

EARTHLIGHT, WORDFIRE  
Elizabeth Simpson's notes



Defense

I chose to write on the work of Ivan Doig for several reasons: I have long been interested in contemporary western writing, and Doig writes about not only Montana but also the Northwest, which would give me a chance to see if there were literary patterns common to both regions; he has a sizeable body of work, so it would be possible to find those patterns without going outside his authorship. Each of his books differs substantially from the others, so that the patterns I did find would not be mere repetitions. Most importantly, I never tired of his writing. Every time I went back to English Creek or This House of Sky I found new things to think about, new nuances of language and theme.

What to do with Doig's work was another question altogether. I blithely assumed that writing criticism would be relatively easy. I had, after all, spent four years ingesting critical theories. One of them had to work. The first I tried was myth



## DOIG, Ivan 1939-

**PERSONAL:** Born June 27, 1939, in White Sulphur Springs, Mont.; son of Charles Campbell (a ranch worker) and Berneta (Ringer) Doig; married Carol Muller (a professor), April 17, 1965. **Education:** Northwestern University, B.S., 1961, M.S., 1962; University of Washington, Seattle, Ph.D., 1969.

**CAREER:** Writer. Lindsay-Schaub Newspapers, Decatur, Ill., editorial writer, 1963-64; *Rotarian*, Evanston, Ill., assistant editor, 1964-66; free-lance writer, 1969-78. **Military service:** U.S. Air Force Reserve, 1962-68; became sergeant.

**MEMBER:** Authors Guild, Authors League of America, PEN.

**AWARDS, HONORS:** National Book Award nomination and Christopher Award, both 1979, both for *This House of Sky: Landscapes of a Western Mind*; Pacific Northwest Booksellers Award for Literary Excellence, 1979, 1980, 1982, and 1984; National Endowment for the Arts fellowship, 1985; D.Lit., Montana State University, 1984, and Lewis and Clark College, 1987.

**WRITINGS:**

(With wife, Carol M. Doig) *News: A Consumer's Guide*, Prentice-Hall, 1972.

*The Streets We Have Come Down* (textbook), Hayden, 1975.

*Utopian America: Dreams and Realities*, Hayden, 1976.

*Early Forestry Research*, U.S. Forestry Service, 1976.

*This House of Sky: Landscapes of a Western Mind* (memoir), Harcourt, 1978.

*Winter Brothers: A Season at the Edge of America* (nonfiction), Harcourt, 1980.

*The Sea Runners* (novel), Atheneum, 1982.

(With Duncan Kelso) *Inside This House of Sky*, Atheneum, 1983.

*English Creek* (first novel in McCaskill family trilogy), Atheneum, 1984.

*Dancing at the Rascal Fair* (second novel in McCaskill family trilogy), Atheneum, 1987.

Contributor to periodicals, including *Modern Maturity*, *New York Times*, *Editor and Publisher*, and *Writer's Digest*.

**WORK IN PROGRESS:** The final novel in the McCaskill family trilogy.

**SIDELIGHTS:** "Ivan Doig doesn't exactly own the Pacific Northwest," notes James Kaufmann in the *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, "but the loving and lively ways he describes it mark him as a regional writer in the absolute best sense of the word." Indeed, Doig has integrated his knowledge of this area of the United States into a number of well-known nonfiction books and novels, including *This House of Sky: Landscapes of a Western Mind*; *Winter Brothers: A Season at the Edge of America*, and *English Creek* and *Dancing at the Rascal Fair*, the first two books of a fictional trilogy.

Of *This House of Sky*—a memoir that describes the harsh but rewarding life of the author's forebears, who settled in the mining towns of western Montana—*Washington Post* critic Curt Suplee says, "This is no country for tennis-shoe ecologists or Snail Darter evangelists—in the uneasy lee of the great mountains, amid the heartless rocky sprawl, nature is not a friend, but an omnipotent and endlessly inventive adversary, and a daily measure of courage is needful as water." Remarking that the memoir format in general "is notorious for snaring even gifted writers in thickets of anecdote and sentiment," *Time's* Frank Trippet finds that Doig "avoids such traps. Exercising a talent at once robust and sensitive, he redeems the promise of [his] first fetching sentences." The author, Trippet concludes, "lifts what might have been marginally engaging reminiscence into an engrossing and moving recovery of an obscure human struggle. There is defeat and

triumph here, grief and joy, nobility and meanness, all arising from commonplace events, episodes and locales."

*Winter Brothers* is a nonfiction work with an unusual premise. Doig recreated the journey of a nineteenth-century traveller named James Gilchrist Swan, who left a wife and children in antebellum Boston to explore the Pacific Northwest. Doig, who studied Swan's extensive diaries, intersperses passages of Swan's writing with his own comments on the trip he took with his wife. "Sometimes the exercise is forced; sometimes it pushes [the author] into overwriting," states Raymond A. Sokolov in the *New York Times Book Review*. "But the occasional patches of dullness or lushness should deter no one from devouring this gorgeous tribute to a man and a region unjustly neglected heretofore. The reader has the pleasure of encountering two contrasting styles and two angles of view, both infused with the fresh air and spirit of the Northwest."

