War America. Owing to his personal background, Garland often depicted farm life on the prairie. Lincoln, his protagonist in Boy Life on the Prairie (1899), for example, marvels at the surrounding prairie; upon moving there from Wisconsin, he "climbed to the roof of the house, and was still trying to comprehend this mighty stretch of grasses."[27] The nostalgic air of the book as a whole celebrates the pioneer experience, yet Garland's

romantic vision is derived as much from his subject as it is his view of the land--describing the experiences of a boy on the prairie his view of the land corresponds to the boy's innocence and delight of discovery. Lincoln (a name replete with pioneering connotations) is the archetypal American boy discovering the potential of the prairie West. Yet even in those works where Garland's subject does not dictate a romantic cast to the land, such a view persists.

The prairie often serves as the backdrop for his bitter polemics in the stories collected in Main-Travelled Roads (1891), Prairie Folks (1893), and Other Main-Travelled Roads (1910). Within these stories two opposing views of the prairie landscape predominate, both of which are seen in one of the original Main-Travelled Roads stories, "Among the Corn Rows." The tale concerns the determination of a young man from Wisconsin who has taken a claim on the Dakota prairie, to return home to find and marry a wife within ten days. But before he develops this plot, Garland introduces a local newspaper editor, Seagraves, who lives on the claim next to the protagonist. After a brief introductory visit to the protagonist and a discussion of the latter's need for a wife, Seagraves heads on to his shanty and meditates on the landscape:

> The scene was characteristically, wonderfully beautiful. It was about five o'clock in a day in late June, and the level plain was green and yellow, and infinite in reach as the sea; the lowering sun was casting over the distant swells a faint impalpable mist, through which the breaking teams on the neighboring claims ploughed noiselessly, as figures in a dream. The whistling gophers, the faint, wailing, fluttering cry of the falling plover, the whir of the prairie-pidgeon, or the quack of a lonely duck, came through the shimmering air. The lark's infrequent whistle, piercingly sweet, broke from the longer grass in the swales near by. No other climate, sky, plain could produce the same unnamable weird charm. No tree to wave, no grass to rustle, scarcely a sound of domestic life; only the faint melancholy soughing of the wind in the short grass, and the voices of the wild things of the prairie.[28]

Seagraves' view of the landscape here is that of the prairie first glimpsed, seen in the most favorable light and season. And Seagraves (whose name may be designed ironically to echo the prairie-ocean analogy) is attracted to the land's "weird charm," a charm owing in large measure to the wildness of the land, the absence of man's domesticating nature. At the same time, however, Seagraves is aware that this same landscape, under a different guise, elicits a quite different reaction from him: "The silence of the prairie at night was well nigh terrible. Many a night, as Seagraves lay in his bunk against the side of his cabin, he would strain his ear to hear the slightest sound, and be listening thus sometimes for minutes before the squeak of a mouse or the step of a passing fox came as a relief to the aching sense" (p. 87). So here Seagraves longs for society.

Seagraves is not central to the action of "Among the Corn Rows," however, and his role in the story is mainly to serve as a complement to the protagonist. Garland wants to justify the protagonist's need for a wife to share the loneliness of the prairie--hence his haste: a wife within ten days. Yet such is the farmer's inarticulate character that he is not a fit consciousness for such musings. Seagraves, as a newspaperman, is more suitable in this regard and his reaction to the landscape defines both its guises: its wild beauty which produces exhilaration, and its silent immensity which threatens. Though only a clumsy technique at best, Garland's need for a supporting character suggests his awareness that he had to account for the land's effect upon his protagonist, and that he had to do so in some detail.

In The Moccasin Ranch: A Story of Dakota (1909), a novella and one of Garland's lesser-known works, the prairie is accorded its most extensive and detailed treatment since Cooper. As in The Prairie, here the setting is well articulated and symbolic. The book chronicles the settlers' excited reaction to their new habitat and, once they have stayed for a while, it also charts their changed perception of the land as the excitement wears off. This transformation causes the central conflict which is articulated by the prairie landscape.

The plot of Garland's story stretches from March to December, and primarily involves the relations of four people: Willard and Blanche Burke, newly-removed from Illinois, who have come to Dakota to take up a claim far out on the prairie, accompanied by Rob Rivers and Jim Bailey, partners in a general store and land agents for the area in which the Burkes settle. Blanche Burke does not take to life in a shanty on the prairie and, responding to the attentions paid her by Bailey, she becomes pregnant by and runs off with him. Because they are forced to take refuge from a blizzard in the partners' store, Rivers learns of their resolve and attempts for a time to stop them; he drops his objections, however, after meditating over the hardships prairie life forces on women, though he subsequently resolves to bring his own sweetheart to the prairie.

Stripped thus to the bare bones of its plot, Garland's story does not sound particularly promising; nor, as a story, is it. But at each point in the tale he makes his characters' relations and responses articulate through his use of the surrounding landscape. As the two wagons head west out of Boomtown, Dakota, at dawn, Garland describes the

scene in a way which encapsulates and verifies 250 years of prairie description: "As the sun rose, a kind of transformation-scene took place. The whole level land lifted at the horizon till the teams seemed crawling forever at the bottom of an enormous bowl. Mystical forms came into view--grotesquely elongated, unrecognizable. Hills twenty, thirty miles away rose like apparitions, astonishingly magnified. Willows became elms, a settler's shanty rose like a shot-tower--towns hitherto unseen swam and palpitated in the yellow flood of light like shaken banners low-hung on unseen flagstaffs."[29] After the fashion of Cooper, Garland here introduces the landscape before the characters. Perhaps unknowingly, he is also echoing James, Gregg, and Lambert on the prairie mirage, and Catlin's sense that traveling on the prairie makes one feel "like a squirrel in his cage." Garland's "enormous bowl" metaphor, moreover, is exactly that used by Castañeda when he spoke of looking at the prairie sky as if he were gazing up from the bottom of a "three-pint measure."

The response of Garland's characters to this scene is also of the kind we have encountered in previous accounts of the prairie: "Burke marched with uplifted face. He was like one suddenly wakened into a new world, where nothing was familiar. Not a tree or scrub was in sight. Not a mark of plough or harrow--everything was wild, and to him mystical and glorious. His eyes were like those of a man who sees the world at its birth" (p. 4). Burke's amazed incredulity is the same as that seen in Castañeda and Kirkland's Selina, and, like Wister's evocation of the Eden archetype in <u>The Virginian</u>, Burke is presented as an Adamic figure. Later, as he and his wife prepare to sleep that evening, Burke senses, like Melville's Ishmael, the more terrifying side of this sublime

setting: he "felt the silence and immensity of the plain outside. It was enormous, incredible in its wildness" (pp. 16-17). Accounting in part for this second reaction may have been the tedium of prairie travel: "Hour after hour they moved across the swelling land. Hour after hour, while the yellow sun rolled up the slope, putting to flight the morning shapes on the horizon--striking the plain into level prose again, and warming the air into genial March. Hour after hour the horses toiled on till the last cabin fell away to the east, like a sail at sea, till the road faded into a trail almost imperceptible on the firm sod" (pp. 4-5). The technique and style of this passage stand in contrast to the poetic description of early-morning shadows and the prairie mirage which precedes it--there the landscape presents a visage which piques the imagination. Here, on the other hand, the grotesquely engaging shapes of early morning have given way to the monotonous clarity of late morning, noon, and afternoon. Garland's descriptive technique defines the tedium of overland prairie travel in his repetition of "Hour after hour," and the tedium is accentuated by an awareness that his characters are entering country where they will be isolated: the final cabin which "falls" away "like a sail at sea" and later the road which fades away. His description of the effect of the sun rising above the prairie--"striking the plain into level prose"--is significant in that it suggests an organic relationship between style and setting: the flat prairie at midday demands prose and a level style in contrast to the more poetic and romantic style required to depict the morning. This shift is, of course, the literary equivalent to the elation-deflation experience of prairie explorers and travelers.

The Burkes are but representative settlers in Garland's Dakota

district; all around them others come to stake their claims and await the government surveyors so that they may enter their deeds. In capturing the jubilant expectation of the settlers Garland indulges in pathetic fallacy: "And, then, all was so new and beautiful, and the sky was so clear. Oh, that marvellous lofty sky with just cloud enough to make the blue more intense! Oh, the wonder of the wind from the wild, mysterious green sea to the west! With the change and sheen of the prairie, incessant and magical life was marvellous and the winter put far away" (pp. 31-32). Similarly, Garland uses the atmosphere to describe the relations between various settlers: "Life was strangely idyllic during these spring days. Envy and hate and suspicion seemed exorcised from the world" (p. 32).

On the one hand, as such a passage suggests, it is the season which is responsible for the negative response to the landscape; on the other hand, it is the fact that the setting has lost its freshness: "By the first of November the wonder had gone out of the life of the settlers. One by one the novelties and beauties of the plain had passed away or grown familiar. The plover and blackbird fell silent. The prairie-chicken's piping cry ceased as the flocks grew toward maturity, and the lark and cricket alone possessed the russet plain, which seemed to snap and crackle in the midnight frost, and to wither away in the bright midday sun" (pp. 67-68).

As he goes on to describe the increasing disaffection of the settlers, Garland focuses the discontent in the reaction of a particular segment of the group: "The vast, treeless level, so alluring in May and June, had become an oppressive weight to those most sensitive to the weather, and as the air grew chill and the skies overcast, the women turned with apprehensive faces to the untracked northwest, out of which

the winds swept pitilessly cold and keen" (pp. 68-69). In focusing this way upon the reactions of the women, Garland nicely interweaves his general and specific concerns, for it is through Blanche Burke that the growing aversion to the landscape is made particular.

Unlike her husband's reaction, Blanche's first impression of the prairie landscape is not positive; she had consented to leave Illinois only reluctantly and, after the party had traveled most of the day across the prairie, Will Burke asks his wife what she thinks of the country they had traveled through that day. "'Not very much'" (p. 8) is her reply. Her aversion to a home on the prairie becomes so acute by December, in fact, that she ultimately flees, as much from the prairie landscape as from her husband. In charting Blanche's growing desperation, Garland uses the landscape as a symbolic index to her state of mind, and he makes it clear that Blanche is but one woman among many: "Now the wind had dominion over the lonely women, wearing away out their souls with its melancholy moanings and its vast and wordless sighs. Its voices seemed to enter Blanche Burke's soul, filling it with hunger never felt before. Day after day it moaned in her ears and wailed about the little cabin, rousing within her formless desires and bitter despairs. Obscure emotions, unused powers of reason and recollection came to her" (p. 71). Thus Blanche is alone in her sod hut, spending "hours by the window watching, waiting, gazing at the moveless sod, listening to the wind voices, companioned only by her memories." Not surprisingly Blanche rails at her husband as a result, for she sees their emigration as a "bitter mistake" (p. 71).

Following a brief midwinter visit to town, Blanche is downcast when the hour comes for their return journey: "Poor Willard also felt

the menace of the desolate, wild prairie, but he had no conception of the tumult of regret and despair which filled his wife's mind as she climbed into the wagon for their return journey. She was like a prisoner whose parole had ended" (p. 78). In its winter strangeness, the prairie is a prison for the settlers, most of whom "were from the wooded lands of the East, and the sweep of the wind across the level sod had a terror which made them quake and cower" (p. 86). As the winter deepens, each sod dugout becomes more and more "like a cave"; "There were many days when the sun shone, but the snow slid across the plain with a menacing, hissing sound, and the sky was milky with flying frost, and the horizons looked cold and wild; but these were merely the pauses between storms. The utter dryness of the flakes and the never-resting progress of the winds kept the drifts shifting, shifting" (pp. 87-88).

Garland focuses the malaise engendered by the prairie landscape on Blanche, and she in turn manifests the primary reaction to prairie isolation, and especially to the never-ceasing wind. During an argument in December, Blanche exclaims "'If I'd had any word to say about it, we never'd 'a' been out in this Godforsaken country'" (p. 88); immediately after, she punctuates this with "'Oh, this wind will drive me crazy!'" (p. 89). As her husband prepares to go to a neighbor's because their supply of flour is low, his wife hears the wind, "piping a high-keyed, mourning note on the chimney-top, a sound that rang echoing down through every hidden recess of her brain, shaking her, weakening her, till at last she turned to her husband with wild eyes. 'Take me with you! I can't stay here any longer--I shall go crazy!' (pp. 89-90). To be sure, Blanche's desperation is caused, in part,

by the knowledge that she is carrying a child fathered by Jim Bailey, who has been paying obvious attentions to her from her arrival on the prairie; but the wind, and the landscape which allows such wind, is the symbol of her plight. Blanche's desperation, indeed, lends ironic resonance to the prairie; before they had gone to sleep, Blanche had said "'Isn't it wonderful' . . . 'It's all so strange, like being out of the world, someway'" (p. 16). When she made this comment, Blanche defined her initial fascinated reaction to the prairie. Now, the reader sees, her words become poignant: Blanche now feels that she is in an alien place.

Blanche Burke does not go to the neighbor's with her husband, however, and shortly after he leaves, Jim Bailey arrives. She tells him of her pregnancy and of her resolve to flee the prairie at once, and he agrees to go with her. Their flight is delayed, though, by the bitterness of the storm, and they are forced to take refuge in Bailey and Rivers' store. Upon realizing what his partner intends, Rivers resolves not to allow him to undertake what he considers an immoral act. The point is moot, however, for the fury of the storm precludes traveling for two days--enough time for Rivers to reconsider. And time enough for Garland to present the storm that rages outside as the symbolic counterpart of the emotional struggles which rage within: "Outside the warring winds howled on. The eye could not penetrate the veils of snow which streamed through the air on level lines. The powdered ice rose from the ground in waves which buffeted one another and fell in spray, only to rise again in ceaseless, tumultuous action. There was no sky and no earth. Everything slid, sifted, drifted, or madly swirled" (pp. 120-21). More than simply a symbolic counterpart, however, the storm is also the factor which compounds the emotional

situation and is in a sense the cause of it: "The three prisoners fell at last into silence. They sat in the dim, yellow-gray dusk and stared gloomily at the stove, growing each moment more repellent to one another. They met one another's eyes at intervals with surprise and horror. The world without seemed utterly lost. Wailing voices sobbed in the pipe and at the windows. Sudden agonized shrieks came out of the blur of sound. The hours drew out at enormous length, though the day was short. The windows were furred deep with frost" (p. 122).

At the same time, ironically, it is the analogous relation of the outside and inside which enables Blanche to appreciate the sublimity of this prairie phenomenon: "The strain upon her was twisting her toward insanity. The never-resting wind appalled her. It was like the iron resolution between the two men. She saw no end to this elemental strife. It was the cyclone of July frozen into snow, only more relentless, more persistent--a tornado of frost. It filled her with such awe as she had never felt before" (p. 124). Conversely, it is his contemplation of the storm which enables Rivers to see the morality of the human situation in a different light and which in turn occasions him to resolve not to stand in the way of the adulterous lovers:

> Outside the implacable winds still rushed and warred, and beat and clamored, shrieking, wailing, like voices from hell. The snow dashed like surf against the walls. It seemed to cut off the little cabin from the rest of the world and to dwarf all human actions like the sea. It made social conventions of no value, and narrowed the question of morality to the relationship of these three human souls.
>
> Lying there in the dark, with the elemental war of wind and snow filling the illimitable arch of sky, he came to feel, in a dim, wordless way, that this tragedy was born of conventions largely. Also, it appeared infinitesimal, like the activities of insects battling, breeding, dying. He came also to feel

> that the forces which moved these animalculae was akin to the ungovernable sweep of the wind and snow--all inexplicable, elemental, unmoral. (pp. 129-30)

Despite the melodrama of his plot, Garland uses the prairie very effectively in The Moccasin Ranch. He is far more immediate in his treatment of his subject here than he is in many of his polemical Main-Travelled Roads stories, perhaps owing to his own experiences as a homesteader in South Dakota. Yet in Blanche Burke's dissatisfaction with prairie isolation, Garland is again treating one of the psychological effects of life in the rural West--and such effects are also at the core of his bitter polemics.

* * *

A Canadian counterpart to Garland is Arthur Stringer, a native of Chatham, Ontario, who from 1899 through 1940 wrote numerous popular romantic novels dealing mainly with crime and adventure. Among these is his prairie trilogy--The Prairie Wife (1915), The Prairie Mother (1920), and The Prairie Child (1922)--which grew out of his experiences as a rancher in southern Alberta. The narrator of the trilogy is Chaddie McKail, an American socialite who, through marriage to a "Scotch-Canadian," Duncan Argyll McKail, is suddenly transported to his none-too-luxurious ranch on the Alberta prairie. Their relationship is tempestuous, and the various dislocations between husband and wife provide the substance of Stringer's plots, which are his main concern. In The Prairie Wife Stringer employs an epistolary technique, Chaddie's narration taking the form of letters addressed to a socialite friend

in the East; and while he nominally retains this form throughout the succeeding volumes, there the reader finds more a diary than a series of letters. Once the plot is underway in The Prairie Wife, in fact, references to the letters' recipient become less frequent. As in E. W. Howe's narrative form in The Story of a Country Town, Stringer's first-person narrative approach gives the reader a greater sense of immediacy than is seen in third-person narratives. At the same time, too, the stark contrast between Chaddie's previous life and her life on the prairie--one of society versus relative isolation--accentuates the land's effect on women. Chaddie is, moreover, the first female protagonist in a prairie novel. That Stringer--a man--would adopt the female point of view suggests the same sympathy to the plight of women on the pioneer prairie seen in Garland's The Moccasin Ranch. Chaddie, like Blanche Burke, is trapped between the walls of her house and so must adapt to the new conditions in which she finds herself.

Chaddie's reactions to the landscape, like those of both first-person commentators and other fictional characters, vary between romantic exhilaration and despondency. Upon arriving at the McKails' homestead and being summarily left by Duncan who has business in Calgary, Chaddie notes: "I became nervously conscious of the unbroken silence about me . . . ."[30] Yet shortly after, her reaction to the landscape is romantically hyperbolic:

> And there are mornings when I am Browning's "Saul" in the flesh. The great wash of air from sky-line to sky-line puts something into my blood or brain that leaves me almost dizzy . . . . And at sunrise, when the prairie is thinly silvered with dew, when tiny hammocks of the spider-webs swing a million sparkling webs strung with diamonds, when every blade is a singing string of pearls, hymning to God on High for the birth of a golden day, I can feel my heart swell, and I'm so abundantly, so inexpress-

> ibly alive, alive to every finger-tip! Such space, such light, such distances! And being Saul is so much better than reading about him! (pp. 59-60).

Chaddie's reaction to the prairie, as in this passage, is very often an index to her mood, and her allusion to Browning's "Saul" punctuates her exuberant response to the prairie. Owing to the nature of Stringer's art, however, the Browning allusion is little more than literary name-dropping: it indicates that Chaddie is well-read in a casual and social sort of way, as do other similar allusions in the novel, but it lends no further depth to her characterization. Later that night she and Duncan stop and look at their place from a distance: "I could see our shack from miles off, a little lonely dot of black against the sky-line . . . . It seemed so tiny, so lonely, so strange, in the middle of such miles and miles of emptiness, with a little rift of smoke going up from its desolate little pipe-end" (p. 71). But though these passages function to establish Chaddie's pensive mood here and her exuberant mood, above, they also serve to define the landscape which gives rise to them.

As the trilogy progresses and the relations between the McKails become more problematic, instances of Chaddie's enthusiasm for her surroundings become less frequent--she is busy raising her children and trying to keep her husband. Midway through <u>The Prairie Mother</u>, however, just as she is most uncertain of whether or not she will be able to entice Duncan to return, Chaddie takes an action representative of perplexed prairie dwellers. Having had her windmill repaired and re-erected once more, Chaddie climbs to its tower, and through the elevated view it affords she is able to renew something of her previous enthusiasm for the landscape:

> I suppose, as windmills go, it wasn't so miraculously high, but it was amazing how even that moderate altitude where I found myself could alter one's viewpoint. I felt like a sailor in a crow's nest, like a sentinal on a watch-tower, like an eagle poised giddily above the world. And such a wonderful and wide-flung world it was, spreading out beneath me in mottled patches of grape-leaf green and yellow and gold, with a burgundian riot of color along the western sky-line where the last orange rind of the sun had just slipped down out of sight.[31]

Chaddie's analogies here suggest one who is on the lookout and ready to give warning or, in the case of the eagle, take action. The diction through which she describes the world about her feet, moreover, suggests an elation amounting almost to intoxication, such are the images of Dionysiac revelry. The area around the base of the windmill, however, presents a less pleasing sight: "As I stared down at the roof of our shack it looked small and pitiful, tragically meager to house the tangled human destinies it was housing. And the fields where we'd labored and sweated took on a foreign and ghostly coloring, as though they were oblongs on the face of an alien world, a world with mystery and beauty and unfathomable pathos about it" (pp. 237-38). Like Garland, Stringer sees nature and human nature as related, and both suggest that the cause of tragedy is confinement. The contrast Chaddie sees here, between the glory of the far-distance and the grim pathos of the family's situation as reflected in the alien quality of their shack and the fields which surround it, motivates her to take action. Whereas before she allowed Duncan to do largely as he wished--with the result that the family's financial position was ruined and Duncan drifted off to become an errand boy for a rich relative--Chaddie now determines to effect Duncan's return to the family, and to improve their fortunes. Accordingly, Stringer uses the prairie landscape here as a catalyst.

It presents Chaddie with a view of romantic potential and grim reality, and in the face of such a contrast Chaddie makes her choice. Her time on the windmill is an interlude from the world, and as she makes her way down, Stringer emphasizes her changed perspective. Before she found the golden prairie to be some distance from her; after weighing the two scenes, Chaddie looks down and comments that the world to which she has to return seems "a long way off" (p. 244).

Chaddie's resolve is successful for a time but, as The Prairie Mother continues, Duncan presents more difficulties with which she must cope and Stringer prolongs them through that novel and also through The Prairie Child. In the latter novel, the plot having taken the McKails away from their ranch, the prairie landscape is not a significant factor. As such, Stringer's depiction of life on the prairie sustained him through The Prairie Wife and most of The Prairie Mother but, since he was more concerned with his plot, it, rather than the landscape, is his concern in the last novel. His publishers recognized this, moreover, since when they reissued his prairie work as The Prairie Omnibus in 1939 they did not include The Prairie Child.[32]

In Stringer's The Prairie Wife and The Prairie Mother, as in much of Garland's work and The Moccasin Ranch in particular, the prairie landscape operates as an informing presence; it serves to articulate both character and theme. Both writers combine in their presentations the two recurrent poles of imaginative reaction to the landscape: an exuberant first impression which gives way to a more considered awareness of isolation and monotony. They place these, moreover, within a context which commingles romance and realism. Stringer, owing largely to the conventional romantic yearnings which keep Chaddie attracted to Duncan,

inclines toward the romantic, and uses the prairie landscape realistically to make symbolic points about character within this context. Garland is more ambivalent, and is neither wholly realistic nor wholly romantic. The main entanglement between Blanche and Bailey is anti-romantic, occasioned by the isolation and hardships of life on the prairie, yet at the end of the novella he affirms the tradition of "true love" in Rivers' attraction to Estelle, and in the implication that she will marry him. As a result, there is in Garland's and Stringer's works a dialectic of romanticism and realism, each of which is derived from the land itself.

* * *

The dialectic between romanticism and realism in Garland's and Stringer's works exemplifies a continuity in the literary depiction of the prairie landscape beginning with Albert Pike in 1834. Although he first attempted to see the landscape in a conventionally romantic manner, after a time he found in it two coequal underlying qualities that could not be ignored: "its power of throwing a man back upon himself and giving him a feeling of lone helplessness, strangely mingled at the same time with a feeling of liberty and freedom from restraint" (Pike, p. 16). Romantic writers could not deny the landscape's "power of throwing a man back upon himself" and, as literary fashions changed, their successors, the realists, were equally unable to deny its power to generate "a feeling of liberty and freedom from restraint."

CHAPTER FIVE: Notes

[1] Washington Irving, Astoria, or Anecdotes of an Enterprise Beyond the Rocky Mountains (1836; rpt. [ed. Edgeley W. Todd] Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1964), p. 217. Irving's use of published material in Astoria is well documented; see the Todd introduction to this edition. Irving acknowledges "aid" from Lewis and Clark, Bradbury, Brackenridge, Long, Franchère, and Ross Cox in his introduction to the work (p. xlviii).

[2] Albert Pike, Prose Sketches and Poems, Written in the Western Country (Boston: Light and Horton, 1834), p. 14. All references to Pike are from this edition.

[3] Rev. of A Tour of the Prairies, by Washington Irving, Southern Literary Messenger, I (1835), 456; as quoted by Edwin Fussell in Frontier: American Literature and the American West, p. 158.

[4] Charles Augustus Murray, The Prairie-Bird (1844; rpt. London: Richard Bentley, 1845), pp. 167-68. Another sportsman turned romancer was William George Drummond Stewart, whom Alfred Jacob Miller accompanied west in 1837; he wrote Altowan; or Incidents of Life and Adventure in the Rocky Mountains, ed. J. Watson Webb, 2 vols. (New York: Harper, 1846), a work very like Murray's.

[5] George Frederick Ruxton, Life in the Far West (Edinburgh, 1848; rpt. [ed. Leroy R. Hafen] Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1951), p. 57. Stewart, Murray, and Ruxton are discussed in De Voto's Across the Wide Missouri, where De Voto maintains that Ruxton was a spy and alleges that Stewart was. Because of his numerous trips into the West, moreover, Stewart receives considerable attention (pp. 20-21, passim).

[6] Emerson Bennett, Prairie Flower; or, Adventure in the Far West (1849; rpt. New York: G. W. Carleton, 1881), pp. 46-47. All references to Bennett are from this edition.

[7] This survey of the popular romance literature set on the prairie is intended to be representative rather than exhaustive. I am also indebted for my discussion of this literature to Dorothy Dondore, whose The Prairie and the Making of Middle America details the prairie western romance in nineteenth-century America, pp. 210-87, 345-92. See also in this regard Henry Nash Smith, Virgin Land, Book III: "The Garden of the World," and Roy W. Meyer, The Middle Western Farm Novel

in the Twentieth Century (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1965), pp. 13-34. The only extensive treatments of the Canadian popular romance are by Dick Harrison; see Unnamed Country, Chapters II and III for a broad overview and, more recently, "Popular Fiction of the Canadian Prairies: Autopsy on a Small Corpus," JPC, 14 (1980), 326-32. Regarding Dime Novels, which very often featured an exotic--if hazy--prairie-plains setting for heroes such as Buffalo Bill, see Virgin Land, pp. 90-120, and Albert Johannsen, The House of Beadle and Adams and Its Dime and Nickel Novels: The Story of a Vanishing Literature, fore. John T. McIntyre, 2 vols. (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1950).

[8] Alexander Begg, Dot it Down: A Story of Life in the North-West (1871; rpt. Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1973).

[9] Sir William Francis Butler, Red Cloud, The Solitary Sioux: A Tale of the Great Prairie (1882; rpt. Toronto: Macmillan, 1910). For a biography of Butler, see Edward McCourt, Remember Butler: The Story of Sir William Butler (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967).

[10] Butler, Red Cloud, p. 33.

[11] Butler, The Wild North Land, p. 30.

[12] R. M. Ballantyne, The Red Man's Revenge: A Tale of the Red River Flood (London: James Nisbet, n.d. [1880]), p. 74.

[13] Laurence Ricou, Vertical Man/ Horizontal World, p. 14. Ricou cites a descriptive passage from Parker's "She of the Triple Chevron," and comments: "His description, although longer than usual, is typical for its use of undescriptive adjectives like 'lovely,' its use of the sea image to suggest vastness, the occurence of the romantic notion that the northern air promotes physical and moral health, and the total lack of any attempt to relate the vastness and invigorating air to the immediate characters and action." This assessment is accurate as far as it goes, but Ricou fails to note that--consciously or not--Parker's presentation of character in this story, as in "A Sanctuary of the Plains," is determined in large measure by the prairie landscape.

[14] Gilbert Parker, "She of the Triple Chevron," in Pierre and His People: Tales of the Far North (1892; rpt. Chicago: Stone & Kimball, 1893), p. 74. All references to Parker are from this edition.

[15] Castañeda, Narrative, in Spanish Explorers in the Southern United States, p. 384; Wallace Stegner, Wolf Willow: A History, a Story, and a Memory of the Last Plains Frontier (1962; rpt. New York: Viking, 1966), p. 19.

[16] John Mackie, The Prodigal's Brother, A Story of Western Life

(London: Jarrold and Sons, 1899), pp. 117-18. Mackie was for several years a N.W.M.P. constable and, having noted this and his familiarity with Butler's The Great Lone Land, Harrison argues that "This [passage] could be straight Butler, but even so, it is one of the most vivid reactions to the land in the early fiction" (Unnamed Country, p. 55). Strictly speaking, Harrison is correct, since he is referring to early Canadian fiction, but Mackie (and Butler) had numerous precursors in their reaction to the prairie landscape, and this passage could be straight Irving or perhaps straight Parkman, just as well.

[17] Much the same can be said of the writings of Harold Bindloss. Harrison discusses his work in Unnamed Country, p. 83, and notes the writer's direct presentation of the prairie landscape in the numerous novels he set on the prairie, but concludes correctly that Bindloss "never seemed to find in the prairie any distinctive spirit of place."

A final group of works set--nominally, at least--on the prairie are the didactic novels of Nellie McClung and Ralph Connor, and the stories of John MacLean. Because in their works polemics supercede any considered description of the prairie landscape, they are not significant to this study. (For a discussion of these works see Ricou and Harrison).

[18] For a consideration of The Virginian and its relation to the popular American western, see James K. Folsom, The American Western Novel (New Haven: College and University Press, 1966), pp. 119-25.

[19] Owen Wister, The Virginian (1902; rpt. [ed. Phillip Durham] Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), p. 14. All references to Wister are from this edition.

