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TIMOTHY G. ANDERSON

Memorializing a Mountain Man

John G. Neihart, Doane Robinson, and Jedediah Smith

In the middle of September 1908, a “sort [of] trampish looking fellow” called on Doane Robinson, secretary of the South Dakota State Historical Society and head of the state’s Department of History.¹ The visitor had just spent more than forty days on the Upper Missouri River, making his way in a small boat from Fort Benton, Montana, to Pierre, South Dakota. He had written Robinson a week earlier to warn him that he might not be looking his best. “You will not expect me to appear in evening dress,” he told Robinson. “Yesterday I saw a mirror — it made me laugh heartily.”² Robinson, about to turn fifty-two, was almost twice the age of his guest, the young Nebraska poet and short-story writer John G. Neihardt, then just twenty-seven and nearly finished with a river voyage he was writing about for a New York magazine. Despite the young man’s trail-worn appearance, Robinson found Neihardt to be “a fascinating conversationalist,” at ease and more than willing to recite some of his poetry. Robinson would remember talking with him about Hugh Glass, Tom Finn, and the United States-Sioux wars,³ but Neihardt would recall another focus of their conversation: “Do you remember the night in September . . . when you introduced me to Jed Smith?”⁴

The meeting of these two amateur historians—one an exuberant young writer who was then in the middle of a powerfully productive

1. Doane Robinson, “John Gneisenau Neihardt,” unpagged typescript, n.d., Box 3366A, Folder 240, Doane Robinson Papers (hereafter cited as Robinson Papers), State Archives, South Dakota State Historical Society (SDSHS), Pierre.

2. John G. Neihardt to Robinson, 5 Sept. 1908, Box 3363B, Folder 159, *ibid.*

3. Robinson, “John Gneisenau Neihardt.”

4. John G. Neihardt, handwritten note to Robinson on proof of title page to *The Splendid Wayfaring*, n.d., Box 3363B, Folder 159, Robinson Papers.

period, and the other a booster of all things South Dakotan who would later initiate the idea for his adopted state's most famous attraction—marked the start of their mutual efforts to preserve the history of an early explorer of the American West. The story of how these two commemorators of heroes worked together and how their individual projects evolved offers insight into the way in which historians often build their scholarly work on personal interest and vision. In their pursuit of Jedediah Strong Smith, Neihardt and Robinson exemplified the idea that historians' personal interests, backgrounds, and world views influence their scholarship. Neither man believed that personal bias contaminated his scholarship, and Neihardt in particular did not believe that his research and writing had to be kept separate from his life.

John Neihardt was born in 1881 in Sharpsburg, Illinois, and spent time as a child in Springfield, Illinois, northwestern Kansas, and Kansas City before moving with his mother and older sisters to northeast Nebraska, first to Wayne in 1891 and then, in 1900, to the small town



John G. Neihardt reposes in his study in Branson, Missouri, in 1924.

of Bancroft. At that time, Neihardt, not yet twenty, had written only a handful of short poems and had paid to have published *The Divine Enchantment*, at its best an uneven attempt at a long, complex narrative poem. Eight years later, by the time he stopped in Pierre to meet Robinson, he had published more than thirty short stories in leading magazines in New York and California and had issued his first collection of stories, *The Lonesome Trail*, most of them tales of the Omaha Indians. Neihardt had published dozens of poems in magazines—in addition to writing dozens of others—and assembled thirty-three of them into *A Bundle of Myrrh*, his first poetry collection. During that time, he had also tried, unsuccessfully, to work as a reporter for a daily newspaper and as editor for a weekly.⁵ Finally, he had secured an assignment from *Outing* magazine, a New York-based sporting journal, to travel the Upper Missouri River by small boat and write a six-part series. His research from this trip, during which he made his stop in Pierre, would eventually become *The River and I*, his first book of nonfiction.⁶

Throughout his long career—Neihardt lived to be ninety-two, publishing his last book a little more than a year before he died in November 1973—he thought of himself as a poet first and foremost. Nevertheless, his long narrative poems, published individually in five books between 1915 and 1941 and collected as *A Cycle of the West* in 1949, dealt with the history of fur trappers and traders and with the wars between Plains Indians and the United States Cavalry in the nineteenth century.⁷ Today, Neihardt is best remembered for *Black Elk Speaks*, the “as-

5. Neihardt, *The Divine Enchantment* (New York: James T. White & Co., 1900); *The Lonesome Trail* (New York: John Lane Co., 1907); *A Bundle of Myrrh* (New York: Mitchell Kennerly, 1907). For biographical information on Neihardt, see Lucile F. Aly, *John G. Neihardt*, Boise State University Western Writers Series No. 25 (Boise, Idaho: Boise State University, 1976).

6. *The River and I* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1910). *Outing* changed hands before Neihardt's series was completed. His stories were published beginning in December 1909 in *Putnam's Magazine*. Timothy G. Anderson, introduction to *The River and I*, by John G. Neihardt (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), p. viii.

7. The individual books, all published in New York by Macmillan, were *The Song of Hugh Glass* (1915); *The Song of Three Friends* (1919); *The Song of the Indian Wars* (1925); *The Song of the Messiah* (1935); and *The Song of Jed Smith* (1941). The five were collected and published in chronological order rather than by order of original publication date as *A Cycle of the West* (1949).

told-through” autobiography of Nicholas Black Elk, a Lakota holy man. First published in 1932 and still widely read today, *Black Elk Speaks* remains difficult to classify, but for more than a quarter century the book has been a focus of interest for a wide range of scholars in history, anthropology, religious studies, and American Indian studies.⁸ For these and others among the two dozen books Neihardt published during his lifetime, he clearly did considerable historical research.