Internal conflict among members of the McCaskill family and the coming-of-age of its younger son in 1939 form the basis for *English Creek*, a novel that "achieves a flawless weld of fact and fiction," according to Carol Van Strum in a *USA Today* article. As in his previous nonfiction, Doig describes the Pacific region of years past, evoking, as Van Strum says, "the sturdy, generous spirit of an era when survival—of child and adult—demanded quick wits, hard work and humor enough to fuel both." *English Creek* "is old-fashioned in the best sense of the word," notes *Christian Science Monitor* critic James Kaufmann. "Doig is concerned with telling a story that entertains, and he is also concerned with the novel's moral and ethical implications. He mounts no soapbox, however."

To *Newsday* reviewer Wendy Smith, Doig's novel "is neither nostalgic nor simple: It's too concrete and detailed in its evocation of the past, too tough-minded in its evaluation of human behavior for that. There are no truly evil characters, but there are weak ones, and Doig makes it clear that the West is cruel to those who can't stand up to its demands." Concluding that *English Creek* is "firmly anchored in the American West," Smith adds that the book "nonetheless resembles a 19th Century European novel in its leisurely pace, measured tone and focus on understanding rather than action. In supple, muscular prose as terse and yet redolent with meaning as the speech of Montana, [Doig] grapples with universal issues of character and morality."

"I am Montana-born and now live within half a mile of Puget Sound," the author told *CA*. "Inevitably, or so it seems to me, my books are the result of those popular pulls of the Rocky Mountains and the Pacific. But whichever the setting, and fiction or non-, in every book I try to work two stubborn substances, research and craft, into becoming the hardest alloy of all—a good story."

**AVOCATIONAL INTERESTS:** Reading, hiking.

**BIOGRAPHICAL/CRITICAL SOURCES:****BOOKS**

Doig, Ivan, *This House of Sky: Landscapes of a Western Mind*, Harcourt, 1978.

Doig, Ivan, *Winter Brothers: A Season at the Edge of America*, Harcourt, 1980.

**PERIODICALS**

*Boston Globe*, October 10, 1982.

*Chicago Tribune*, September 17, 1978, December 10, 1987.

*Christian Science Monitor*, December 24, 1984.

(over)

(periodicals cont'd)

*Los Angeles Times*, September 13, 1978, October 20, 1980.  
*Los Angeles Times Book Review*, December 9, 1984, October 18, 1987.  
*Montana: The Magazine of Western History*, winter, 1985.  
*Newsday* (Long Island, N.Y.), November 11, 1984.  
*New Yorker*, January 21, 1985.  
*New York Times Book Review*, January 11, 1981, October 3, 1982, November 1, 1987.  
*Time*, September 11, 1978.  
*Tribune Books* (Chicago), August 30, 1987.  
*USA Today*, October 26, 1984.  
*Washington Post*, December 11, 1978, January 6, 1981, November 28, 1987.  
*Washington Post Book World*, October 17, 1982, October 18, 1987.

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University of Idaho

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Department of English  
Moscow, Idaho 83843

June 20, 1990

Ms. Elizabeth Simpson  
Department of English GN-30  
University of Washington  
Seattle, WA 98195

Dear Elizabeth:

I'm writing you about the collection of essays I am editing from the 1989 Western Literature Association conference, a book which will most likely be published by the University of Idaho Press. Admittedly, I've been very slow about selecting the essays that will be included with the major addresses by Limerick, Nash, Robinson, Tompkins, and Love, plus a new essay by Kittredge. After the conference I took a rather long break from such matters, to recuperate and catch up with other work; then the task of selection itself has been a time-consuming one. While final decisions have yet to be made (and will be determined in part by the length of the book we can reasonably publish), I hope to include your essay, "Folklore as History in the Work of Ivan Doig."

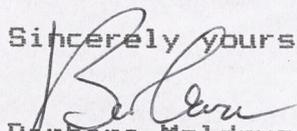
So I'm enclosing a form that should simplify your response to several questions I have. I'd appreciate it very much if you'd send me your reply right away, so I can get a clearer picture of which essays I'm interested in including are actually available.

I don't have specific suggestions for revisions (apart from some careful proofing)--except for one question I have. I get the impression of an either-or argument, whereas it seems to me that there's some nostalgia in some of Doig (esp. This House of Sky), and that another writer who uses folklore--H.L. Davis--exhibits the exploitation leading to disgust pattern you mention. Do you claim too much for folklore?

Since the UI Press uses the Chicago Manual of Style, I'm enclosing a page with the rudiments of documentation format for your convenience.

I hope you've had a good year and that you're interested in publishing your essay in the conference volume. I look forward to hearing from you. Since I've been awarded a residency fellowship at the American Antiquarian Society, I'm trying to complete basic work on the essay collection this summer before going to Massachusetts.