[20] Mark Twain, Roughing It, (1872; [forward Leonard Kriegel] New York: New American Library, 1962), p. 33. All references to Twain are from this edition.

[21] Vernon L. Parrington, Main Currents in American Thought 3 vols. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1927-30); Alfred Kazin, On Native Grounds: An Interpretation of American Prose Literature (1942; rpt. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970), pp. 3-50; Smith, Virgin Land, pp. 224-49; and Meyer, The Middle Western Farm Novel in the Twentieth Century, pp. 13-34.

[22] Claude M. Simpson, Introd., The Story of a Country Town, by E. W. Howe (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961), pp. vii-xxvii. All references to Howe are from this edition.

[23] Smith, Virgin Land, p. 245.

[24] Clyde E. Henson, Joseph Kirkland (New Haven: College and

University Press, 1962), pp. 11-42.

[25] Joseph Kirkland, Zury: The Meanest Man in Spring County, A Novel of Western Life (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1887), p. 1. All subsequent references to Kirkland are from this edition.

[26] See David Thompson's Narrative, p. 54, and Bradbury's Travels, p. 267.

[27] Hamlin Garland, Boy Life on the Prairie (1899; rpt. [introd. B. R. McElderry, Jr] Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1961), p. 5.

[28] Hamlin Garland, "Among the Corn Rows," in Main-Travelled Roads, introd. William Dean Howells, Authorized ed. (1930; rpt. [afterword B. R. McElderry] New York: Harper & Row, 1956), p. 86. All references to this story are from this edition.

[29] Hamlin Garland, The Moccasin Ranch: A Story of Dakota (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1909), pp. 3-4. All references to The Moccasin Ranch are from this edition.

[30] Arthur Stringer, The Prairie Wife (New York: A. L. Burt, 1915), p. 29. All references to The Prairie Wife are from this edition.

[31] Arthur Stringer, The Prairie Mother (New York: A. L. Burt, 1920), p. 237. All references to The Prairie Mother are from this edition.

[32] Regarding Stringer's background and his prairie trilogy, see Victor Lauriston, Arthur Stringer: Son of the North, Biography and Anthology (Toronto: Ryerson, 1941).

CHAPTER SIX

"the great fact was the land itself": Prairie Landscape in Modern Fiction

When Alexandra Bergson, the protagonist of O Pioneers! (1913), resolves to stay in Nebraska and grow with the country, Cather explains that she "had a new consciousness of the country, felt almost a new relation to it . . . . She had never known before how much the country meant to her. The chirping of the insects down in the long grass had been like the sweetest music. She had felt as if her heart were hiding down there, somewhere, with the quail and the plover and all the little wild things that crooned or buzzed in the sun. Under the long shaggy ridges, she felt the future stirring."[1] Likewise, when years later Alexandra explains to Carl Lindstrum her success in farming, she stresses the relationship between man and the land: "'The land,'" she says, accomplished the abundance. "'It had its little joke. It pretended to be poor because nobody knew how to work it right; and then, all at once, it worked itself. It woke up out of its sleep and stretched itself, and it was so big, so rich, that we suddenly found we were rich, just from sitting still'" (p. 116). The essence of both passages is that man must understand the prairie on its own terms--a situation which pertains as well to the artistic depiction of this landscape. It was a recognition of the need for both kinds of understanding which enabled Willa Cather to produce what have remained the classics in the prairie novel

tradition.

Dorothy Canfield, who met Cather before she was twenty has said that "an imaginative and emotional shift from Virginia to Nebraska is at the core of Willa Cather's fiction."[2] Born in Virginia in 1873, Willa Cather accompanied her parents on a move from their home there to the sparsely-settled Nebraska prairie in 1883. The family lived for a time among a colony of other settlers who had also come from Virginia, but later moved into the small town of Red Cloud, where Cather lived until she went to Lincoln to attend university in 1890. Upon graduation from college, Cather worked for a time for a Lincoln paper but in 1896 went east, first to teach school and, later, to be a journalist. In 1908 she was named Managing Editor of McClure's Magazine, but within a few years left journalism in order to write full time. Though she visited Nebraska while her parents were alive, after their deaths she remained largely in the East, writing and publishing the numerous novels and stories on which her reputation rests.

The extent to which the accuracy and effectiveness of Cather's depiction of the prairie derive from her personal experience may be suggested by considering her comments in an interview following the publication of O Pioneers!, wherein she described her first impression of the country when she arrived from her former home in Virginia: "'I shall never forget my introduction to it. We drove out from Red Cloud to my grandfather's homestead one day in April. I was sitting on the hay in the bottom of a Studebaker wagon, holding on to the side of the wagon box to steady myself--the roads were mostly faint trails over the bunch

grass in those days. The land was open range and there was almost no fencing. As we drove further and further out into the country, I felt a good deal as if we had come to the end of everything--it was a kind of erasure of personality.'"[3] At the outset of My Ántonia (1918), Jim Burden's reaction to the prairie landscape is exactly the same as Cather's--"Between that earth and that sky" he feels "erased, blotted out."[4] This sense of erasure, moreover, is dramatized in her protagonists' transcendent reactions to the landscape in both O Pioneers! and My Ántonia: Alexandra Bergson senses her heart hiding beneath the prairie sod, and Jim Burden recognizes that happiness is "to be dissolved into something complete and great" (OP, p. 71; MA, p. 15). Cather's transference of her personal reaction to the prairie landscape to Alexandra Bergson and Jim Burden, among others, is the same action, intrinsically, as Francis Parkman's embellishment of one entry in his journal--"Awkward feeling, being lost on the prairie"--into an extended analytical passage in The Oregon Trail. Both reactions are caused by the prairie landscape; what differs is the form accorded each.

Before turning to Cather's classic prairie fictions, however, some mention should be made of several of her early stories dealing with the Nebraska prairie. Unlike her later novels, these are characterized by a stark grimness. In "On the Divide" (1896), for example, which concerns a lonely Norwegian's decision to take a neighbor's daughter and force her to marry him, Cather writes: "If it had not been for the few stunted cottonwoods and elms that grew along" a nearby river's banks, the protagonist, Canute, "would have shot himself years ago."[5] For the face that the prairie itself presents reflects only the desolation noted by De Smet and the demonism which terrified Ishmael's Vermont colt:

> He knew by heart every individual clump of bunch grass in the miles of red shaggy prairie that stretched before his cabin. He knew it in all the deceitful loveliness of its early summer, in all the bitter barrenness of its autumn. He had seen it smitten by all the plagues of Egypt. He had seen it parched by drought, and sogged by rain, beaten by hail, and swept by fire, and in the grasshopper years he had seen it eaten as bare and clean as bones that vultures have left. After the great fires he had seen it stretch for miles and miles, black and smoking as the floor of hell. (p. 494)

After ten years in his shack on the Divide, with only raw alcohol and some bizarre little figurines he carved out of his windowsill for distraction, Canute seizes Lena Yenson and forces her to marry him. As Cather says, Canute "drank alone and in solitude not for pleasure or good cheer, but to forget the awful loneliness and level of the Divide" (p. 496). Cather's depiction of life on the Divide in her early tales is, like Garland's before her, unremittingly grim, but unlike her precursor she does not countenance in these tales a romantic vision of the new land. Instead, she describes only desperation: "Insanity and suicide are very common things on the Divide. They come on like an epidemic in the hot wind season. Those scorching dusty winds that blow over the bluffs from Kansas seem to dry up the blood in men's veins as they do the sap on corn leaves . . . . It causes no great sensation there when a Dane is found swinging from his own windmill tower, and most of the Poles after they have become too careless and discouraged to shave themselves keep their razors to cut their throats with" (p. 495). Significantly, none of these early tales rises to the artistic level of Cather's later work, and in later years Cather herself at one point called them "bald, clumsy, and emotional."[6]

After she wrote these stories Cather fell under the influence of Henry James, and her first novel, Alexander's Bridge (1912) is a Jamesian pastiche which she also later regretted. Despite her subsequent attempt to present her shift from the sitting-room novel to the pioneer novel as a sudden one, E. K. Brown has noted that Cather's change was more gradual.[7] "The Bohemian Girl," (1912), which appeared in McClure's only four months after the serialized version of Alexander's Bridge was concluded in the same publication, points quite definitely in the direction of Cather's great prairie novels. With its dynasty of second-generation pioneers and the relationship between Nils Ericson and Clara Vavrika, the story contains elements which Cather later used in both O Pioneers! and My Ántonia. Gone from this story are Cather's earlier lengthy descriptions of the vicissitudes of prairie life; instead, the land is rendered symbolically and underscores both the conflict and the theme of the story.

As he approaches the family home he left twelve years before, Nils's first glimpse of Clara Vavrika Ericson (now his brother's wife) is presented in the context of the landscape. Late in the day Nils sees a woman on horseback against a hillside: "Once in the main road, she let him [the horse] out into a lope, and they soon emerged upon the crest of high land, where they moved along the skyline, silhouetted against the band of faint color that lingered in the west. This horse and rider, with their free, rhythmical gallop, were the only moving things to be seen on the face of the flat country. They seemed, in the last sad light of evening, not to be there accidentally, but as an inevitable detail of the landscape."[8] Here Cather employs the same technique of backlighting used by Cooper--which she was to use again in My Ántonia--

and as with that of Leatherstocking, her figure lighted by the landscape is symbolically tied to the land.

Clara is here characterized as an "inevitable" element in the landscape, and when she is forced to choose between her present life and that offered her in Europe by Nils, Cather expands upon her attachment to the prairie as Clara contemplates her decision:

> The great, silent country seemed to lay a spell upon her. The ground seemed to hold her as if by roots. Her knees were soft under her. She felt as if she could not bear separation from her old sorrows, from her old discontent. They were dear to her, they had kept her alive, they were a part of her. There would be nothing left for her if she were wrenched away from them. Never could she pass beyond that skyline against which her restlessness had beat so many times. She felt as if her soul had built itself a nest there on that horizon at which she looked every morning and evening, and it was dear to her, inexpressibly dear. (p. 37)

Clara's dilemma--the need to choose between the world of the western frontier and the larger world beyond--is not without precedent in Cather's writing, but her use of the individual's attachment to the Western landscape as a means of symbolic expression is. Throughout the story Clara's dissatisfaction as a member of the Ericson family is evident; her only solace is in wit and sarcasm which goes unnoticed by the family. Yet it is the land which holds Clara, and her ultimate decision forms the crux of her personal conflict. Cather's symbolic evocation of the prairie landscape also lends greater depth to the love story, since Nils, too, is attracted once again to the landscape. Its major function in the story, however, is symbolically to establish Clara's sensitive character. Her "inevitable" relationship with the landscape predicates an equally

inevitable clash of wills with the smug and insensitive Ericsons who farm the land.

Though "The Bohemian Girl" therefore lessens the abruptness of the shift from Alexander's Bridge to O Pioneers!, Cather does assess the situation correctly when she explains in a flyleaf dedication of a friend's copy of O Pioneers!: "'This was the first time I walked off on my own feet--everything before was half real and half an imitation of writers whom I admired. In this one I hit the home pasture and found that I was Yance Sorgensen and not Henry James.'"[9] Cather's phrase "home pasture" reverberates within the novel; it is apparent throughout that she is treating the country she best knew and most loved, and at a time during which she most enjoyed recreating it. She did, however, recognize the risk she was taking, since no writer of stature had before depicted the prairie west. In "My First Novels," Cather speaks of her choice of setting, noting that "Nebraska is distinctly declassé as a literary background," and explaining that after the novel was published she was confronted with questions such as "'How did you come to write about that flat part of the prairie west, Miss Cather, which not many people find interesting?'" She also explains that she expected little interest in her tale of Nebraska, citing the New York critic who wrote: "'I simply don't care a damn what happens in Nebraska, no matter who writes about it.'"[10]

In view of this situation, that Cather was able to interest those who were negatively biased must be attributed to her art--an art which involved the recreation rather than merely the description of the experience of the prairie. The experience she records is not in itself different from that to be found in the early accounts and later in

second-rate fiction; nor can the images and motifs which she employs be described as original. What constitutes the advance made by Cather lies in the extent to which she dramatizes what others had merely observed. This is not to suggest, of course, that Cather was re-working the materials of a tradition instead of writing out of her own experience. Rather it is to emphasize the sameness of the response, and to argue that the full extent of her artistry can be appreciated only when her works are seen in context.[11]

Cather's dramatic techniques are in evidence from the beginning of O Pioneers!, and consist first in her introduction of the land prior to the introduction of any signs of life, and in her use of omniscient narration. Indeed, in her first paragraph there are few people to be seen at all, only occasionally "a red or a plaid shawl" flashing from one store to another. Thus Cather begins: "One January day, thirty years ago, the little town of Hanover, anchored on a windy Nebraska tableland, was trying not to be blown away" (p. 3). The lack of a definite historical date, together with organic imagery and diction, serve to accentuate the force of nature and the impermanence of man's dwellings in the face of such a force. Hanover is "anchored," (the word choice an echo of the prairie-ocean analogy), and the word "trying" suggests that its attempts might not be successful.

Cather's initial presentation of the town, echoes the narrator's comment in The Virginian that towns like Medicine Bow "seemed to have been strewn there by the wind and to be waiting until the wind should come again and blow them away" (The Virginian, p. 14). Unlike this comment which is presented as an impression only, however, Cather vividly evokes Hanover's precarious hold on its location: "A mist of fine snowflakes was curling and eddying

about the cluster of low drab buildings huddled on the grey prairie, under a grey sky" (p. 3). The verb "huddled" in conjunction with the adjectives "low drab" suggests the human response to the power of the forces of nature on the prairie, just as "cluster" emphasizes again the possibility of the town being carried off by the wind. In this scene, too, there are no definite contours: not only are the buildings "drab" but the reader sees them against a "grey prairie" which is "under a grey sky." The effect of Cather's description is thus vagueness rather than clarity. Sameness rather than difference.

Similarly, the buildings themselves suggest no ordered arrangement: "The dwelling-houses were set about haphazard on the tough prairie sod; some of them looked as if they had been moved in overnight, and others as if they were straying off by themselves, headed straight for the open plain. None had any appearance of permanence, and the howling wind blew under them as well as over them" (p. 3). Just as Cather's grey prairie is set against a grey sky, with the result that there is little sense of contrast, these buildings befuddle the reader by appearing animate, yet lost. Cather uses the more impersonal and somewhat awkward "dwelling-houses" to describe the homes of Hanover, and these buildings, which appear as uneasy initiates are not rooted, they are only "set about . . . on the tough prairie sod." Hence they "stray" about aimlessly like animals which do not wish to be domesticated, and they are buffeted by the prairie wind which, owing to their seemingly casual construction, blows under them as well as around them.

When Cather does describe the town center, it is to emphasize its relative insignificance, for there is a single main street,

and "On either side [of it] straggled two uneven rows of wooden buildings" (p. 4), which she then goes on to enumerate. Throughout, Cather's scene is largely bare of people--the shopkeepers are "keeping well behind their frosty windows," the children are in school, and those who do venture forth are wrapped "in coarse overcoats, with their long caps pulled down over their noses" (p. 4). Her protagonists, similarly, are initially described merely as "a boy" and "a girl." Only later does the reader learn they are Emil and Alexandra Bergson.

This impersonal perspective continues as Cather moves her narrative away from the town, where "the roads were but faint tracks in the grass, and the fields were scarcely noticeable. The record of the plow was insignificant, like the feeble scratches on stone left by prehistoric races, so indeterminate that they may, after all, be only the markings of glaciers, and not a record of human strivings" (pp. 19-20). At the same time that she here emphasizes man's lack of impact on the prairie, she also creates the impression of the antiquity of the land.

"Of all the bewildering things about a new country, the absence of human landmarks is one of the most depressing and disheartening," Cather observes, (p. 19), echoing reactions to the prairie landscape. Castañeda repeated "nothing" to emphasize the way in which man left no mark on the prairie to show of his passage, and commentators from his time on have agreed. Although Cather speaks of the prairie as if it were just like any other "new country," the evidence presented here indicates that it is more problematic. As Washington Irving suggested in his brief foray into realism A Tour on the Prairies, part of the increased chagrin and depression experienced by prairie travelers may be attributed to the

fact that the prairie landscape made the absence of landmarks so very apparent.

As Alexandra, Carl Linstrum, and Emil begin their journey home, Cather moves to a consideration of the human response to the landscape, yet their responses fall within the context she establishes in her opening descriptions. They drive not toward home on the distant prairie but "toward the streak of pale, watery light that glimmered in the leaden sky" (p. 14). In keeping with its precarious grip on its location, the town "behind them had vanished as if it had never been, had fallen behind the swell of the prairie, and the stern frozen country received them into its bosom" (p. 15). Cather creates an atmosphere of forlorn isolation suggesting the immediate disappearance of the town, first of all, and then by inverting the usual mother-earth image, for these characters are clasped against the earth's frozen bosom. This atmosphere is heightened further by the waning light in the "leaden" sky which, as suggested in the novel's first paragraph, did not provide much illumination even at two o'clock.

"The homesteads were few and far apart; here and there a windmill gaunt against the sky, a sod house crouching in a hollow," Cather goes on to observe; "But the great fact was the land itself, which seemed to overwhelm the little beginnings of human society that struggled in its sombre wastes" (p. 15). Here Cather articulates what her opening descriptions in the novel dramatize: the land's vastness dwarfs the puny efforts of man, making his windmills "gaunt" and forcing his dwellings to crouch. This notwithstanding, the prairie exacts a kind of grudging respect from those who inhabit it: "It was from facing this

vast hardness that [Carl's] mouth had become so bitter; because he felt that men were too weak to make any mark here, that the land wanted to be let alone, to preserve its own fierce strength, its peculiar, savage kind of beauty, its uninterrupted mournfulness" (p. 15). Accordingly, Cather moves from Carl's point of view--that of the male defeated in conquest of the land--to that of the female, inviolate, and in the process she moves as well from a negative, defeated point of view to a positive, affirmative one. Similarly in O Pioneers! as a whole, John Bergson dies, a man defeated in his attempt to "tame" (p. 20) the land, while Alexandra, his daughter, succeeds because she understands and affirms its strengths.

But to return to the opening of the novel, Cather's way of disorienting her readers so as to recreate the pioneer experience should be noted.[12] Specifically, she reverses the normal seasonal order used in conventional presentations of the land. Instead of beginning in the spring or summer, the procedure followed in numerous romantic accounts of the prairie landscape first glimpsed, Cather begins in winter. Garland's The Moccasin Ranch begins in the spring and, in terms of his depiction of the prairie landscape, the movement is from the benign to the malignant. Perhaps aware of this, Cather reverses the order so that, roughly parallel to Alexandra's growing awareness of the land, the reader moves from a negative reaction--one owing, in part, to the general ignorance of the region Cather could assume in her readers--to an understanding, favorable one.

Once introduced in the opening section of the novel as geographical setting, the prairie in O Pioneers! takes on both thematic and symbolic

meaning as the work progresses. The harsh and alienating image first presented reflects the values of those who like John Bergson seek to subdue the land without understanding it; he sought to tame the land--for him, it was "an enigma. It was like a horse that one knows how to break to harness, that runs wild and kicks things to pieces. He had an idea that no one understood how to farm it properly . . ." (pp. 21-22). Alexandra, in part because of her father's failure in his own attempt to tame the land, eventually sees--like Francis Parkman--that one must seek to understand and adapt to the prairie. This is central to the development of her character in the novel's first part, "The Wild Land," and her eventual understanding is foreshadowed in the description of her and Emil driving across the prairie toward their homestead: "The rattle of her wagon was lost in the howling

of the wind, but her lantern, held firmly between her feet, made a moving point of light along the highway, going deeper and deeper into the dark country" (p. 18). Within O Pioneers! Alexandra is like her lantern--through her understanding of the land she brings a light into a dark country--and Cather's symbolic point here is made available to the reader through the vast sweep of the prairie landscape.

Cather's objective in depicting the prairie landscape at the outset of O Pioneers! is to create the same sort of "erasure of personality" for her reader that she herself experienced upon her first extended experience of it. Once this has been accomplished, largely in the first two sections of the novel's first part, "The Wild Land," Cather is able to concentrate on her story; yet Alexandra Bergson's story is not her own--O Pioneers! is about her relationship with the land she farms, and of her role as a pioneer. Hence the reader's movement in the novel runs parallel to Alexandra's growing understanding of the land. Beginning with the harsh, barren, and alienating landscape which opens the novel, the reader is intended to reconsider and come to understand the land, and the role of the pioneer on the land, just as Alexandra does.

When she visits Crazy Ivar early in the novel, Alexandra is seeking his knowledge--in this instance her interest concerns hogs--and she adopts a respectful attitude toward his reverence for nature. Ivar is clearly a fool-saint; he stands at the other pole from John Bergson, who "knew every ridge and draw and gully between him and the horizon" (p. 20), but was not able to employ his knowledge successfully. Ivar's knowledge is of a different order, and ultimately Alexandra is influenced by Crazy Ivar's intuitive reverence for the land, which she adopts in addition to

the common-sense approach to farming she inherits from her father. That is, in part, why she succeeds while her father failed. But while Alexandra respects Ivar's opinions and reverence for nature, during her visit she does not share it. She comes to share Ivar's understanding only some years later, during her inspection tour of neighboring farms, a trip occasioned by her brothers' desire to abandon the farm for jobs in the city. Cather describes her protagonist's new-found understanding in this manner: "For the first time, perhaps, since the land emerged from the waters of geologic ages, a human face was set toward it with love and yearning. It seemed beautiful to her, rich and strong and glorious. Her eyes drank in the breadth of it, until her tears blinded her. Then the Genius of the Divide, the great, free spirit which breathes across it, must have bent lower than it ever bent to a human will before. The history of every country begins in the heart of a man or a woman" (p. 65). Immediately after this, Alexandra recognizes her transcendent attachment to the land, where "she felt the future stirring" (p. 71).

Alexandra's relationship with the prairie's "personality"--for the landscape is to all intents and purposes a character within the novel--evolves from and relates to this "Genius of the Divide," and occasions a movement from realism to romance. In this way, furthermore, Cather introduces a new kind of "romance" element to prairie fiction; in <u>O Pioneers!</u> the romantic component is not something which occurs <u>on</u> the prairie--it consists of Alexandra's love <u>for</u> the prairie itself. Her relation with the land is personal, since it depends on her understanding of the "Genius of the Divide," and the timing of its advent is

crucial: Alexandra comes to understand its beauty at the moment of pioneering. Afterwards, once the land is settled and developing, man's relation with the prairie is not the same; thus the tone of the novel once "The Wild Land" ends is that of nostalgic melancholy. When Carl Linstrum returns for a visit sixteen years after John Bergson's death, for example, he tells Alexandra "'I even think I liked the old country better. This is all very splendid in its way, but there was something about this country when it was a wild old beast that has haunted me all these years. Now, when I come back to all this milk and honey, I feel like the old German song, 'Wo bist du, wo bist du, mein geliebtest Land?'--'" (p. 118). Alexandra agrees.

Just as at the beginning of the novel both reader and pioneer are disoriented by the strange new landscape, with its absence of landmarks, so too are acclimatized reader and established settler later

able to read the landscape's signs in view of the experience of their earlier disorientation. Thus after the first part closes the prairie is not so often evoked directly as it is symbolically. On one occasion, for example, Cather uses "the wide field outside, where the snow was drifting over the fences" (p. 202) as a symbolic counterpoint for Maria Shabatas' state of mind as she longs for spring.

But Cather's most thematically central symbolic use of the landscape is to be found in the final pages of the novel. Having just agreed to marry, Alexandra and Carl walk about the fields in the evening; they are lighted by the red rays of the setting sun: "They paused on the last ridge of the pasture, overlooking the house and the windmill and the stables that marked the site of John Bergson's homestead." Placing them on the ridge overlooking the family's original homestead, with "brown waves of earth" rolling away "to meet the sky" (p. 307), Cather thus dramatizes their isolation and symbolizes their stature within O Pioneers!; they alone remember and value the experience of pioneering, which occurred when the prairie was still a "wild old beast." In turn, as she thinks of the dream in which she is carried off by a figure personifying death and the land itself--the "Genius of the Divide"--Alexandra is described as "still gazing into the west, and in her face there was that exalted serenity that sometimes came to her at moments of deep feeling. The level rays of the sinking sun shone in her clear eyes" (p. 308). This is how she looked when she first understood the "Genius of the Divide"; here she experiences again that same transcendence which

made her feel "as if her heart were hiding down there" amid the "quail and plover" (p. 71). An interesting--but ironic--parallel to Alexandra's dream is Cather's recurrent feeling "that sudden death would overtake her somewhere on the prairies. The feeling would come on her obsessively and darken her life for days" while she was visiting Red Cloud.[13]

My Ántonia, the next novel in which Cather concentrates on the prairie landscape, shows a refinement of many of the techniques she employed in O Pioneers!. Whereas in the earlier novel Alexandra is both objective character and subjective sensibility, in My Ántonia Cather separated the two functions, so that Ántonia is a symbolic character perceived as such by Jim Burden the narrator, who sees her as the bridge between his present self and his pioneer Nebraska boyhood. He is also the romantic in the novel, and herein lies the significance of the shift in technique. Because of her omniscient narration in O Pioneers!, Cather could be accused of being a romantic in her presentation of Alexandra. With Jim Burden in My Ántonia, however, romantic nostalgia becomes a function of his character, and not of Cather herself. As O Pioneers! ends, the reader has difficulty believing that Alexandra will find her future with Carl equal to her pioneering past. Much the same may be said of Jim Burden in My Ántonia, although in Ántonia and her family he has a tangible, and symbolic, link to those days, one which exists in the present.

The introduction of Burden also allowed Cather to define further the symbolic possibilities of the prairie landscape, since as filtering narrator, and reminiscing narrator, Burden presents objects--whether characters, things, or elements in landscape--subjectively. And because

his tale is a reminiscence, moreover, Burden evaluates all of the various people, places, and events he knew in light of his subsequent knowledge and experience. Introducing Burden in her "Introduction," which serves as preface to the main narrative, Cather explains that he lives in New York City, where he "is legal counsel for one of the great Western railways," but retains "the romantic disposition which often made him seem funny as a boy . . ." (pp. 1, 2). Within the narrative of My Ántonia Jim himself briefly describes his education, first in Lincoln at the university and, later, at Harvard, both as an undergraduate and law student. Burden is thus the first educated narrator in prairie fiction; he is also the first writer since--despite his protestation that his story "'hasn't any form '"--he is trying to capture all that Ántonia's "'name recalls'" for him (p. 2); My Ántonia is the title of his reminiscence. Distant in time and, usually, in space (because of his life in New York), Jim Burden sees his material romantically from the beginning of the novel, and Cather is at pains to develop this aspect of his character, initially and throughout.[14]

In the opening section of Book I, Jim describes his arrival in Nebraska at the age of ten. Traveling overland in the back of a wagon, he tries to sleep but cannot, owing to the hardness of the wagon and the roughness of the ride; awake, Jim looks out at the country through which they are traveling:

> There seemed to be nothing to see; no fences, no creeks or trees, no hills or fields. If there was a road, I could not make it out in the faint starlight. There was nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made. No, there was nothing but land--slightly undulating, I

> knew, because often our wheels ground against the brake as we went down into a hollow and lurched up again on the other side. I had the feeling that the world was left behind, that we had got over the edge of it, and were outside man's jurisdiction.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> If we never arrived anywhere, it did not matter. Between that earth and that sky I felt erased, blotted out. (pp. 8-9)

Compared to her initial evocation of the prairie landscape in O Pioneers! which disoriented the reader and presented the alienating qualities of the land at their height, Cather here focuses the response within a central consciousness. Before, she dramatized the relationship between land, sky and man's structures through imagery and diction; here, the same impression is given an immediacy by reason of the first-person method of narration. In O Pioneers! Cather presented the prairie in winter as an image, a scene. Here the emphasis is upon the felt quality of this landscape, seen in late summer or early autumn, and made articulate by Jim Burden's filtering sensibility. The omniscient narrative technique of O Pioneers! had the effect of objectifying the prairie, at least until Alexandra reaches her accord with the "Genius of the Divide," whereas Cather's use of the first-person point of view in My Antonia has the effect of locating the reader in the landscape. Thus Jim's generally abstract reaction to the landscape here--"the material out of which countries are made"--is balanced against the concrete description of the lurching of the wagon which follows it. Jim's feeling that "the world was left behind," too, is a more immediate articulation of Blanche Burke's comment that being on the prairie is "'like being out of the world, someway'" (Moccasin Ranch, p. 16). And because of his background and subsequent experiences, Jim

Burden's responses, while not different in kind from those seen elsewhere, are more informed and digested.

Rebounding from his initial loss of a sense of self in the face of the vast prairie, Burden adapts quickly--although in the process he recapitulates the sentiments and expressions of numerous travelers before him. Although while first viewing the prairie from the back of the wagon Jim was appalled, stating that he had "never before looked up at the sky when there was not a familiar mountain ridge against it" (p. 9), two days later he is mesmerized. Except for a few large broken fields, Jim sees "Everywhere, as far as the eye could reach . . . nothing but rough, shaggy, red grass, most of it as tall as" he is (p. 13). Employing the recurrent phrase to suggest vastness, he also resorts to synecdoche and simile: "As I looked about me I felt that the grass was the country, as the water in the sea. The red of the grass made all the great prairie the colour of winestains, or of certain seaweeds when they are first washed up. And there was so much motion in it; the whole country seemed, somehow, to be running" (p. 13). The latter phrase reminds one of Henry's description of the transformation caused by a buffalo herd--"the meadow seemed as if in motion"--while the basis of the imagery is of course the ubiquitous sea-prairie analogy. Shortly thereafter, as he and his grandmother walk off to visit her garden, Burden expands synecdoche to personification: "I can remember exactly how the country looked to me as I walked beside my grandmother along the faint wagon-tracks on that early September morning. Perhaps the glide of long railway travel was still with me, for more than anything else I felt motion in the landscape; in the fresh, easy-blowing morning wind, and in the earth itself, as if

the shaggy grass were a sort of loose hide, and underneath it herds of wild buffalo were galloping, galloping . . ." (p. 14, Cather's ellipsis). Only two days after his arrival, therefore, Burden had begun to shift the basis of his comparisons from his Virginia past to the prairie past--from mountain ridges to galloping Buffalo.