Doane Robinson was born in Sparta, Wisconsin, in 1856. As a young man, he first tried homesteading in Minnesota and then practiced law in Dakota Territory. He started a daily newspaper, the *Watertown Courier-News*, and in 1898, nine years after South Dakota became a state, he founded the *Monthly South Dakotan* to promote the state by exploring the history and heritage of its people.⁹ Like Neihardt, Robinson tried writing and publishing poetry. He issued one collection, *Midst the Coteaus of Dakota*, in 1899,¹⁰ just about the time Neihardt was finishing his first attempt at epic poetry, *The Divine Enchantment*.

When the South Dakota Legislature created the Department of History in January 1901, Robinson was named its executive secretary; he kept the job until 1926. It was as “Mr. South Dakota History” that Robinson became best known, writing, publishing, and lecturing on what made South Dakota great.¹¹ For twenty-five years, he compiled the biennial *South Dakota Historical Collections* series, to which he often contributed his own writings. His “History of the Dakota or Sioux Indians,” for example, constituted nearly the entire second volume, published in 1904. He also wrote *A History of South Dakota*, which served for years as a standard source for the state’s history, and *Doane Robinson’s Encyclo-*

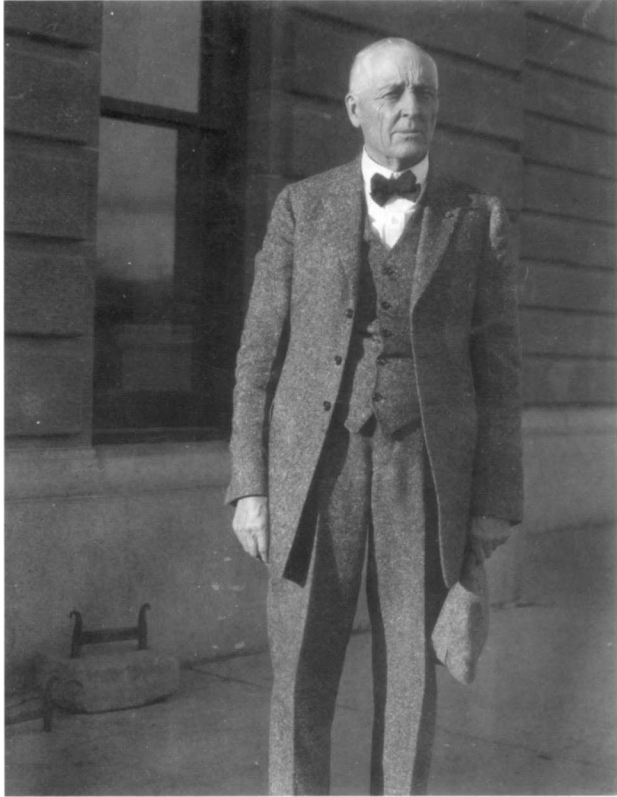
8. Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1932).

9. H. Roger Grant, “Doane Robinson,” in *Historians of the American Frontier: A Biographical Sourcebook*, ed. John R. Wunder (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), pp. 541–42.

10. Robinson, *Midst the Coteaus of Dakota* (Yankton, S.Dak.: Gazette Printing Co., 1899).

11. Grant, “Doane Robinson,” p. 542. For more information on Robinson’s life and work, see Chelle Somsen, “Dakota Resources: The Doane Robinson Papers at the South Dakota State Historical Society” in this issue.

Doane Robinson stands outside the South Dakota Capitol, where the Department of History was located, in 1924.



pedia of South Dakota, among other works.¹² Robinson made a profound contribution by collecting and editing records, but he believed history consisted of more than just compiling and preserving documents. In Robinson's view, the study of history was a useful pursuit that could instill in people a pride in their heritage that would, in turn, make them better citizens. He was, as one historian has written, "the quintessential booster."¹³ As was common for his time, Robinson held conflicting at-

12. Robinson, "A History of the Dakota or Sioux Indians," *South Dakota Historical Collections* 2, pt. 2 (1904): 1–523; *A History of South Dakota* ([Logansport, Ind.]: B. F. Bowen, 1904); *Doane Robinson's Encyclopedia of South Dakota* (Pierre: By the Author, 1925).

13. Grant, "Doane Robinson," p. 544.

itudes toward American Indians. He could be inclusive, as in his encyclopedia entry, “Sports in South Dakota,” which discussed in significant detail the wide variety of games the Sioux played. Yet, Robinson believed wholeheartedly in Manifest Destiny, and in other writings, such as his “Last Stand of the Sioux,” he referred to American Indians as primitives, savages, and barbarians. Nor was he above using other derogatory terms, such as “Injun.”¹⁴ Today, looking back on Robinson’s writings, at least one writer has found him to be “anti-Indian.”¹⁵

The focus of both Robinson’s and Neihardt’s interest from the time of their 1908 meeting was Jedediah Smith, “an authentic American hero” when it came to exploring the American West. As biographer Dale L. Morgan put it more than fifty years ago, Smith was overshadowed “only by Meriwether Lewis and William Clark.”¹⁶ More recently, historians Robert V. Hine and John Mack Faragher offered similar accolades in their synopsis of Smith’s impressive accomplishments:

Jedediah Strong Smith spent only a decade in the West, but he firmly left his stamp upon it. In 1824 Indians guided him to the great South Pass across the Rockies, and Smith’s discovery allowed American trappers to exploit the far side of the Continental Divide. Two years later he traveled over the great southwestern desert to California and became the first American to cross the Sierra Nevada west to east. He explored the Great Basin and dipped his toes in the Great Salt Lake. Smith’s physical endurance allowed him to cover the West like a real Paul Bunyan, with steps too large to be believed. His accomplishments were not fully appreciated until historians compiled the complete record of his many explorations.¹⁷

14. Doane Robinson’s *Encyclopedia of South Dakota*, s.v. sports in South Dakota: Sioux games; Robinson, “Last Stand of the Sioux,” typescript, n.d., Box 3366A, File 236, and Robinson to Taft, 28 Dec. 1923, Box 3363A, Folder 149, Robinson Papers.