Sincerely yours,

  
Barbara Meldrum

Professor of English

208: ~~882-2919~~ (home) or 885-7743 (office)

689-3782

Sheep May Safely Graze: A Personal etc.

discussing the next two-three-four days' strategy--up this a.m. at 4:45. Chute should have been 15" wide but was 23-1/2 instead so a 2 x 12 was nailed on giving an internal width of 18" (almost). Began loading sheep about 7:30 a.m. after ham and eggs at camp--two triple deck truck and trailer rigs; men use canes and short staffs but no shepherd's crooks; trucks are 3-deck, trailers 4-deck. The last truck was loaded and pulled out about 10:25. Remaining sheep had to be counted and sent out to another pasture at Sater Meadows--finished by 11:25/about 1250 sheep total.

Camp #2 Salt Box. We reached Salt Box about 1:45--three tents here and another loading chute--corral. Chute is 17-1/2' interior width 41' high outside about 20 paces from widest part of chute to back; 15 paces along the fork-Y from 12"-15". I hope photos will show what I am inadequate to draw.

The pens are sort of like four-leaf clovers, two each side for working-sorting sheep.

Supper-soup (vegetable and chicken) followed by a pan-fried omelette of diced onions, beaten eggs, dried potatoes--good. Lots of coffee drinking--to bed at 9:45.

Sunday 16 Sept. This day began at 4:30 with the camp-tenders getting around and building fires, making coffee--up at 5 with a hot cup of coffee-breakfast at 5:30--rest of crew--Frank first then Harry and Phil and truckers--about 25 of us in all--Judd Beeson and wig--la peluca. Began working sheep about 7:15--3 multi-level truck-trailer outfits and at least 2 small trucks--loading started about 7:30. I helped move sheep into trucks. After noon meal I helped load, and at one point kept tally--500 lambs, 1400 ewes--helped break camp and move to Sater Meadows--rode with Harry. Then to town and left McCall at six--home at 8:45. In the sheep camps, there is the sort of horseplay--even with Peruvians--one finds always with crews of men. While loading "feeders" and "fats" Tom Boyd told a good story about Stringer-Bartlett sheep and Sen. Stanfield: the latter was blocking the way to some public land by forbidding travel over his land (purchased school sections). The senator stood with arms folded and told Stringer "The only way you'll get through here is to run over me." Stringer let out the clutch and ran over him, backed up and ran over him again.

A band of sheep is varying size: it might be 1,000 ewes and their lambs (2,000 sheep) or if there was a lot of twinning, it might be 800 ewes and their lambs. A camp-tender cares for two bands and their herders, one herder per band. Once every 10 days supplies will be brought in. Lambs are slaughtered for camp meat. A band of sheep

Elizabeth, I said I'd send <sup>56</sup><sub>70</sub> along a few pages dealing with story telling. I've marked those places that may be of interest -- if not value -- to you. You may keep these sheets -- Thanks for a good visit and great food!  
Lou G.

require about 50 pounds of salt every other day. Combed vs. carded wool: combed, all the fibers are parallel; carded, no effort is made to parallel fibers. Worsted cloth is made of combed wool and is superior to carded.

At Salt Box Camp meat saw is hung on ridgepole of tent. Frying pans and kettles dry by being placed upside down on the stove. The feeders that won't be fat for 45 days or more will be sheared at Letha. The more herders the more horseplay...a herder may or may not go out to his sheep before desayuno--breakfast, depending on how far they are from camp; a long way off he will eat, then tend his sheep. A bell sheep will be followed by a band or bunch, and the bell sheep is often a pet, that is, a sheep that some youngster has prepared for show at a fair.

While working at loading sheep, Phil told a story of Sugar Mountain (a Virginia camptender) and his buddy who was mining in the area of the camptender's herds. They ran out of whiskey and headed for town in the camptender's pickup truck. On the way they encountered a bear somewhere between Squaw Meadows and McCall. An axe was their only weapon, but the wielder was slightly off the mark, and the bear climbed the tree with the axe in his skull. After some deliberation, they made the long drive back to the sheep camp, got a rifle, drove back to the treed bear, shot it, and loaded the carcass into the pickup, the axe firmly embedded in the bear's skull. In town they celebrated for two or three days while telling bear stories, and the bear got riper and riper. One herder had a glass eye which he would remove to get attention or to make a point. By the time the herders had finished their drunk, it was a toss-up as to whether they or the bear smelled worse.

NOTE: Sheep moving in the wooden chutes do go "trip, trip, trip," just like the Billy Goats Gruff.

Some comments about the function of these narratives is appropriate here, and in no particular order they are as follows. These narratives are esoteric, that is, unique with and peculiar to sheepmen-owners and herders. The stories reinforce their traditional values. They validate and clarify the postures and strategies through which the sheepmen meet the world; that is, these narratives are the verbal means through which a world view is articulated. It

is consistent with the nature of esoteric lore that to tell these tales is to be identified as a tradition-bearer and a value-shaper, for these tales remind the teller and inform or remind (or both) the audience of the early times of sheep raising, what its origins are, where it came from. The journey from that point of origin has witnessed independence, loneliness, violence, hard times, and the validation of traditional ways of doing things.