Just after his sense of the past comes to him, Jim undergoes a mystical experience, which is almost the obverse of the sense of impermanence dramatized at the beginning of O Pioneers!:

> I wanted to walk straight on through the red grass and over the edge of the world, which could not be very far away. The light air about me told me that the world ended here: only the ground and sun and sky were left, and if one went a little farther there would be only sun and sky, and one would float off into them, like the tawny hawks which sailed over our heads making slow shadows on the grass. While grandmother took the pitchfork we found standing in one of the rows and dug potatoes, while I picked them up out of the soft brown earth and put them into the bag, I kept looking up at the hawks that were doing what I might so easily do. (p. 14)

Burden's sense of transcendence here is occasioned by the prairie landscape, and Cather has moved on to a different sort of "erasure of personality." Staying behind in the garden, Jim leans against "a warm yellow pumpkin" and, having immersed himself in the minutiae of the surrounding scene, he observes:"I was something that lay under the sun and felt it, like the pumpkins, and I did not want to be anything more. I was entirely happy. Perhaps we feel like that when we die and become a part of something entire, whether it is sun and air, or goodness and knowledge. At any rate, this is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great. When it comes to one, it comes as naturally as sleep" (p. 15).

Reminiscent of Alexandra's dream, here the "something" into which Jim has immersed himself is the new (for him) prairie land, with its elemental simplicity of "sun and air." Burden's sense of transcendence could also be described as a dramatization of the recurrent romantic reaction to the prairie landscape, seen in Brackenridge, Catlin, Flagg, and Washington Irving, among others.

Having presented Burden's initial romantic immersion in the landscape, Cather counters this, and tempers it with the other views of the land and various sufferings within Ántonia's family over the next year. Because they are registered through Burden's eyes, however, they do not operate to undermine the overall romantic character of the novel. Mr. Shimerda's suicide, for example, is a more desperate act than Blanche Burke's flight from her husband in Garland's The Moccasin Ranch but, because the reader knows more directly the causes of Blanche's desperation and sees her driven out by the prairie landscape, Garland's negative treatment of the land's alienating qualities is more acute than in Cather's novel. Although, as in "On the Divide," Cather thus acknowledges the crushing effects of prairie isolation, since Burden is mainly an observer throughout the incident, the negative impact is not as pronounced as Burden's positive impressions.

Similarly, Burden's description of the prairie in winter has none of the violence of Garland's description of a snowstorm. Riding to the Shimerdas' after snow had fallen, Jim writes: "The sky was brilliantly blue, and the sunlight on the glittering white stretches of prairie was almost blinding. As Ántonia said, the whole world was changed by the snow; we kept looking in vain for familiar landmarks" (p. 43). He does

of course sound a more pessimistic note later when he observes that the "pale, cold light of the winter did not beautify--it was like the light of truth itself." But his concluding observation--"It was as if we were being punished for living the loveliness of summer" (p. 116)--is a far cry from Ishamel's "colorless all-color." That this is deliberate on Cather's part, moreover, may be seen from the effectiveness of her description of spring--the romantic's proper season: "There was only--spring itself; the throb of it, the light restlessness, the vital essence of it everywhere; in the sky, in the swift clouds, in the pale sunshine, and in the warm, high wind--rising suddenly, sinking suddenly, impulsive and playful like a big puppy that pawed you and then lay down to be petted" (p. 79). In summer, finally, Burden and Ántonia watch a "beautiful electric storm," perched Alexander Henry-like atop "the slanting roof of the chicken house":

> the lightning broke in great zig-zags across the heavens, making everything stand out and come close to us for a moment. Half the sky was chequered with black thunderheads, but all the west was luminous and clear: in the lightning flashes it looked like deep blue water, with the sheen of moonlight on it; and the mottled part of the sky was like marble, like the quay of some splendid sea-coast city, doomed to destruction. Great warm splashes of rain fell on our upturned faces. One black cloud, no bigger than a little boat, drifted out into the clear space unattended and kept moving westward. (pp. 92-93)

Here are the recurrent elements in travelers' accounts: the optical illusions, an implicit sea-prairie analogy, and the vast space which allows one to see both clear weather and violent storm at once. In contrast to Jim's evocation of the storm, however, is Ántonia's response

to this scene, at the conclusion of Book I, which combines both an appreciation of its beauty and an awareness of its threatening aspect: "'I wish my papa live to see this summer,'" she says, "'I wish no winter ever come again'" (p. 93). After her comment, Jim asks her why she cannot be herself more often, as she is then, rather than being--as she so often is--coarse like her brother Ambrosch ; she responds: "'If I live here, like you, that is different. Things will be easy for you. But they will be hard for us'" (p. 93). Thus Cather here draws attention to the significance of her use of Burden as narrator and in turn to the fact that his view presents one side of the two faces of the prairie.

That both faces are necessary is the import of a concluding evocation of that landscape. Toward the end of the novel, when Burden visits Ántonia after the birth of her daughter, but before she marries Anton Cuzak, the two walk across the prairie: "As we walked homeward across the fields, the sun dropped and lay like a great golden globe in the low west. While it hung there, the moon rose in the east, as big as a cart-wheel, pale silver and streaked with rose colour, thin as a bubble or ghost-moon. For five, perhaps ten minutes, the two luminaries confronted each other across the level land, resting on opposite edges of the world" (p. 209). More than any other single passage in <u>My Ántonia</u>, this scene symbolically defines the relations between Burden and Ántonia and, indeed, the purpose and achievement of the novel itself. Each character is a luminary, the polar opposite of the other, each turning his or her bright being toward the other "across the level land." This third element in Cather's symbolic configuration is as necessary as the other two, for the

characters are conjoined through their shared experience of and sympathy with the prairie. They arrived in Nebraska on the same night, and the land informs their relation from first to last.

No discussion of My Ántonia--and this one in particular--would be complete without reference to the episode in which Cather pointedly refers to the tradition in which she is writing. Resting after a game with "The Hired Girls," Ántonia says to Jim: "'I want you to tell the girls about how the Spanish first came here . . . .'" Jim then recounts the apocryphal story, which he believes, that Coronado's expedition traveled as far north as the Republican River in present-day Nebraska, and not only as far as Kansas. The girls question him as to why Coronado had come so far, what the country was like then and why he had not gone back to Spain; these questions, Jim cannot answer, saying he "only knew the schoolbooks said he 'died in the wilderness of a broken heart'" (p. 158). Ántonia agrees and, thinking of her father, says "'More than him has done that' . . ." (p. 158). Thinking, the group "sat looking off across the country, watching the sun go down. The curly grass was on fire now. The bark of the oaks turned red as copper. There was a simmer of gold on the brown river." Cather continues:

> Presently we saw a curious thing: There were no clouds, the sun was going down in a limpid, gold-washed sky. Just as the lower edge of the red disk rested on the high fields against the horizon, a great black figure suddenly appeared on the face of the sun. We sprang to our feet, straining our eyes toward it. In a moment we realized what it was. On some upland farm, a plough had been left standing in the field. The sun was sinking just behind it. Magnified across the distance by the horizontal light, it stood out against the sun, was exactly contained within the circle of the disk; the handles, the

> tongue, the share--black against the molten red. There it was, heroic in size, a picture writing on the sun. (p. 159)

Cather orchestrates her scene very carefully toward this prairie-induced spectacle: the discussion of Coronado and the country's alleged romantic past sets the atmosphere; Coronado's strivings and tragedy are linked to Mr. Shimerda's and, finally, the whole is encompassed in the best single description of the prairie mirage to be found in fiction since Cooper's depiction of Natty Bumppo. The symbolic plough, rendered "heroic in size" by the prairie landscape, encapsulates Cather's vision of the pioneer spirit; although it soon fades as "the ball dropped and dropped" until "that forgotten plough had sunk back to its own littleness somewhere on the prairie" (p. 159), Cather's symbolic vision lingers. As E. K. Brown wrote, the mention of Coronado "has woven an enchantment about the region,"[15] and the nature of that enchantment consists in the sense of continuity and culmination.

James E. Miller, Jr. has written that My Ántonia depicts "a struggle to re-create and assert existence in a seemingly hostile or indifferent land."[16] Indeed it does, but when placed in the context of the literature of the prairie, stretching back to the very Spaniard whom Cather evokes, My Ántonia (along with O Pioneers! and Cather's other prairie writings) also reflects the ways in which the landscape forces literary adaptation.[17] Other writers defined the practical adjustments required by the landscape, but Cather was the first to define the new strategies which were required to do justice to the prairie in fiction. Cather's techniques, which adjust the traditions of literature to the landscape's characteristics, are rooted in and are an amplification of the

basic elements of prairie landscape description from Castañeda onward. Her view of the land, finally, which commingles a romantic fancifulness--"the Genius of the Divide" and Burden's sentiments--with its stark realities--the opening of O Pioneers! and Mr. Shimerda--recognizes both poles in the history of reaction to the landscape.

Thus Cather's position as the author of both O Pioneers! and My Ántonia is best described in terms of her own use of a line from Virgil. Musing over the Georgics during his sophomore year at university, Burden lights upon the phrase: "'for I shall be the first, if I live, to bring the Muse into my country'" (p. 171). Owing to Ántonia's position in the novel as informing symbol (indeed, she is Jim's muse), this phrase applies to Burden, but it could also be applied to Willa Cather herself, who transformed the conventions of prairie landscape depiction and her own experience into the substance of great art.[18]

* * *

Of American pioneer novels, O. E. Rölvaag's Giants in the Earth (1927) is the most widely known after those by Cather. Like his predecessor Rölvaag was not born in the prairie West; he arrived in South Dakota a twenty-year old in 1896, having just emigrated from Norway. After some years of farm labor and various jobs, he entered a preparatory school; in 1905 he graduated from St. Olaf's College in Northfield, Minnesota and, after a year's graduate work in Norway, returned there to teach Norwegian for the remainder of his life. As a farm worker acquainted with the Norwegian-American community of the Dakotas and Minnesota, Rölvaag saw the land his pioneer predecessors had settled, and heard about

their experiences.

Like Cather, in Giants in the Earth Rölvaag concentrates on the psychological effects of pioneering, but he does so in a more immediate manner, and focuses on the more negative aspects. In My Ántonia, the reader sees Mr. Shimerda's dissatisfaction with the family's new home, and through Ántonia hears about it, but his suicide is a small element in the total work. Rölvaag's treatment of Beret Holm's growing insanity is far more extensive, and as with Garland's Blanche Burke the reader senses her growing dismay early in the narrative. Because of her bizarre religious beliefs--including terror of divine retribution and other anxieties and repressions--Beret feels that the family should never have left Norway, the site of all she cherishes, and her worst fears are confirmed by the prairie landscape, which aggravates her already pronounced melancholy temperament. Per Hansa, on the other hand, is the natural pioneer; the move from Norway to the Dakota prairie is for him the necessary experience of his lifetime--he sees his homestead as his destiny and despite several very bad years in which the settlers are visited by plauges of grasshoppers, he generally thrives through foresight and ingenuity. Rölvaag has thus made husband and wife each representative of a particular philosophical point of view, and the conflict which results strikes to the center of the psychological effect of the pioneer experience--if either party gains ascendancy over the other, the latter's essence will be denied. In Beret and Per Hansa, too, realism clashes with romance.

While Beret's melancholy has its roots in her old-world upbringing, the prairie landscape appalls her, leading her ultimately to a state of agoraphobia, in which she covers the windows of their dugout and, when she

finally succumbs to her fears during the first plague of grasshoppers, leads her to hide with her children in a large trunk which had been in her family since the seventeenth century. So Rölvaag's pioneers carry along with them an object which is almost as old as prairie exploration itself. Beret's first thought upon their arrival at their homestead, after wandering lost on the prairie for several days, becomes her refrain in the novel: "here there was nothing even to hide behind."[19] Immediately following this, Rölvaag expands upon the nature of Beret's fears at greater length:

> The infinite surrounding her on every hand might not have been so oppressive, might even have brought her a measure of peace, if it had not been for the deep silence, which lay heavier here than in a church. Indeed, what was there to break it? She had passed beyond the outposts of civilization; the nearest dwelling places of men were far away. Here no warbling of birds rose on the air, no buzzing of insects sounded; even the wind had died away; the waving blades of grass that trembled to the faintest breath now stood erect and quiet, as if listening, in the hush of the evening [. . . .] Had they travelled into some nameless, abandoned region? Could no living thing exist out here, in the empty, desolate, endless waste of green and blue? . . . How could existence go on, she thought, desperately? If life is to thrive and endure, it must at least have something to hide behind! (p. 37)

Like Washington Irving in the Cross Timbers when he compares his surroundings to a Gothic cathedral, Beret is reminded of a church by the western landscape--yet Rölvaag's allusion ironically inverts Irving's, for Beret sees no splendor here, only an unfittingly somber silence which exceeds that of a church. She comes to believe in the prairie horizon as a magic circle--interpreting their new-world home in terms based on old-

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world folk beliefs--and that nothing good can come to them there. As a result, she grows increasingly strange, overcome by the enormity without; she is anxious and nervous whenever Per Hansa travels away from their house and, after he concocts a lime mixture to whiten the walls of their sod hut in order to cheer her, she resorts to staring at the dark floor--the bright walls being too like the brightness outdoors.

Before Per Hansa's party relocates the rest of the group in the early sections of Giants in the Earth, while they are still lost on the prairie, Beret inquires of her son whether or not those they are seeking have been located; when he replies negatively, her response is reminiscent of Blanche Burke's and Jim Burden's sense that the prairie is somehow out of the world: "'This seems to be taking us to the end of the world . . . . beyond the end of the world!'" (p. 8).

Like Cather, to dramatize the idea that "the great fact was the land itself," Rölvaag introduces the landscape before introducing the characters:

> Bright, clear sky over a plain so wide that the rim of the heavens cut down on it around the entire horizon . . . . Bright, clear sky, to-day, to-morrow, and for all time to come.
>
> . . . And sun! And still more sun! It set the heavens afire every morning; it grew with the day to quivering golden light--then softened into all the shades of red and purple as evening fell . . . . Pure colour everywhere. A gust of wind, sweeping across the plain, threw into life waves of yellow and blue and green. Now and then a dead black wave would race over the scene . . . a cloud's gliding shadow . . . now and then . . . .
>
> It was late afternoon. A small caravan was pushing its way through the tall grass. The track that it left behind was like the wake of a boat--except that instead of widening out astern it closed in again.

> 'Tish-ah!' said the grass . . . . 'Tish-ah, tish-ah!' . . . Never had it said anything else--never would it say anything else. It bent resiliently under the trampling feet; it did not break, but it complained aloud every time--for nothing like this had happened to it before. (p. 3)

Like numerous first-person commentators, Rölvaag here presents the prairie as a magnificent object of visual apprehension. But his portrayal of the caravan from, as it were, the prairie's point of view, and his personification of the grass introduces a new perspective to the prairie tradition. The grass's complaint, moreover, emphasizes man's inability to have any impact on the landscape--"Tish-ah" is really a phonetic equivalent of "hush, hush"--and in its bending without breaking we infer the return of each blade to its upright posture. This is, of course, one of the aspects of the prairie which vexed Castañeda.

When Rölvaag does introduce Per Hansa and his family, one reason for his choice of title becomes clear:

> The caravan seemed a miserably frail and Lilliputian thing as it crept over the boundless prairie toward the sky line. Of road or trail there lay not a trace ahead; as soon as the grass had straightened up again behind, no one could have told the direction from which it had come or whither it was bound. The whole train--Per Hansa with his wife and children, the oxen, the wagons, the cow, and all--might just as well have dropped down out of the sky. Nor was it at all impossible to imagine that they were trying to get back there again; their course was always the same--straight toward the west, straight toward the sky line . . . . (p. 6)

Rölvaag's reference to Gulliver's Travels provides a familiar literary analogue: like Gulliver, who is a giant in Lilliput, Per Hansa and his

fellow pioneers are metaphorical giants because of their confrontation with the prairie. Clearly, they are metaphorical giants only: the land dwarfs them. Similarly, by alluding to Swift's work of fantasy, Rölvaag implies the problems inherent in depicting an unfamiliar landscape as setting. As his opening descriptions indicate, travel on the prairie has aspects of the fantastic about it--Per Hansa's party is lost when the novel opens, traveling to the accompaniment of the complaining prairie grass without the comfort of any-old-world landmarks. So while Rölvaag's dominant mode is realism, by invoking Gulliver's Travels he suggests the fantastic as well.

As in the case of Washington Irving and Francis Parkman, the impact of the prairie is the strongest when Per Hansa acknowledges that he is lost: "he literally did not know where he was, nor how to get to the place he had to reach" (p. 6). Looking about for his rendezvous, Per Hansa thinks he should have been there "two or three days ago; but he hadn't seen anything that even looked like the place . . . Oh, my God! If something didn't turn up soon! . . . My God! . . ." (p. 7). As a result of this experience, Per Hansa is--to paraphrase Albert Pike--thrown back upon himself; but undaunted he digs in and is determined to find their companions. True to the tradition of Alexander Henry, Per Hansa "swung over and held straight toward the highest part" of an elevation (p. 9), and, immediately after, the party views the sunset. Like Cooper and Cather, Rölvaag uses the prairie sunset symbolically, but his usage emphasizes darkness as well as light: "At the moment when the sun closed his eye, the vastness of the plain seemed to rise up on every hand--and suddenly the landscape had grown desolate; something bleak and cold had come into

the silence, filling it with terror . . . . Behind them, along the way they had come, the plains lay dark green and lifeless, under the gathering shadow of the dim, purple sky" (p. 9). Symbolically, the bright sunshine of the book's second paragraph ("And still more sun!") has its counterpart in Per Hansa; this image of desolation, bleakness, and silence--a landscape filled with terror--has its counterpart in Beret Holm. This tension between the romantic and the realistic persists to the end of the novel. Per Hansa, after all, dies when he becomes lost while on a foolish errand made mainly to please Beret, and he is found months later, dead, with his eyes "set toward the west" (p. 453). Thus the landscape is used throughout Giants in the Earth as a symbolic externalization of the philosophical and psychic differences between Per Hansa and Beret; it is the perfect symbol for a naturalistic universe against which Per Hansa struggles, armed only with his indomitable (and romantic) pioneer spirit and his wits.

If Per Hansa could in this sense be called one of the "giants in the earth," however, the giant is the land itself, and in some ways the real tension in the novel is between the mythic and the naturalistic, as the following description of the prairie in winter suggests:

> An endless plain. From Kansas--Illinois, it stretched, far into the Canadian north, God alone knows how far; from the Mississippi River to the western Rockies, miles without number . . . . Endless . . . . beginningless.
>
> A grey waste . . . an empty silence . . . a boundless cold. Snow fell; snow flew, a universe of nothing but dead whiteness. Blizzards from out of the northwest raged, swooped down and stirred up a greyish-white fury, impenetrable to human eyes. As soon as these monsters tired, storms from the north east were sure to come, bringing more snow . . . . 'The Lord have mercy!

> This is awful!' said the folk, for lack of anything else to say.
>
> Monsterlike the Plain lay there--sucked in her breath one week, and the next week blew it out again. Man she scorned, his works she would not brook . . . . She would know, when the time came, how to guard herself and her own against him! (p. 241)

What the mythic and the naturalistic have in common, finally, is an antagonism toward Christian ideology. Thus the final chapter of the novel, in which Per Hansa and Hans Olsa--the best men in the settlement--die as a result of exposure to the elements is entitled "The Great Plain Drinks the Blood of Christian Men and Is Satisfied."

* * *

A more positive expression of the humbling effects of the prairie is to be found in Fruits of the Earth (1933) by Frederick Philip Grove, the most eminent spokesman of pioneering on the Canadian prairie. Born Felix Paul Greve in 1879, Grove was a minor poet, novelist, translator, and dramatist in Germany before he fled in 1909 to North America to escape personal and financial problems. Where he arrived is uncertain, but in 1912 he turned up in Manitoba as Frederick Philip Grove and pursued a teaching career in rural towns. Grove's basis for his use of the prairie in his fiction, like Cather's, lay in his own experience of the landscape; thus in Over Prairie Trails (1922)--his first book in English and a series of descriptive travel essays--Grove writes: "For a moment I thought that something was missing here on the prairies. But then I reflected again that this silence of the grave was still more perfect, still more uncanny and ghostly, because it left the imagination entirely free, without limiting it by even as much as a suggestion."[20] Grove's positive reaction to the silence and imaginative freedom

occasioned by the landscape ironically echoes Irving's sense while lost that "there is something inexpressibly lonely in the solitude of the prairie. The loneliness of a forest seems nothing to it" (A Tour, p. 100). While Irving is confounded because the prairie's open vista forces him to recognize his isolation, Grove delights in that same openness and the imaginative freedom it occasions. Grove's reaction, too, is incontrast to Beret Holm's distress because she senses that the silence of the prairie incongruently exceeds that of a church.

At the beginning of Fruits of the Earth, however, Grove's protagonist, Abe Spalding, is not much interested in understanding the prairie land he comes to settle and conquer. Coming west from Brant County, Ontario in the summer of 1900, Spalding is seeking "a 'clear proposition' . . . a piece of land capable of being tilled from line to line, without waste areas, without rocky stretches, without deeply-cut gullies which denied his horses a foothold."[21] Or as Grove more pointedly observes: Spalding "wanted land, not landscape, all the landscape he cared for he would introduce himself." He dreams, moreover, of "a mansion dominating an extensive holding of land . . . . Dominating this prairie" (p. 23).

Grove's presentation of this theme of man against prairie is underscored by Abe's first dramatic, and symbolic action. Instead of spending the night in town upon his arrival, Spalding travels out to his claim and, though it is late afternoon, ploughs until sundown, cutting sixteen rounds. While doing so, Abe "had the peculiar feeling as though he were ploughing over an appreciable fraction of the curvature of the globe; for whenever he turned at the north end of his furrow, he could no longer see his wagon, as though it were hidden behind the shoulder of the earth" (p. 25). Grove's basis for this scene had its source in a personal

experience of his which is in itself strangely reminiscent of Cooper and Cather. As he explains in In Search of Myself:

> Somewhere towards the end of my outward drive, to town, I saw a man; and what is more, he was ploughing straight over the crest of a hill to the west, coming, when I caught sight of him, towards my trail. The town which I was approaching lay on the railway, in the dry belt of the country; the general verdict was that the surrounding district was unfit for farming. The mere fact, therefore, that this man was ploughing as he came over the crest of the hill was sufficiently arresting and even startling. Besides, outlined as he was against a tilted and spoked sunset in the western sky, he looked like a giant.[22]

Thus Grove's idea for Spalding's actions at the beginning of Fruits of the Earth and his characterization of Abe grew, after a fashion, from a striking image made vivid by the prairie landscape.

Similarly, laying the basis for Abe's personal conflict is his dual response to the land. Running counter to his resolve to conquer the prairie as he rides out to his claim is an inchoate attraction to the land as it is: "He would conquer! Yet, as he looked about, he was strangely impressed with this treeless prairie under the afternoon sun . . . . this prairie seemed suddenly a peculiar country, mysteriously endowed . . ." (pp. 22-23). The sentence ends, however, with the phrase "with a power of testing temper and character," and thus having translated the attraction of the prairie into a challenge, Abe continues to assert his initial resolve: "But this immense and utter loneliness merely aroused him to protest and contradiction: he would change this prairie, would impose himself upon it, would conquer its spirit!" (p. 23).

Throughout the first part of the novel, as the title of this section--"Abe Spalding"--suggests, the landscape is a thing shaped and

molded by Grove's hero to suit his desires. A man possessed, he thinks only of his ongoing battle with the soil and the elements, having no time for his neighbors' periodic discussions of metaphysical questions, nor for any relaxation. Abe dreams only of the time when he will put 1200 acres of wheat in; he does so and, through a last-minute decision to stack his wheat, turns probable ruin into his best crop ever. Flush with victory, Abe finally builds his mansion complete with electric power, and seeing the light blazing away at night from miles distant on the prairie constituted "the proudest moment" of Spalding's life (p. 119). The prairie has its revenge, however, for a year later Abe's favorite child, Charlie, is crushed to death beneath a wagon-load of wheat.

The shock of Charlie's death, following so closely upon Abe's achievement of his dreams, effects a change in his character. Whereas before he has been an economic pragmatist, monomaniacally concerned only with subduing his land, Abe becomes in Part II a man motivated by selflessness and civic pride. Grove dramatizes this transformation in terms of Abe's changing perception of the prairie landscape. In a chapter entitled "The Prairie," Abe notices that his dream mansion, which has been standing for only five years, is already showing the wear of the prairie winds and that his windbreak, made up of spruce and poplar trees, is similarly showing the wear caused by their exposure. Gazing across the prairie, Abe realizes that "Whatever relieved the sky-line was man's work" (p. 135), and like his house and wind-break, these too were in the process of being leveled by the force of natural elements. Thus he concludes that on the prairie, even after twenty years of continuous settlement "man remains distinctly

an interloper" (p. 137).

To balance this new-found realistic view of his position on the prairie, Abe also acquires another new view point which, if not exactly romantic, at least involves an appreciation of the imaginative appeal of the landscape, and which takes the form of an articulation of his earlier, inchoate sense of the peculiar and mysterious prairie. He appreciates the "frequency of mirages. Often a distant strip of land was lifted above the horizon like a low-flung cloud; a town or a group of farmsteads, ordinarily hidden behind the intervening shoulder of the world, stood up clearly against the whitish sky which only overhead shaded off into a pale blue . . . . On this prairie, near things often seemed to be distant--a haystack no more than a quarter of a mile away loomed gigantic as though separated from the eye by two or three miles" (p. 135). Throughout this chapter, it is as if after twenty years in the area Abe is discovering the landscape for the first time--he who years earlier had "wanted land, not landscape"--although as Grove planned it, Abe is also seeing and understanding the peculiarly characteristic traits of the prairie landscape which strangely impressed him as he rode out to plough his first furrow in the summer of 1900.

Significantly, one of the images Grove employs in articulating Abe's new-found understanding is the same as that used by Cather in Jim Burden's trip to the family's garden--the soaring hawk. Grove writes: "Altogether, it is even today a landscape which in spite of the ever-encroaching settlements of man, seems best to be appreciated by a low, soaring, flight, as by that of the marsh-hawk so commonly seen in the open season" (p. 136). Similarly, in the midst of a description of various aspects of the prairie landscape, Grove writes: "The prevailing

silence--for, apart from man's dwellings, not even the wind finds anything to play its tunes on--is accentuated rather than disturbed by the sibilant hum, in early summer, of the myriads of mosquitoes that haunt the air, bred in stagnant pools, and the shrill notes, in the early autumn, of the swarm of black crickets that literally covered the soil. That silence, like the flat landscape itself, has something haunted about it, something almost furtive . . ." (p. 138). The silence of which Grove speaks here is the very same aspect of the landscape that so impressed Albert Pike and so disturbed Beret Holm in Rölvaag's novel.

Finally, when Abe's new-found knowledge is fully articulated, Grove's description of his protagonist's new understanding is presented in terms of imagery derived from the prairie landscape:

> Abe, now that he was becoming conscious of this landscape at last, and of its significance, could at first hardly understand that he, of all men, should have chosen this district to settle in, though it suited him well enough now. But even that became clear. He had looked down at his feet; had seen nothing but the furrow; had considered the prairie only as a page to write the story of his life upon. His vision had been bounded by the lines of his farm; his farm had been floated on that prairie as the shipwright floats a vessel on the sea, looking not so much at the waves which are to batter it as at the fittings which secure the comfort of those within. But such a vessel may be engulfed by such a sea. (p. 138)

The prairie-ocean analogy informs this passage, serving as an illustrative counterpoint to Abe's new perspective--before he had only been aware of his farm, his "ship," but now he sees his metaphoric ship within the context of the wider sea in which it sails. Though a hackneyed analogy, Grove employs it here to interject a familiar parallel into a still largely unfamiliar landscape, just as Cather did through Burden's feeling

that the prairie grass made the land feel as if it were in motion. The prairie landscape, moreover, is a fit symbol for Abe's transformation, since it provides him with an uninterrupted view--a long perspective--unequalled on earth. As noted earlier, when he cut his first furrow years before, Abe had an inchoate sense that he was "ploughing over an appreciable fraction of the curvature of the globe," since he was unable to see his wagon "behind the shoulder of the earth." Although it takes him twenty years, Abe eventually obtains an understanding of himself and of his community which equals in breadth of imagination the physical vastness of the prairie. Through the landscape, as one critic has observed, "Grove is able to amplify the three major aspects of Abe's growing consciousness"--his involvement in family and community, his feeling that man is an interloper, and his recognition that the prairie landscape has distinctive qualities all its own.[23]

Grove's technique in Fruits of the Earth is organic to the prairie landscape, in large measure. In coming to conquer, Abe Spalding stands as a fictional analogue to such earlier commentators as Lewis and Clark who failed to see the uniqueness of the prairie landscape in their adherence to contemporary aesthetics, and to Washington Irving, who was equipped to see the landscape only in terms of his previously inculcated literary conventions. And just as the landscape forced itself upon Irving when he was lost, so the prairie asserted its peculiar impressiveness for Abe. Like those actual travelers and explorers who preceded him onto the prairie, such as Alexander Henry, Edwin James, and Francis Parkman, Grove's Abe Spalding learns, as does Cather's Alexandra Bergson, that man must adapt to the prairie and understand it--it will not adapt to man nor be conquered by him; it is implacable: "Man passes,

they say; his work remains. Does it? It seemed vain in the face of the composure of this prairie" (p. 262). Frederick Philip Grove adapted to the landscape in Fruits of the Earth.

