Winter Brothers, Port Townsend talk:

AN ASTUTE

~~A very good~~ poet once wrote, "In dreams begin

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responsibilities." I have to share a story with you in which I had to wonder whether I, a hitherto innocent dreamy writer, was responsible for the collapse of the Jefferson County judicial system.

The all-seeing medium of television was ~~behind~~ the CULPRIT, ~~occurence~~, naturally. We all know why television is called a medium--it's neither rare, nor well-done. That was certainly my point of view when out of nowhere, the year after **Winter Brothers** was published, here came a phone call from a woman

who said she was Jean Walkinshaw--the name meant nothing to me then--a documentary producer for the public TV station, KCTS/9 and she and her cinematographer wanted to do a television version of **Winter Brothers**. I sat up a little straighter at my end of the phone, envisioning a mini-series. How much air-time, I asked. Half an hour, she said.

A little-known secret about me is that, back there in journalism school at Northwestern, I set out in life to be a ~~television guy--~~ THAT IS RATHER, a radio-TV journalist, as the then-honorable breed was back there when Edward R. Murrow still walked the earth--and I knew how many written words you can get into a

minute of air-time: it's about a hundred and fifty. I also knew, that even in commercial-free public television, a half hour has maybe twenty-six minutes of content, once you've done the titles and end credits and shown the pictures. So, maybe at best, a little under four thousand words of my hard-won hundred thousand word book would see life on the television screen.

I found that underwhelming, but Jean Walkinshaw doesn't know the meaning of the word "no", and ultimately I found myself in the hands of her and her cinematographer partner of the time, Wayne Sourbeer. They, literally, were from another creative world than the one I was used to, (AS A WRITER) Sourbeer was built

along the general lines of Br'er Bear in the Disney Uncle Remus cartoon--big mop-haired guy, a photographer with only one good eye, with a habit of setting up a shot while letting out some pronouncement such as, "We must not hurry with this, for we have no time to waste." I ultimately came to prize the strange abracadabra rattled out at me by a sorceress-like blond woman in places along this coast that had never known a TV camera before: magic does not come easy. Jean to this day is one of the closest friends my wife Carol and I have. But that first day, when Jean set about turning me into a television performer--that dubious day came right here in Port Townsend where we were starting to film

Winter Brothers. Or more accurately, I was standing dead-center in the middle of a Port Townsend street--I think it was probably Washington Street, ~~up here~~--dodging the occasional passing car while desperately trying to recite from memory the lines from my book needed for that scene. Meanwhile Jean, when she wasn't trying to shoo away schoolchildren innocently waiting for their bus, all the while hovered just out of camera range, instructing me to look more relaxed.

Next, though, next came the scene to be shot in the Jefferson County courthouse. The three of us go in, each lugging camera gear, lighting gear, sound gear--no one had told me that in public

television the talent is also the crew--and we found the courthouse jammed with people. Court was in session. There's the judge and the jury and all the people, but that doesn't bother us, we troop on up to an upper floor where the vault is. We're going to shoot the scene from the book where I have come across James Swan's citation for a bit too much public inebriation, tucked away there in the city records. I am to walk into the vault, pick up this whopping old ledger, walk out into the office with it, open it, and pensively read the citation. Sourbeer squints his one eye and says something like, "In the dark of the moon, nothing can flourish." I have to admit, he had a point. We can all grant that the Jefferson

County courthouse is quite an arthitectural accomplishment, but in those days, at least, it was a tiny bit dim inside. In what I supposed was the natural way of television people, Jean and ~~cameraman~~ Sourbeer proceeded to set up enough lighting equipment in the vault and the clerk's office to illuminate, say, Husky Stadium. As I blinked there in the glare and tried to remember my lines--Jean again encouraging me to look more relaxed--I opened my mouth, and the Channel 9 lighting gear blew the fuses for the entire Jefferson County courthouse.

//Well, I wanted to crawl down the fire escape, slink over to the ~~newspaper~~ LEADER office and take out an ad IN THE PAPER that said something like, "I'm

responsible! Forgive me, good people of Port Townsend!"

Televising **Winter Brothers** was a learning experience in every way, though. I remember Sourbeer just stood there, in that darkened courthouse, and said something like, "All things come to we who wait--they'll get the lights back on somehow."

Well, that's the television version for you, and now to what I still think of as the real thing, the words you can hold in your hand.