The Stanfield-Stringer episode is a narrative that is humorous, whether the event itself was funny or not. It is an account that allows the teller to emphasize, if not exaggerate, Stanfield's self-important obstructionism: what right had he, a United States Senator, to keep a little man, a yeoman sheepraiser, from pasture that belonged to the latter? At the same time, the narrative allows the teller to emphasize the independence and self-determined effort to achieve justice without recourse to the courts. The law exists as a last resort, and the valiant yeoman and justice are both better served through unreflective on the spot reaction. Other narratives of a humorous nature are grounded in <sup>a</sup> Rabelaisian jokes, monumental drinking bouts, wenching, and the like. It is tradition, not chance, that led to the erection of pseudo-road signs warning that shepherders on the way to town have the right of way. On the surface the Lost Shepherder Mine legend (Chapter 2) tells of isolation and vulnerability: this occupation may

be hazardous to your life! But imbedded in it is the motif of hidden treasure, of gold right under one's nose, not acres of it, but enough. And it vanishes before it can be claimed. It is a parable of the lost or ignored opportunities of life.

The narration of Sugar Mountain and the dead bear is a superb evocation of activities, associations, and smells that Robelais would have understood.

Both Phil's story about the fragrant shepherders with their smelly bear and Tom's story about the senator and the obliging sheepman were humorous and light, clearly told for entertainment, although other and perhaps more serious values are embedded in them. It is accurate to say that the tellers derived as much pleasure from the telling as did the audience. Both stories were told with no tape recorders used, and both included details that the summaries omit. They were seen to fit an occasion, they seemed spontaneous, they grew naturally within a social matrix. A year later, I was able to get Tom to retell the story of the senator, and a transcript of it follows:

† 21 September 1985:

LA: Tom, you've told us an excellent story about Stanfield and another great sheepman in eastern Oregon. I wonder if you'd mind sharing that with me.

TB: Certainly. I was very young when this happened. I don't think I was even in grade school yet, I remember the excitement it caused around Baker and how John Stringer came West working for Swift and I think he was from South Carolina, and later he and Dr. Bartlett from Baker formed a partnership and they bought up some school sections while Huntington Land and Livestock was possibly--well, I'm sure--one of the very biggest sheep

outfits in the West...I think they were reported like something like 120,000 ewes and one of the principal owners was Senator Stanfield. And they didn't run on deeded land-- they ran all on open free grazing--you know, just public domain. After Stringer and Bartlett formed their partnership, they started buying some school sections scattered throughout, and as I understand it most of the sections they bought were the sections that contained the water. And, so they bought these school sections right out through the middle of the Huntington Land and Livestock's land that they claimed for their grazing, and of course, in those days open range...and I'm sure you've heard of many stories about the range wars, well this did cause some problems--so, what they would do then they'd trail, I think Stringer and Bartlett just had at that time, probably just a few bands of sheep--two or three bands, maybe. And,--that they'd trail from one of their school sections to another school section and when they were going from deeded land to deeded land, why of course they were on the open land which the Huntington Land and Livestock claimed to be theirs, and so this went on for some time and John Stringer was on his way in to tend the camps, haul groceries into their camps, and Stanfield met him out of Huntington where the road ran back into range country, and he was standing in the gate and told Stringer that he wasn't going through that gate, that he wasn't coming on into their property or into their grazing land any longer. And, this Stringer was driving an old touring car. It seems to me I was told it was a Studebaker. He told Stanfield to get out of the gate and they say Stanfield crossed his arms, spread his legs, stood in the middle of the gate and said, "The only way you'll get through here is to run over me." They say ol' John just put it in gear and he ran over him. And he put it in reverse and he backed into him! ~It sounded like he had good intentions, but I guess all he did was break his leg so Stanfield ended up in Baker in the hospital to have his broken leg put into a cast, and he swore out a warrant against Stringer for attempted murder. So John Stringer was arrested and brought to Baker, and after a few days, why, he kinda had things organized around the city jail, he had him a telephone installed, and he had a desk moved in one cell and kinda set up office, and it was the first time I ever remember seeing John Stringer. I went there with my father and some other people that were interested in a band of yearlings...Stringer and Bartlett had a band of yearlings they were wantin' to buy so--I went with my father and we all went up to the county jail to see John Stringer. It's hard to tell how, if all this had

gone to trial, why--just what might have happened although I think Stanfield's popularity was declining and as to what happened--well, Dr. Bartlett was a pretty shrewd person, and he kinda got to the press and here's the United States Senator trying to run his livestock on public domain and prevent a small sheep man from grazing his own deeded land, so he got the press in it and they kinda got it going pretty good and they put a few phone calls and telegrams back to Washington, D. C. where the Eastern papers picked it up. Stanfield started to get a lot of real bad publicity out of it, and so I think he thought the thing wasn't really working his way, so he withdrew the charges, but it really was too late--the public opinion against him would turn already pretty drastically and that coupled with a little later story of Stanfield being arrested in Baker for being drunk and disorderly, I think about did his political career in--he was defeated and was never in the Senate again, but it was--I remember at the time there was a lot of excitement over Stringer and Stanfield, and John Stringer running over this U. S. Senator that was trying to prevent him from going on his deeded land.