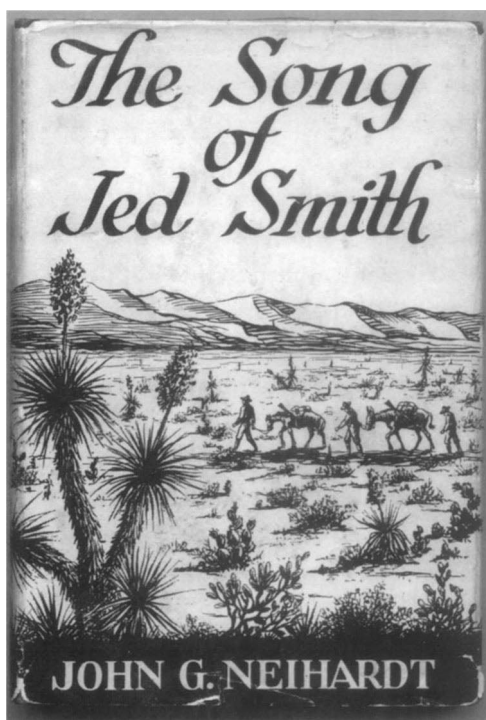
15. Sidney L. Haring, *Crow Dog’s Case: American Indian Sovereignty, Tribal Law, and United States Law in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 108n.27.

16. Morgan, *Jedediah Smith and the Opening of the West* (1953; reprint ed., Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1964), p. 7.

17. Robert V. Hine and John Mack Faragher, *The American West: A New Interpretive History* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2000), pp. 151–52.

Moreover, Smith did it all, as historians and other writers have pointed out for more than a century, without becoming popularly known.

Neihardt was among those who continually lamented the fact that Smith was unappreciated and ignored. The writer frequently traveled throughout the United States giving poetry readings and lectures, and he was especially upset that Smith did not appear in schoolbooks. “One who has talked to high school assemblies in various parts of the country has often asked how many present knew anything about Jedediah Smith,” he wrote in the mid-1930s. “Seldom was there any response.” Neihardt found it especially galling that these same students often knew of another, and in his opinion, less-qualified pathfinder—John C. Frémont. “In answer to the question, ‘How many have heard of Fremont?’” Neihardt remarked, “the audience was certain to sprout a



With *The Song of Jed Smith*, Neihardt finished his masterpiece. *A Cycle of the West* contains more than seventeen thousand lines of verse.

thick crop of hands.”¹⁸ To Neihardt, Smith was the king of the mountain-men explorers. “If we must decide upon a ‘greatest’ in the field of western exploration,” Neihardt later wrote, “certainly Jedediah Smith is that one, though his name has not yet found its way into our orthodox school texts and the general public has never heard of him. As an explorer he did all that Fremont did, and a great deal more, under far more difficult circumstances; and he did it 20 years before Fremont appeared on the scene.”¹⁹

Neihardt spent years researching and writing about Jedediah Smith in the hope of bringing him to the public. He wrote a schoolbook history of the expeditions of William Henry Ashley and Andrew Henry, *The Splendid Wayfaring*, published by Macmillan in 1920. The subtitle of the book made clear Neihardt’s focus: *The story of the exploits and adventures of Jedediah Smith and his comrades, the Ashley-Henry men, discoverers and explorers of the great Central Route from the Missouri River to the Pacific Ocean, 1822–1831*. In 1941 he published, as the last of his five books of narrative poetry, *The Song of Jed Smith*. In between these two works, he reviewed a number of major and minor books on the American West for various newspapers, always driving home his point that Smith was key to the westward migration of white settlers. “In the records of exploration on the North American continent,” he wrote in one review, “Smith’s story is unsurpassed and hardly equaled as a tale of adventure alone, and its importance as a part of the grand story of American expansion is very great.”²⁰

For nearly half a century, as he traveled the West lecturing and reading his poetry, Neihardt visited the sites of Smith’s travels. In 1918, while planning a lecture trip to California, he wrote to a friend there, “I want to see Monterey—one of my heroes goes there & mixes with the Spanish authorities.”²¹ He was glad when, a few years later, he could visit the Columbia River, “as it was so important in the old heroic days of the fur

18. John G. Neihardt, “Very Good News!,” review of *The Travels of Jedediah Smith*, by Maurice S. Sullivan, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 3 Mar. 1935.

19. John G. Neihardt, “An Excellent Biography,” review of *Fremont, the West’s Greatest Adventurer*, by Allan Nevins, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 25 Apr. 1928.

20. Neihardt, “Very Good News!”

21. Neihardt to George Sterling, 1 Feb. 1918, George Sterling Papers, Huntington Library, San Marino, Calif.

trade. Jed Smith passed up that way on his return from California.”²² In 1935, Neihardt traveled part of the Santa Fe Trail to study the crossing of the Cimarron where Smith was killed in 1831.²³ As late as 1962, at the age of eighty-one, the writer still relished walking in his hero’s footsteps, traveling the Oregon Trail from Ash Hollow in Nebraska to South Pass in Wyoming.²⁴ Near the end of his life, Neihardt explained his obsession with Smith by saying simply, “It was in my mind, and filled my mind for some years.”²⁵

Until his meeting with Robinson, Neihardt—like the schoolchildren he later worried about—knew nothing of the importance of, or even the existence of, Jedediah Smith. In 1907, however, having just accepted the assignment from *Outing* magazine for his series of stories on the Missouri River, Neihardt began searching for information on the early steamboat men. Before he undertook the trip down the Missouri from Fort Benton, Montana, to Sioux City, Iowa, he wanted to make certain he knew the river’s history.²⁶

Agnes C. Laut, a Canadian novelist and historian of the Old Northwest, was familiar with both Neihardt and Doane Robinson. She had given Neihardt’s first book of lyric poems, *A Bundle of Myrrh*, a positive review in the *New York Times*,²⁷ and she had also written “a little comment” on Robinson’s “History of the Dakota or Sioux Indians” for another daily newspaper.²⁸ She suggested that Neihardt contact Robinson for information. “Works giving the anecdotal side of the men who developed the Northwest,” Neihardt wrote the State Historical Society secretary, “would suit my purpose better than the purely historical.”²⁹

22. Neihardt to Mona Neihardt, 28 Nov. 1921, John G. Neihardt Papers, Western Historical Manuscript Collection, University of Missouri, Columbia, Mo.