Winter Brothers was my second book, and I'm now at work on my dozenth, so some time has passed since I was spending the winter of 1978-79 going day-by-day back into that ~~community~~ FRONTIER of

time where James Gilchrist Swan was to be found. A blessed bonus of the research on Swan was that I stumbled across the idea for my first novel, **The Sea Runners**, and most of my books since have been fiction. It is a turn in my life that I never would have expected ~~back~~ when I was a young workhorse journalist from the West working newspaper and magazine jobs back east in Illinois--or for that matter, when I was a not-so-young self-unemployed freelance writer in Seattle, working my way toward those first two books. In the considerable years since, it has dawned on me THAT a definition of a literary novelist, at least as it fits me, is a person half in love with poetry and half in love with

history. But there were times of tryst, back there, when I was still an honest journalist but managing to kiss them both. I'd like to take you through a little of that dual affair with the words and the past, before I share some of the book out loud with you. This needs to begin with a bit of history, without which there would never have been **Winter Brothers**.

In the spring of 1978, about now, my first book--**This House of Sky**--was making its way through the arcane processes at the publishing house, and would appear in bookstores by the end of that summer, and I was ready to embark on my next book. I can't lay claim to many street smarts, particularly the ones needed in

the publishing precincts of New York, but for once I knew I was dealing from a strong hand. **This House of Sky** was going to be a hit, every sign said so. My grand and glorious editor at the time, Carol Hill, was whipping up enthusiasm at the publishing house by predicting to the sales staff that **House of Sky** was going to win the National Book Award--she was off by one vote, it ultimately came in second in the judges' balloting, but all the other constellations lined up beautifully for that book: a cover done by the same artist who had unforgettably done the cover of **Jaws**, wonderful reviews, a strong sales record, and instant

acceptance into literature and history courses about the American West.

So it was that I found myself one lunchtime in a New york restaurant called El Caminetto, which had a noise level just short of pandemonium, trying to catch the rapid-fire sentences of my glamorous high-strung editor. Even in publishing, where women had been able to rise on the basis of talent perhaps more than in any other industry at that time, Carol Hill at the publishing house of Harcourt was some terrific piece of work--she had made her name in the book world by picking out an overlooked manuscript about relationships, shaping it up and slapping on the title **I'm**

(She looked somewhat like a young Katharine Hepburn out on a spree. Big liquid eyes in a finely drawn face. Quick and intense--I always came home after being around Carol Hill feeling like a cat who'd had a jolt of electricity--my hair standing up with all the absorbed energy from her.)

OK, You're OK, and selling kilotons of copies. Not to mention signing up me and **This House of Sky** after twelve other publishing houses had turned down the manuscript sample. Now, before I could even pick up a fork, Carol Hill's question was, "What are you going to write for me next?"

I knew just enough to know a chance when I saw one, and I did what I could to describe the very hard-to-describe volume that we are gathered around here today, **Winter Brothers.** I told her about the amazing quality and quantity of James Swan's diaries, across his four decades as a pioneer figure along ~~the~~ OUR coasts ~~of~~ HERE, ~~Washington~~, and that I wanted to spend the coming winter day-

by-day exploring Swan's words and travels and landscapes--a kind of a journal of a journal, as I tried to describe it to her. (To give you an idea of how hard it was to put across the notion of trooping around after a relatively obscure literary drifter who'd been dead for more than 75 years, I was later confessed to by the Montana and Oregon writer Bill Kittredge, an eventual fan of the book and one of its dedicatees, that when I originally told him what I was intending to do he thought to himself, "Oh, my God.") But to my everlasting astonishment, there at lunch in New York, Carol Hill broke in on my attempts at explanation and said **This House of Sky** had shown that my work didn't fit description or

categorization, don't worry about it. As I put into my own diary that night, with the contract for what would become **Winter Brothers** successfully negotiated with Carol Hill over that noisy lunch, "I got the clear signal that she doesn't really give a damn what I write, so long as I write."

Well, I wrote. And pretty quick here, I'm going to read. But I do want to put today's selection from **Winter Brothers** into context for you with a few comments about what I thought I was up to, as a word artist, back then.

The book, as ~~some~~ A LOT of you I think know, draws on the forty years of diaries of YOUR TOWNSMAN, James Gilchrist Swan. I was interested in

exploring back and forth between his era in this region, and my own-- "a kind of border crossing of time," I say at an early point in the book.

The question was, how to structure such a book.

I've had a total of two college English courses in my life, but in one or the other, I must have heard it proclaimed that form should fit content. Right from the start I had the notion that if I was writing about a day-by-day diarist, why not do it in the form of a day-by-day diary?

Not forty years' worth, of course, because there I'd be in that trap of logic described in a Borges short story, where the zealous

mapmakers construct ever larger and more accurate maps, until the maps get to be the same size as the country. Something like, say, our Department of Homeland Security might do. No, in my case, just a season's diary, a span long enough in which to do some exploring, and a period of time natural to us.

