

BIG SKY JOURNAL

SPRING 1996



NEW MONTANA FICTION BY IVAN DOIG, WRITER'S PROFILE BY WILLIAM KITTREDGE

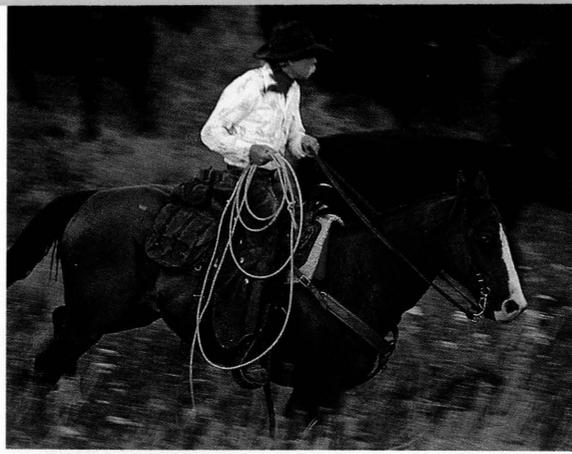
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A few years ago, Ivan Doig began researching what will surely be seen as one of the most remarkable novels to come out of the western literary landscape in some time. *BUCKING THE SUN*, a historical work set during the building of the Fort Peck Dam, opens with two bodies in a drowned truck. Two naked bodies.



GRAVEL DUMPING INTO UPSTREAM TOE OF FORT PECK DAM, JULY 19, 1935.

They're both named Duff, and they're both married... just not to each other.

The plot turns the pages, but Doig's history of the dam—the remarkable, precise documentation of what it was to work and eat and sleep and drink around the largest earth-filled dam in the world—gives this novel breath and life.

We have excerpted one of the later chapters.

BUCKING THE SUN

BY IVAN DOIG

To be published in May, 1996 by Simon & Schuster

Four days before the river was to be closed off, in the middle of an already complicated enough afternoon of jigsawing the dredgelines back together downstream from the dam, Owen was called to the field telephone.

"Sangster. Sounds like he's got a hair crosswise," the pipehaul fore-

man warned before handing him the phone.

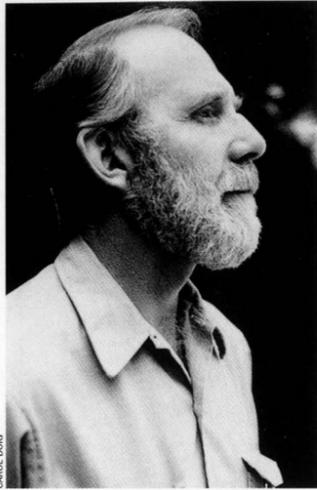
"Owen," said the thin voice on the other end, "you better come see something."

"What, at the trestle again? I'll be right—"

"Huh uh," the fieldphone voice now sounded as if it was having trou-

FORT PECK DAM, CHANNEL CLOSURE, JUNE 24, 1937.





WRITERS WEST: IVAN DOIG

BY WILLIAM KITTREDGE

Back in the winter of 1978, I was hanging around in a Missoula bookstore, and the woman who owned it handed me a copy of the galleys of a book called *This House of Sky: Landscapes of a Western Mind*. I stayed up late and loved the reading—a memoir

which starts with the death of Doig's mother, Berneta, in 1945, and tells the hard story of Ivan growing up with two full-scale westerners—his father, Charlie Doig, and his grandmother, Bessie Ringer. It was a narrative which rang of emotional accuracy and the difficult dead-right details of life on the blue-collar end of the stick out east of the Montana Rockies.

There had been *Winter in the Blood* in 1974, and *A River Runs Through It* in 1976, and now this book. The northern West was indeed going to have its own literature.

Reviewers agreed with me. *The Christian Science Monitor* said "This extraordinary, eloquent memoir heralds a powerful new American writer. Doig poignantly traces his Montana boyhood...As the land has haunted and shaped him, so his movingly beautiful prose haunts us."

Literary people in Montana got a chance to meet Ivan and his wife, Carol, when they came through on a book-signing tour, Ivan autographing copies with green felt-tipped pens until his fingers were blistered (literally), taking his time, enjoying the talk, a country man come home.

The next year, Doig was nominated for the

National Book Award. Like *A River Runs Through It*, his book had been well-rejected by the publishing establishment in the East, and then enjoyed great success (it sold something like 130,000 hardback copies).

In the spring of 1979, Bob Reid and I staged a literary conference in Missoula called "Who Owns the West." One of my proudest memories is of introducing Dorothy Johnson, Bud Guthrie, Norman Maclean, Ross Toole, and Ivan Doig to one another—had my heroes in one place for a weekend.