In Wallace Stegner's On a Darkling Plain (1939) the pioneering theme is treated from a slightly different perspective. Born in Iowa in 1909, Stegner moved with his family to a homestead in southern Saskatchewan where he spent his boyhood years; his experiences during this time form the basis of Wolf Willow (1962), a personal reminiscence, wherein he treats frontier prairie life and compares life on either side of the 49th parallel. In On a Darkling Plain Edwin Vickers, just released from the Princess Pats regiment because of lung damage resulting from the battle of Ypres, arrives in the spring of 1918 to take up a homestead in southern Saskatchewan near the American border. Like other pioneers, he is seeking a new life, but his reasons for taking up a homestead alone cluster about his desire to escape society: "He was a man upon the earth, anchored in the rind of a continent, as far from the fever and sickness of humanity as he could get . . . ."[24] Seeking isolation on the prairie, Vickers learns--like Washington Irving, Francis Parkman, Beret Holm and Abe Spalding--that the landscape forces introspection. He soon discovers his need for humanity and so befriends his neighbor's teenage daughter; Vickers is frighted, as well, when he meets another neighbor, Wilde, whose sod hut is filled with pictures of women to appeal to his perversion and "starved lust" (p. 90). He is aware of his own sexual needs and, at the same time, acknowledges a neighbor's reasons for declining his invitation to share a meal: "'No. Wife's over home waitin'. Been alone four days. That's enough in this country. Drive you batty in a week'" (p. 113).

But while Stegner dissects the psychological effects of prairie isolation during Vickers' sojourn on the prairie, he saves much of his analysis for the way the landscape makes a person feel, and for the difficulty of transferring such feelings into art.

> To kill some of the interminable time he began to keep a diary, putting into it whatever he saw or felt or thought. The way a hawk coasting in a long glide down an air current suddenly folded wings and dropped, a red-brown streak through the afternoon; the scuffle of dust where it struck, and the heavy launching again, the slow beating upward and southward with a gopher limp in the dragging talons.
>
> That, or the drift of the wind after sundown, always a west wind that blew directly out of the clean sky, trailing the roll of the eastward earth. A dozen times he tried to get into poetry that feeling of riding the naked back of a planet, but the thing was stubborn in his hands, an image too big for him. If he did get something down, it turned out next day when he read it over to be a series of glib Tennysonian prettinesses that he ripped out of the tablet and threw at the wall. At times like those he hated the vast earth. It was too big and too impersonal; it dwarfed him, made his very consciousness seem sick, as if he were the one spot of corrupt tissue in a mighty health. (pp. 109-10)

Describing Vickers' attempt to describe the prairie, Stegner suggests numerous aesthetic problems raised by the prairie landscape. Vickers longs to capture the feeling of "riding," Pegasus like, "the naked back of a planet." But though, as in the description of a hawk's kill, Vickers has muse enough he does not have the means to articulate his scene and his sense of it. Instead, he scorns the British romantic conventions with which he is familiar--such is his implication--for they are not suitable form for his feelings. The land's impersonality forces him to reckon with his own minuscule stature in relation to the larger world--it forces him to

objectify, to recognize his own insignificance. And later, Vickers writes as much in a letter to a friend: "That is the magnificence of this country. It takes my breath sometimes, the sweep of it. But I can't get a flash of it into poetry that satisfies me. It's altogether too indifferent to my little human itches and urges and yearnings" (p. 127). Vickers implies here that his difficulty arises from the land itself--it scorns subjectivity. Interestingly, a poet and critic who also scorned subjectivity was Mathew Arnold, whose "Dover Beach" is the source of Stegner's title. Although its main suggestiveness relates to Vickers' retreat from society--where "ignorant armies clash by night"--because of its alienating qualities, Stegner's Saskatchewan "darkling plain" provides also only a temporary retreat from subjectivity.

And Vickers' inability to write poetry which satisfies him, as he continues to explain in his letter seems "to mean that poetry and art have to deal with people or there's no reason for their existing. There's no point in landscape for landscape's sake. My lines about wind and sun and moon and the motion of blowing grass are as asinine out here as a silk purse would be, or eau de Cologne" (p. 127). Vickers raises aesthetic issues here which are at the center of the prairie fiction tradition. As he says, by its very nature art must deal with humanity but the essence of the prairie landscape is the relative absence of humanity, even to the present. Vicker's dissatisfaction, moreover, echoes Albert Pike's comment that the prairie has the power to throw "a man back upon himself"; that is, it enforces the very introspection and objectivity of which Vickers speaks. In this vein, too, is another comment in his letter, where he says that the land makes him feel as if he is "hanging on" to the earth "so tight that there isn't time to analyze" his emotions (p. 123). The first painters

who came into the prairie West bear Vickers out through their techniques; many, like Catlin, simply blocked the background and so enclosed and controlled the prairie space. Others, like Alfred Jacob Miller in his Noon-day Rest (See Appendix, p. 362), balanced the triangle of the canvas which contained the prairie with a foreground eminence and, to domesticate the scene further, sprinkled the prairie vista with numerous carts, grazing animals, and sleeping humans which stretch to the horizon.

Vicker's initial romantic exhilaration is followed by a sense of emptiness caused by his inability to capture his feelings in poetry--another type of prairie monotony. Yet the landscape, although its qualities make emotional analysis difficult, forces Vickers into introspection--he builds a sundial on the ground so as to control his time and, through his scrutiny of his neighbors recognizes a personal need for human society. And, as he states in his letter, his poetic art depends upon interaction within society. Vickers' resolve to return to society--which is forced upon him in part by the objectifying properties of the prairie landscape--is carried out when the town nearest his homestead is struck by the flu outbreak of 1918 and he takes part in ministering to its victims.

In On a Darkling Plain, therefore, Stegner employs the landscape as a catalyst for Vicker's recuperation. The prairie's "magnificence" forces Vickers to rely on his personal abilities, and faced by such a bare and impersonal vista, he must rethink his relations with the rest of humanity and with the very earth itself as he rides "the naked back of a planet." Explorers and travelers attested to the ways in which the prairie landscape made them rethink their assumptions, but Wallace Stegner, like Cather, Rölvaag, and Grove before him, transformed an imaginative process into a major technical motif in a work of fiction. And Edwin Vickers,

although his motives for homesteading differ from most, is as much a pioneer as Per Hansa or Abe Spalding; each farmer opened new land for settlement and reacted to the requirements of the land. Vickers did much the same thing while learning similar lessons, but he was attempting to open the prairie for the realm of art.[25]

* * *

Falling between those works which depict pioneering in the prairie West and those which concern life on the settled prairie are a group of works which dramatize the relations between the first generation pioneers and those who came after. Representative is Martha Ostenso's Wild Geese (1925) which concerns a pioneer's relations with his children. Born in Norway, Ostenso spent her youth in Minnesota, South Dakota, and Manitoba; these areas provide the settings of her novels. Wild Geese, because of its setting in the interlake and prairie regions of Manitoba, is usually singled out from her works set in the U.S. and treated within the Canadian context. In it, Ostenso uses the land deliberately to define her major antagonists, Caleb Gare and his daughter Judith. While Gare tries to conquer his land, wringing from it all it will produce, Judith rebels against his domination and in doing so exhibits an understanding attitude toward the land which is in some ways reminiscent of Alexandra Bergson's.

Caleb is a pioneer who strives to dominate everything around him--the prairie, his family, and his community. Unlike Abe Spalding, Gare has no redeeming qualities whatsoever; he is able to manage real feeling only for a prized field of flax and is, moreover, a user of the soil--he simply oversees the work done by his children. As Ostenso presents him,

Gare's harshness stems from the land itself: Caleb "could not be characterized in terms of human virtue or human vice," for he is "a spiritual counterpart of the land, as harsh, as demanding, as tyrannical as the very soil from which he drew his existence."[26] As a melodramatic villain, Gare's control over his family is in the same generic vein, since he maintains his sway by virtue of the dark secret he holds over his wife; he succeeds in cowing all his children but Judith, who defies him.[27]

Gare is described in images of landscape, although significantly not of the prairie: his head "loomed forward from the rest of his body like a rough projection of rock from the ledge of a cliff . . ." (p. 13). After berating his family one evening (as is usual), Gare emerges with his lantern to take a ritualistic walk through his fields. Here Ostenso does draw upon the prairie setting in order to dramatize her protagonist's mania:

> Far out across the prairie a lantern was swinging low along the earth, and dimly visible was the squat,top-heavy form of a man. It was Caleb Gare. He walked like a man leaning forward against a strong wind. He frequently went outside alone so, with a lantern; no one knew where, nor why; no one asked. Judith had once told Amelia scornfully that it was to assure himself that his land was still all there . . . .
>
> Caleb pressed on through the half-dark, leaning foward as if against some invisible obstacle. Presently he came to a ridge from which he could look east and west, north and south, upon the land that was his; the two tame hayfields, separated from each other by a neck of timber belonging to Fusi Aronson [. . . .] (pp. 18-19)

Two elements in the landscape are used to characterize Gare: seen from a distance on the prairie, carrying his lantern (like Alexandra at the end

of the first chapter of O Pioneers!), Gare's symbolic stature is made imagistically available to the reader; similarly, Ostenso uses the view from an eminence--after the fashion of Howe's use of the church tower--as a means to delimit both Caleb's position on the prairie and his attitude toward his neighbors.

Ostenso's central symbol, the wild geese, are first seen flying north "to a region beyond human warmth . . . beyond even human isolation . . ." (p. 32). The flight of the geese--an image indigenous to the prairie--symbolizes the movement in the novel away from Gare's tyranny which is manifested primarily in Judith. Despite Caleb's attempts to cow her by beating her and stabling her like an animal, Judith affirms her spirit, and rejoices in the child she conceives out of wedlock. Judith is, ultimately, her father's opposite--he lacks all feelings while she delights in her emotions. She also possesses a Cather-like understanding of the rhythms of the earth, as seen when she removes her clothing and embraces the earth. Thus when Judith serves as central consciousness for a view of the prairie landscape, her personality and history combine to present both its romance and its reality:

> As she jogged along in the cart, her eyes idled across the flat, unsurprising earth that went on and on into the north with scarcely a perceptible undulation. Here was the bush land, without magnificence, without primitive redundance of growth: here was the prairie, spare as an empty platter--no, there was the solitary figure of a man upon it, like a meagre offering of earth to heaven. Here were the little wood trails and prairie trails that a few men had made on lonely journeyings, and here the crossings where they had met to exchange a word or two. The sky above it all was blue and tremendous, a vast country for proud birds that were ever on the wing, seeking, seeking. And a little delicate wind that was like a woman, [Judith] thought to herself, but could

> in a moment become a male giant violating the earth. (pp. 112-13)

While other writers have noted the presence of birds on the prairie, Cather, Ostenso and Mitchell highlight the animation their presence brings the landscape. Describing her first impression of the prairie landscape, when she was ten years old, Cather recalls being impressed by the "splendid notes" of the larks.[28] Ostenso also employs these birds to dramatize both poles of the prairie experience; the prairie is empty, the site of "lonely journeyings," but also arched over by "tremendous" blue sky for "seeking" birds. Her final sentence, which lends symbolic weight to the omnipresent prairie winds, draws upon an element in the landscape to make a thematic point particular to Wild Geese--Judith is like the "delicate wind," in view of her understanding of the earth's rhythms while Caleb Gare, her polar opposite, is a "male giant violating the earth."

Wild Geese combines romance and realism in its depiction of pioneer prairie life, as do the works of Garland and Cather, among others. Yet the way in which Ostenso went about her mixture is instructive; by reaching to the conventions of the melodrama for her depiction of Caleb Gare, who is a human equivalent to the landscape, she posits a most extreme view of the land's harshness. As with Rölvaag's reference to Gulliver's Lilliput, however, the exaggeration with which Caleb's character is drawn suggests the fantastic--the land seems to demand a man who is a tyrant, a harsh monomaniac, or perverse giant. To balance this view, though, Ostenso presents Judith with her sense of the land as a delicate creature, something to be understood and nurtured, and to be

enveloped by the image of the ever "seeking" geese. In Wild Geese, then, the fantastically harsh reality of the land demands melodrama while, at the same time, from another view, its romantic qualities are equally salient.

Another novel which concerns the relations between pioneers and those who came after is Conrad Richter's The Sea of Grass (1937). Richter, born in Pennsylvania, went west to live in New Mexico and this novel draws upon his experiences there, depicting

life on the West Texas-Eastern New Mexico plains during the period in which settlers took up land previously used for cattle ranching. The sea-of-grass image, which is of course here an overt invocation of the prairie-sea analogy, is central to Richter's depiction because certain of his characters--most notably Lutie Brewton and the nesters who try to settle land--seem to drown in this landscape.

The narrative technique is similar to that of My Ántonia; told from the point of view of Hal, the nephew of the protagonist, Colonel Jim Brewton, the novel dramatizes Brewton's relations with the settlers--nesters--as well as his relations with his wife, Lutie Brewton. Also as in My Ántonia, Richter's use of a first-person narrative persona projects the works's inherent romanticism away from the author. Hal, who was a boy when ranchers such as his uncle were at the height of their influence, tells a tale tinged with nostalgia for those days, since as he grows he watches the progressive decline of his uncle's power.

This decline is depicted on two levels, the public and the personal, and in each realm the landscape counterpoints the decline Hal describes.

Because ranchers like Brewton--who had "a ranch larger than Massachusetts with Connecticut thrown in"[29]--owned only a small portion of their holdings, the rest owed by the government, he cannot do anything to stop settlers from taking up claims on what had been "his" land. Upon being told that the army was there to protect the settlers' right to farm the land, Brewton responds: "'You can keep the nesters from being blown away but God himself can't [keep] the prairie [from being blown away]!'" (p. 80). Brewton proves to be right, for the land which will support ranching on a large scale will not support farming on any scale at all.

The domestic plot, which runs parallel to the struggle between the ranchers and nesters, involves the relations between the Colonel and Lutie Cameron, a St. Louis belle who comes west to marry him. A person of great intensity, Lutie bears three children (one of whom is putatively the result of an affair between Lutie and the Colonel's nemesis, Brice Chamberlain) but, because she is not a frontier woman, she cannot bear the isolation of her ranch house, and ultimately leaves the Colonel. Richter articulates her dissatisfaction through her aversion to the prairie landscape, which is apparent as soon as she arrives in Salt Fork from St. Louis, as Hal relates: "But when we reached the top of the escarpment and, suddenly like coming on the ocean unaware, there in front of us stretched the vast, brown, empty plain, dipping and pitching endlessly like a parched sea, she stopped as if she had run into barbed wire. I tried to point out a remote, nearly indistinguishable cloud shadow that marked the general location of the distant ranch house, but she didn't seem to hear me, chatting almost breathlessly about a travelling acquaintance on the Pullman palace car . . ." (p. 13). Upon her arrival in the house, Lutie has a wall of tamarisks and cottonwoods

planted, ostensibly for shade, but actually because she cannot bear the open view of a prairie vista--it reminds her too much of her isolation. Describing occasions on which he drove his aunt into town, Hal realizes this: "the moment we passed out through the dense wall of cottonwoods and tamarisks, [Lutie] chatted incessantly, her sensitive face turned away from the wide sea of grass as if it were the plague, so that I swore she never saw the road runner racing with the carriage wheel or the antelope moving among the cattle. And I thought that at last I begun to understand the reason for her wall of cottonwoods and tamarisks, which had not been planted for summer shade at all" (p. 33).

Lutie's response to the landscape is like that of Blanche Burke in The Moccasin Ranch, Mr. Shimerda in My Ántonia, and Beret Holm in Giants in the Earth; each author seems to be contending that some people are constitutionally ill-suited for life on the prairie which, as Washington Irving wrote, does not allow the individual to imagine "some livelier scene beyond." As commentators like Brackenridge and Butler attest, too, the prairie vista makes one aware of his isolation, and as Stegner's Edwin Vickers realizes, this forces a person to objectify his situation. Like these characters and commentators, Lutie cannot bear isolation and, at the same time, she has little sympathy with her husband's fight with the nesters (to her, they represent a social element which she misses)--so she leaves both her husband and her children. Her inability to cope with frontier conditions, however, has the effect of enhancing Richter's presentation of Colonel Brewton as a romantic pioneer of forthright morals and spartan endurance. As Hal describes him at the beginning of the novel: "That lusty pioneer blood is tamed now, broken and gelded like the wild horse and the frontier settlement. And I think I shall never see

it flowing through human veins again as it did in my Uncle Jim Brewton riding a lathered horse across his shaggy range or standing in his massive ranch house, bare of furniture as a garret, and holding together his empire of grass and cattle by the fire in his eyes" (p. 3). Brewton, mounted upon a horse, controlled the prairie while John Bergson, who sensed the land was like a horse no one could break to the harness, was unable to do so. Edwin Vickers, too, longs to express in his poetry the feeling of riding "the naked back of a planet." Each of these characters either controls or longs to control the prairie by riding Alexander Henry-like above it; and the horse--recurrent in the travel literature and striking to Melville's Ishmael--is seen as another means to that end.

Richter's evocation of the romantic image of the new, scarcely touched, land sullied by the nesters is like the numerous elation-deflation reactions seen in earlier descriptions and depictions of the prairie yet, here, the transformation is brought about not so much by a changing single point of view as by the collision of different points of view. The ranchers value the land in its semi-wild state while settlers, regardless of advice to the contrary, are determined to attempt farming. The result, as Richter suggests, is that without the "sea of grass" to cover the soil, the prairie blows away, leaving a land suitable for neither purpose. As such, Richter's novel depicts a land which has passed through the pioneer stage, and the issues it raises relate not to settling the land but what to do with it, once settled.[30]

* * *

The dustbowl thirties were bad years for the prairie region, yet the drought produced some of the finest

prairie fiction--Sinclair Ross's As For Me and My House (1941) and W. O. Mitchell's Who Has Seen the Wind (1947), being two of the most notable examples. Before turning to these two Canadian works, however, some mention must be made of the two American classics which preceded them and which--although not directly--were influential in shaping the prairie literature tradition. Sinclair Lewis's Main Street (1920) depicts Gopher Prairie, Minnesota, from the point of view of Carol Kennicott, newly-married wife of the town's physician, and newly arrived from Minneapolis. Despite her attempts to improve life in the town through a literary association and similar cultural efforts, Gopher Prairie is unyielding: its residents will not alter their smug and intolerant ways. And while the landscape is of no particular importance to Lewis's dissection of small-town narrowmindedness, its connotation is vital to the novel, since Lewis is drawing upon the same prejudice as that articulated by Cather's New York critic: "I simply don't care a damn what happens in [the prairie West], no matter who writes about it." Thus in Main Street the prairie connotes rustic America, a place from which relatively cultured and enlightened people, like Carol Kennicott, are forced to flee.

Similarly, the prairie provides the literal point of departure for the Joads in Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath (1939). Evicted from their farm in Oklahoma, the Joads--like the throng of Okies they typify--set out for California to start a new life in what they hold to be a land of plenty. Hounded throughout their journey by authorities and stalked by want and starvation, the Joads represent Steinbeck's rejection of capitalism and other established norms, included Christianity. In

their stead, he presents a vision based on the cyclical nature of life, which in turn is based on the life cycle. People adapt--as do the Joads--to the conditions which confront them, and change, but they continue on. The role of the prairie in The Grapes of Wrath is therefore as a landscape which is for a time at the bottom of the cycle during the dustbowl. Like humanity, which the Joads exemplify, it too will go on and renew itself.

In Sinclair Ross's As For Me and My House life on the prairie during the dustbowl thirties is depicted in excruciating detail. Born in Shellbrook, Saskatchewan, in 1908, Ross grew up on the Canadian prairie and worked as a banker, in numerous small prairie towns as well as in its cities before retiring. A sense of dispirited loneliness pervades As For Me and My House. Ross's protagonists, Philip and Mrs. Bentley--she has no first name--are newly-arrived in Horizon where Philip is to be the local minister. Horizon is merely the latest in a succession of similar prairie towns in which the Bentleys have lived since their marriage twelve years previously. The emptiness of the surrounding prairie reflects the barrenness of the Bentley's lives--the term "barren," (first used by Henry Kelsey to describe the prairie in the late seventeenth century), moreover, has several levels of meaning in the novel. A land without rain, the prairie is barren of growth just as it is, as a landscape, largely barren of trees; the Bentley's marriage is spiritually barren just as it is physically barren, the latter owing to Mrs. Bentley's inability to have a child; and Philip, whom Mrs. Bentley claims to be an artist, is also seen to be artistically impotent.

The novel is narrated through Mrs. Bentley's diary entries, which are

dated and cover little more than a year; there are frequent gaps of several days, which dramatize the non-eventful character of her life, just as numerous repetitions dramatize the tedium of her situation. As Warren Tallman observes, "The novel is less like a story than it is like a cumulative picture in which Ross, by a remarkable, almost tour de force repetition of detail, grains a central scene upon the reader's consciousness so that all other details and even the action of the novel achieve meaningful focus in relation to the one scene at the center, repeated some thirty times."[31] This central scene, repeated so many times in the novel, is Philip's retreat into his study in order to--Mrs. Bentley says--avoid her. There he sits, drawing or looking at his previous drawings, most of which are of false-fronted buildings staring at one another.

What needs to be noted, however, is that the source of Ross's "cumulative" picture technique is the landscape itself, and that his use of repetition and the diary form constitute the culmination of a tradition in prairie writing. David Thompson commented that the journal form, "however dull, is the only method, in my opinion, that can give the reader a clear idea of" the prairie landscape, and here Thompson confirmed the internal evidence provided by Henday's repetitions of "We are still in the Muscuty plains" and also Kelsey's implicit vexation with the vastness of the landscape. Thompson's observation was itself later confirmed by the writings of Edwin James, George Catlin, and John Lambert, among others, who noted the monotony of the landscape and the ways in which this monotony affects the imagination. As it is used by both Thompson and Ross, the journal format attempts to give suitable form to the land's monotony. Similarly, in his first extended description of

Horizon's locale and environs, Ross combines a series of responses and techniques to be found in prairie literature:

> It's an immense night out there, wheeling and windy. The lights on the street and in the houses are helpless against the black wetness, little unilluminating glints that might be painted on it. The town seems huddled together, cowering on a high, tiny perch, afraid to move lest it topple into the wind. Close to the parsonage is the church, black even against the darkness, towering ominously up through the night and merging with it . . . . Above, in the high cold night, the wind goes swinging past, indifferent, liplessly mournful. It frightens me, makes me feel lost, dropped on this little perch of town and abandoned. I wish Philip would waken.[32]

In terms of treatment this has much in common with Wister's description of Medicine Bow and Cather's opening paragraph in O Pioneers!--the town seen from a distance, the possibility that it might "topple in the wind," and the indifference of the forces without. Mrs. Bentley's frightened reaction to the prairie might also echo the sort of responses to the land seen in Butler's "terrible grandeur" passage in The Wild North Land and his awareness of loneliness and isolation seen in The Great Lone Land. And the wind, which ultimately drives Blanche Burke from the prairie in Garland's Moccasin Ranch, similarly affects Mrs. Bentley; because of the wind's indifference--the same sense of the land perceived by Stegner's Vickers--she feels as Beret Holm feels at the outset of Giants in the Earth.[33]

Where Ross goes beyond his predecessors, however, where his originality lies, is in the extent to which "the outer situation mirrors the inner"[34]--the landscape serving as the objective correlative of Mrs. Bentley's feelings and state of mind. After the Bentleys spend a

difficult evening with Paul, the local school teacher who befriends them, for example, Mrs. Bentley writes: "There's a high, rocking wind that rattles the windows and creaks the walls. It's strong and steady like a great tide after the winter pouring north again, and I have a queer, helpless sense of being lost miles out in the middle of it, flattened against a little peak of rock . . . . The town, too, seems clinging to a little peak, the rays of light from lamps and windows like so many thin-drawn tentacles. The stars are out, up just above the wind. They light the sky a little, and leave it vast and dark down here" (p. 35). The disturbing wind and her sense of vulnerability are a reflection of the hatred which during the dinner with Paul she felt she perceived in her husband on account of her barrenness.

Similarly, just after Mrs. Bentley has had to defend their decision to adopt Steve, the recently-abandoned twelve-year-old son of a local Roman Catholic ne'r do well, she dwells upon the dust swirling through Horizon: "It's been nearly dark today with dust. Everything's gritty, making you shiver and setting your teeth on edge. There's a crunch on the floor like sugar when you walk. We keep the doors and windows closed, and still it works in everywhere. I lay down for a little while after supper, and I could feel it on the pillow. The air is so dry and choking with it that every few minutes a kind of panic seizes you, and you have an impulse to thresh out against it with your hands" (p. 62). In this instance, the seeping dust symbolizes the disapproval of the Protestant townsfolk--those with "Main Street minds"--who thoroughly disapprove of the Bentley's decision to adopt Steve, and Mrs. Bentley's panicked response reflects her suppressed anger.

On Christmas Eve, two weeks after the Bentleys learn that Judith West is expecting a child, Mrs. Bentley walks off into the snow-covered prairie, away from the town:

> The hollows and crests of the drifts made the walking hard, and half a mile from town I perched for a few minutes on a fence post that stood up about a foot above the snow. I sat so still that a rabbit sprinted past not twenty feet in front of me, and a minute later, right at my feet, there was the breathlike shadow of a pursuing owl. I had been climbing a little all the time I walked, so that I could see the dark straggle of Horizon now below me like an island in the snow. A rocky, treacherous island, I told myself, that had to have five lighthouses. (p. 148)

The difficulty she experiences in walking is the externalization of her difficulty in how to cope with Judith's pregnancy, while the owl pursuing the rabbit is a forecast of how she will respond to the situation. What she sees from her raised perspective is similarly a reflection of her own feeling of betrayal and also of her own subsequent treacherousness.

Yet Ross's most impressive symbolic use of the elements of the landscape lies not with these continual parallels between the external landscape and the Bentleys' inner one; rather, it lies in his depiction of Partridge Hill, a nearby community where Philip holds a weekly service. Describing their first meeting with the congregation there, Mrs. Bentley's observation reflects the community's relationship with the dustbowl prairie landscape: "The last hymn was staidly orthodox, but through it there seemed to mount something primitive, something that was less a response to Philip's sermon and scripture reading than to the grim futility of their own lives. Five years in succession now they've been

blown out, dried out, hailed out; and it was as if in the face of so blind and uncaring a universe they were trying to assert themselves, to insist upon their own meaning and importance" (p. 19). At the root of Ross's description is the same perception of the prairie landscape which so affected Castañeda, Irving, and Parkman, as well as others. While those men were concerned with finding their way through a land which enforced an awareness of their own loneliness, the residents of Partridge Hill, in the face of an equally impersonal landscape, are engaged in trying to assert their presence.

On another trip to Partridge Hill, Mrs. Bentley reports that the congregation was "listening to the wind, not Philip, the whimpering and strumming through the eaves, and the dry hard crackle of sand against the windows. From the organ I could see their faces pinched and stiffened with anxiety. They sat in tense, bolt upright rows, most of the time their ryes on the ceiling, as if it were the sky and they were trying to read the weather" (p. 37). Here Ross implies a truth made evident by the landscape: that the weather has far more pertinence to the lives of these people than do Philip's sermons and scriptures. Indeed, through Mrs. Bentley's sense that there is "something primitive"--followed as it is by Paul's etymological lecture ("'That was what you heard this morning--pagans singing Christian hymns . . . .'" [p. 19])--Ross suggests that Christianity has no place on the dustbowl prairie. In a certain sense Christianity is as imported and inappropriate a form on the prairie as Washinton Irving's literary conventions--and the people of Partridge Hill attest to that view. Ross's point, furthermore, echoes Thompson's observation that "living in the wide open plains" (Narrative, p. 264)

affects the religious attitudes of the prairie Indians. Likewise, Rölvaag demonstrates how Beret's traditional religious beliefs compound Per Hansa's problems in Giants in the Earth. To accentuate this point, when Peter Lawson, a young Partridge Hill boy, dies, Ross describes the cemetery as "just a fenced in acre or two on the prairie" where "There are dry, stalky weeds on the graves, and you can see where gophers and badgers have been burrowing." Later, his father looks off "across the hot burned fields" and, trying to steady himself, says "'We aren't going to get even our seed this year. Maybe he's not missing such a lot'" (p. 109). On another occasion, Mrs. Bentley recounts an incident which also implies the questionable relevance of Christianity in Partridge Hill. After service, "a woman came up to us and said it was well to be a preacher, money to spend, not much to do, a car to drive round the country in. They won't thresh a bushel this fall. They won't have potatoes even, or feed for their chickens and pigs. It's going to be a chance, she says, for the Lord to show some of the compassion that Philip's forever talking about in his sermons. She has five children. This winter they're going to need shoes and underwear" (p. 113).