23. Neihardt to A. E. Long, 13 Aug. 1935, *ibid.*

24. Stanley C. Smith to author, 28 May 1996.

25. Interview of John G. Neihardt by Myrtle Young, February 1972, Kay Young private collection, Lincoln, Nebr.

26. Anderson, introduction to *The River and I*, p. ix. Two companions—a photographer and a teenager from Bancroft—accompanied the writer on his journey downriver.

27. Laut, “Neihardt’s Poems Show New Spirit,” review of *A Bundle of Myrrh*, by John G. Neihardt, *New York Times*, 15 Feb. 1908.

28. Robinson to Neihardt, 4 Dec. 1915, Box 3363B, Folder 159, Robinson Papers.

29. Neihardt to Robinson, 31 Aug. 1907, *ibid.*



Neihardt fixes a broken rudder, one of the many setbacks he encountered on his long, captivating journey down the Missouri River.

Robinson's written response is lost, but the next fall, when Neihardt's Missouri River trip brought him through South Dakota, Neihardt stopped in Pierre to visit with Robinson. Throughout his long career in South Dakota, first as historical society secretary and later as state historian, Robinson preached the gospel of Jedediah Smith. "He was one of the great men of that heroic age and left an impress that is still felt in western affairs," Robinson wrote.³⁰ In Neihardt, Robinson found an enthusiastic acolyte. Each man, in his own way, would seek to popularize Jedediah Smith, to build a public monument to his memory.

Though Robinson and Neihardt would not meet again for thirteen years, Neihardt continued to write to Robinson with questions. The first of Neihardt's epic poems was *The Song of Hugh Glass*, published in

30. Doane Robinson, untitled manuscript, *ibid.*

1915, and Robinson was among those he alerted to the project. “For a number of years I have been contemplating a series of narrative poems dealing with certain portions of that truly epic material to be found in the history of the Upper Missouri country,” Neihardt wrote Robinson in 1914. “A year ago I began, at last, to work on this dream of mine, and I expect to be occupied with it for some years.” In that same letter, Neihardt also listed several possible subjects for future poems in his epic series. “You told me a lot of things about Jedediah Smith—that’s the name, I think,” he wrote. “Wouldn’t he do for another portion of the series?”³¹ Less than a week later, after hearing from Robinson, Neihardt wrote again: “Jed Smith looks good to me also. How can I get at all of him? I find very little in the books I have.”³²

Again, exactly what advice Robinson gave Neihardt is lost, but it must have been profoundly helpful. A few years later, when Neihardt’s publisher asked him to write a book of western history for supplemental reading in schools, he chose to make Smith its focus. To Robinson’s recollection, he and Neihardt communicated fairly extensively. “Our correspondence . . . was quite continuous,” Robinson wrote, “especially pertaining to the ground plans of ‘The Splendid Wayfaring.’”³³ Neihardt acknowledged Robinson in the book’s preface for having told him “the wonderful life-story of Jedediah Smith”³⁴ and wrote to him shortly before finishing the manuscript: “You see, you are somewhat to blame for this book I am writing; for did you not tell me in the fall of 1908 that I must by all means get acquainted with Jed? Well, I have run down everything that is known about him, and I can recite his whole story offhand. A great chap he was, truly!”³⁵

Robinson certainly would have shared with Neihardt his own writing on the mountain man from his massive *History of South Dakota*. Central to Robinson’s telling of Smith’s story, which he included in a variety of other manuscripts and speeches, was a prayer Smith offered on 2 June 1823, after Arikara Indians had attacked a contingent

31. Neihardt to Robinson, 30 Mar. 1914, *ibid.*

32. Neihardt to Robinson, 4 Apr. 1914, *ibid.*

33. Robinson, “John Gneisenau Neihardt.”

34. Neihardt, *Splendid Wayfaring*, p. ix.

35. Neihardt to Robinson, 24 Sept. 1919, Box 3363B, Folder 159, Robinson Papers.

of trappers above the mouth of the Grand River, killing twenty-three and wounding many others. When the group's leader, William Ashley, asked for a volunteer to take a message to Andrew Henry at a camp several hundred miles away on the Yellowstone River, Smith stepped forward. Before he left on his new mission, however, he knelt to pray beside a dying comrade who lay on the deck of a boat also called the *Yellowstone*.³⁶ According to Smith family legend, Smith had personally dragged the young man, named John S. Gardner, out of the fight.³⁷

36. See Robinson, *History of South Dakota*, 2 vols. (Chicago: B. F. Bowen & Co., 1904), 1:97–107. See also Robinson, "When Christ Came to Dakota," typescript, n.d., pp. 24–25, Box 3366A, Folder 240, and Robinson to J. Howard Gates, 30 Apr. 1923, Box 3359, Folder 24, both in Robinson Papers; *Doane Robinson's Encyclopedia of South Dakota*, s.v. Smith, Jedediah S.

37. E. D. Smith to Robinson, 11 Nov. 1909, Box 3369A, Folder 180, Robinson Papers.



No contemporary likeness of Jedediah Smith is known to exist, but artists have tried to capture his spirit. Ruth Senf Framberg's oil painting *Jedediah Smith* was done around 1940.