Since those days, Ivan has published a whole line of books: *Winter Brothers* (1980); *The Sea Runners* (1982); the McCaskill family trilogy, *English Creek* (1984), *Dancing at the Rascal Fair* (1987), *Ride With Me, Mariah Montana* (1990), and *Heart Earth* (1994).

Literary people in the northern West owe a considerable debt to Ivan Doig. He helped prove to agents and editors in the East that books about this part of the world could sell, and sell very well. I owe him a personal debt—he and Carol were among those responsible for encouraging me to write my own memoirs.

But his most important gift is his ability to find significance in the texture of our lives. In the West, many of us live far way from the self-importance of the so-called "Great World." It's easy to feel cut off from things. Ivan Doig takes us seriously, reminding us that our doings—cooking, plowing, fixing fence, caring for the kids—are of consequence. In Doig's books we see ourselves and our society as in a mirror, defined, inherently complex and difficult, interesting and valuable

from
THIS HOUSE OF SKY: LANDSCAPES OF A WESTERN MIND
HARCOURT BRACE & COMPANY, 1978

Soon before daybreak on my sixth birthday, my mother's breathing wheezed more raggedly than ever, then quieted. And then stopped.

The remembering begins out of that new silence. Through the time since, I reach back along my father's tellings and around the urgings which would have me face about and forget, to feel into these oldest shadows for the first sudden edge of it all.



WHEELER, MONTANA: A WORKER'S VILLAGE BY THE DAM.

ble believing itself. "This is at the truss bridge again."

His first look at the slumped earth, within spitting distance of the truss bridge, sent Owen white-faced. Sangster's was whiter.

The slipped section of fill resembled a muddy scallop shell perhaps two hundred feet long and a hundred high. It had slid, still in one arched piece, several feet down into the river channel. Scoured away underneath by the flood, loosened by the rapid fall of the floodwater, who knew what the precise cause was: it had slid. The arc of gap where the shell edge had pulled away from the dam was spookily neat, as if a hill had just taken an innocent step forward from the mountain of earthfill. There was nothing innocent about it. The shifted heap of fill was throwing enormous weight down against the main pier of the railroad bridge.

"It holding okay?" Owen tore his eyes away from the sickening dam slippage to ask about the health of Sangster's bridge.

"Not really." Sangster even still sounded pale. "Out of line about a foot already, and more to come. That pier's cracked."

FOUR YEARS OF CALM PLANNING
AND TEMPERATE ENGINEERING
ABOUT HOW TO MOST HANDILY CLOSE
OFF THE MISSOURI RIVER HAD
TO BE FED INTO THE MEATGRINDER
OF THE NEXT TWELVE HOURS.

Owen spoke six or eight expletives, rapid-fire. "I agree," Sangster said. "But we've got to do something besides cuss at it."

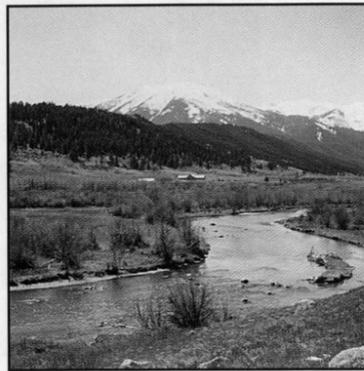
They knew they had only minutes before the official car delivered Colonel Parmenter and Major Santee and general hell.

They already had the gravel cars going by the time the Ad Building contingent descended. First thing first, everyone could see that much. If they lost the truss bridge they lost the railroad loop, the key to plugging the river; they would lose the entire dam schedule, they

from
DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR
ATHENEUM, 1987

West. West, the mountains as steady as a sea wall. The most eminent of them in fact was one of the gray-rock palisades that lay like reefs in the surge of the Rockies, a straight up-and-down cliff perhaps the majority of a mile high and, what, three or more miles long. A stone partition between ground and sky, even-rimmed as though it had been built by hand, countless weathers ago.