As Philip Bentley sees it, art and religion have much in common: they "'are almost the same thing anyway. Just different ways of taking a man out of himself, bringing him to the emotional pitch that we call ecstasy or rapture. They're both a rejection of the material, common-sense world for one that's illusory, yet somehow more important'" (p. 112). And with this observation we may turn now to a consideration of Philip Bentley, beginning by noting however, that Bentley and his wife also have a problem in common. As David Stouck has pointed out, Philip

Bentley's art is essentially narcissistic: he cannot escape the force of the prairie landscape and the small towns which dot its imperturbable surface. Thus when Mrs. Bentley describes Philip while he labors over his pictures, her diction emphasizes the fact that, for Philip as an artist, the prairie landscape is inescapable: "Alone in there, hunched over his table, groping and struggling to fulfill himself--intent upon something that can only remind him of his failure, of the man he tried to be. I wish I could help him, but it's like the wilderness outside of night and sky and prairie, with this one little spot of Horizon hung up lost in its immensity. He's as lost, and alone" (p. 25). Philip himself, however, argues that the personal has no place in an estimation of art; he tells Mrs. Bentley that, if she would decide whether or not a given picture is any good, she must "turn it upside down. That knocks all the sentiment out of it, leaves you with just the design and form" (p. 154). Stouck points out that Ross, by whisking his characters off for a holiday in the foothills, is in effect fulfilling the requirements of Philip's aesthetic observation; like Philip's picture, Ross's characters are for the time being turned "upside down."[35] At the same time, however, the trip also constitutes Ross's use of a raised perspective--going to the foothills allows the characters to "get above" their lives in Horizon. As a consequence, Philip paints with increased interest, accomplishment, and a genuine desire for appreciation. At the same time, Mrs. Bentley's raised perspective allows her a long-range view of their situation on the prairie, since throughout the interlude she weighs Philip's behavior there against life in Horizon.

That as an artist Philip cannot escape his own self-absorption is to say that as an artist he cannot escape the prairie landscape. Having

returned to Horizon, Philip continues to draw and paint prairie scenes; on one occasion he paints "two horses frozen on their feet," which he saw on his way to partridge Hill. Mrs. Bentley describes the picture thus: "The way the poor brutes stand with their hindquarters huddled up and their heads thrust over the wire, the tug and swirl of the blizzard, the fence lost in it, only a post or two away--a good job, if it's good in a picture to make you feel terror and pity and desolation" (p. 153). This is, of course, just what Ross makes his reader feel through his tale of the Bentleys.

Stegner wrote of Vickers in On a Darkling Plain that "A dozen times he tried to get into poetry that feeling of riding the naked back of a planet, but the thing was stubborn in his hands, an image too big for him" (p. 110). Through his repeated attempts to depict the same subject, Philip Bentley attests to the same inability, and one of Mrs. Bentley's walks produces a response which illuminates his reliance on his environment as subject matter.

> I turned once and looked back at Horizon, the huddled little clutter of houses and stores, the five grain elevators, aloof and imperturbable, like ancient obelisks, and behind the dust clouds, lapping at the sky.
>
> It was like one of Philip's drawings. There was the same tension, the same vivid immobility, and behind it all somewhere the same sense of transience.
>
> I walked on, remembering how I used to think that only a great artist could even paint the prairie, the vacancy and stillness of it, the bare essentials of a landscape, sky and earth, and how I used to look at Philip's work, and think to myself that the world would someday know of him. (p. 59)

Looking back at Horizon, Mrs. Bentley compares life on the prairie to Philip's art, and this is at the core of As For Me and My House. Philip's art is in a certain sense a transcription of the prairie landscape-- Stouck has called it a mirror--and so is Sinclair Ross's. In writing about the problems inherent in depicting the landscape through his artist-protagonist, Ross, like Wallace Stegner before him, dramatizes the imaginative force of the landscape which overwhelms the people of Partridge Hill and the artist as well. Philip is able to paint different subjects, and in another manner altogether, only when he is away from the prairie; while living on it the land forces itself into his consciousness and dictates his subject matter. Were he a better and less self-absorbed artist, perhaps Philip could define his own aims--but he is not, and so submits to it. Like Vickers, Philip finds "the image too big for him," but like Stegner--though more effectively--Ross has captured the unique qualities of the prairie through a discussion of the difficulties it poses.

W. O. Mitchell's Who Has Seen the Wind (1947) should be discussed in conjunction with Ross's novel because the two works, though they have a great deal in common are, at the same time, vastly different. Ross's prairie makes the reader feel "terror and pity and desolation" (p. 153), whereas Mitchell's prairie has his readers feeling growth and beauty and transcendence; yet both writers are depicting the Canadian prairie during the dustbowl thirties. The differences lies in the interpretation accorded the prairie landscape by each writer, although it should be emphasized that each interpretation is verified by the tradition of prairie landscape depiction. Ross, as has already been demonstrated,

dwells upon those elements in the landscape which produced the feelings of monotony registered in the accounts of James, Catlin, Lambert, and others. W. O. Mitchell, on the other hand, recreates the first romantic exhilaration seen in the non-fictional account of writers such as Brackenridge, Irving, or Flagg. Mitchell was born in Weyburn, Saskatchewan; he spent much of his boyhood in Florida and attended high school there, before returning to Canada to attend the universities of Alberta and Manitoba. Though he has held various jobs, writing has been his primary occupation and the Canadian prairie has been his primary subject.

The novel is essentially a romantic Bildungsroman, and the prairie landscape is the focal point for Brian O'Connal's education. Whenever Brian experiences a crisis he finds solace and understanding in the natural workings of prairie nature. The "dirty thirties" do, however, have their spokesman in Brian's Uncle Sean, who farms the prairie; so while Mitchell's primary focus is Brian's growing consciousness of life, he does not deny the existence of harshness--both on the prairie itself and within Brian's small town.

Mitchell's depiction of life in a small prairie town during the thirties is similar to Ross's in As For Me and My House, since in each the "Main Street" mentality, made famous by Sinclair Lewis, prevails. Mitchell's depiction of small-town bigotry is like his treatment of Uncle Sean's problems on the farm: it counterbalances the prevailing romantic view of life and the landscape seen in Brian's story. Within Ross's novel, small-town intolerance is presented as yet another aspect of life in Horizon which torments the Bentleys. Although Ross is more subtle, his realism is also balanced by romanticism--much of Mrs. Bentley's

dissatisfaction with Philip's attitude toward her is occasioned by her perspective.[36] She is hopelessly romantic, and longs to be fussed and fawned over like a young belle; when, while on their holiday, she is asked by a cowboy to dance she agrees, "hoping absurdly Philip might see" her (p. 97).

In Who Has Seen the Wind, Mitchell--like Garland, Cather, and Rölvaag before him--introduces the prairie landscape before focusing on his characters; yet whereas his precursors opted to dramatize the land's appearance, Mitchell describes it with matter-of-fact directness: "Here was the least common denominator of nature, the skeleton requirements simply, of land and sky--Saskatchewan prairie. It lay wide and shimmering around the town, stretching tan to the far line of the sky, shimmering under the June sun and waiting for the unfailing visitation of wind, gentle at first, barely striking the long grasses and giving them life; later, a long hot gusting that would lift the black topsoil and pile it in barrow pits along the roads, or in deep banks against the fences."[37] Mitchell thus emphasizes the land first, only then moving gradually to the town. The four-year-old Brian O'Connal wanders about town, having been told by his grandmother to play outside; and he visits the local minister's wife and asks her about God, whom, with childish irritation over being so banished, he wants to "get after" his grandmother. Without receiving a satisfactory answer, Brian continues his wandering about town until he finds that "Ahead lay the sudden emptiness of the prairie. For the first time in his four years of life he was alone on the prairie" (pp. 10-11). Like Irving when he was lost, Brian here sees the prairie comprehensively for the first time, noticing the steady wind, gophers, grasshoppers, and the Young Ben: "And all about him was the wind now, a

pervasive sighing through the great emptiness, unhampered by the buildings of the town, warm and living against his face and in his hair" (p. 11).

Brian's education takes the form of testing things learned in the town against the natural forces which he sees present in the prairie. The Young Ben, whom he sees at the edge of town along with his first glimpse of the prairie, is a character analogous to Cather's Crazy Ivar in his natural correspondence with the cycles of nature (in this respect Mitchell's Saint Sammy also parallels Ivar), and throughout Brian associates Ben with the prairie. Brian experiences a series of deaths among creatures and people around him; as he tries to understand each one in turn, he draws upon his appreciation of the natural cycle made manifest in the prairie. When his baby pigeon dies, Brian is asked by his father where he would like to bury it; instinctively, he replies: "'The prairie--dig a hole for it in the prairie . . . . Where the [Young Ben] is.'" This decision made, Brian "was aware of a sudden relief; the sadness over the death of the baby pigeon lifted from him" (p. 58). Likewise, when his dog dies some years later Brian buries it on the prairie himself: "He looked down at the grave, and it was hard for him to believe that Jappy was under it, that he wouldn't in a moment see the earth bulge up and the dog's head come out. Then he remembered the stiffness of the body, the turned head, the filmed eyes. He knew that a lifeless thing was under the earth. His dog was dead." Just after this the Young Ben appears and helps Brian cover the grave with rocks to keep coyotes out. Within Brian as he looks at the grave is "an emptiness that wasn't to be believed" (p. 178). And, when his father dies, Brian again seeks tranquility in the prairie, which he visits after the funeral; there, he realizes:

"Forever the prairie; never for his father--never again. People were forever born; people forever died, and never were again. Fathers died and sons were born; the prairie was forever, with its wind whispering in through the long dead grasses, through the long and endless silence" (p. 241). Thus here Brian recognizes the cyclical nature of life--made manifest in the prairie--and, contemplating his loss, he sees as more important "the dark well of his mother's loneliness" (p. 242); so he leaves the prairie abruptly to go home and help assuage her grief. When, just prior to the novel's end, Brian's grandmother dies, he sees her death in light of those which came before, and so takes it maturely, recognizing it as the proper end to a long life.

Mitchell uses the natural cycles of the prairie as an index to Brian's growth, and the boy matures to an understanding very like that seen in Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath. The symbiotic quality of his growth in concert with his perception of the prairie landscape is encapsulated by his decision to become "a dirt doctor" as the novel closes. Like Steinbeck, Mitchell sees the dustbowl thirties as a low point in the life cycle and, as well, a failure of man's knowledge--hence Brian's resolve to minister to the land, which his Uncle Sean has described as "sick" throughout the novel.

Finally, Mitchell's dramatization of Brian's developing understanding, like Cather's depiction of Alexandra Bergson and Jim Burden, suggests that the prairie must be understood on its own terms--that man must adapt to its cycles. Recently, Michael Peterman has compared Mitchell's novel to My Ántonia, and he notes that "the emotional responsiveness of Jim and Brian to the landscape of the open prairie is remarkably similar."[38] In so saying, Peterman has made a point necessary to this study. When placed

side by side, the parallels between the novels seem striking but, because each falls within the prairie novel tradition, that is not so very surprising. Placed within the context of this study, Mitchell's novel shares with Cather's (as well as other examples of the form) the salient features of the prairie novel--the commingling of realism with romance occasioned by the landscape itself, and the epistemological process involved in adapting to its features.[39]

* * *

Though a study of the development of prairie fictions comes to an end with this discussion of the writers who reflect the maturity of the tradition, concern with the landscape did not end here. And before concluding, some mention should be made of those writers who reflect the continuity of the tradition as well as pointing to new directions.

The most significant contemporary American novelist of the prairie is Wright Morris, whose writings draw upon his native Nebraska, an area he describes as having "conditioned what I see, what I look for, and what I find in the world to write about."[40] Born in 1910, Morris has lived mainly in the East while writing numerous novels that deal with personal and family relations and which draw upon his Nebraska background. Wherever one looks in Morris' fiction the image of prairie flatness is never far distant. In The Works of Love (1952), for example, Morris begins: "In the dry places, men begin to dream. Where the rivers run sand, there is something in man that begins to flow. West of the 98th Meridian--where it sometimes rains and it sometimes doesn't--towns, like weeds, spring up when it rains, dry up when it stops."[41] But as he

goes on to describe the dreaming thus engendered in a sod hut on the Nebraska prairie, where the protagonist's father, Adam Brady lived in the 1880s, Morris makes it clear that it is not dryness alone which fosters dreams. Seeking to woo a wife to share his dugout, Brady has a romantic photograph of himself made to send to prospective wives who answer his ad. In the photo he is standing against the backdrop image of a "virgin forest," so that in the picture:

> there was no indication, anywhere in it, of the landscape through the window that Adam Brady faced. There was not an inkling of the desolation of the empty plain. No hint of the sky, immense and faded, such as one might see in a landscape of China--but without the monuments that indicated men had passed, and might still be there. In that place, remote as it was, men at least had found time to carve a few idols, and others had passed either in order to worship, or to mutilate them. But in this place--this desolation out the window--what was there? Nothing but the sky that pressed on the earth with the dead weight of the sea, and here and there a house such as a prairie dog might have made. (pp. 5-6)

Brady is suffering from the same isolation and loneliness which motivated a similar search for a wife in Garland's "Among the Corn Rows," and this same desire for company is a factor in Vickers' eventual return to civilization in On a Darkling Plain. Morris is holding up Brady's photograph as a sham, and he does so by invoking the prairie landscape directly; on the prairie there are no landmarks which show of man's passage--as there are even in remote China--and Morris' contrast here echoes the inability of man to make his presence, or even his passage, apparent in the prairie landscape, as witnessed in Castañeda's comments or in Rölvaag's complaining prairie grass. In his description of Brady's house,

too, Morris suggests Brady's dugout is a part of his desolate environment, for he is living like a prairie dog; this also troubled Beret Holm, for she felt that living in a prairie dugout debased humans. The Nebraska prairie and Brady's sod hut represent "reality"--as indeed they were to many--a reality which forces Brady into dreams and misrepresentation. Thus he lies in order to obtain a wife who, upon her arrival, is kept from running away immediately--in the manner of Blanche Burke--only by the intersession of a reality which also stopped Blanche: a snowstorm. Though she thinks Nebraska "a godforsaken hole" (p. 12)--almost Blanche's words exactly--Brady's wife remains because their marriage has been consummated.

In Ceremony in Lone Tree (1960), the impalpability of the landscape, which fills the eyes yet makes one wonder, is given specific attention by Morris: "Waves of plain seem to roll up, then break like surf. Is it a flaw in the eye, or in the window, that transforms a dry place into a wet one? Above it towers a sky, like the sky at sea, a wind blows like the wind at sea, and like the sea it has no shade. There is no place to hide. One thing it is that the sea is not: it is dry, not wet."[42] Writing in the second half of the twentieth century, Morris is here musing over elements in the landscape which were and still are of perennial interest to commentators. Like Coronado, Castañeda, and virtually every other commentator or writer who described the prairie, Morris notes the sea-like qualities of the landscape. And, also like Coronado, Castañeda, and others, Morris notes yet again the absence of "human" landmarks--of the sort he missed in The Works of Love--on the prairie; but here, his use of "no place to hide" is both a comment on the landscape and a literary echo of Beret's refrain in Giants in the Earth. The continuity of reaction

from the sixteenth to the late twentieth centuries, moreover, is demonstrated in Morris' works, and a final comment of his, which might have been written by any of the prairie authors treated in this chapter, summarizes the demands made on the artist by the prairie landscape: "Where there is almost nothing to see, there man sees the most."[43] Like his dissection of the prairie as sea, this observation has numerous precursors--most notably Emerson in Nature--yet in it Morris captures the essence of the land's demands. Edwin James, George Catlin, and John Lambert; Cooper, Irving, Parkman, Melville and Albert Pike as well as the others--each saw something in the prairie landscape which he initially did not expect to find.

Just as Wright Morris analyzes and dramatizes the effect of the Nebraska prairie on his imagination and writing, so too authors of contemporary Canadian prairie fiction continue to assess man's relation to the land, and to its landscape. An incident from W. O. Mitchell's The Vanishing Point (1973) suggests, like Morris's comments, that the concerns central to the very first prairie writing remain yet. Mitchell's protagonist, Carlyle Sinclair, who is Indian agent on a Stony Indian reservation, recalls an exercise he undertook as an eleven year old in grammar school art class. The students were instructed in the geometric depiction of the vanishing point in a prairie scene, the final meeting place of roads, telephone poles, and fences at the distant horizon which provides perspective. Having accomplished his exercise, Carlyle is dissatisfied with the result: "it was shocking; his eye travelled straight and unerring down the great prairie harp of telephone wires strung along tiny glass nipples of insulators on the cross-bars, down the barbed-wired fence lines on the other side of the highway. And as the

posts and poles marched to the horizon, they shrank and crowded up to each other, closer and closer together till they all were finally sucked down into the vanishing point."[44] After looking at and analyzing it for a time, Carlyle decides that "The drawing had to have something more . . . . That was it! A tree!" (p. 319). He begins putting trees in his picture--pines and poplars--and is discovered shortly after by his teacher, who straps him for his disobedience. This notwithstanding, Carlyle is unrepentant--he actually longed to put in a tiger. Carlyle's action suggests his need as one critic has written, to "go beyond the imposed perspective"[45] of his teacher to a more natural, and comfortable one; at the same time, however, Carlyle's action is a paradigm of the white man's means of understanding the prairie. Looking at his drawing of a prairie scene, one which creates a sense of prairie vastness accurately, if mechanistically, Carlyle is shocked. Like Catlin, Alfred Jabob Miller, Paul Kane, and other painters, Carlyle feels compelled to fill the space, even though he is prairie born, for it seems to need something. Washington Irving, likewise, filled the space through his literary conventions, and many commentators back to Castañeda confirm their own shock at the land's emptiness while others delight in it--for a time. Mitchell's Vanishing Point suggests that while the prairie has been settled and, to a certain extent, controlled, its basic elements--land and sky, stretching to a horizon--still attract and compel its writers today.

Similarly, Margaret Laurence's fiction is in large measure a working out of the heritage of the present generation of prairie Canadians, the result of the polyglot admixture of Indian, French, English, Scots, Germans, Poles, Scandinavians, and Ukrainians that makes up the prairie provinces. Born in Manitoba, Laurence chronicles life on the prairie in

the 1940s, and deals with ways in which the land continues to haunt those who have left it. In The Stone Angel (1964) Hagar Shipley recognizes that in the Manawaka cemetery "a person walking there could catch the faint, musky dust-tinged smell of things that grew untended and had grown always, before the portly peonies and the angels with rigid wings, when the prairie bluffs were walked through only by Cree with enigmatic faces and greasy hair." And, as if to prove in practice Morris's observation that where there is little to see man sees most, Laurence writes in The Diviners (1974), after Morag Gunn meditates over the "grain elevators, like stark strange towers," that "People who'd never lived hereabouts always imagined [the prairie] was dull, bleak, hundreds of miles of nothing. They didn't know. They didn't know the renewal that came out of the dead cold."[46] And in the radically different techniques of Robert Kroetsch and Rudy Wiebe there is the attempt to make the reader shuck off the realism of the early-twentieth century, in the case of the former, and to re-learn Western Canadian history, in the case of the latter.

Kroetsch has referred to this process as "demythologizing the systems that threaten to define" prairie Canadians, and in practice his fiction has deliberately overturned all conventional expectations about the experience he describes.[47] Even so, whether "demythologizing" or re-learning the history of Big Bear or the Mounted Police,[48] the tendency in contemporary fiction in this country is toward a new relation with, and a new understanding of, the prairie landscape. But although this process admits different points of view--such as the Indian's--and recognizes new approaches to narration, the contemporary prairie writer is still contending with prairie vastness; for the prairie writer always keeps in mind that "the great fact is the land itself."

CHAPTER SIX: Notes

[1] Willa Cather, O Pioneers! (1913; rpt. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1941), p. 71. All references to O Pioneers! are from this edition; to avoid confusion, the title will occasinally be abbreviated as OP.

[2] E. K. Brown, Willa Cather: A Critical Biography, completed by Leon Edel (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), pp. vi-vii.

[3] "Willa Cather Talks of Work," The [Philadelphia] Record, August 9, 1913; rpt. The Kingdom of Art: Willa Cather's First Principles and Critical Statements 1893-1896, ed. Bernice Slote (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1966), p. 448.

[4] Willa Cather, My Ántonia (1918; rpt. [introd. Walter Havighurst] Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1949), p. 9. All references to My Ántonia are from this edition; to avoid confusion, the title will occasionally be abbreviated as MA.

[5] Willa Cather, "On the Divide," Overland Monthly, 37 (January 1896); rpt. in Willa Cather's Collected Short Fiction, 1892-1912 introd. Mildred R. Bennett, ed. Virginia Faulkner, rev. ed (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1970), p. 493. Subsequent references to the story are from this edition. Hereafter this edition will be abbreviated CSF.

[6] Latrobe Carroll, "Willa Sibert Cather," The Bookman, 53 (May 1921); as quoted by Mildred R. Bennett, Introd., CSF, p. xxvi.

[7] Willa Cather, "My First Novels (There Were Two)," in On Writing: Critical Studies of Writing as an Art, fore. Stephen Tennant (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949), pp. 89-97; E. K. Brown, Willa Cather: A Critical Biography, pp. 160-61.

[8] Willa Cather, "The Bohemian Girl," McClure's, 39 (August 1912); rpt. CSF, pp. 6-7. Subsequent references to the story are from this edition.

[9] As quoted by Mildred R. Bennett in The World of Willa Cather, new ed. (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1961), pp. 200-01.

[10] Cather, "My First Two Novels (There Were Two)," p. 94; "Willa Cather Talks of Work," rpt. The Kingdom of Art, p. 448.

[11] Thus the present study does not pretend to go beyond previous studies insofar as Cather's technique itself is concerned, and I acknowledge my indebtedness to the following: John H. Randall, III, The Landscape and the Looking Glass: Willa Cather's Search for Value (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960); Edward A. Bloom and Lilian D. Bloom, Willa Cather's Gift of Sympathy, pref. Harry T. Moore (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1962); Don D. Walker, "The Western Humanism of Willa Cather," WAL, 1 (1966), 75-90; Evelyn J. Hinz, "Willa Cather's Technique and the Ideology of Populism," WAL, 7 (1972), 47-61; and Susan J. Rosowski, "Willa Cather--A Pioneer in Art: O Pioneers! and My Ántonia," PrS, 55, Nos. 1 and 2 (1981), pp. 141-54.

[12] Stuart B. James has written that Cather's use of the landscape in her prairie novels is such that it emerges "as metaphor for the infinite, and the pioneers who enter those prairies are like people undergoing denudation; they are stripped to their spiritual bones." "Western American Space and the Human Imagination," WHR, 24 (1970), 149.

[13] Brown, p. 164.

[14] See James E. Miller, Jr., "My Ántonia: A Frontier Drama of Time," AQ, 10 (1958), 476-84; David Stouck, "Perspective as Structure and Theme in My Ántonia," TSLL, 12 (1970), 285-94; Mary E. Rucker, "Prospective Focus in My Ántonia," ArQ, 29 (1973), 303-16, and Rosowski.

[15] Brown, p. 209.

[16] Miller, p. 478.

[17] Various critics have considered Cather's relation to literary tradition, as reflected in her choice of form and allusions; the most instructive generic treatment of Cather is to be found in David Stouck's Willa Cather's Imagination (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1975).

[18] In this discussion I have limited myself to consideration of some early stories, O Pioneers! and My Ántonia, these being Cather's most extended treatments of the prairie landscape. Other of her works which could be used as further supportive evidence are The Song of the Lark (1915), One of Ours (1922), and A Lost Lady (1923), as well as several later short stories.

[19] O. E. Rölvaag, Giants in the Earth: A Saga of the Prairie. trans. Lincoln Colcord and O. E. Rölvaag (1927; rpt. New York: Harper & Row, 1955), p. 36. All references to Rölvaag are from this edition. Giants in the Earth was first published in Norwegian as I de dage, 1924, 1925. Rölvaag used ellipses as a stylistic device, so unless they appear in brackets, they are his.

Rölvaag first depicted the landscape in Paa Glemte Veie (1914) which, although published in the United States, has never been published in English. Giants in the Earth was followed by Peder Victorious (1929), which continues Rölvaag's story of the family into the second generation. Because Giants in the Earth is his acknowledged masterpiece, I have limited my discussion of Rölvaag to that novel. For a discussion of Giants in the Earth with reference to Rolvaag's life and other works, see Paul Reigstad, Rölvaag: His Life and Art (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1972).

[20] Frederick Philip Grove, Over Prairie Trails (1922; rpt. [introd. Malcolm Ross] Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1957), p. 33. For Grove's background, and the controversy surrounding it, see Douglas O. Spettigue, FPG: The European Years (Ottawa: Oberon, 1973).

[21] Frederick Philip Grove, Fruits of the Earth (1933; rpt. [introd. M. G. Parks] Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1965), p. 23. All references to Fruits of the Earth are from this edition. For a discussion of Grove's depiction of the pioneer along with Garland's, see Francis W. Kaye, "Hamlin Garland and Frederick Philip Grove: Self-Conscious Chroniclers of the Pioneers," CRevAS, 10 (1979), 31-40.

[22] Frederick Philip Grove, In Search of Myself (1946; rpt. [introd. D. O. Spettigue] Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974), p. 259.

[23] Laurence Ricou, Vertical Man / Horizontal World, p. 61.

[24] Wallace Stegner, On a Darkling Plain (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1939), p. 17. All references to Stegner are from this edition.

[25] In addition to those novels of prairie pioneering treated here, others which could be included are: the pioneering novels of Robert Stead (especially The Homesteaders and Grain), Herbert Quick's Vandemark's Folly, Feike Feikema's This is the Year, and A. B. Guthrie's The Big Sky and The Way West.

[26] Martha Ostenso, Wild Geese (1925; rpt. [introd. Carlyle King] Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1961), p. 33. All references to Ostenso are from this edition. Ostenso used ellipses as a stylistic device; unless they appear in brackets, they are hers.

[27] See Dick Harrison, Unnamed Country, pp. 107-13, for a discussion of Ostenso's debt to the romantic melodrama.

[28] "Willa Cather Talks of Work," in The Kingdom of Art, p. 448.

[29] Conrad Richter, The Sea of Grass (New York: Knopf, 1937), p. 4. All references to Richter are from this edition.

[30] In addition to Grove's Our Daily Bread and the latter parts of Fruits of the Earth which deal with the land in transition from frontier to settlement, see also Dorothy Scarborough, The Wind (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1925), and Edward McCourt's Music at the Close (Toronto: Ryerson, 1947) and Home is the Stranger (Toronto: Macmillan, 1950).

[31] Warren Tallman, "Wolf in the Snow," CanL, No. 5 (Summer 1960); rpt. Contexts of Canadian Criticism, ed. Eli Mandel (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1971), p. 239. Critical studies of As For Me and My House are numerous. The most recent include Morton Ross's "The Canonization of As For Me and My House: A Case Study," in Figures in a Ground: Canadian Essays on Modern Literature Collected in Honor of Sheila Watson, ed. Diane Bessai and David Jackel (Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1978) pp. 189-205; Robert Kroetsch's "The Fear of Women in Prairie Fiction: An Erotics of Space," in Crossing Frontiers: Papers in American and Canadian Western Literature, ed. Dick Harrison (Edmonton: Univ. of Alberta Press, 1979), pp. 73-83; Lorraine McMullen's Sinclair Ross (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1979); and Paul Denham's "Narrative Technique in Sinclair Ross's As For Me and My House, SCL, 5 (Spring 1980), 116-24.

[32] Sinclair Ross, As For Me and My House (1941; rpt. [introd. Roy Daniells] Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1957), p. 5. All references to the novel are from this edition.

[33] Dick Harrison, in Unnamed Country, pp. 92-94, points out several parallels between Arthur Stringer's technique in his prairie novels and those later employed by Ross in As For Me and My House. He appears to be unaware of the far greater similarity between Garland's Blanche Burke and Mrs. Bentley--especially in terms of their shared reaction to the wind.

[34] Margaret Laurence, Introd., The Lamp at Noon and Other Stories by Sinclair Ross (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1968), p. 7.

[35] David Stouck, "The Mirror and the Lamp in Sinclair Ross's As For Me and My House, Mosaic, 7, No. 2 (1974), 148-49.

[36] See Barbara Godard, "El Greco in Canada: Sinclair Ross's As For Me and My House," Mosaic, 14, No. 2 (1981), 55-76.

[37] W. O. Mitchell, Who Has Seen the Wind (1947; rpt. Macmillan, 1972), p. 3. All references to Who Has Seen the Wind are from this edition.

[38] Michael Peterman, "'The Good Game': The Charm of Willa Cather's My Antonia and W. O. Mitchell's Who Has Seen the Wind," Mosaic, 14, No. 2 (1981), 97.

[39] A third Canadian novel set on the prairie during the dustbowl thirties is by the Alberta-born Robert Kroetsch, The Words of My Roaring (Toronto: Macmillan, 1966). Here the lack of rain is likened to the Old Testament plagues, and prairie man suffers at the hands of a wrathful God. Johnnie Backstrom, Kroetsch's narrator and protagonist (and also the local undertaker), runs for the provincial assembly on the promise of rain against the incumbent, Doc Murdoch, who owns a lush garden amid the drought and also has a daughter who is a type of goddess of love for Johnnie. Thus Kroetsch translates the period into mythic terms, but retains the actual history of Alberta, for Johnnie runs as a candidate for John George Applecart, radio preacher turned politician, who inveighs against the "scarlet Who-er of Babylon" (p. 32)--as he describes eastern interests. Applecart is modelled exactly on the actual winner of the 1935 Alberta election, William Aberhart. While Kroetsch's concern in the novel is not the prairie landscape per se, the dustbowl conditions versus Doc Murdoch's lush garden (he is the candidate of the "Who-er") form the basis of its conflict.

In an earlier novel, But We Are Exiles (Toronto: Macmillan, 1965), Kroetsch describes the prairie as his characters cross the country by car, traveling east:

> And, the flat country then. Dusty and dry. Dry and dusty and hot. Wheat country. And the first elevator. There at Dufresne, alone and reaching, like a great damned phallus, like one perpetual hard-on, Mike said, trying to make eternity. They laughed and the sky was so big that Peter couldn't breathe. He hadn't believed there was so much sky. And trees looking self important and a little scared. The high piercing whine of gravel trucks. And little gas-station cafes that looked like boxes that fell off the roaring semi's that shook the trees and the telephone poles. (p. 135)

Kroetsch captures the essential shock of the prairie vastness here and, in doing so, he recreates the emotional effect of the landscape. Peter's reaction echoes the vexation of Castañeda and the fright of Butler; the description articulates the minuscule position of man, his buildings, and his machines on the prairie.