The fuller story is emphatic with respect to facts and to accuracy. It is the sort of narration that often occurs when an informant talks at a tape recorder instead of to friends or associates in a dynamic context in which stories are shared for the purposes of establishing a community of interest.

Journalists, faced daily or weekly with inches of white space to be filled, regularly read last year's newspapers to find out what was going on then that might help fill today's space. Every folklorist can anticipate a phone call before Halloween, Groundhog's Day, and Valentine's Day. Invariably the same questions are asked and answered as the journalist seeks a new warp for old material. Such superficial research could more easily be done in a library, but books

## Defense

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What to do with Doig's work was another question altogether. I blithely assumed that writing criticism would be relatively easy. I had, after all, spent four years ingesting critical theories. One of them had to work. The first I tried was myth criticism: Doig's work, although grounded in the concrete, the particular, the historical, deals with universal issues: immigration (in mythic terms, we can call it "the Exodus") growing up (The Initiation of the Hero, a la Joseph Campbell) -- I even thought I had found the Myth of the Fisher King in the flu virus that Varick McCaskill catches every winter in English Creek. It was a good idea -- myth criticism does wonders for H.L. Davis, after all -- but it simply didn't work. To uncover the myth, I

had to bury the text. So then I tried to find patterns of symbolism, and discovered, to my chagrin, that there weren't any. And so on then with the "isms" -- Marxism, feminism, structuralism, New Criticism. I found that I could say a great deal about each of the critical schools and practically nothing about Doig. So I reconsidered my approach. At that time, nothing had been written about Doig -- there were book reviews, but that was all. Yet his books were widely read and were being taught in high schools and colleges. So I decided that my best contribution to scholarship would be to write an introduction to his work, and to let the texts themselves tell me how to approach them.

I discovered as I wrote the first chapter that Doig's narrative structures are extremely complex, and moreover, do not seem to be indebted to literary tradition. Instead, each book grows from the contexts in which it is set: This House of Sky is structured on the principles of memory and storytelling, the narrative moving back and forth between experience itself and experience reconsidered. Winter Brothers is structured on principles of place -- specifically the patterns of repetition, variation and shared space that appear in Northwest Indian art and in the lush growth of the rainforest that inspires that art.

In my practice of allowing each text to speak for itself, I was following Doig's example; the world that he re-creates in his books speaks for itself quite literally. The fact that This House of Sky, English Creek, Winter Brothers and Dancing at the Rascal

Fair are all narrated in first person and in the vernacular, make it clear that his texts are folkloric.

The study of folklore in literature has fascinating possibilities, but few good models. Most folklorists content themselves with counting the zebras -- finding items of folklore in a text and pretty much leaving it at that. Moreover, scholars who work in the field now focus on folklore in context, particularly folklore in performance, and most of them don't believe that an author can create sufficient contexts in a literary work to show how a given performance is culturally significant. I became fascinated with the ways that Doig is able to overcome the problems of using folklore in his texts and with how he makes it work for him to solve literary problems, such as securing the links between English Creek and Rascal Fair.

In my reading for the landscape chapter I began to find common ground between Doig's work and the work of other contemporary western writers: it seems to me that their sense of landscape differs from the approach to Nature one usually finds in American literature. "Nature" in most American writing is often abstracted, made mythic or symbolic. The journeys of initiation in books like Huckleberry Finn or Moby Dick or Walden Pond are inward journeys, and nature or wilderness becomes a philosophical foil or a psychological testing ground. But Doig, like other contemporary western writers, writes from local knowledge of a landscape that has a direct, immediate and powerful impact on people's lives. There is no need to roman-

ticize it or make it into an intellectual construct. As Ken Kesey says in Sometimes a Great Notion, making it more than what it is, just lessens it. Being able to see it clearly and describe human interaction with it, is, to use Kesey's word -- plenty. Because in so doing, western writers can explore relationships between people which foreground the importance of community, and they can delineate the difference between living in profane space and living in sacred space, and what effect each choice has on human beings and the landscape they live in.

In other words, contemporary western writers show the complex relationships between character and landscape -- and the two are bound so intricately that the critic would be hard-pressed to discuss them separately. Doig's sense of the complexity of the interrelationships between people and place is captured beautifully in the language he uses: by creating "landscaped" figures of speech to describe human beings, he brings the two together forcefully and convincingly.

I did want to say a few words about method -- when I talk about my own work I usually wind up talking about Doig, and I find myself straying now. The best description of my own process is that it was probably backwards: I worked not from theory but from text -- the research I did in secondary sources was always to substantiate or develop what I was already seeing in Doig's books. Mark picked this up, and wrote me a wry and wonderful note about my always being able to put my finger on examples from Doig's work that would illustrate my point or move my argument

forward. His gentle way of noting, I suspect, that I was always working from Doig -- that is, I would read and re-read, shaking the texts and saying, "What's going on here?" "What are you doing and why are you doing it?" That method was slow, but infinitely rewarding, for trusting the author to have artistic purpose for everything that happened on his pages, and trusting myself to articulate what that was, led to some of the arguments that now please me most, such as pointing out that the cliches in the conversations in This House of Sky function as powerful devices for character development.