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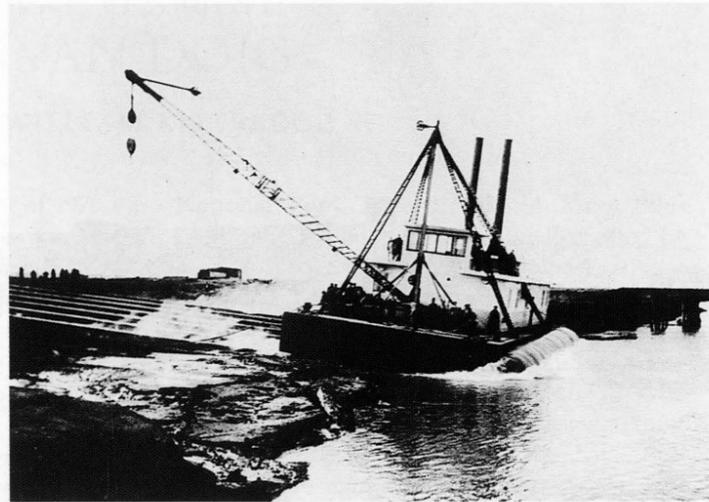
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DERRICK BOAT BEING LAUNCHED, FORT PECK DAM.

would lose all advantage over the river for Christ knew how long. Thirty timely railcars of gravel, dumped on the weak side of the cracked concrete pier to temporarily shore it up, saved them from that at least for the moment. But now came the question of holding together both the bridge's underpinning and the channel shoulder of the dam until they could get the river plugged.

Owen and Sangster and everybody in the vicinity nervously sized up the Corps officers as the briefing was convened there at the river. Colonel Parmenter appeared to be wishing for the Philippines. Major Santree looked a little smirky, as he often did when things went wrong.

The colonel made short work of discussion. "What about this, Duff?"

What about what? What the floodwater did along here, so that neither I nor God Almighty can guarantee you that chunk of earthfill won't move some more, won't cave off and take the bridge with it, in the next four days or the next four minutes? That there was only, what, one chance in five that we'd get the highest water of the whole project this spring, but that's exactly the thing we did get? Or that what I most want right now, the one thing I can think of to maybe stabilize the fill that's slipped, is to have high water up against it again? What are you going to think of any of my whats, Colonel?

Owen took the deep, deep breath needed to go for broke.

Fort Peck woke up to dynamite at dawn.

The detonation, at 4:20 a.m. sharp, breached the dike which had been holding back the riverwater above the tunnel portals. That quick, with one ka-BOOM and a dirt geyser of blown dike, the map of the Missouri River changed. Now the river forked at the dam, the main flow still tumbling through the channel but an easternly eddy swirling its way into the tunnel inlets. It was a bit past dawn when the first riverwater made its passage through the tunnels and surged into the outlet channel below the dam, frothing white against the confining concrete.

At the main channel, at the truss bridge, four years of calm planning and temperate engineering about how to most handily close off the Missouri River had to be fed into the meatgrinder of the next twelve hours. Improvising every inch of the way, they were going to make the river into the counterweight proposed by Owen Duff, by backing the water up against the sloughed section of fill like a liquid retaining wall. Which meant plugging the river here and now, at the downstream end of the channel, instead of upstream at the

trestle the intended three days from now.

"Owen, where the hell's that dispatcher, we got to get rolling on—"

Which meant that the forty-five-car trainload of plugging boulders could not be jauntily dropped straight into the river—the side girders of the truss bridge were in the way—but needed to be unloaded at both ends of the bridge, spilled down onto gravel approaches to the river.

"I know, I know, Colonel, it's not the greatest field office there ever was, but it's all the ready-built crew could skid over here to us in a hurry. What exactly is it? Well, sir, it's a two-holer."

Which meant that the crane barge laboring in the middle of the river current had to grapple the boulders from the gravel banks one by one, to build a rough sill out into the channel.

"Okay, Max, so this is slower than the wrath of God, but we don't have any choice but to keep that crane boat at—"

Which meant that the rail fleet of gravel cars couldn't let fly with their massive plug of gravel until the boulder sill was firmly there to keep it from washing away.

"Oh, Jesus, it won't be done until WHEN?"

To the engineers, this was like being trapped in a very long game of checkers when they had been all set to play bombs-away.

*H*old, you so-and-so. There's no damn reason for you to be falling into the river.

Owen wasn't addressing this thought to the truss bridge although, heaven knew by the blue smoke of invective and energy he was lending in support of Sangster and it, he did not want to see the steel span hit the water either.

Either nobody savvies or nobody's saying—not even you, Max—that the truss

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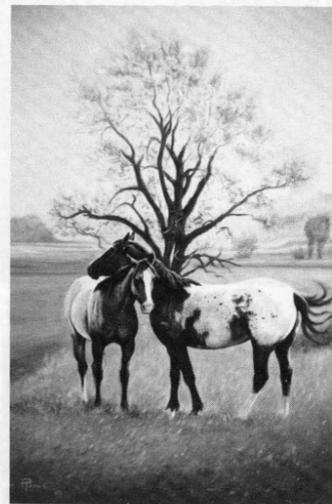


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bridge could be only the first symptom here.