Hugh Glass, another member of Ashley's group that day, sent a letter to Gardner's father. "My painfull duty it is to tell you," Glass wrote, "of the deth of yr son who befell at the hands of the indians 2d June in the early morning. . . . Mr. Smith a young man of our company made a powerful prayr wh moved us all greatly and I am persuaded John died in peace." Robinson had Glass's letter as part of the historical society's collection, and Neihardt quoted from it in *The Splendid Wayfaring*.³⁸

For Robinson, a devout Congregationalist, this incident was the foundation for his belief in Smith's importance. Robinson always referred to the moment along the Grand River as the first religious service in what would become South Dakota. No evidence exists to suggest the historian was troubled that this proclamation denied the existence or validity of any American Indian religion that would have existed among the area's inhabitants. It makes clear, however, Robinson's chief points of personal interest in Smith. Like Robinson, Smith was a religious man, and his observance occurred in South Dakota, Robinson's primary focus. These two personal connections echoed throughout Robinson's public work; when asked for a heroic figure of the Upper Missouri, he naturally answered Jedediah Smith.³⁹

Neihardt's interest in Smith, which sprouted directly from the seed Robinson planted, came to focus more on Smith as a representative figure. Though Neihardt admired the specifics of Smith's life and achievements, he valued him more as being the "type" of man who arose in the time of exploration. His oft-stated goal in writing his *A Cycle of the West* was to "celebrate the great mood of courage that was developed west of the Missouri River in the nineteenth century."⁴⁰ Like many historians then and now, Neihardt believed in the idea that exploring the past could illuminate the present. "Old tales survive," he once wrote,

38. Hugh Glass to father of John S. Gardner, [J]une 1823, Box 3536A, Folder H75.14, State Archives, SDSHS. Although the letter is signed "Yr Obt Svt[,] Hugh Glass," it is likely that Glass dictated the letter to someone else, for, by all accounts, he was illiterate. See also Neihardt, *Splendid Wayfaring*, pp. 62–63.

39. Grant, "Doane Robinson," p. 542. For a discussion of how internal issues resonate through public work, see John Demos, "Using Self, Using History . . ." *Journal of American History* 89 (June 2002).

40. Neihardt, *Cycle of the West*, p. v.

“because in some important respect they are universally true. An ancient tale, adequately retold in the modern idiom, may therefore illumine the newest human problems; for the newest are the oldest in disguise.”⁴¹

Clearly, Neihardt was set onto a path of study of Jedediah Smith by Robinson’s suggestion. Neihardt followed up with years spent traveling in Smith’s footsteps, from South Dakota to the Pacific Ocean. His historical method certainly included an attempt to experience the past to the greatest extent possible. He not only visited the sites of his favorite historical events but also traversed the Missouri River to gain first-hand knowledge to fuel his imagination further. Getting close to Smith excited him: “I once almost touched even Jedediah Smith himself, the greatest and most mysterious of them all, through an old plainsman who was an intimate friend of Bridger, who had been a comrade of Jed!”⁴² Neihardt, of course, also consulted historical sources in his pursuit of Smith’s story; he cites nearly three dozen sources in *The Splendid Wayfaring*, including Hiram M. Chittenden’s *The American Fur Trade of the Far West*, Harrison C. Dale’s *The Ashley-Smith Explorations and the Discovery of a Central Route to the Pacific*, and Josiah Gregg’s *The Commerce of the Prairies*, as well as letters written by Jedediah Smith, William Ashley, and Austin Smith.⁴³

Neihardt and Robinson, in their attempts to draw attention to Jedediah Smith, searched beyond the obvious in their pursuit of history; rather than focus on Ashley or Henry, who led the expeditions and owned the company, they focused on Smith, one of a hundred men in their employ. “I have made Jedediah Smith the central figure of my story,” Neihardt wrote, “for of all explorers of the Great West he was in

41. Neihardt, “Trails of the Pathfinders,” *New York Times Book Review*, 21 May 1911, p. 311. See also Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1994), p. 10.

42. Neihardt, *Cycle of the West*, p. x.

43. Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West* (New York: Francis P. Harper, 1902); Dale, *The Ashley-Smith Explorations and the Discovery of a Central Route to the Pacific* (Cleveland: Arthur H. Clark Co., 1918); Gregg, *The Commerce of the Prairies*, reprinted in Reuben Gold Thwaites, *Early Western Travels* (Cleveland: Arthur H. Clark Co., 1905). The Smith letters were located at the Kansas Historical Society; Ashley’s were housed at the Missouri Historical Society.

many ways the most remarkable, though, heretofore, our school children have not even heard his name.”⁴⁴ Smith, Neihardt believed, was bound to become “one of the great torch-bearers of the race.”⁴⁵ Neihardt and Robinson were commemorative historians, amateurs who saw history as illuminating the building of communities, regions, and nations. Both were Jeffersonian in their vision of the American West, as well. They believed the West was “discovered” and “developed” by innovative individuals, Smith chief among them. Smith himself was tied personally to the Jeffersonian ideal, his explorations having actually helped to achieve Jefferson’s vision of a United States that ran from ocean to ocean. Robinson and, especially, Neihardt were also romantics, looking back on a time that they believed had produced better men.

Robinson brought more to his partnership with Neihardt than simply the first step his suggestion represented. He corresponded with E. D. Smith, a grandson of Jedediah Smith’s older brother Ralph and the family repository of the mountain man’s letters and memorabilia. Many of the personal details Smith shared with Robinson show up in Neihardt’s work. Jedediah Smith, E. D. Smith wrote to Robinson, had “a keene bright blue eye of fathomless depth. . . . A bold rugged face, nose straight and prominent, rather high cheak bones, thin cheeks, a prominent chin, a square firm mouth with thin lips.”⁴⁶ In *The Splendid Wayfaring*, Neihardt characterized Smith as a “tall, slender man, with keen gray-blue eyes,”⁴⁷ and in *The Song of Jed Smith*, he described Smith as “stone-sober, looking down his long, thin nose,” a nose that “made you think about a hawk,” and called attention to “the way his wide-set eyes turned slits of blue / When he was thinking.”⁴⁸

44. Neihardt, *Splendid Wayfaring*, p. viii.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

46. Smith to Robinson, 26 Oct. 1909, Box 3364A, Folder 180, Robinson Papers. Much of the correspondence of Robinson and Smith cited in this article contains corrections penned on the typewritten originals. Where it was possible to verify the handwriting as that of the author of the letter, the corrected version is quoted. Otherwise, the letter is quoted as typed.