One of the many pleasures of writing this dissertation was being able to work with Ivan himself. I would send him the first drafts as they came out of the printer, give him a week to read them, then go armed with my tape recorder and spend a couple of hours talking through the manuscript with him. The tapes and notes I made were always incorporated into the revision, and I gained a great deal of insight into Doig's own artistic process.

By writing the dissertation as I did, I discovered a couple of other things, as well. First, that the reason established critical theories didn't illuminate Doig's work is that they don't illuminate the work of most other western writers, either. As Doig makes clear in each of his books, life goes differently here, imposes different conditions on people, on how they live on the land and with each other. Artists who express their experience of life in the West are changing literary conventions in order to do so. Only now are scholars developing critical

theories that respond to those differences -- that is, to what is new in western literature.

The second thing I discovered is that it is possible to talk about American literature as regional by looking at the contexts writers work from, how they ground their work in place, time, history, language, folklife. There are distinct differences in texts from different regions: writers group characters in different ways, face them with different problems, endow them with distinct regional folkways and speech patterns. And it seems to me that this is a fascinating, and valuable, way to examine American writing.

## Folklore as History in the Work of Ivan Doig

Elizabeth Simpson  
University of Washington

The theme of this conference, "Old West, New West," touches on one of the major issues writers and scholars face today, the problem of history in Western writing. By "history," I mean a relationship to the past which gives meaning to the present, a sense of shared tradition and experience which are the foundations of regional and personal identity. It has been argued that the special circumstances under which the West was settled have created a sense of discontinuity for westerners, and for writers who try to articulate western experience. I would like to discuss some of the ramifications of these circumstances, and then explore one solution as it appears in the work of Ivan Doig.

In his classic study, "History, Myth and the Western Writer," Wallace Stegner argues that western writing suffers from the patterns of western history, which he describes as exploitive and disruptive. He notes that in the nineteenth century, settlement of the West often amounted to nothing more than a raid on its resources: one place after another was stripped of its minerals, its timber, its water, its grass, and then abandoned. Exploitation of their land left many westerners with a feeling of having been betrayed -- as if their Eden had been destroyed before it could be realized. Furthermore, the get-rich-and-get-out mentality created a large migrant population which precluded the development of stable communities in the West. The absence of stable communities, in turn, stunted the growth of tradition. Stegner writes:

Despite their colorful history, there has hardly been a continuous community life in an Aspen or a Telluride; and when oilfields are superimposed on orchards in California, something disruptive has happened in the life of both people and towns...Few western places can show, even during their short life, the uninterrupted life of a Maine fishing village or a country seat in Indiana or Iowa or a southern town clustered around the courthouse square. (p. 191-192).

Stegner goes on to say that the patterns of western history have caused western writing to fall into two categories, neither of which has been able to demonstrate a meaningful continuity between past and present, nor to create a sense of community in the region. The first category is comprised of formula Westerns. These, according to Stegner, reflect myth rather than history, and furthermore, tend to elevate the lamentable lack of community to the status of a genre motif: the hero is a loner who might come to the aid of beleaguered town or schoolmarm, but rides off again into the sunset. "Community" in formula Western fiction is scorned as being a refuge of the weak rather than a source of tradition and strength.

The second category Stegner calls "western literature with a small w," in which he includes the work of Walter Van Tilburg Clark, Willa Cather and A.B. Guthrie, among others. He points out that these writers are usually western by birth and therefore write from a strong sense of place. But they are frequently overwhelmed by what has happened in that place, the urbanization and industrialization which have defiled a fragile landscape. Their attitude toward the past, therefore, is nostalgic, even

elegaic, and their attitude toward the present is one of disgust. Their work, according to Stegner, does not provide westerners with a sense of regional identity, nor a feeling that their lives are linked meaningfully with the past. He writes:

One of the lacks, through all the newly swarming regions of the West, is that millions of westerners, old and new, have no sense of a personal and possessed past, no sense of any continuity between the real western past which has been mythicized almost out of recognizability and a real western present that seems as cut-off and pointless as a ride on a merry-go-round that can't be stopped (p. 199).

Stegner's essay was published in 1967. In the twenty years since, there has been an explosion of writing in and about the West, some of the most innovative and vital writing anywhere in America. Many of these writers have responded to the problems Stegner pointed out by redefining the concept of community and by finding continuities between past and present which do not rely on myth, nor on feelings of nostalgia and disgust. There are many avenues to follow here, but I would like to focus specifically on the work of Ivan Doig, and examine how he uses folklore to expand the definitions of "community" and "history" and thereby finds significant connections between people and meaningful avenues to the past.

It is clear from Stegner's essay that he defines "community" largely in terms of place -- towns like Aspen and Telluride, whose development has been fitful and discontinuous. Doig is also aware of uneven urban development in the West, as he documents in

This House of Sky. The Montana countryside is dotted with abandoned homesteads, each named for the first family that tried, and failed, to make a life there. The towns are divided between ramshackle buildings which meet the needs of the present and huge empty carcasses of grander edifices which reflect a time when these towns were more ambitious about themselves. Both the buildings and the ambitions have been abandoned, and people are denied a sense of continuity in their town's history.

