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SCOTCH HEAVEN

"Homestead, huh? It looks like more stead than home."

--Stanley Meixell, English Creek district ranger,
Two Medicine National Forest, summer of 1907

Here was the proposition: if the settler would live on the land a given number of years and "improve" it into yielding a crop, the government of the United States of America would give the settler that land. A free farm, a free ranch. By the tens of thousands the takers of this most American of bets--the divvy of the continent against the perseverance of the individual--headed themselves west. Among them were Doigs, and I suppose growing up amid stories of homestead life is what makes me yearn to tell one of my own in this next novel of my English Creek trio: the coming-to-Montana of Rob Barclay and Angus McCaskill.

The setting will be, as Jick narrated in English Creek, "the North Fork known by the nickname of Scotch Heaven on account of the several burr-on-the-tongue and thistle-up-the-kilt families who had come over and settled. Duffs, Barclays, Frews, Findlaters, Erskines, and my McCaskill grandparents..." The period, 1889 (Montana's year of statehood) to the devastating winter of 1919. And the voice will be that of Angus McCaskill, Jick's grandfather. Early in his telling of it all, while he and Rob are aboard the steamship to America, Angus will say:

"We had a book. Croftutt's Trans-Atlantic Emigrants' Guide. It told that a shilling was worth 24 American cents, and what postal stamps cost in the big country, and that when it was midnight in Scotland the clocks of Montana were striking just five of the afternoon. Croftutt told us this, too: 'Do not emigrate in a fever, but consider the question in every aspect. The mother country must be left behind, the family ties, the old associations, broken. Be sure that you look at the dark side of the picture: the broad Atlantic, the dusty ride to the great West, the scorching sun, the cold winter--coldest ever you experienced!--and the hard work. But if you finally, with your eyes open, decide to emigrate, do it like a man, with no divided heart.'"

But the heart of Angus is divided, and therein is the storyline. Put simply, Scotch Heaven is to be the tale of these two lifelong friends, Scotland-leavers together, neighbors on the Montana homestead frontier, who become enemies over what one of them does to a woman they both love.

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This plot will be played against a backdrop of "loved life, and loved country," as Wallace Stegner remarked about English Creek. Put this simply, too: the notion for this novel of the homesteaders has tagged after me through life like a second shadow. My own western existence has bordered the lives of the last homestead generation, the settlers who poured into Montana between 1900 and 1918 under the spell of the dream of making the state "the last and best grain garden of the world." My father was born in a log homestead cabin south of Helena in 1901. Now that I am middle-aging and deep-bearded, I am told continually by older Montanans of my resemblance to D.L. Doig, the first of the family to come from Scotland to Montana. More vitally, however, by conversation and correspondence I've been accumulating lore from the remnants of those homestead families: what they ate, where they slept, who did the chores, what graced their walls, how children tethered their saddlehorses at the one-room school (a touch of elegance was for the school to have a hitching rail; otherwise, each steed was tethered to a separate sagebrush), how Christmas was kept on a treeless prairie (a tumbleweed was decorated).

Scotch Heaven's cast of characters will be largely new--Angus, Rob, others of the Barclay family and the other homesteaders along the North Fork--but there'll also be younger selves from English Creek. Stanley Meixell, arriving midway in the book as the "forest arranger" of the new Two Medicine National Forest. Toussaint Rennie, glimpsed again and again as he ingests the history of the Two country. Varick McCaskill is born, grows to be a Sunday bronc rider with another English Creek youngster, Dode Withrow. And on April 1, 1900, Lisabeth Reese is born and is on her way to becoming Beth McCaskill.

The story begins on the dock at Greenock in Scotland. Amid the steerage queue stand two young men, one eager and savoring it all, the other apprehensive of the days of the Atlantic Ocean ahead--"A situation like that asks a lot of a man who cannot swim. Or at least who never has." The queue slowly moves. "Robert Burns Barclay: that was Rob on the passenger list of the steamship James Watt, 22 June of the year 1889. Angus Alexander McCaskill, myself. The both of us, nineteen and green as the cheese of the moon and trying our double damnedest not to show it." Now, at last, they are aboard and America-bound.

"America. Montana. Words with their ends open. Words that were ever in my mind, and I am sure Rob's too, all the hours of that voyage, for we were threading our lives into the open beckon of those words. We were on our way to be Americans. To be--what did they call themselves in that far place Montana? Montanese? Montanians? Montaniards? Whatever that denomination was, the two of us were going to be its next members, with full feathers on."