Comes now the first regional writing ingredient, the one straightforwardly said by the title: weather. Winter. Specifically, the winter of 1978 and '9. I've always been baffled by the reputation of winter out here as always the same gray damp days. Months of ankle-deep Chicago suburban slush--now that's what I remember as sameness. So I felt Northwest winter, with its day-

by-day possibilities, its mood of "well, what's gonna happen next?" might be the proper framework for the book.

Early on in **Winter Brothers,** I tried to express this angle of view into winter:

"No winter I have spent in the Pacific Northwest--this will make an even dozen--ever has been as grayly bland and excitementless as the season's reputation. 'Oh, *Seattle,*" anyone from elsewhere will begin, and one of the next three words is "rain." There can be winter weeks here when the Pacific repeatedly tries to throw itself into the air and out across the continent, an exhilarating traffic of swooping storms. Other

durations when the days arrive open-skied and glittering, the mountains of the Olympic and Cascade ranges a spill of rough white gems along two entire horizons. All else quiet, this modest valley where I live invites wind, the flow of air habiting to the southewsterly mood of winter and arriving into this green vee like rainflow to a stream bed. Oceanburst or brave thin days of sun or spurting breeze, Northwest winter I enjoy as restless, startful."

That particular winter, of 1978 and '9, more than came through for me. Among its other exertions, some of you will remember, it drowned the Hood Canal Bridge, with the big windstorm that sent portions of the bridge to the bottom. And

there were periods of brilliant frosty weather, and of various moods of rain, and fat fresh snow at Mt. Rainier when I borrowed a cabin ~~there~~ THERE, and of black ice on that last fifteen miles of roller-coaster road to Neah Bay. At the same time, in Swan's diaries as I gleaned through them, was his weather of a century or more ago.

The nineteenth of December, 1865, at Neah Bay: "Crust of ice on the snow...The Indians have inquired of me frequently during the month when the sun would begin to return north. They say the fish are hid under the stones and when the sun commences to come back, the stones will turn over and they will be able to catch fish."

The twenty-seventh of March, 1862: "Wind southeast; morning cloudy and showery, PM calm. Captain John"--one of the Makah elders-- "said that the people in Victoria told him that Queen Victoria had ordered a very hot summer to make up for the cold winter."

That winter of 1978 and '79, "the season at the edge of America" which turned into both **Winter Brothers** and the subtitle of the book, dawned to me--as I've said--from those diaries of James Gilchrist Swan. I believe we live in a community of time, as well as the community of people who happen to be drawing breath along with us just now, and Swan and all his years

of frontier diary seemed to me to provide a path back into the neighborhood of that community of time which interests me most, the history of the west of America.

I think you can see the appeal of Swan's diaries to a writer with a curiosity bump the size of mine. Writing conscientiously of his life and those of the other white westcomers and the Northwest coastal Native Americans around him, as Swan did virtually every day between the Civil War and his death at the turn of the twentieth century, he seemed to me to provide stories rising from the bloodstream of this country. They're a kind of pulse of our everyday past.

More than that, too, at least to me. Swan the pioneer diarist led me on to what became a vital ~~regional~~ ingredient in my writing of the book--the native art of this Northwest coast.

Art lessons ran both ways, between Swan and the native people. He became deeply interested in the native art out here, particularly that of the Haida tribe of the Queen Charlotte Islands. And here along the Washington coast, Swan's own talent as a minor artist and major appreciator of art seem to have been his ticket of acceptance among the Makah tribe in his years with them at Neah Bay. The Makahs, as Swan's diaries amply record, were interested in the fresh motifs Swan could provide out of the

collection of books he packed around the Pacific Northwest frontier with him. So whenever Makah artwork featured a Chinese dragon, or a double-headed eagle of the Austrian imperial crest, Swan and his illustrated books most likely had been on the scene.

To keep up with Swan's art dabblings, specifically some writing he did about Haida artwork and a collecting trip he made for the Smithsonian in the Queen Charlottes in 1883, I began to try to look at that art myself and to study up on the brilliant analytical books by Bill Holm and Bill Reid. Those musings made their way into the book, this way, in this first, fairly short

~~selection. It begins with~~ HERE'S a set of three quotes from Bill Reid, the magical British Columbia artist of carving, THAT I PUT IN THE BOOK:

"In Northwest coast art, perhaps more than in any other art, there's an impulse to push things as far as possible."

NEXT QUOTE:

"Haida artists worked mostly within a rigid, formal system, but occasionally burst out and did crazy, wild things which out-crazied the other people of the coast."