But Doig is also aware that the relationship between community and tradition is dual: communities create tradition, but tradition also creates communities. All of us are members of many tradition-communities: ethnic, familial, religious, occupational, fraternal, avocational, recreational, as well as local. We are guided in our work, our crafts, our aesthetics and foodways and dress codes, our sense of convention and propriety by the folk groups we belong to, and these groups are only partly created by location.

One brief example from This House of Sky will illustrate what I mean. This is from a scene where Ivan, his father Charlie and the rancher, McGrath, are tallying sheep:

McGrath has kept the count steady with his chopping hand. When Dad does the count, he stands half-sideways to the river of sheep, his right hand low off his hip and barely flicking as each sheep passes. I have seen buyers, the men in gabardine suits and creamy Stetsons, with other habits -- pointing just two fingers, or pushing the flat palm of a hand toward the sheep -- as they count. The one trick everyone has is somehow to pump the end of an arm at each whizzing sheep, make the motion joggle a signal to the brain.

By redefining "community" to mean a group of people who share knowledge, traditions and values, Doig asserts that the rancher McGrath, and Charlie Doig and the buyers in gabardine suits are, regardless of where they live, members of the same community. They know the same things: the difficulties of finding good herders; how to dock lambs and castrate them; how to "jacket" a motherless lamb so that another ewe will take him; when to shear and when to sell, when to throw the flock on new grass; how to train a good sheep dog. Skills like these are informally acquired, passed from person to person, and connect the people who share them. The rancher carries these traditions with him like a snail carries its house on its back. And he will, therefore, have more in common with other sheep ranchers in other parts of the country than he will with the banker in his own home town.

*Chulich* Even though much of the working population in Montana is migrant, its members are not homeless, nor are they strangers to one another. In Doig's novel English Creek, for example, the same men come together year after year for seasonal jobs such as haying or lambing or firefighting, and form effective crews because they know each other well and know how to work together. The temporary communities they create are oddly cosmopolitan: the men swap stories, talk about other towns or ranches they have seen, learn from each other's experiences. Their communities are work-related, rather than place-related, but are nonetheless stable and meaningful.

Folklife creates bonds that are diachronic as well as synchronic, stretching across time as well as space. The traditions which comprise folklife are both stable and innovative: they have their roots in the past, but remain viable because they change with changing circumstances.

The first two books of the Montana trilogy, English Creek and Dancing at the Rascal Fair, follow the fortunes of the MacCaskill family through several generations from the homesteading period in the 1800's through the beginning of the Second World War. Doig examines the continuities and changes in the cultural life of the region in scenes which focus on its folk-life: dances, rodeos, picnics, ranch life. For example, in Rascal Fair, which takes place in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, homesteaders dance Scottish dances to songs they brought with them from Scotland, such as "Tam Lin," and "Sir Patrick McWhirr." Two generations later, descendants of these immigrants dance square dances, guided by a caller, to Western songs like "The Dude and Belle." The tradition of community dances has remained stable; the dances themselves have changed over time. Similarly, the turn-of-the-century rodeos in Rascal Fair are impromptu affairs, Sunday celebrations that young men hold informally in somebody's corral. The rodeos in English Creek, two generations later, are more sophisticated and professional, but still feature events that recall the past.

The past is important in Doig's work: he himself is an historian as well as a novelist, and historical events inform the

plots of his novels and shape the lives of his characters. In Rascal Fair, his characters move West in response to the Homestead Act, and spend their lives working to meet its demands and struggle against its shortcomings. They experience the development of the railroads, which expand their markets, and the establishment of the National Forests and the grazing acts that restrict their access to grasslands. They suffer from the devastation of the First World War and the influenza epidemic of 1918.

These events are history writ large, and comprise the formal written histories which order and interpret the past. But even though our lives are shaped by these events, we are usually unaware of their lasting significance -- they are best understood in retrospect. Our sense of a personal and possessed past, as Stegner calls it, is created by history writ small -- family history, local history, the kind that usually does not make its way into textbooks. Informal knowledge of the past is essential to the formation of personal and regional identity, and to a sense of continuity. In a passage from a book of stories read aloud by the school children in Rascal Fair, Doig illustrates the function of history writ small:

"One more sun, sighed the king at evening,  
"and now another darkness. This has to stop.  
The days fly past us as if they were racing  
pigeons. We may as well be pebbles, for all  
the notice life takes of us or we of it. No  
one holds in mind the blind harper when he is  
gone. No one commemorates the girl who grains  
the geese. None of the deeds of our people  
leave the least tiny mark upon time...Why is

it that the moon keeps better track of itself than we manage to? And the seasons put us to shame, they always know which they are, who's been, whose turn now, who comes next, all that sort of thing. Why can't we have memories as nimble as those? Tell me that, whoever can (RE, p. 131-132).

The issue for the king is one of memory. Without the ordering power of memory, events are discreet, isolated, meaningless. In This House of Sky, Doig notes:

Memory is a set of sagas we live by, much the way of the Norse wildmen in their bear shirts. That such remembering takes place in a single cave of brain rather than half a hundred minds warren'd wildly into one another makes them sagas no less. By now, my days would seem blank, unlit, if these familiar surges could not come (Sky, p. 10).