[40] As quoted by David Madden, Wright Morris (New York: Twayne, 1964), p. 25. See also David Madden, "The Great Plains in the Novels of Wright Morris," Critique, 4 (1961-62), 5-23.

[41] Wright Morris, The Works of Love (1952; rpt. Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1972), p. 3. All references to the novel are from this edition.

[42] Wright Morris, Ceremony in Lone Tree (New York: Atheneum, 1960), p. 3.

[43] As quoted by David Madden, Wright Morris, p. 25.

[44] W. O. Mitchell, The Vanishing Point (Toronto: Macmillan, 1973), p. 318. All references to The Vanishing Point are from this edition.

[45] Harrison, Unnamed Country, p. 198.

[46] Margaret Laurence, The Stone Angel (1964, rpt. [introd. William H. New] Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1968), p. 5; Margaret Laurence, The Diviners (1974; rpt. Toronto: Bantam, 1975), p. 282.

[47] Robert Kroetsch, "Unhiding the Hidden: Recent Canadian Fiction," JCF, 3, No. 3 (1974), p. 43.

[48] For a discussion of the role of the Mounted Police in Canadian history and myth, see my "Canada's Mounted: The Evolution of a Legend," JPC, 14 (1980), 298-312.

CONCLUSION

This study has sought to establish the continuity of reaction to the prairie landscape evident in writings derived from the region. The similarities between sixteenth-century description of overland travel on the prairie and accounts written within this century are striking but not, as this study has shown, coincidental. From the time of Cabeza de Vaca, Coronado, and Castañeda, Europeans have reacted to the landscape in ways which over time became typical: they complained of the lack of landmarks, of the inability to maintain their bearings, of the monotony of the prairie scenery, and of the optical tricks the land seemed to play on them. At the same time, many writers described their enthusiastic response to the vastness of the landscape, and to the equally vast potential they saw for the land's development.

This study has shown that these two poles of imaginative reaction to the prairie landscape formed the basis of its literary depiction. The literary techniques that dramatize the prairie's vastness--optical illusions and other effects--are extensions of the reactions seen in the exploration and travel literature. Castañeda's reaction to the prairie landscape is found, dramatized and orchestrated for the benefit of readers, in Willa Cather's O Pioneers!. Not that Cather read Castañeda, of course; she reacted to the landscape herself and dramatized her personal feelings. But both Castañeda and Cather react to the land itself. Similar correspondences, stretching from Castañeda's time to our own, are evident in prairie literature. Focusing on the rhetorical

role of these reactions to the landscape, this study traces the development of the prairie landscape tradition in North American prose fiction.

In do doing, this treatment moves beyond previous criticism in several different ways. First of all, it places prairie fiction within its proper context--the prairie. Within the criticism of American literature, prairie fiction has not been studied as a field, per se; instead, critics have preferred to treat the literature of the prairie West within the contexts of other, and usually larger, concerns: the West, the frontier, the farm novel, or the fiction of agrarian revolt, as well as others. This attitude of ignoring the prairie as a unique region with its own literature has led to anomalous treatment of the classic work of prairie fiction, Cather's My Ántonia. As Michael Peterman points out, this novel has been frequently overlooked in the major studies of American literature, indicating that critics have found it difficult to assess within their larger concerns. This example illustrates the need for examining prairie fiction within its proper tradition. Much of My Ántonia's dramatic and imaginative power is derived from the landscape itself, and so it is best understood with the context of prairie literature description.

Within the criticism of Canadian prairie fiction, a different situation exists. There are three book-length treatments of the subject. Edward McCourt, in The Canadian West in Fiction (1949; revised 1970), concerns himself primarily with the imaginative and technical abilities of prairie authors, and so concentrates on identification and evaluation. The next study, Laurence Ricou's Vertical Man / Horizontal World (1973), treats the image of man amid the prairie landscape. McCourt, on the one

hand, emphasizes artistry at the expense of any sustained consideration of the prairie environment while Ricou, on the other, emphasizes the landscape without reference to the role of culture. Attempting to steer a middle course between the two is the most recent study of Canadian prairie fiction, Dick Harrison's Unnamed Country (1978). Throughout his treatment, Harrison considers the effect of culture, or "non-prairie" experience, in tandem with imaginative effects caused by the landscape. Unlike McCourt and Ricou, however, Harrison does not limit himself to belles-lettres; instead, he considers popular fiction, and also suggests the parallel between pictorial and literary landscape depiction.

All of these studies, but especially Harrison's, would have benefited from a recognition of the larger tradition defined here. Each surveys a field that is too narrowly defined. Prairie fiction, properly so called, does not stop at the 49th parallel, whether one is looking south or north. Harrison's Unnamed Country purports to be a developmental study of Canadian prairie fiction, and it is: he traces Canadian prairie fiction. Harrison begins with the first explorer to visit what is now the Canadian prairie, Henry Kelsey, but he does not accord any work of non-fiction major treatment until Butler's The Great Lone Land. Butler was writing at a time when the tradition of prairie landscape description was over 300 years old and he was influenced in his boyhood by the writings of one of the major non-Canadian writers in the tradition, James Fenimore Cooper. At the same time, the parallels Harrison draws between painting and literary depiction are evident throughout the work of the illustrators of the entire prairie West, and not only in the Canadian examples he cites. Thus while American critics have ignored the field of prairie fiction, their Canadian counterparts have drawn the

boundaries of the field too sharply. Harrison, while he is more thorough in his treatment than either McCourt or Ricou, simply does not avail himself of the larger tradition of which his subject is but a part.

Accordingly, by putting prairie fiction into its proper context, and thereby defining a developed tradition, this study suggests a new way of approaching prairie classics. Michael Peterman's comparison of My Ántonia and Who Has Seen the Wind illustrates the problem of treating the novels apart from their tradition. As he presents them, they are two works which, seemingly curiously, have many points in common. While not all of the similarities he discusses are attributable to the landscape, many are. But without the context provided here, such an analysis within the tradition is impossible.

Finally, this study departs from previous scholarship because of its bicultural base. With the exception of Crossing Frontiers, one or two monographs, and a few essays, virtually no scholarship treats subjects common to both Canada and the United States on an equal footing. And while such an approach is not appropriate for all subjects, certainly, in a study of the prairie landscape in fiction it is essential. The 49th parallel is an arbitrary man-made thing, and between the Lake of the Woods and the Rocky Mountains the land on either side is largely one landscape. It should be approached as such, because as this study has sought to demonstrate, prairie novels, whether American or Canadian, have a great deal in common with one another. More, perhaps, than with their eastern-American or -Canadian counterparts.

APPENDIX

Early Illustrators of the Prairie West: A Selection

This appendix reproduces those paintings, drawings, and sketches discussed in Chapter Three, arranged in the order of their consideration. They have been taken from the following sources:

Curry, Larry. The American West: Painters from Catlin to Russell. Foreword Archibald Hanna. New York: Viking, 1972.

De Voto, Bernard. Across the Wide Missouri. Cambridge: Houghton Mifflin, 1947.

Harper, J. Russell, ed. Paul Kane's Frontier. Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1971.

James, Edwin. Account of an Expedition from Pittsburgh to the Rocky Mountains. . . . Early Western Travels, 1748-1846. Ed. Reuben Gold Thwaites. Cleveland: Arthur H. Clarke, 1905, XV.

Josephy, Alvin M., Jr. The Artist Was a Young Man: The Life Story of Peter Rindisbacher Fort Worth: Avon Carter Museum, 1970.

McCracken, Harold. George Catlin and the Old Frontier. New York: Dial Press, 1959.

Miller, Alfred Jacob. The West of Alfred Jacob Miller. Ed. Marvin C. Ross. Rev. ed. Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1968.

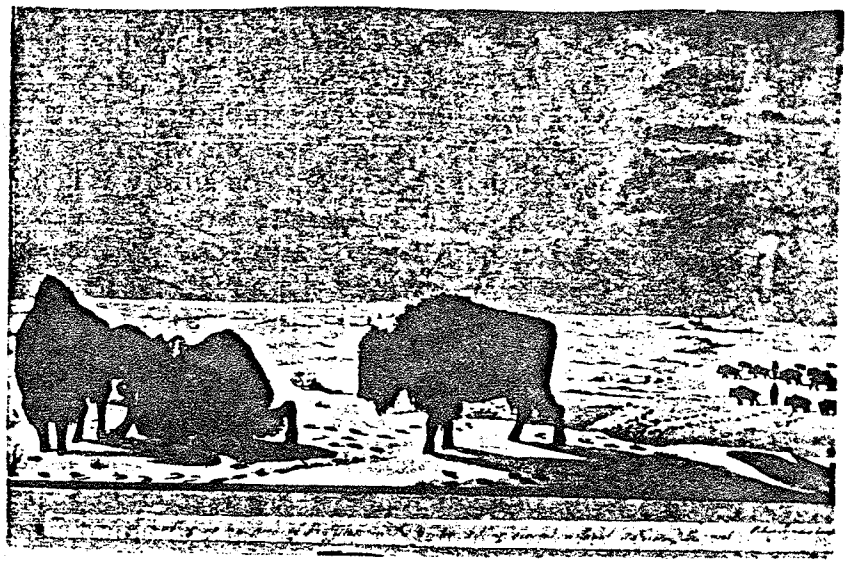
Novak, Barbara. Nature and Culture: American Landscape and Painting 1825-1875. New York: Oxford, 1980.

150 Years of Art in Manitoba: Struggle for a Visual Civilization. Winnipeg: Winnipeg Art Gallery, 1970.

Peattie, Donald Culross, ed. Audubon's America: The Experiences of John James Audubon. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1940.

Peter Rindisbacher. Blackfeet Hunting on Snowshoes [Untitled]. In Josephy, plate XXXIV, p. 64.

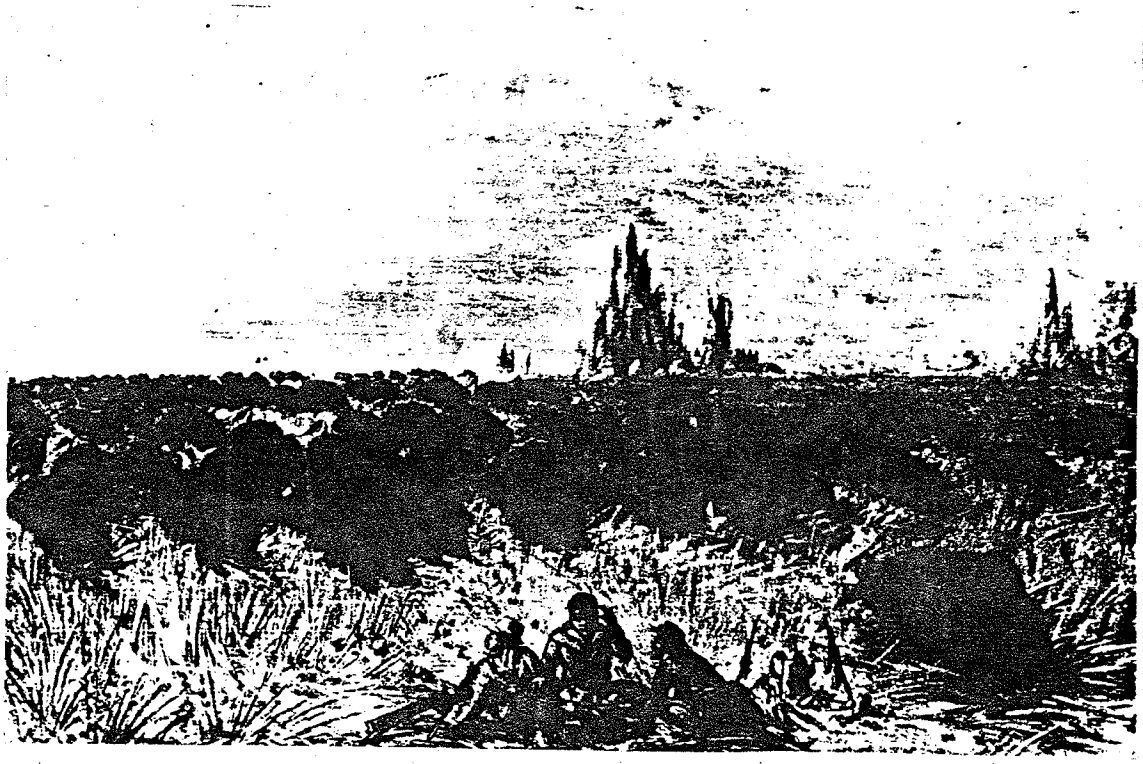
Peter Rindisbacher. Blackfeet Hunting on Horseback [Untitled]. In Josephy, plate XXXV.



Peter Rindisbacher. The Method of Crawling Up to a Herd of Buffaloes. In 150 Years of Art in Manitoba, item 166, p. 5.

George Catlin. Moving Camp. In McCracken, p. 78.

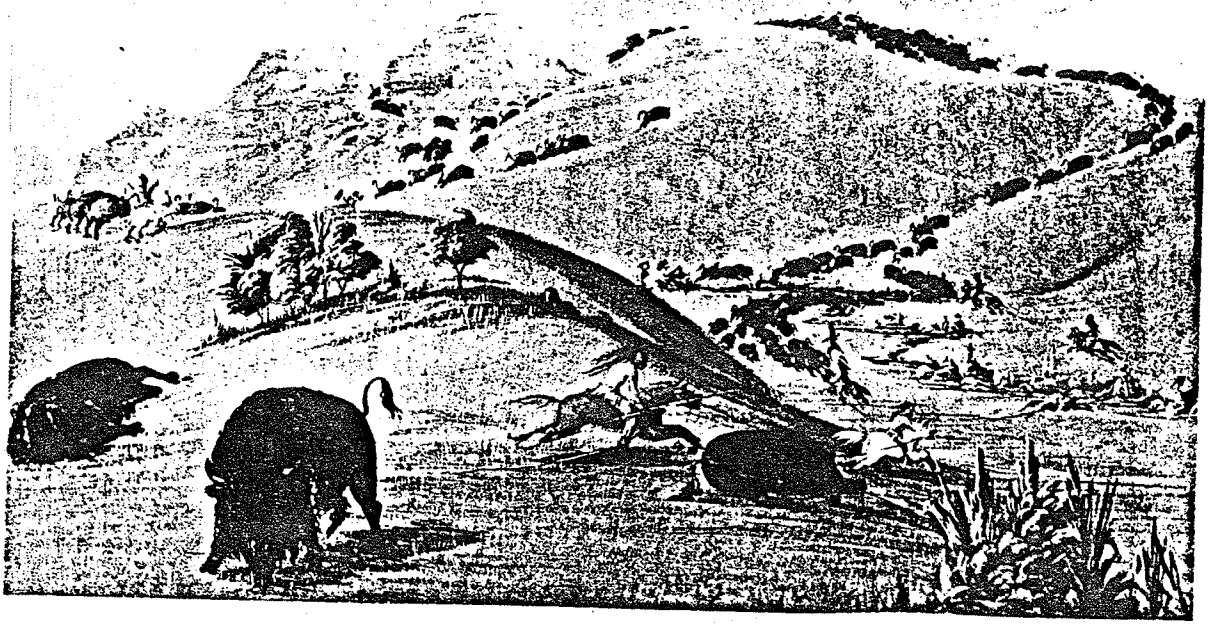
George Catlin. Catlin Sketching Buffalo Under Wolf Skin. In McCracken, p. 72.



George Catlin. A Buffalo Stampede. In McCracken, p. 123.

George Catlin. Buffalo Chase in Winter, Indians on Snowshoes. In Novak, fig. 70, p. 133.

George Catlin. Buffalo Chase of the Sioux. In McCracken, p. 45.



George Catlin. Sioux Indians Hunting Buffalo. In McCracken, p. 64.

George Catlin. Catlin Hunting Buffalo for Food. In McCracken, p. 126.

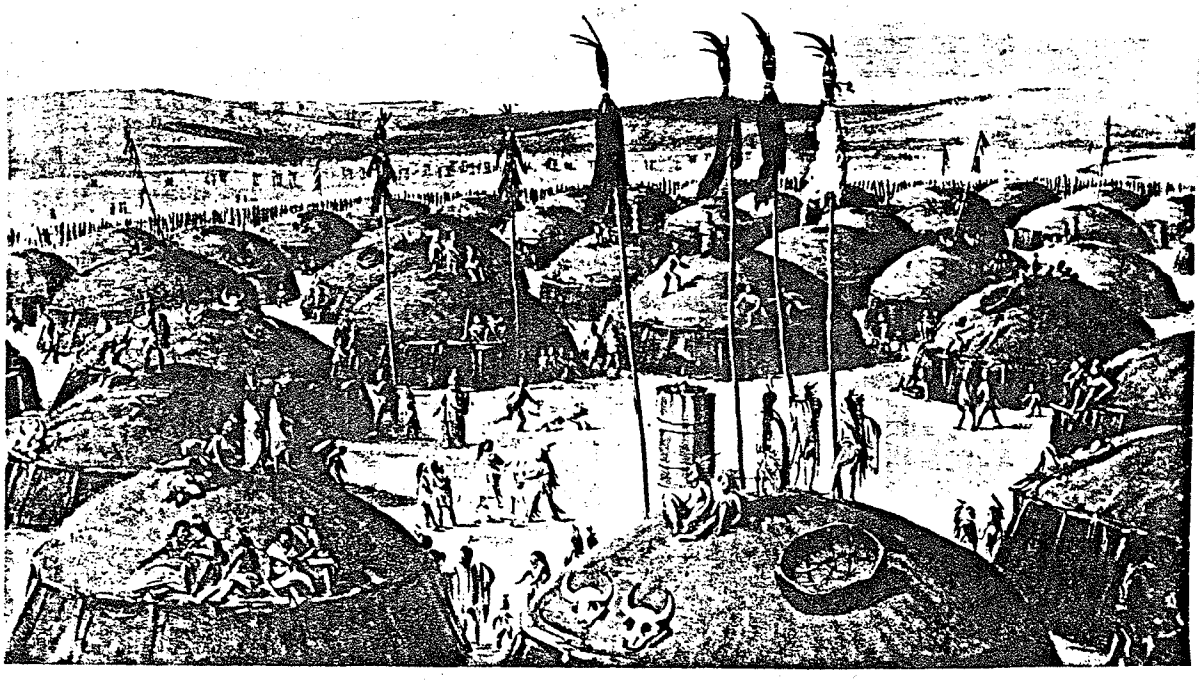
George Catlin. Buffalo Chase, Upper Missouri. In McCracken, p. 146.

George Catlin. Comanche Feats of Horsemanship. In McCracken, p. 151.

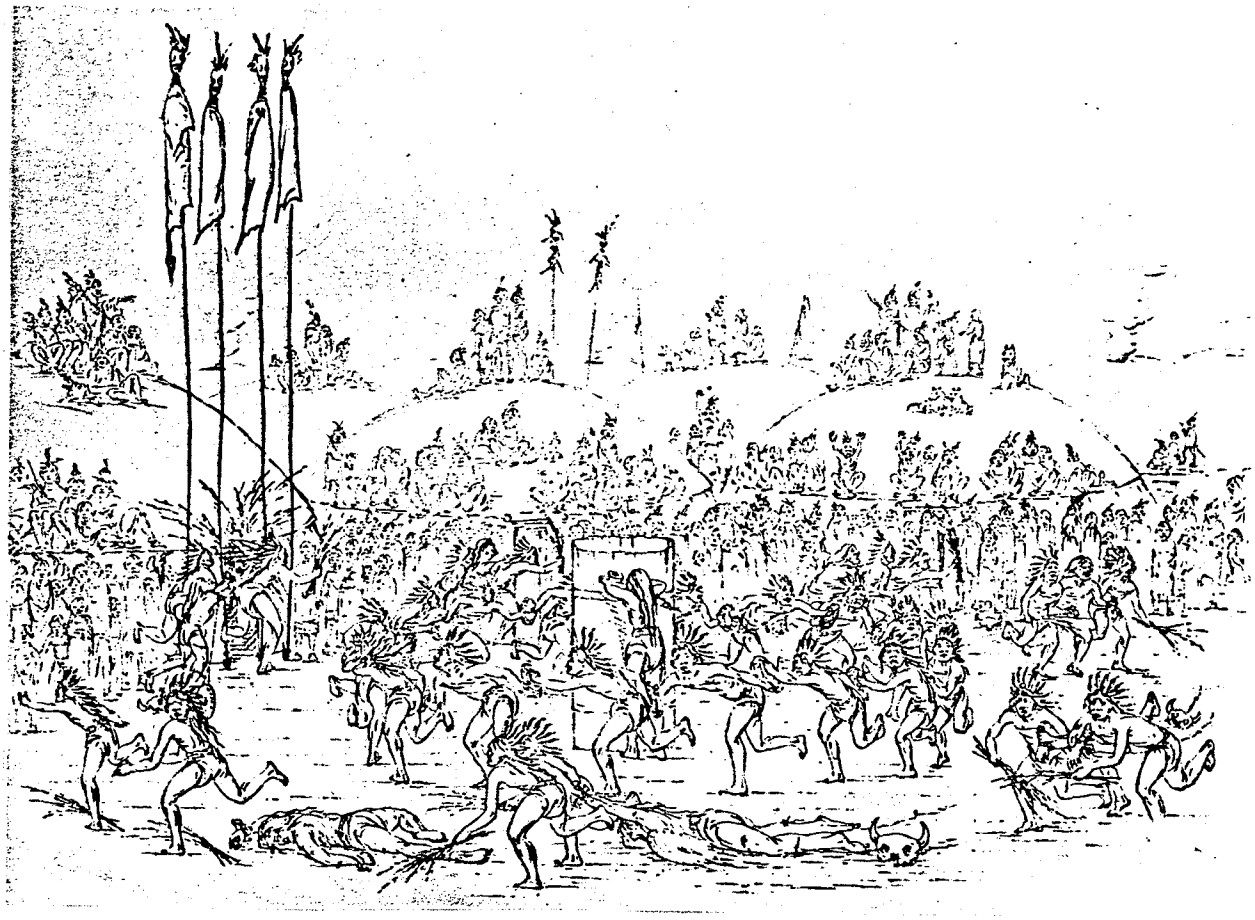
George Catlin. Comanche War Party Meeting Dragoons. In McCracken, p. 181.

George Catlin. BA-DA-AH-CHON-DU, He Who Outjumps All. In McCracken, p. 92.

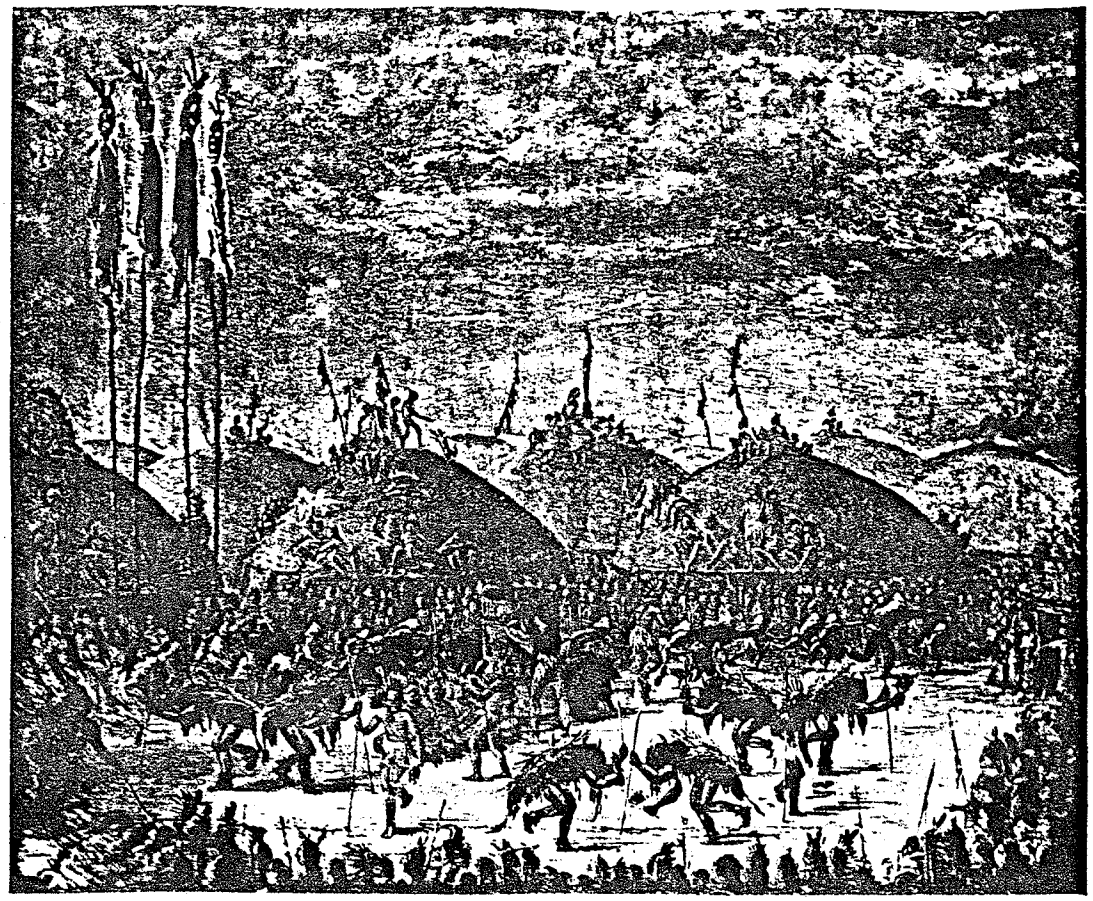
George Catlin. HA-NA-TA-NU-MAUK, The Wolf Chief. In McCracken, p. 87.



George Catlin. Mandan Village. In McCracken, p. 82.

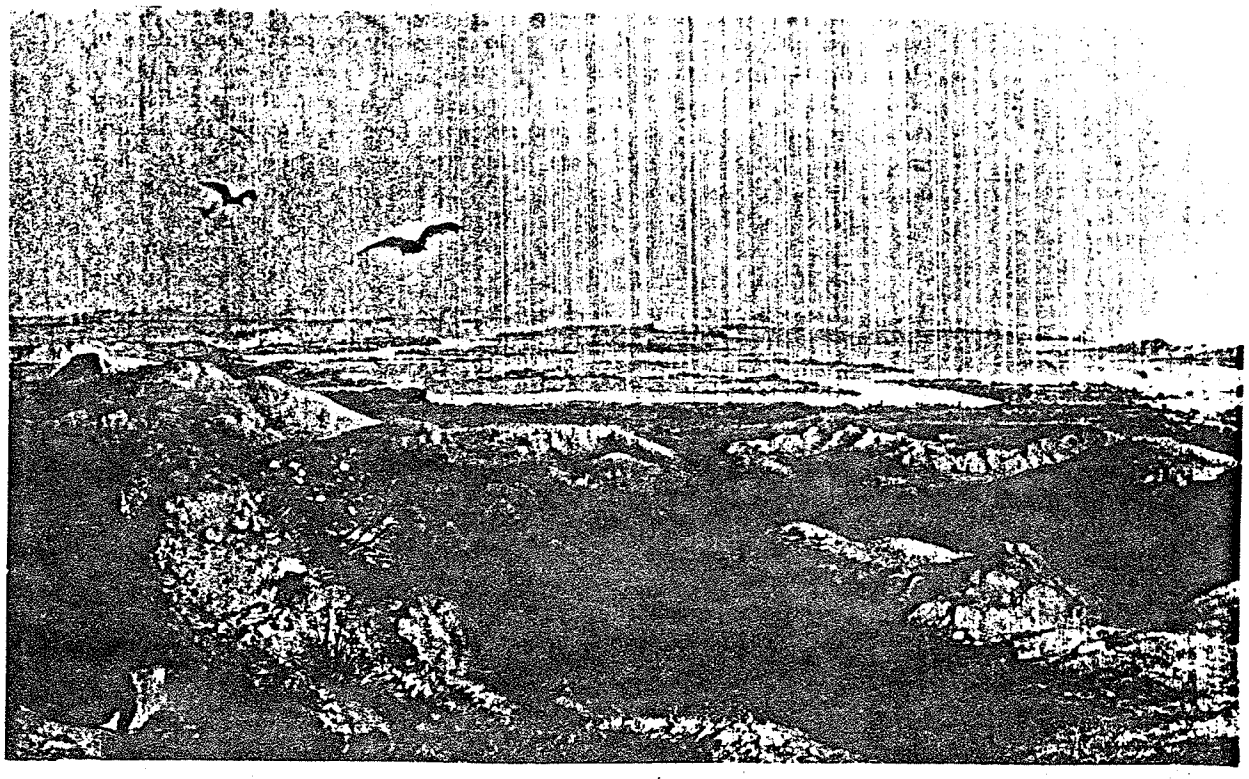


George Catlin. "O-KEE-PA": The Last Race. In McCracken, p. 107.

