

IVAN DOIG

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*On Reading & Writing about*  
James G. Swan



HIS NAME WAS James Gilchrist Swan, and I have felt my pull toward him ever since some forgotten frontier pursuit or another landed me into the coastal region of history where he presides, meticulous as a usurer's clerk, diarying and diarying that life of his, four generations and seemingly as many light-years from my own....When eight, ten years ago, I took a segment of his frontier life and tried to lop it into magazine-article length, loose ends hung everywhere....A later try, I set out carefully to summarize Swan—oyster entrepreneur, schoolteacher, railroad speculator, amateur ethnologist, lawyer, judge, homesteader, linguist, ship's outfitter, explorer, customs collector, author, small-town bureaucrat, artist, clerk—and surrendered in dizziness, none of the spectrum having shown his true and lasting occupation: diarist. This, I at last told myself, wants more time than I ever can grant it.

Until now. Here is the winter that will be the season of Swan. Rather, of Swan and me and those constant diaries. Day by day, a logbook of what is uppermost in any of the three of us.



It is a venture that I have mulled these past years of my becoming less headlong and more aware that I dwell in a community of time as well as of people. That I should know more than I do about this other mysterious citizenship, how far it goes, where it touches.

And the twin whys: why it has me invest my life in one place instead of another, and why for me that place happens to be western. More and more it seems to me that the westernness of my existence in this land is some consequence having to do with that community of time, one of the terms of my particular citizenship in it. America began as West, the direction off the ends of the docks in Europe. The firstcomers from the East of this continent to its West, advance parties of the American quest for place (position, too, maybe, but that is a pilgrimage that interests me less), imprinted our many contour lines of frontier. And next, it still is happening, the spread of national civilization absorbed those lines. Except that markings, streaks and whorls of the West and the past are left in some of us.

Because, then, of this western pattern so stubbornly within my life I am interested in Swan as a westcomer, and stayer. Early, among the very earliest, in stepping the paths of impulse that pull across America's girth of plains and over its continental summit and at last reluctantly nip off at the surf from the Pacific, Swan has gone before me through this matter of siting oneself specifically *here: West*.

Swan Doug



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