Whatever else he was at, through this longest day, Owen kept the slipped section of damfill guardedly in sight, forever in mind.

Just hold. That's not asking such a hell of a lot, is it? Sit there, another few hours is all, and then I can tend to you. If he ran the arithmetic of the situation through his head once this day, he ran it two hundred times. The site of the slippage, the core pool, the distance between: by every calculation he could think of, the core pool sitting dumb, fat and happy up there in the east half of the dam should be safely far enough from where that odd shell of fill had given way; look, millions of other cubic yards there in the channel shoulder supporting the core pool hadn't given way. Result: the slippage as it now stood didn't necessarily mean that the core pool was going to start leaking out of it any minute and the leak would increase to a gush in less time than it took to tell about it and the gush would speedily grow to be a breach and the breach majestically would cave away and the entire sonofabitching core pool would rush out in a 150-foot-high avalanche of water and fill, tearing the guts out of the dam.

Owen Duff, engineer, knew the slipped spot didn't necessarily mean that.

Owen Duff, alarmed member of the human race, Fort Peck sub-group, was not so sure. This version, the one he had to traipse around in while big rocks got fumbled into place beneath the bridge, would not breathe easy until he had the plugged Missouri and a Niagara of freshly piped dredge material both at work shoring up that slipped spot.

So hold, damn it, okay?

The bridge pier needed helpings of gravel every so often, and so Sangster at least had spurts of being



FORT PECK DAM, NOV. 25, 1936, WORKMEN, ENGINEERS AND FOREMEN.

BY MIDAFTERNOON, OFFICERS AND ENGINEERS WERE RUNNING ON COFFEE AND HABIT.

busy at that, having the train dispatcher roll another thirty-car cut of dumper cars in, which Owen envied him. He himself had the pipeline crew hauling and installing along the channel shoulder and had called in the bullgang to help out with the last needed section of the strutworks there, and all four of his dredges were standing ready downriver, so that as soon as the river was safely plugged they could pour material like mad into this neck of the channel and backfill the slipped slope. Begin to end the dam, as well. Oh, there'd be another full year, fifteen months maybe, of building it up and topping it off. But the vee of the river channel was the last gap, the four mile valley between the chosen bluffs had shrunk down to it. Owen had ready or was getting ready everything he could think of to throw at the channel. But for now he was reduced to scenery inspector, standing watching the ungodly slow progress of the rock sill under the bridge.

The river boiled around the crane barge, which stood there in mid-stream like a patient broad-butted fisherman, its long boom swinging as it brought a ton-and-a-half boulder into the water, going back for another.

Reporting for pipeline work, the bullgang watched the scurry and commotion around the truss bridge with envy.

"Not much call for guys with hammers in that, is there?" someone asked wistfully.

"Afraid not," answered their foreman, Jepperson. "No, most of you, just whack away at setting up the next section of struts. I goddamn well know you're going to spend most of your time gawking over there, but try and look

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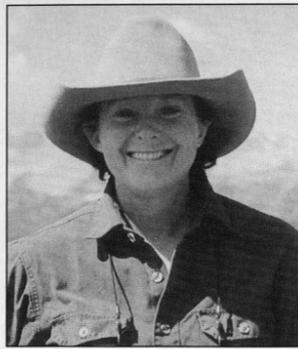
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busy once in a while." Jepperson shifted his weight. "But four of you get to be gravelmasters."

A silence settled on the crew.

"What this is," Jepperson went on, "they're gonna double up on the gravel dumping. Constantly run trains until they get the river held. The four guys up there," he jerked his head in the direction of the railroad bridge, "who're used to doing it will show you how. Oh, and you'll draw an extra two bits an hour." Someone sang out "Our chance to be big rich!" and there was a little laughter.

"So, let's say—" Jepperson made a show of looking around—"Morrie...Livingston...Duff..."

Not I, said the man named Me.

The expression on Darius put a sourball look on the foreman as well. "Not you, Bonnie Prince Darry. Other Duff, Neil there."

Neil bit a corner of his mouth, but stepped forward.

"And..." Jepperson shopped through the crew for one more. He stopped as Birdie Hinch moved indicatively. The three the foreman had named so far were all much younger, fitter. "Birdie, sorry, but I'm supposed to send guys who can run like chicken thief—" He broke off, then grinned. "Yeah, okay. And Birdie."