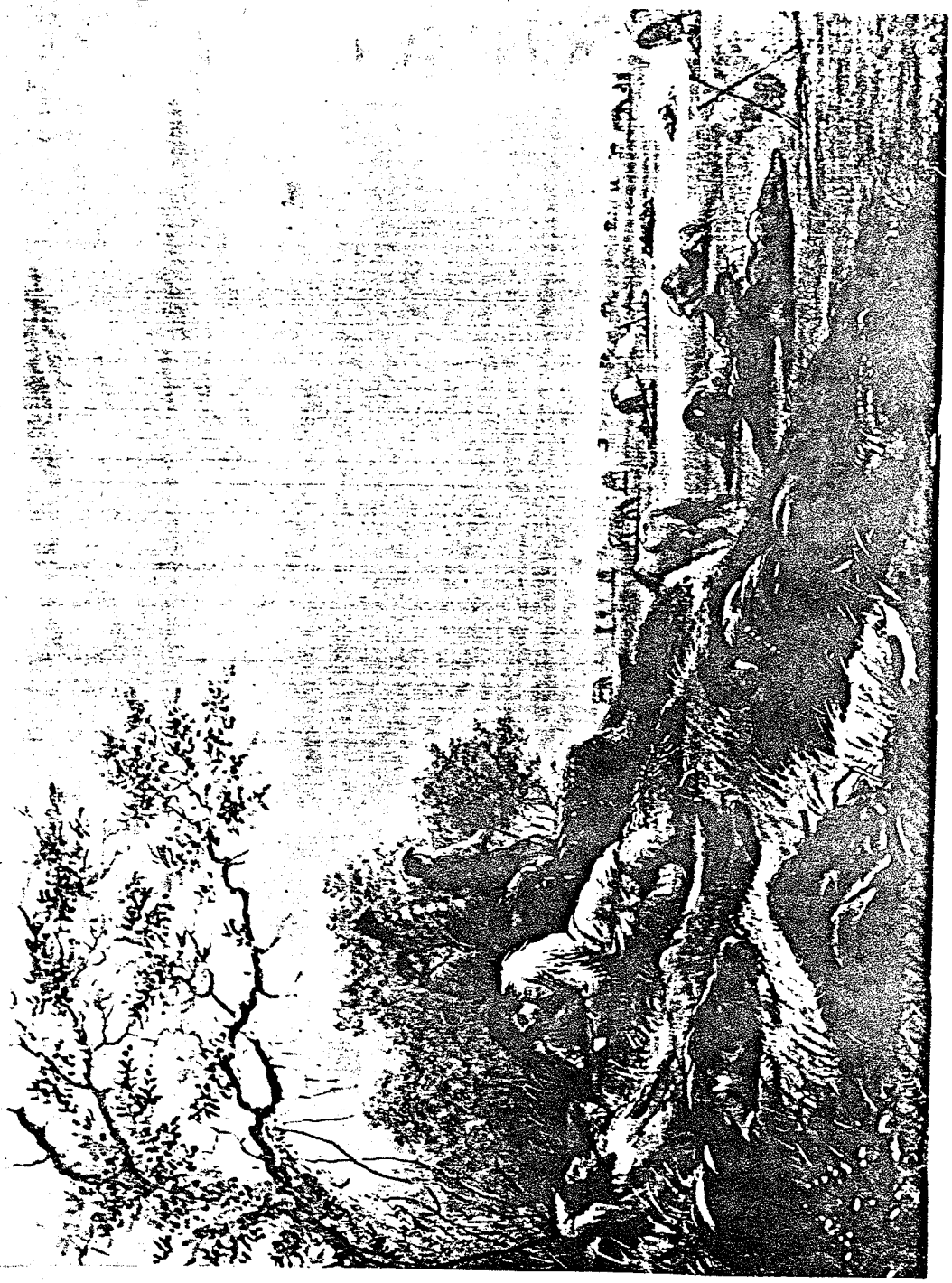


George Catlin. Mandan O-KEE-PA, The Bull Dance. In McCracken, p. 127.

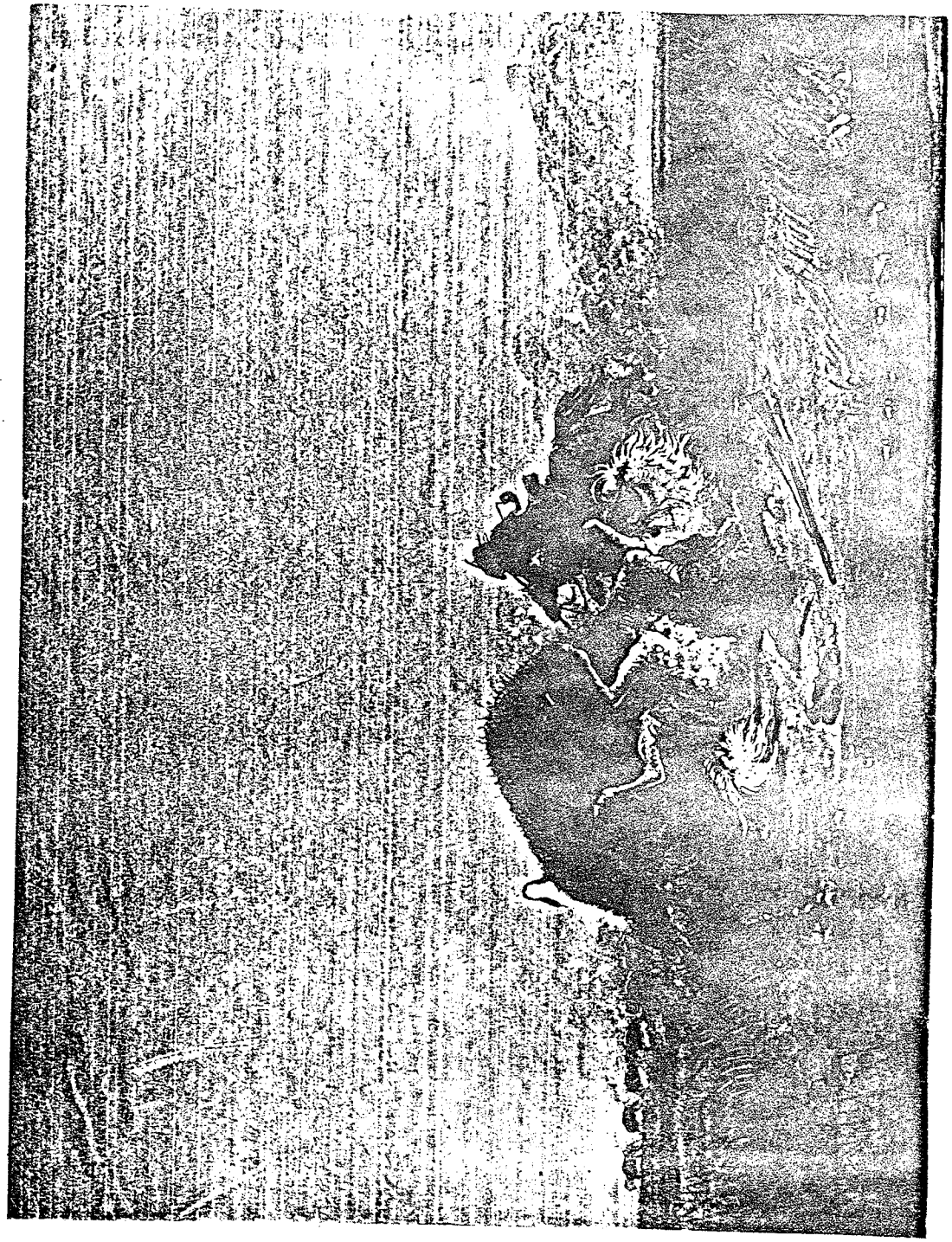
Karl Bodmer. Pehriska-Ruhpa. In De Voto, plate LXXI.



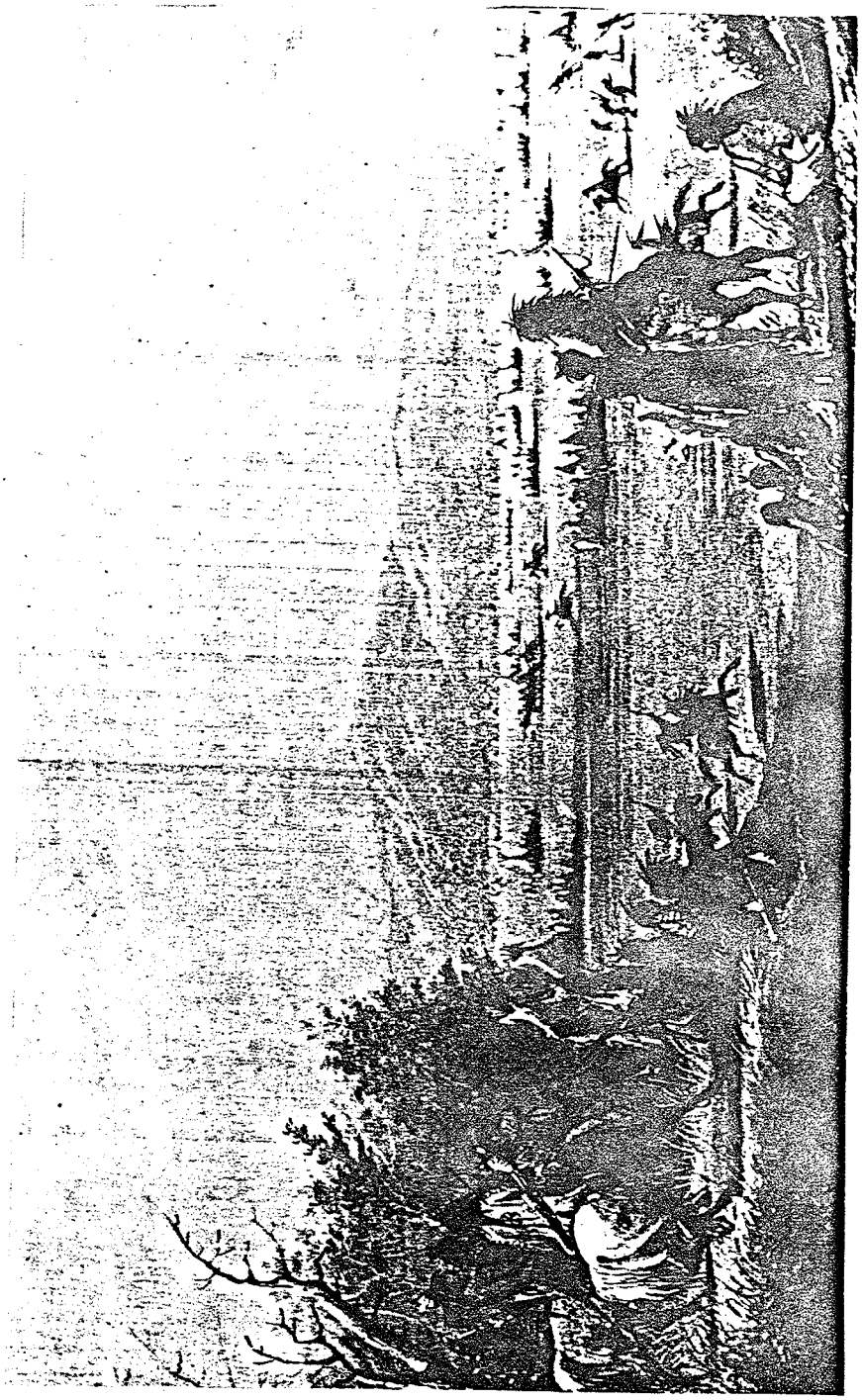
Karl Bodmer. View of the Junction of the Missouri and Yellowstone Rivers, June 25, 1833. In Noyak, fig. 71, p. 141.



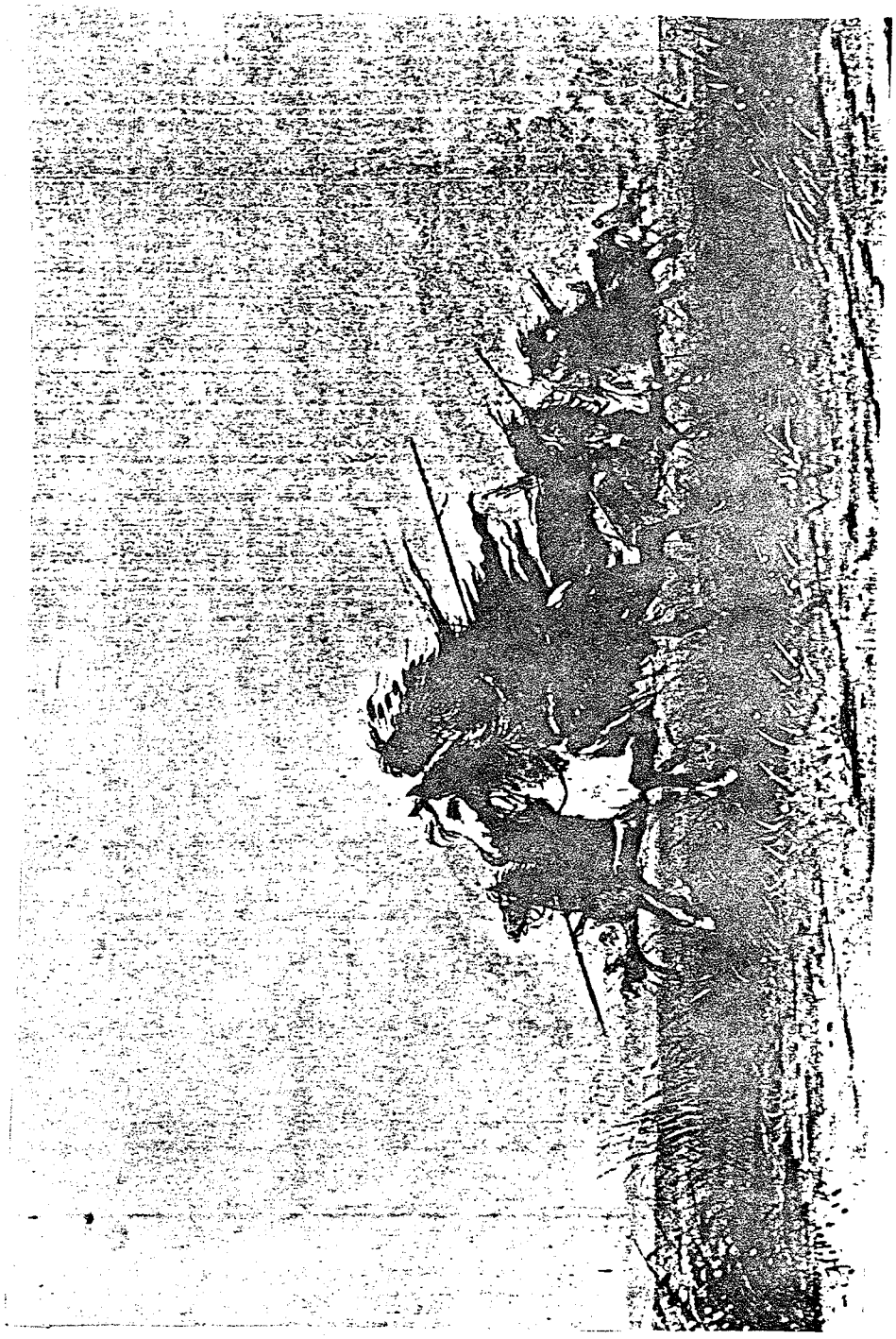
Alfred Jacob Miller, Noon-day Rest. In The West of Alfred Jacob Miller, plate 139.



Alfred Jacob Miller. Pierre and the Buffalo. In The West of Alfred Jacob Miller, plate 58.



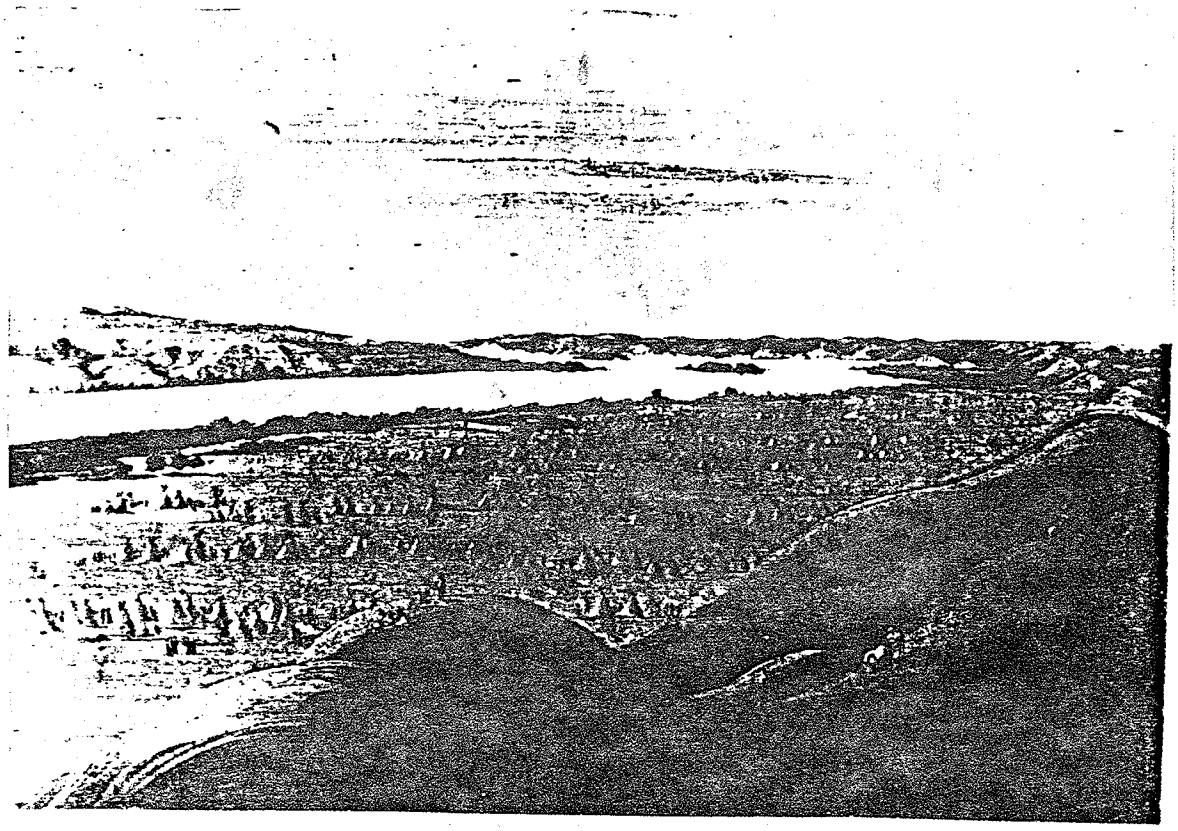
Alfred Jacob Miller. Scene at "Rendezvous". In The West of Alfred Jacob Miller, plate 175.



Alfred Jacob Miller. Indians on the War Path. In The West of Alfred Miller, plate 61.

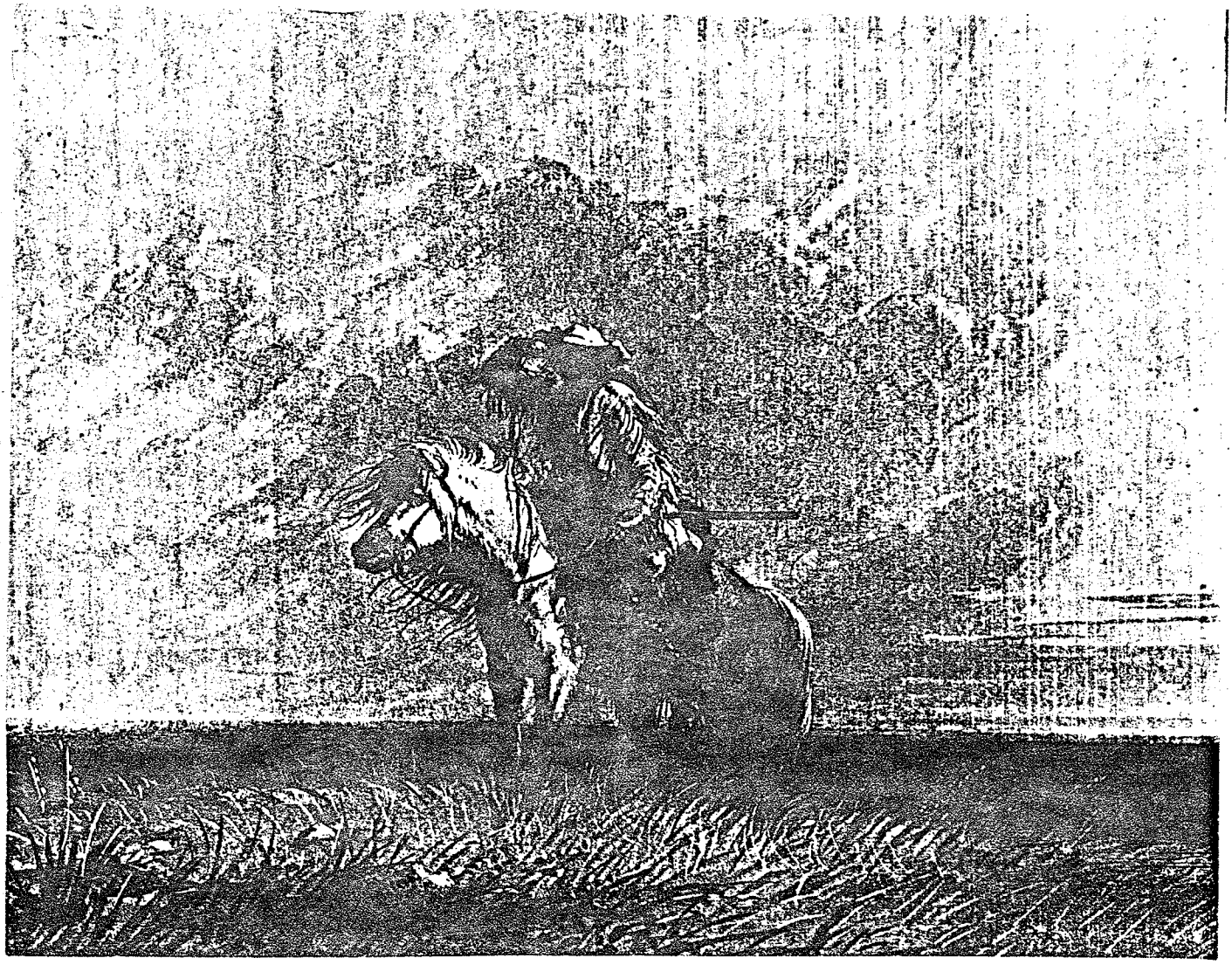
Alfred Jacob Miller, Snake Indians. In Curry, plate 3, p. 54.

Samuel Seymour. Distant View of the Rocky Mountains. In James, Account, EWT, XV, facing p. 269.

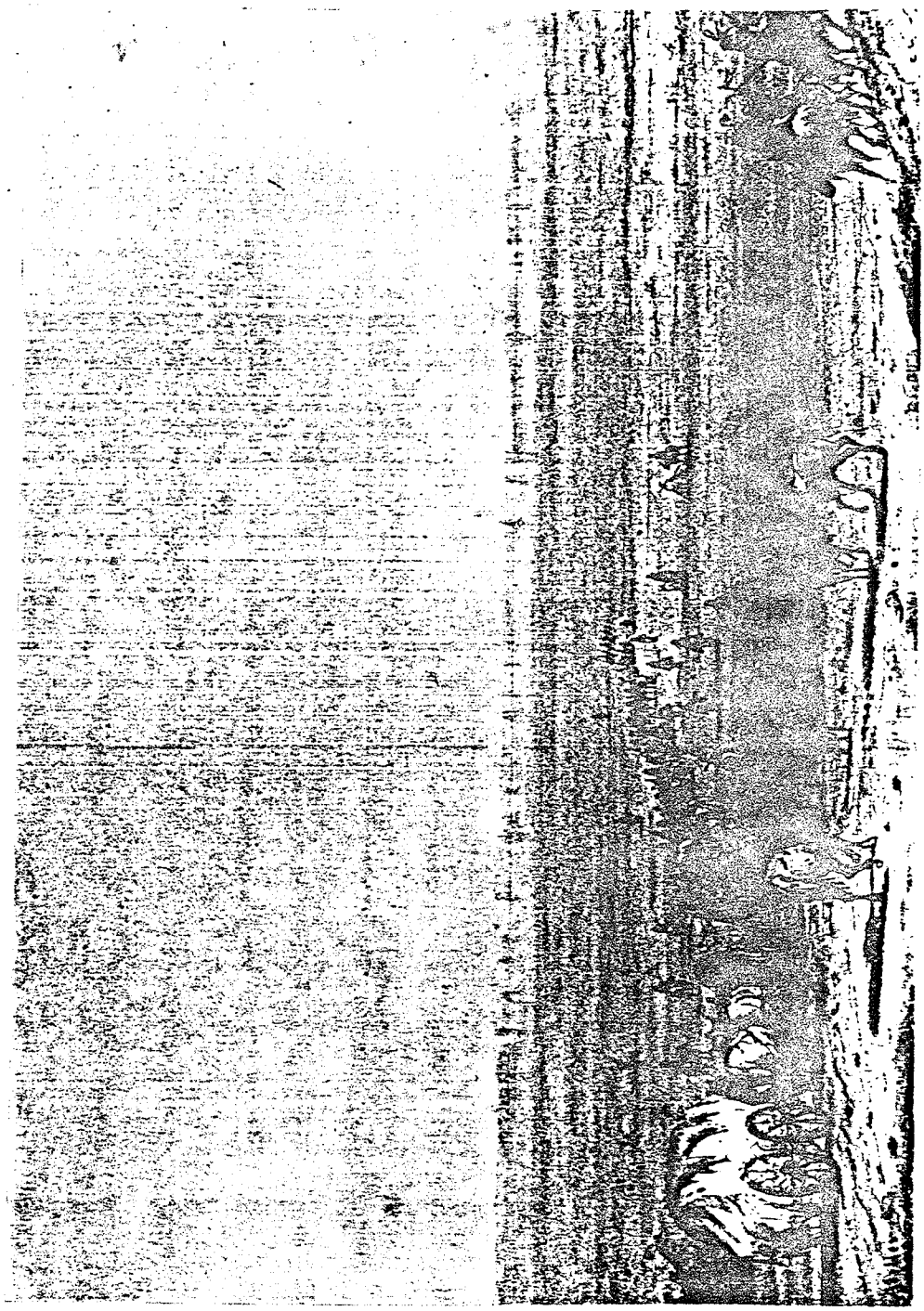


George Catlin, Fort Pierre, With Sioux Camped Around. In McCracken, p. 48.

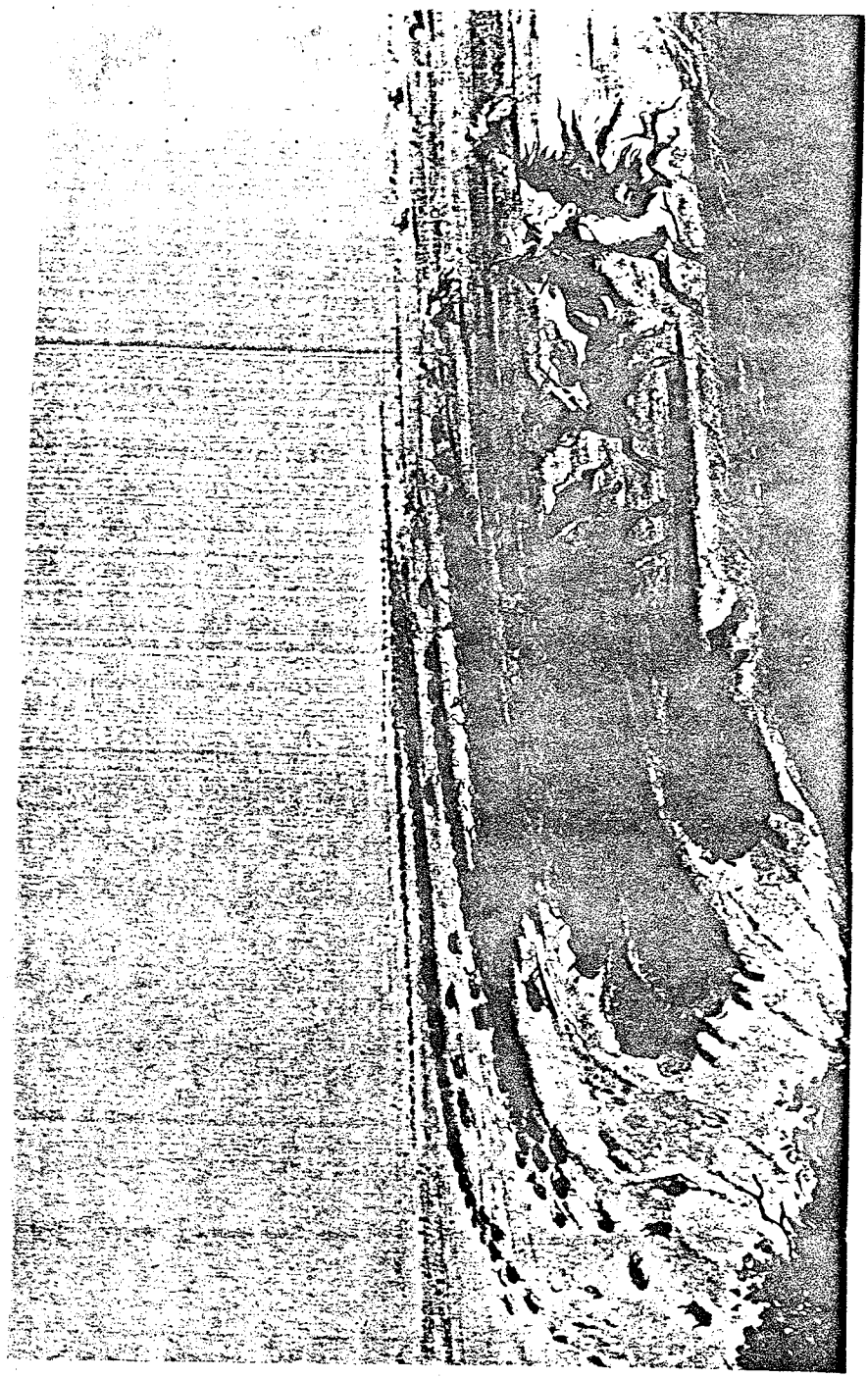
Alfred Jacob Miller. Buffalo Turning on his Pursuers. In The West of Alfred Jacob Miller, plate 138.