LAST QUOTE:

"They weren't bound by the silly feeling that it's impossible for two figures to occupy the same space at the same time."

As accompaniments to Swan's notes on Haida art--from his collecting trip for the Smithsonian in the Queen Charlotte Islands

--I had been reading **Indian art of the Northwest Coast: A Dialogue on Craftsmanship and Aesthetics**, by Bill Holm and Bill Reid. In my kingdom, the pair of them will be the highest priests. Holm of the University of Washington's Burke Museum and Reid himself a Haida artist, they sat to discuss item by item one of the great exhibitions of Northwest Indian art--the Haidas, Tlingits, Tsimshians and other tribes created so much there came to be a kind of academic sub-industry based on numerous museum holdings--and the talk of Holm and Reid as they pass back and forth incredibly carved pipes and dagger hilts and ceremonial masks is as exuberant and nuanced as their topic.

Reid, whose little set of quotes I read, had done a carving surely as great as any of those of his ancestors: a depiction of Raven, as the Haida legend vows, discovering mankind in a clamshell; the clever bird poised atop, wings cupped out in shelter--or is it advantage?--while tiny mankind squirms to escape the birth-shell, pop forth from the sea-gut of the planet.

(All these years later, I continue to think the late great Bill Reid was the Michaelangelo of our coast. If you haven't seen his big carving of Raven discovering mankind, at the University of British Columbia's Museum of Anthropology, you're in for a mind-stretching experience. Reid's other masterpiece, to me, is

his canoe-load of Haida history, lore and legend titled "The Spirit of Haida Gwai." I believe there's a version in the Vancouver airport terminal, but the one I always pay a pilgrimage to when I'm in Washington, D.C., is in the forecourt of the Canadian embassy; that, and the Vietnam Memorial, speak to me of the better artistic angels of our nature.)

Back to the lessons in Northwest art that following Swan around brought me to:

Not incidentally, nor coincidentally, for a writer trying to imagine himself back into the life of someone born a dozen decades before him, that wildest sentence by Bill Reid-- "They

weren't bound by the silly feeling that it's impossible for two figures to occupy the same space at the same time"--that's particularly the sort of thing you like to hear. And from Bill Holm's analysis of form in his own book **Northwest Coast Indian Art**, I got lessons in the immense sophistication of that work. That there was painstaking use of standard design elements, yet as Bill put it, there was "easy transition from form to form" within a piece of art. That there was flow, connection, relation, double meaning, curvaceousness. Something was always happening in that art, any design element was on its way to add meaning to all the other elements.

I decided to see whether some of this coastal heritage of art technique might work into my writing of **Winter Brothers.** So it is, for instance, that I made patterns of time recur in the book. A week of Swan's life, as told in his diary, at Neah Bay during the Civil War years. Further on, another week, again from his diaries, during his great Queen Charlottes collecting trip twenty years later. Characters appear and vanish and reappear: Captain John, a tribal bard of the Makahs; Swell, a young Makah chieftain who is one of the Winter Brothers of the title; and me, sometimes a witness to Swan's places and endeavors and sometimes not.

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Yet these come-and-go elements I hope connect, relate, are held into the same flow of formline, somewhat as the Haidas did it by their marvelous patterns--are held together by the day-by-dayness of the book. The ninety invididual days of it which add up into one single piece of time--a Northwest coastal winter.

Time now for one of those days, one with a maritime flavor, or at least with a lighthouse flavor, one of my favorite elements of living along this coast. This is Day Eleven in the book--it was actually New Year's Eve, back there in '78--and it's about a place beloved to me, one that any of you know well: Dungeness Spit. And I think it's a piece that shows that back-and-forthness through

time, coastdwellers occupying the same space together. By the way, the "Carol" who co-stars in this selection is not my estimable editor at the time, but my even more estimable wife--this Carol, down here in the audience. with whom I hiked Dungeness Spit yesterday morning.

in short talks in Speeches icon

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p. 49 : booze, line of packet ships

p. 62 - S's middle - distance gaze, compared w/ Carnegie's.
- week of writer (1864)

p. 66 - diary "pulls his hand down onto each day's page like a coaxing lover."
- building a castle out of pebbles

p. 80-1 NYTBR - "never part of time they were born into"
- "walk. sts or highways of the generation as strangers"

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p. 143 - Indians' view of white tribe

p. 150 - Hood Canal storm

PIONEER HISTORIAN

JAMES G. SWAN

Bradford, Mass.

JAN. 11, 1818

Port Townsend, Wash.

MAY 18, 1900