Just as individual identity is shaped by personal memories, communal identities are shaped by folk tradition, oral history, local legends. The king in the story solves his problem by appointing a "remembrancer," and Doig does the same. Each of his books is graced by a remembrancer, a storyteller, such as Charlie Doig in This House of Sky and Toussaint Rennie, who appears in both Rascal Fair and English Creek. Charlie Doig makes life in the valley meaningful to his son by telling him stories about it. In English Creek and Rascal Fair, Toussaint Rennie connects the past and the present by recounting events he has experienced. Part Indian, part white, very old but still vital in the 19<sup>3</sup>40's, Toussaint belongs to two cultures and two centuries. By his own account, he has witnessed most of the history of Montana: the

decimation of the Native American tribes and the buffalo herds, the great cattle drives, the construction of the Valier irrigation project, the establishment of homesteads, the growth of the town of Gros Ventre. The stories that Toussaint tells remain alive in the men of the McCaskill family, who feel the resonance of history when they look over hay fields in the valley and picture the buffalo and cattle herds which once grazed there. Historical significance for them is not nostalgia for the past, but an understanding of how they themselves fit into the life of the valley which preceeded them and which will continue after they are gone.

Oral history is the provenance of the folk: it is literally "his story" and "her story," and its significance lies in the personalizing of events, the details of lives that are so often neglected in formal histories.

In Winter Brothers, Doig comments on the limitations of formal history and implies the need to supplement it with oral history. Winter Brothers explores the journals of James Swan, a pioneer of the Northwest Coast. Swan recorded much of the tribal histories of the Makah and the Haida Indians, and Doig notes that these histories, of necessity, become abbreviated through time as historians use them for different scholarly purposes. He notes that an old Indian woman, Stingess, a remembrancer in her own right, spent an evening telling Swan about the Haida practice of tattooing, and Swan recorded some of the information in his diaries. Doig notes:

How elliptical, literally, the past becomes. Stingess culls from what may have been an evening-long narrative an answer for Swan. Who chooses as much of it as he thinks worth cramming into his diary pages. At my hundred years' remove, I select lines from his and frame them in trios of editing dots. From her Haida tradition to Swan's white tribe to my even paler version. The logical end of the process signaled by my ellipses, I suppose, might be for the lore of Haida tattooing to compress down to something like a single magical speck of print, perhaps the period after the news that Stingess has got tired of all the chit-chat and hobbled home. But I've heard it offered that a period is simply the shorthand for the dots of an ellipsis. That a story never does end, only can pause. So that would not complete it either, the elliptical transit from Stingess to Swan to me to whomever abbreviates the past next.

History writ large is essential: our lives are, after all, determined by the major events that comprise it. But a personal, possessed past, which links people one to another and connects them to the past, ~~is~~ the stuff of folklore, Stegner ended his essay with the lament that no western writer had, as yet, created a western Yoknapatawpha county or discovered an historical continuity comparable to that which Faulkner traced. I think it is clear that that is one of the tasks Ivan Doig has set himself, and through his explorations of folklife in Montana, he is well on his way to achieving it.

*is essential to our sense of regional and personal identity.*

An Introduction to the Work of

Ivan Doig

by

Elizabeth Simpson

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

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Abstract

An Introduction to the Work of Ivan Doig

by Elizabeth Simpson

Chairperson of the Supervisory Committee:  
Professor Mark Patterson  
Department of English

Ivan Doig is a contemporary western writer whose books bring the landscape, folklore and history of the West to life. Doig's training in journalism and in frontier history, and his own background in rural Montana and the Pacific Northwest are all brought to bear in his writing, which is notable for its verisimilitude, diversity and poetic style. This study is intended as an introduction to his work.

In 1978, after fifteen years of free-lance writing, Doig published This House of Sky: Landscapes of a Western Mind, which was nominated for the National Book Award in contemporary thought. Sky recreates Doig's boyhood in Montana, and the characters of his father and grandmother, in a complex play of narrative structures and voices. Winter Brothers, a combination of biography, autobiography, and history, examines frontier experience through an exploration of the journals of Northwest pioneer James

Swan. The structure of Winter Brothers is derived from environmental contexts, most notably the art of Northwest Coast Indians and the interpenetrating life forms of the rainforest. The Sea Runners, Doig's first novel, describes the historic canoe voyage down the Pacific Coast made by four men escaping indentureship in Russian Alaska. Doig's last three books, English Creek, Dancing at the Rascal Fair, and Ride with Me, Mariah Montana, (to be published in 1990) trace the lives of Montana families from the early days of immigration in the 19th century to the present.

Doig's work is notable for its focus on western folklore and folklife; for its accurate, detailed use of historical events; for its demonstration of the interdependence of character and landscape; for its use of regional contexts and its rich poetic language. Doig's writing is grounded in the direct perception of ordinary life in a given place. Through that local knowledge, Doig explores American experience.

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for Ivan  
and  
for Henning

An Introduction to the Work of Ivan Doig

by

Elizabeth Simpson