By midafternoon, officers and engineers were running on coffee and habit. They had all been up through the night, pitching in on the final readying of the inlet channels and the tunnels for the river diversion, and ever since early morning they had watched boulder by boulder as the sill gradually grew, and they were close to becoming zombies before Sangster cured them with:

"That's as much as we can do with rock. Hadn't we better go to gravel, Colonel?"

The quartet sent to be apprentice gravelmasters were at the end of the bridge, receiving the fastest education of their lives. The four men already working the gravel cars which periodically shored up the ailing

THEY FINISHED THE FIRST TRAIN, TWO THOUSAND TONS OF GRAVEL GONE TO THE RIVER BOTTOM, AND THE NEXT TRAIN IMMEDIATELY CAME.

bridge pier were showing them the routine. There was a catwalk between the truss girders and where the train ran. Scrambling along that, you had to keep pace with a given dumper car and when the shout of "Pull!" came, reach down and yank the big springpin which opened one of the two hopper doors beneath the railcar. Your partner on the other side of the train opened the other hopper door at the same time and the dumper car was emptied of fifty tons of gravel, falling with an appalling roar and hellish cloud of rockdust into the river. This had to be done constantly at a trot—the trains were not to stop, not for anything—and the newcomers' respect for the gravelmasters rapidly rose by hundreds of percent.

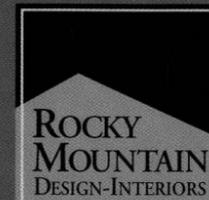
This was Sangster's show now, the gravel plug to be dumped down through the bridge car by car and train by train, and Owen caught a fleeting look of gratitude on the bespectacled man when he told him he was clearing out of his way, going up to a perch in the bridge girders for a ringside seat.

He was startled to see Neil, below on the catwalk, then wished he'd thought of that himself, getting Neil assigned out of the bullgang to perform this. With a little softsoap and pressure, he could have wangled Bruce onto the gravelmaster crew too. Wouldn't that have been something, Owen thought to himself, twin Duff brothers plugging the Missouri.

Neil developed a lope to keep up with the dumper cars, although Birdie Hinch somehow managed simply by scampering. The four pairs of men ran a strange looping race, the lead pair dumping their car of gravel

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and turning to run back past the other three sets of men to the fourth dumper car back in line, following beside it until the "Pull!" signal again. They finished the first train, two thousand tons of gravel gone to the river bottom, and the next train immediately came...

Every time a carload was dumped now, some gravel was swept away in the current as if the Missouri was determined to deliver it to St. Louis, but some stayed, a loose and shifting pyramid there under the water.

Neil, sprinting and wondering along with the other seven gravelmasters how much more of this there would be, how much more they could take, glanced up at Owen whenever he could. Braced there in the girders like a spiffed-up steelworker in a Stetson and pressed khakis, Owen looked somehow distracted, gazing off at the channel shoulder instead of watching the bombardier-bursts of gravel into the river. *What do I expect, though, that he's going to act like some kind of radio announcer up there calling a fight? "Here's a haymaker from Neil Duff...followed by a wallop of gravel from Birdie Hinch...but the Missouri is absorbing all the punishment they can throw at it so far." Huh uh. Owen is going to go about it his own way, whatever it is.*

Catching himself at this, knowing he was going a little giddy from exertion, Neil concentrated on his running, staying exactly even with the next dumper car, the little hop-skip when "Pull!" was shouted again and the thunder of gravel.

He could feel it all, Owen could, through the bridge. The slow rumble of the train, the concussive force as each carload was dumped: the incessant rhythms came up through his shoes, and sideways out of the girders into his gripping hands. Owen knew better but he could wish, couldn't he, that he and the bridge were taking into themselves all the tremble of plugging the river, that none could reach and dislodge the slipped area of fill. So far, the wishing had worked.

In the half-dusk, the gravel dumping slowly but unstopably gained, the hail of pebbles building up in a rough slurry which would show for an instant above the river-water and then slip from sight.

Tired as they were, the gravelmasters worked like acrobats now, bouncing to the catwalk railing to peek down at the effect of each dumpload, then back into the rhythm of catching their next dumper car, yanking the springpin—

In the end it was a carload dumped by Birdie Hinch and a very tired Neil that brought the shout:

"That one's staying dry!"

Neil scooted to the railing beneath Owen's perch and the two of them stared down. In the vast wallow of gravel mush below, a low conelike heap—as Darius would have said, "Not two hands higher than a duck"—was a drier gray. The Missouri, by just that much, was captured now.

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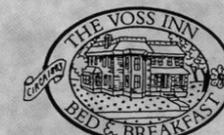
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