47. Neihardt, *Splendid Wayfaring*, p. 74.

48. Neihardt, *Song of Jed Smith*, pp. 9, 11.



Harvey Dunn's *Jedediah Smith in the Badlands* (1947) depicts a moment during the 1823–1824 expedition. Courtesy of South Dakota Art Museum

What would have been especially appealing to both Robinson and Neihardt were the descriptions of Jedediah Smith's religious nature and courage. "His was a nature of spiritual mold and discernment to which the life of Christ came as an ideal to be striven to reach," E. D. Smith wrote.

His [Christ's] death for man placed such a mind under personal obligation, as if the sacrifice of his life had been that of a companion, who had died to save him. Caring nothing for his own life as weighed against duty, neither

would he reckon another's life as of value in one scale where duty balanced the other. Such a man could, and would endure anything for his friend, or face any danger with a smile, if it was for the benefit of the human race. So when in mortal combat for what he deemed right (and he would not contend for non-essentials) he would kill calmly, dispassionately and as relentlessly as fate[;] of such character were Cromwell's "Ironsides."⁴⁹

Through letters Jedediah Smith had written to his brother, his great-nephew reported, "we learn that his reputation for great courage, came not from the disposition of the desperado, or the daring of the reckless adventurer, but was the result of a natural fearlessness of mind coupled with a high regard for duty as he saw it, and based on an implicit trust and faith in God and his overruling providence in the affairs of men."⁵⁰

Neihardt, in *The Splendid Wayfaring*, wrote that Smith had the "confident bearing of one who is born to command;"⁵¹ that he was "curious, capable, fearless, and self-contained;"⁵² that "from the beginning he had been a man of mark;" and that his conduct in battle with the Arikaras and his subsequent mission to Henry "had distinguished him for extraordinary courage."⁵³ As he did later with Black Elk in *Black Elk Speaks*, Neihardt turned Smith's religious faith, in *The Song of Jed Smith*, into a western mysticism. In the epic poem, Neihardt has a former colleague of Smith's—a Neihardt creation—recall the "funny sort of feeling" he would get around Smith:

A feel of something you could never know,
But it was something big and still and dim
That wouldn't tell. It seemed to come from him
Just looking down the Sandy towards the Green

49. Smith to Robinson, 26 Oct. 1909. Soldiers of the New Model Army, a Parliamentary force led by Oliver Cromwell during the English Civil War (1642–1654), were nicknamed "Ironsides" for their ability to cut through enemy formations. Unlike many forces in the Civil War, the Ironsides were professional soldiers, and their battlefield discipline earned them a reputation for ruthlessness. H. W. Koch, *The Rise of Modern Warfare, 1618–1815* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1981), pp. 51–53.

50. Smith to Robinson, 4 Nov. 1909, Box 3364A, Folder 180, Robinson Papers.

51. Neihardt, *Splendid Wayfaring*, p. 74.

52. *Ibid.*, p. 84.

53. *Ibid.*, p. 234.

That had been waiting yonder to be seen
 A million winters and a million springs
 And summers! 'Twas the other side of things—
 Another world!”⁵⁴

During the years when Neihardt was fashioning his two literary monuments to Smith, Robinson was working to have a physical one created. Robinson sought to combine South Dakota’s natural scenery with its history to make a popular tourist attraction. In 1911, sculptor Lorado Taft had completed a forty-eight-foot statue called *The Eternal Indian* that stands on the eastern bank of the Rock River near Oregon, Illinois. In late 1923, Robinson contacted Taft to see if he would be willing to try something similar by carving some of the granite pinnacles near Harney Peak into likenesses of western heroes. “Having in mind your ‘Big Injun,’” Robinson wrote Taft, “it has occurred to me that some of these pinnacles would lend themselves to massive sculpture. . . I am thinking of some notable Sioux as Redcloud, who lived and died in the shadow of these peaks. If one was found practicable, perhaps others would ultimately follow.”⁵⁵

Taft responded that he was ill and could not consider such a project, but his answer did not stop Robinson from promoting—and even expanding—his idea. “The plan I suggested to you grows upon me as I think of it, and I am sure that an artist of vision and imagination could work out a wonderful scheme,” he wrote Taft. “I can see all the old heroes of the west peering out from them: Lewis and Clark, Fremont, Jed Smith, Bridger, Sa-kaka-wea, Redcloud, and in an equestrian statue, Cody and the overland mail.”⁵⁶ Still, Taft declined.

Eight months later, Robinson contacted another sculptor, Gutzon Borglum, then involved in carving a colossal memorial to the Confederacy at Stone Mountain, Georgia, and sent him a much more subdued invitation. “In the vicinity of Harney Peak, in the Black Hills of South Dakota are opportunities for heroic sculpture of unusual character.

54. Neihardt, *Song of Jed Smith*, p. 17. The quoted passage takes place following Smith’s 1824 crossing of South Pass as he and his men followed the Big Sandy River to the valley of the Green River in present-day southwest Wyoming.

55. Robinson to Taft, 28 Dec. 1923.

56. Robinson to Taft, 26 Jan. 1924, Robinson Papers.



Gutzon Borglum sculpts the likeness of another president, Woodrow Wilson, commissioned for the Polish city of Poznań by the statesman-pianist Ignacy Jan Paderewski.