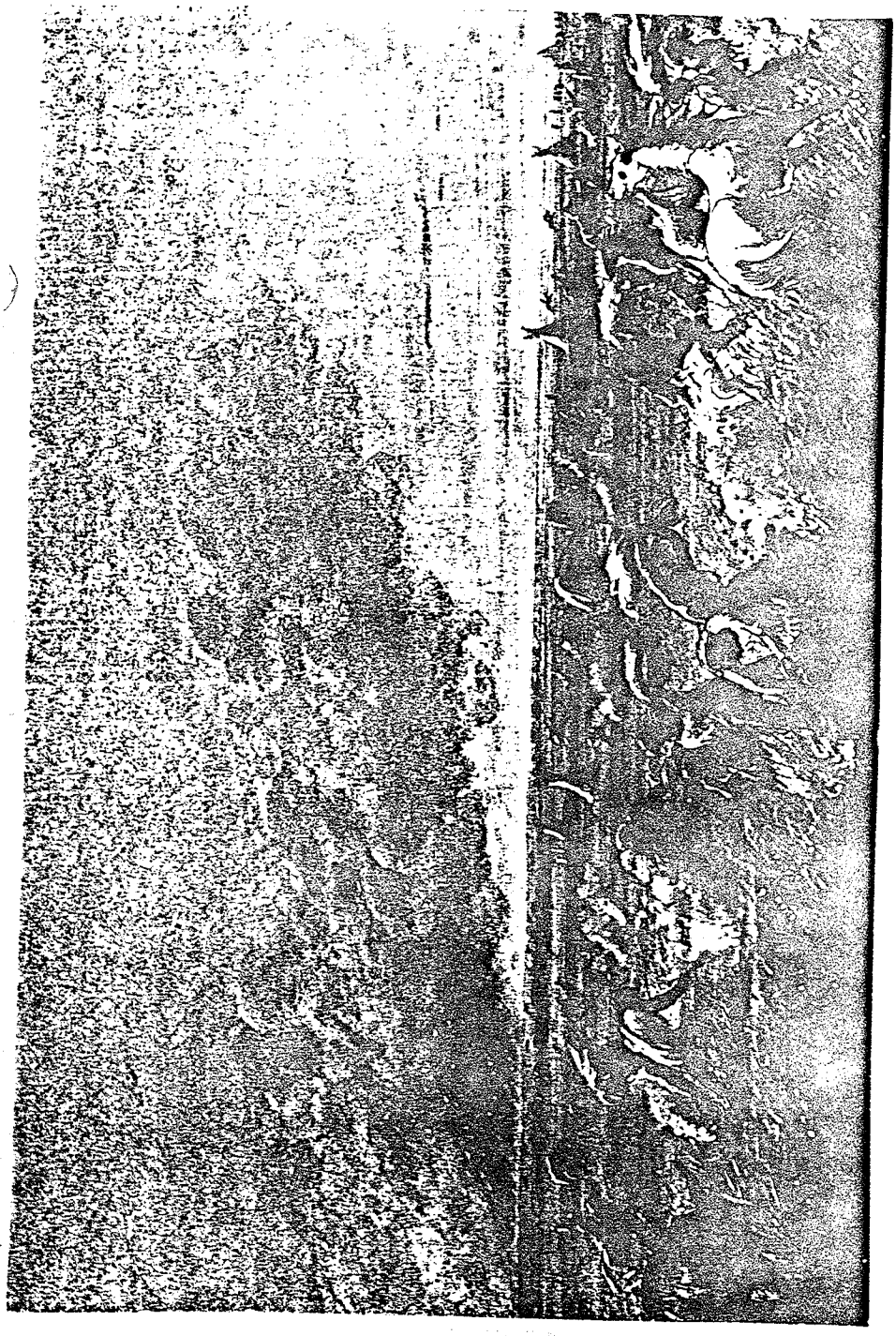
Alfred Jacob Miller. The Lost "Green Horn". In The West of Alfed Jacob Miller, plate 141.



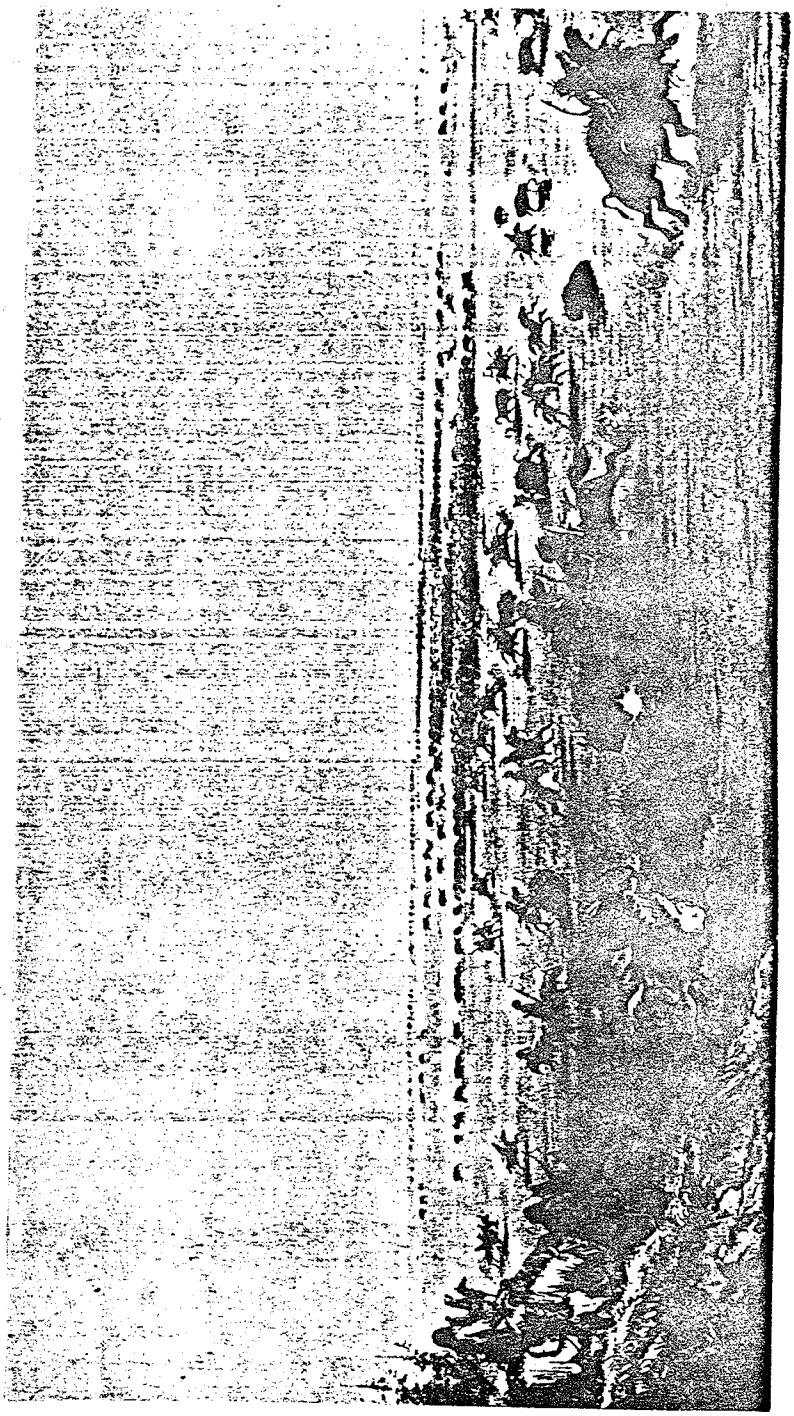
Alfred Jacob Miller. Prairie Scene: Mirage. In The West of Alfred Jacob Miller, plate 149.



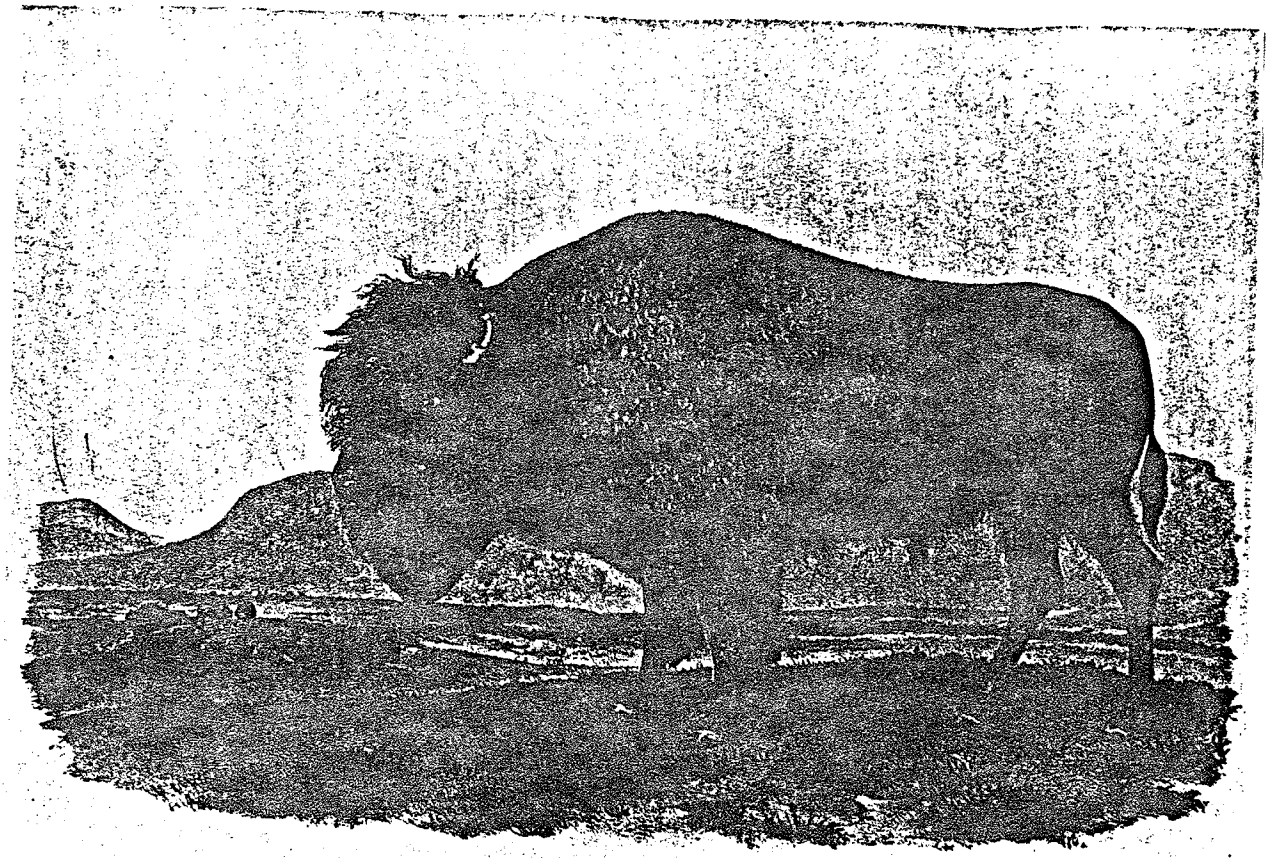
Alfred Jacob Miller. Hunting Buffalo. In The West of Alfred Jacob Miller, plate 190.



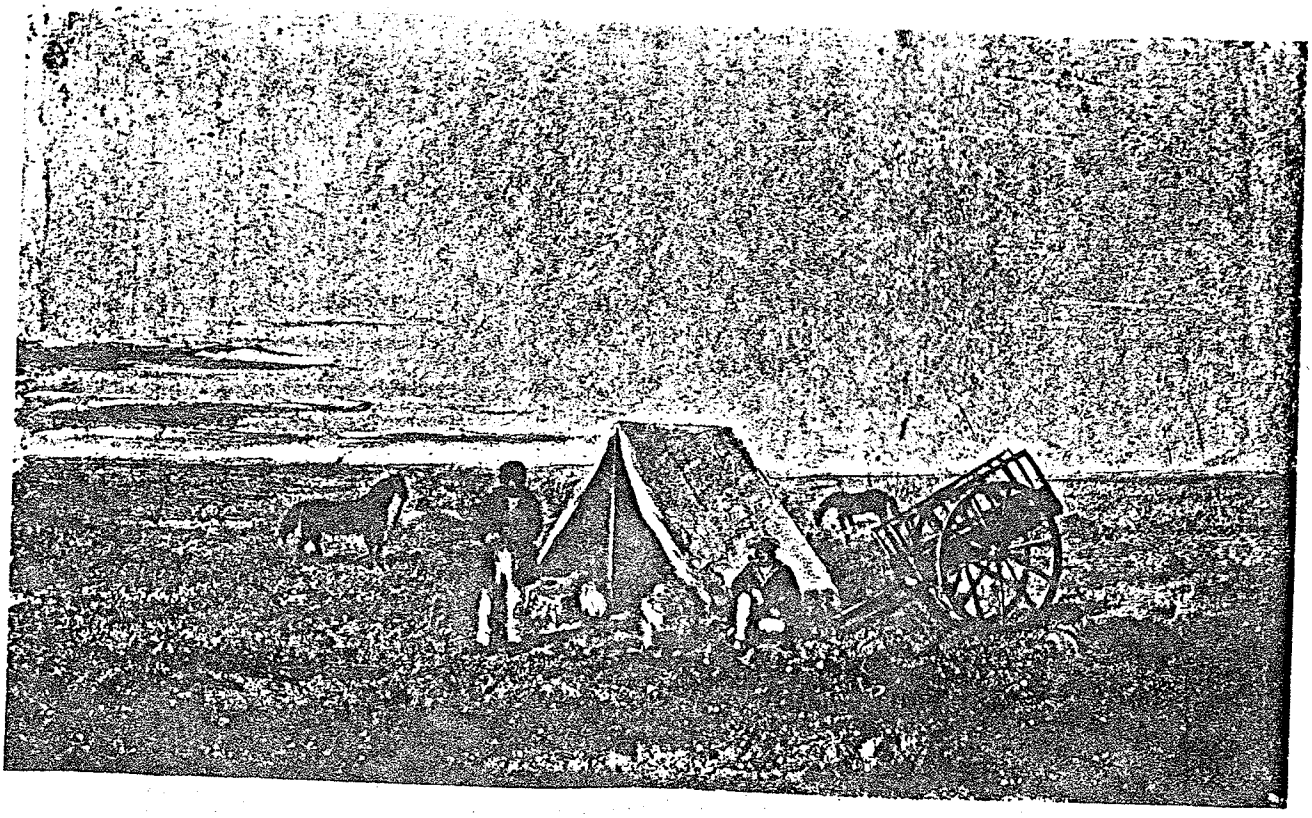
Alfred Jacob Miller. Prairie on Fire. In The West of Alfred Jacob Miller, plate 198.



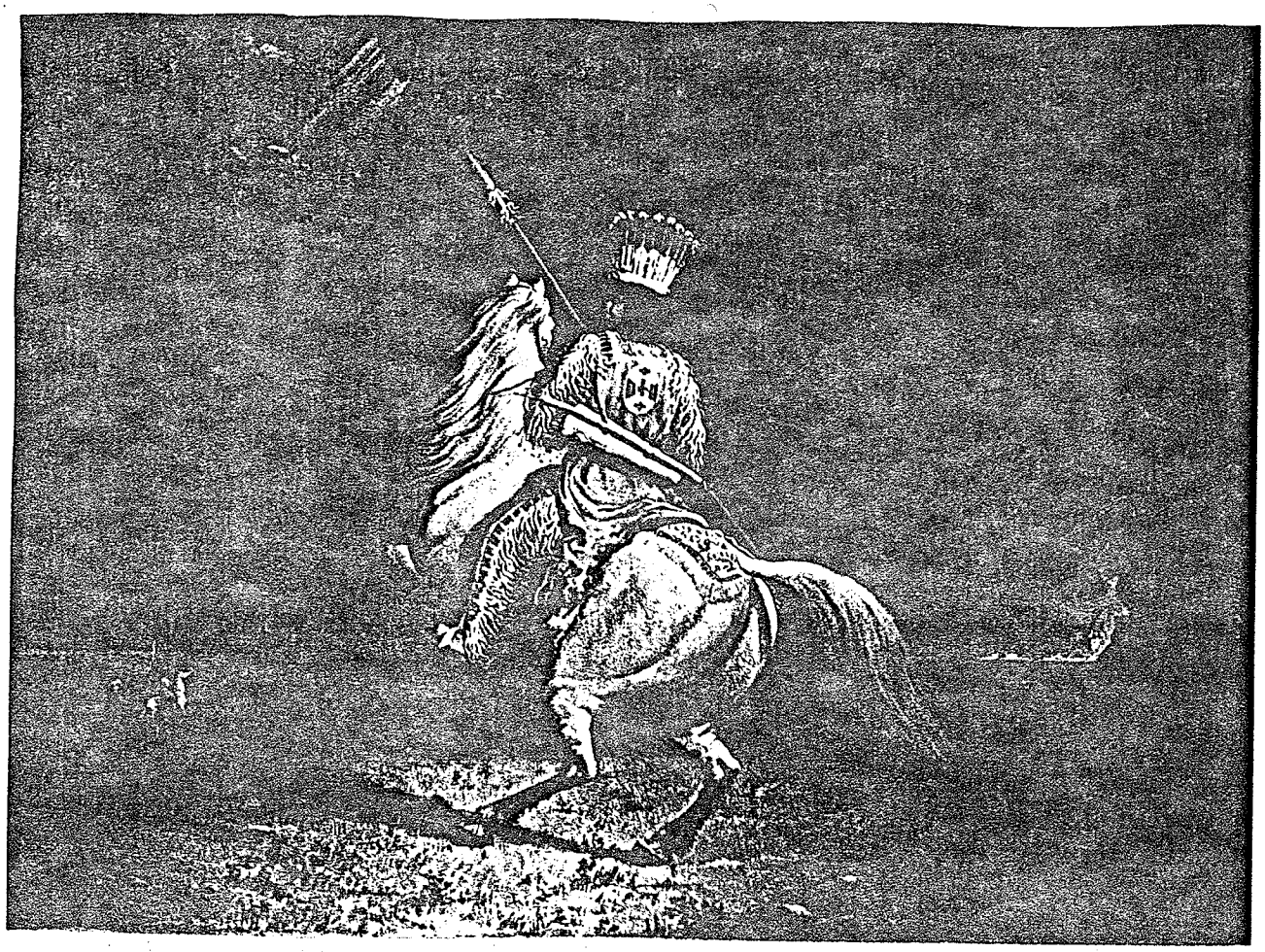
Alfred Jacob Miller. A "Surround" of Buffalo by Indians. In The West of Alfred Jacob Miller, plate 200.



John James Audubon. American Bison or Buffalo. In Audubon's America, p. 306.

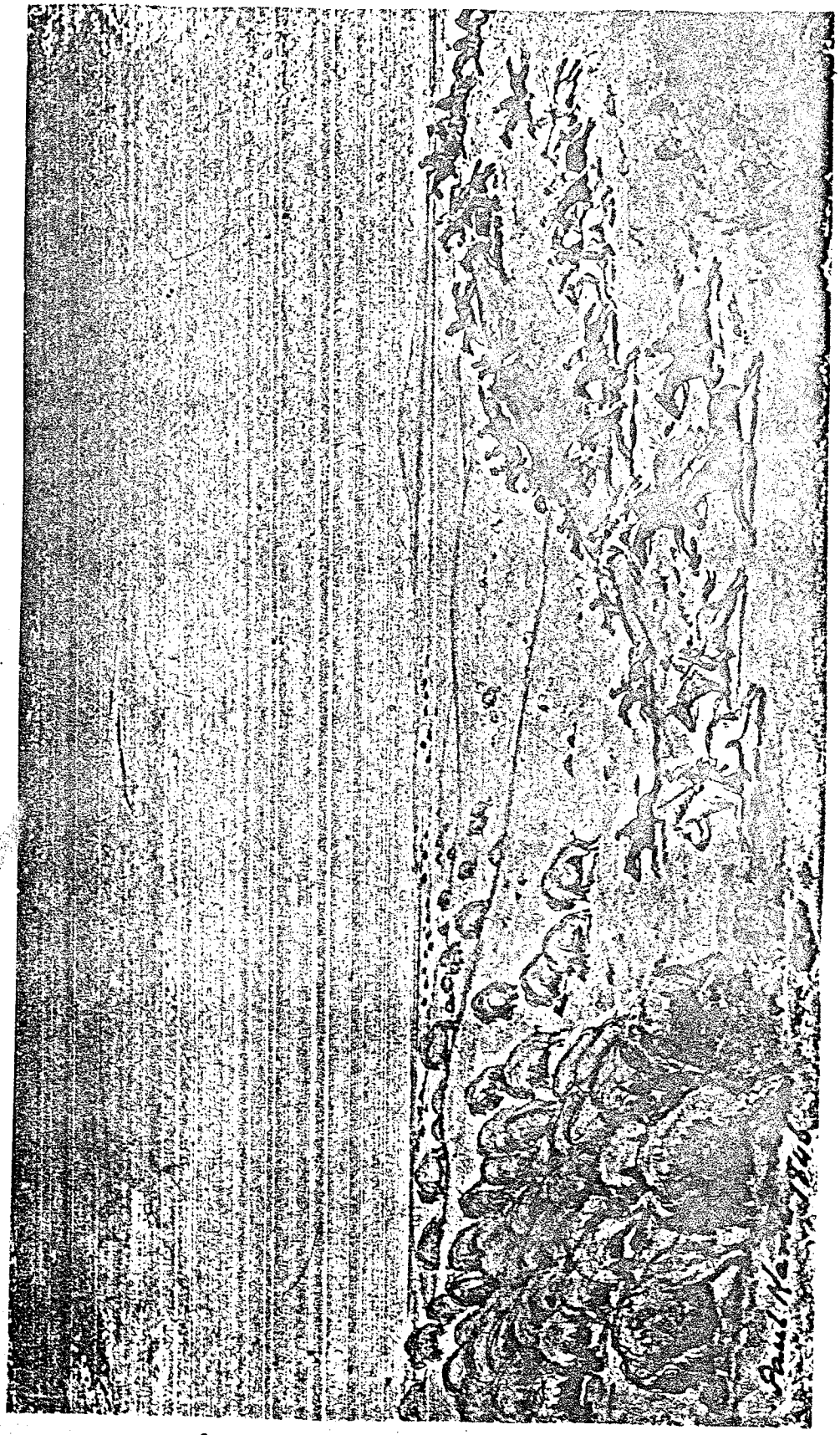


Paul Kane. Camping on the Prairies (Kane and a Companion). In Paul Kane's Frontier, Plate XVI.

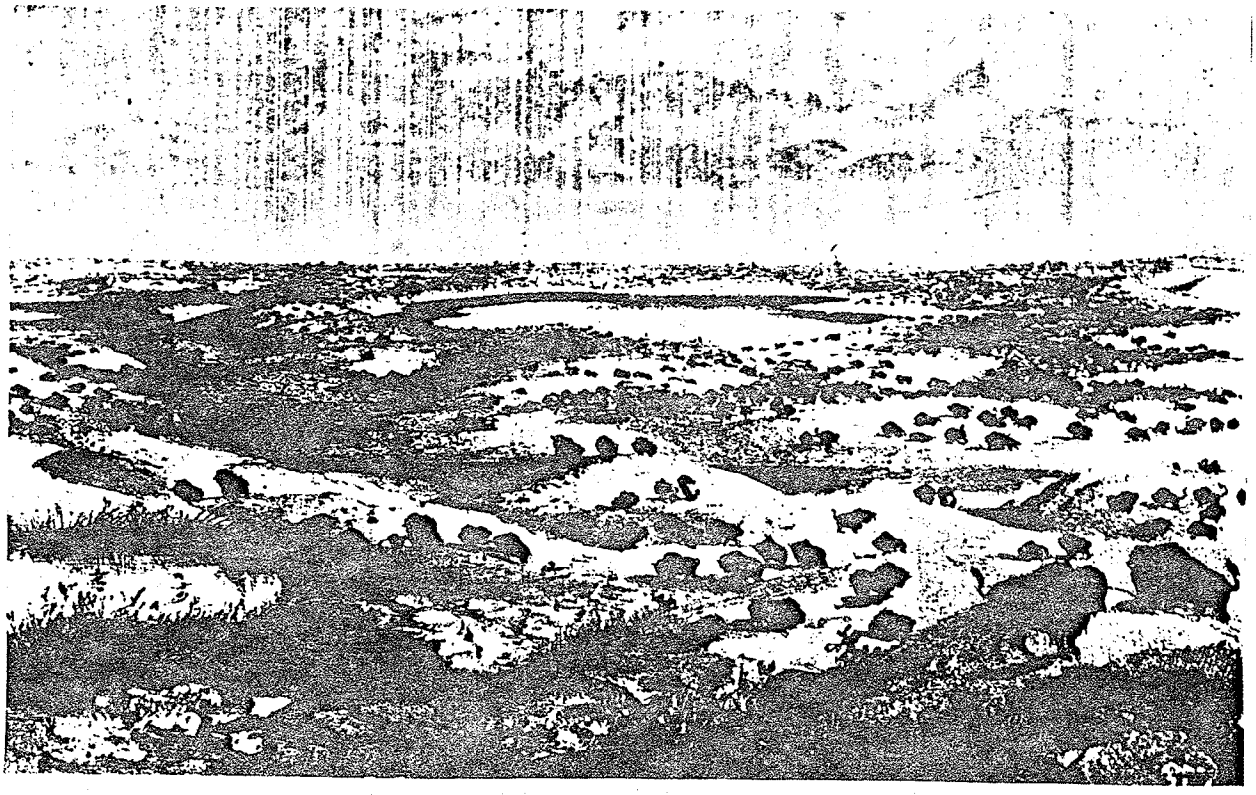


Paul Kane. The Man That Always Rides. In Paul Kane's Frontier, Plate XX.

Paul Kane. Winter Travelling (A Wedding Party Leaving Ft. Edmonton). In Paul Kane's Frontier, Plate XXVI.

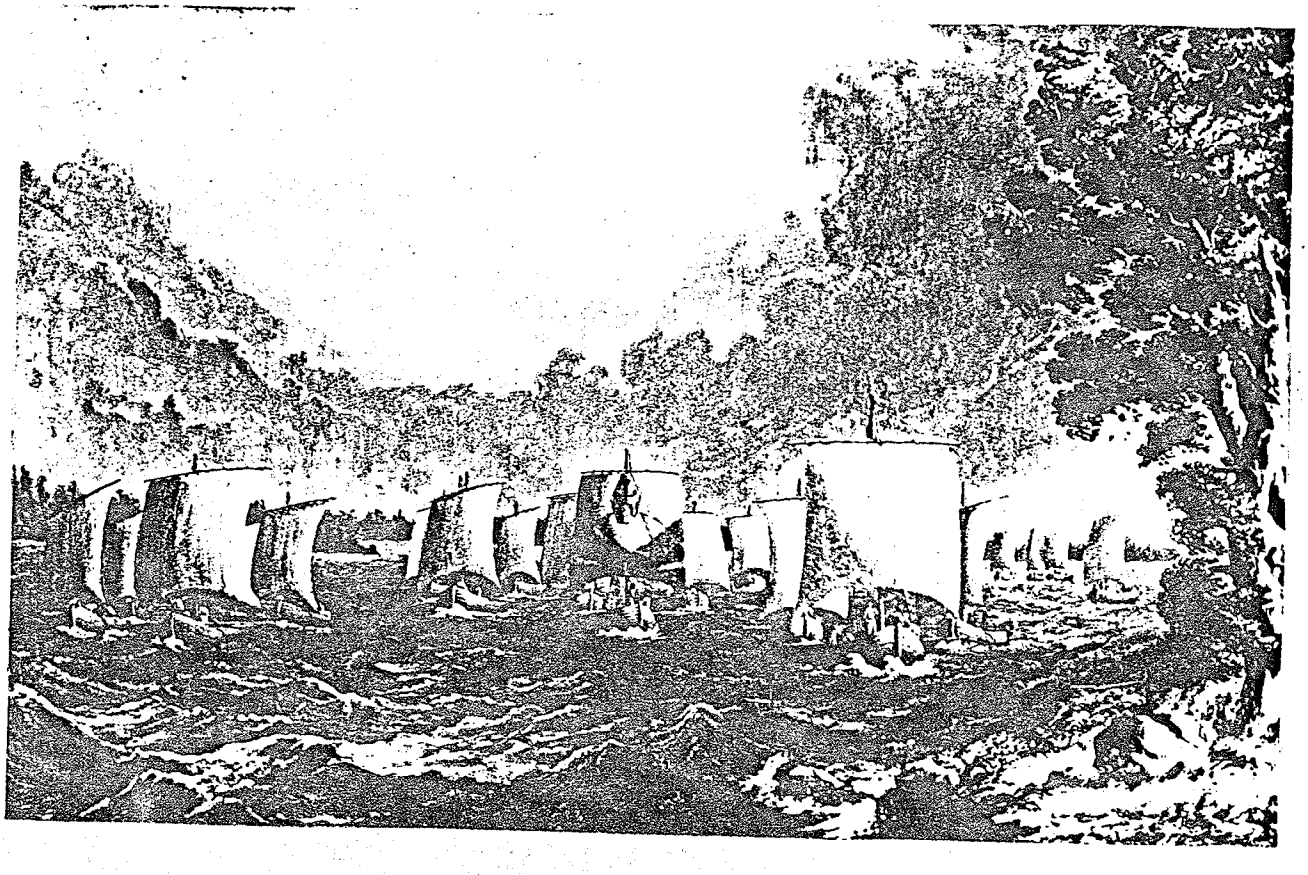


Paul Kane. Métis Chasing a Buffalo Herd. In Paul Kane's Frontier, Plate XVII.



John Mix Stanley. Herd of Bison Near Lake Jessie. In Novak, fig. 72, p. 142.

Paul Kane. Assiniboine Hunting Buffalo. In Paul Kane's Frontier, Fig. 105, p. 213.



Paul Kane. Brigade of Boats. In Paul Kane's Frontier, fig. 74, p. 195.

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