Would it be possible for you to design and supervise a massive sculpture there[?]? The proposal has not passed beyond the mere suggestion, but if it be possible for you to undertake the matter I feel quite sure we could arrange to finance such an enterprise. I should be glad to hear

from you at your convenience.”⁵⁷ Borglum, unlike Taft, wanted the job, and he quickly sent Robinson a telegram: “VERY MUCH INTERESTED IN YOUR PROPOSAL GREAT SCHEME YOU HAVE HOLD TO IT THE NORTH WILL WELCOME IT”⁵⁸ A month later Borglum met Robinson on a Chicago and North Western train between Pierre and Rapid City and agreed to take the job. He did not, however, want to carve western heroes, but national ones, “America’s founders and builders.”⁵⁹ At the end of 1924 Borglum wrote, “I suggested two colossal figures—Washington and Lincoln, because these two figures will give your undertaking national interest and consideration.”⁶⁰

If Robinson was disappointed that a likeness of Jedediah Smith did not end up carved into Mount Rushmore, he left no written evidence of it. Besides, he had succeeded years earlier, when the South Dakota

57. Robinson to Borglum, 20 Aug. 1924, *ibid.*

58. Borglum to Robinson, telegram, 28 Aug. 1924, *ibid.*

59. Rex Alan Smith, *The Carving of Mount Rushmore* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1985), pp. 31–32. Robinson’s role in the development of Mount Rushmore is also explored in Gilbert C. Fite, *Mount Rushmore* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1952).

60. Borglum to Robinson, 2 Dec. 1924, Box 3363A, Folder 149, Robinson Papers.



At a 1940 banquet, a beaming Robinson (right) and Governor Harlan J. Bushfield celebrate the progress made on Mount Rushmore.

State Capitol was being built from 1908 to 1910, in honoring Smith with an artistic monument that, while smaller than an outdoor sculpture, was still oversized. “I trust the splendid rotunda of that structure may be decorated with Allegorical and historical paintings worthy of this great state,” he wrote at the time,

and were it left to me to choose the subjects for the brushes of the foremost mural painters to interpret, I should choose for the most conspicuous place in that capitol a painting of heroic dimensions depicting Jedediah S. Smith at prayer on the gruesome deck of the Yellowstone; I would give a hint of the grand old river at full flood with its abutting hills; I would show the savage and blood thirsty savages lurking along the river fringe; I would show the blanched faces of the voyaguers crowding the deck of the little vessel and the peace that passes understanding stealing over the features of the dying men as the young Christian called down the blessing of heaven upon them.⁶¹

When artist Charles Holloway finished his mural, *The Peace that Passes Understanding*, in a cove panel high above the house of representatives in the South Dakota Capitol, Robinson got much of what he wanted. Jedediah Smith, his face turned toward heaven, prays over the dying frontiersman as four other mountain men and an angel gather around; hidden, though not well, behind trees and bushes are five Indians, looking considerably more caring than savage.

Neihardt, too, in his literary depictions of Smith, got much of what he wanted. In *The Splendid Wayfaring*, which the author immodestly envisioned as “an important contribution to American history”⁶² and likely to be “a pretty big financial success,”⁶³ he may not have found fame and fortune, but the book garnered mostly positive reviews. “Mr. Neihardt lists his sources,” one critic wrote, “and a student familiar with the authorities realizes how accurately and intelligently he has followed them throughout his narrative; how he has clarified and vivified them by the careful selection and animated expression of the ma-

61. Robinson, “When Christ Came to Dakota,” typescript, n.d., pp. 24–25, Box 3366A, Folder 240, *ibid.*

62. Neihardt to Frank Luther Mott, 14 Dec. 1920, Mott Collection, Western Historical Manuscript Collection, University of Missouri, Columbia.

63. Neihardt to Lulu McDonald, Aug. 1920, Neihardt Center, Bancroft, Nebr.



Charles Holloway's *The Peace that Passes Understanding* crowns the South Dakota House of Representatives. Of all the paintings in the capitol, it is the largest.

terial; how important a service he has done in the recreation of history, in the rescuing from oblivion of one of those ‘forgotten brave men’ whose hands, as Carlyle says, have made the world for us.”⁶⁴ Smith biographer Dale L. Morgan in 1964 credited *The Splendid Wayfaring* as the first biography of Jedediah Smith.⁶⁵ Even a writer who, forty years later, pointed out that some of Neihardt’s information had been shown to have inaccuracies, noted that the author had “attempted to catch the lusty spirit of the Ashley-Henry men.”⁶⁶

64. Lucy Lockwood Hazard, *The Frontier in American Literature* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1927), p. 127.

65. Morgan, *Jedediah Smith*, p. 10.

66. Alton J. Smith, *Men against the Mountains: Jedediah Smith and the South West Expedition of 1826–1829* (New York: John Day Co., 1965), p. 8.

The Song of Jed Smith was the last of the five books of epic poetry Neihardt wrote; with it he completed his *A Cycle of the West* after devoting much of nearly three decades to the task. Initially, he saw Smith as something of a western Odysseus and the book as “a tale of adventure,”⁶⁷ but as his work progressed, Neihardt’s Smith became something of a mystic, reflecting another of Neihardt’s own lifelong interests. The reviews at the time, generally, were good. One critic called the book Neihardt’s “personal Jefferson National Expansion Memorial. . . . Truly a monumental work.”⁶⁸ Another called the cycle of poems culminating with *The Song of Jed Smith* “a monument both to the author’s industry and to his love of the chronicles of Spartan days.”⁶⁹ Yet another, even though he found the narrative too often blurred by Neihardt’s “philosophical reflections,” said, “In the straightforward telling parts of the adventures of the frontiersmen, Mr. Neihardt gets the convexity of physical things with something of the hard, clear objectivity of Homer.”⁷⁰

Ironically, Jedediah Smith may have preferred to keep his story quiet. His great-nephew, writing to Robinson nearly a hundred years ago, described a traditionally reticent family:

The fact is that the development, and march of civili[z]ation on this continent has followed the path blazed by my family, from Plymouth Rock to the Golden Gate. Always in an humble position they have been among the foremost Empire builders of this country. Never any one of them talked of his own or the acts of his family. The one condition on which I received in-

67. Neihardt to Julius T. House, 15 Aug. 1934, Neihardt Center.

68. Harry R. Burke, “A Knight in Buckskin and American Poets,” review of *The Song of Jed Smith*, by John G. Neihardt, *St. Louis Globe Democrat*, 27 Sept. 1941. The Jefferson National Expansion Memorial in Saint Louis, Missouri, was established in 1934 near the starting point of the Lewis and Clark Expedition to commemorate the Louisiana Purchase and westward migration. Its prominent features today are the stainless-steel Gateway Arch designed by Eero Saarinen, the Museum of Westward Expansion, and Saint Louis’s Old Courthouse, site of the first trials in the Dred Scott case. National Park Service, “Jefferson National Expansion Memorial,” <http://www.nps.gov/jeff/>, accessed 5 Jan. 2009.

69. “Neihardt Ends His Heroic Cycle with ‘Song of Jed Smith,’” review of *The Song of Jed Smith*, by John G. Neihardt, *Pasadena Star-News*, 11 Oct. 1941.

70. Maurice Swan, “The New Books of Poetry,” review of *The Song of Jed Smith*, by John G. Neihardt, *New York Times Book Review*, 28 Dec. 1941.

formation from my Grandmother was that I did not tell any one. My father hammered this into me as well, and it was by very hard coaxing that I got from him the letters of J. S. S. [Jedediah Smith] to Grandfather, when he knew the purpose for which I wanted them. It has been a hard task to get him to tell of such things as he knew, and saw when a boy.⁷¹

John Neihardt may have been the first biographer of Jedediah Strong Smith, but he has not been the only one for several decades. Maurice S. Sullivan wrote *Jedediah Smith: Trader and Trail Breaker* and *The Travels of Jedediah Smith* in the 1930s,⁷² and Dale L. Morgan published his monumental biography, *Jedediah Smith and the Opening of the West* in the 1950s. Today, a number of different histories and biographies of Smith are available, including at least three written specifically for those schoolchildren Neihardt was so concerned about.⁷³ Even so, only fifteen years ago, a reviewer of a new Smith book could still confidently refer to him as one of “North America’s important but least well-known frontiersmen.”⁷⁴

Smith’s best chance yet at widespread fame came in 2005 when Steven Spielberg, a twenty-first-century monument maker of a different kind, made him a key character in his television miniseries *Into the West*. The program, which dramatized a small portion of Smith’s story, drew more than twenty-one million viewers when broadcast six times in one weekend in the summer of 2005.⁷⁵ Although the program offered no clues that Smith’s character was based on fact while most of the others were not, and although the depiction was not in all ways accurate, that

71. E. D. Smith to Robinson, 24 Jan. 1910, Box 3364A, Folder 180, Robinson Papers.

72. Sullivan, *Jedediah Smith: Trader and Trail Breaker* (New York: Press of the Pioneers, 1936), and *The Travels of Jedediah Smith* (Santa Ana, Calif.: Fine Arts Press, 1934).

73. Frank Latham, *Jed Smith: Trailblazer of the West* (Arlington Heights, Ill.: Christian Liberty Press, 2003); Olive W. Burt, *Young Jed Smith: Westering Boy* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1954); Sharlene Nelson and Ted Nelson, *Jedediah Smith* (New York: Scholastic Inc., 2004).

74. Andrew Rolle, review of David J. Weber’s *The Californios versus Jedediah Smith, 1826–1827: A New Cache of Documents* (Spokane: Arthur H. Clark Co., 1990).

75. TimeWarner, “TNT Original Into the West Delivers More Than 21 Million Viewers, Ranks as Most Watched Program on Television for the Week,” press release, 14 June 2005, <http://www.timewarner.com/corp/newsroom/pr/0,20812,1072548,00.html>, accessed 5 Jan. 2009.

summer, a great many people in addition to western historians suddenly heard of Jedediah Smith. At one point in the television program, a mountain man named James Fletcher is asked where he is headed and replies proudly, "Saint Louis. To meet up with Jedediah Smith." "*The Jedediah Smith?*" asks a young Virginia wheelwright, Jacob Wheeler, whose story becomes central to the program. "God made only one of him," answers Fletcher, "for all of us to look up to."

Nearly a century ago, John Neihardt was there first, working diligently for years to bring Smith's story to the public. In poetry and prose, in lectures from one coast to another, he spread the gospel of Smith, a story suggested to him by a man who staked a South Dakota claim to this rugged individual and then tried, in his own way, to build a monument to him. Today, virtually all of Neihardt's works remain



Gutzon Borglum (center, arms crossed) acknowledged "Doane Robinson and the support his great dream enlisted" on this photograph taken at Mount Rushmore in 1932. Robinson, wearing a dark bowtie, stands second from the left in the middle row.



Although his own likeness is not carved there, Robinson is memorialized by a mountain of his own. This plaque is located near the site where visitors stand to view Mount Rushmore.

in print, and he is celebrated at the John Neihardt Center, a branch of the Nebraska State Historical Society in Bancroft, Nebraska, where the one-room shack in which he wrote many of his books has been restored. Robinson, meanwhile, is memorialized at Mount Rushmore National Memorial with a plaque that denotes the site from which visitors view the monument as Doane Mountain. Inside the museum, a display pictures Robinson and suggests that the mountain began as a molehill, a tourist attraction that was transformed through the talents of sculptor Gutzon Borglum “into a memorial to the ideals of democracy.”⁷⁶

76. National Park Service, “Times of Trial,” exhibit text, Mount Rushmore National Memorial, Keystone, S.Dak.