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1991

Review of Beyond the Frontier: Writers, Western Regionalism and a Sense of Place

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Imig, Barbara L., "Review of Beyond the Frontier: Writers, Western Regionalism and a Sense of Place" (1991). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 568.

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Beyond the Frontier: Writers, Western Regionalism and a Sense of Place. By Harold P. Simonson. Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1989. Preface, notes, index. x + 192 pp. \$15.95.

Rather than embarking upon a quest for the ever-illusionary "new beginning" in a "new land," Harold P. Simonson in *Beyond the Frontier: Writers, Western Regionalism and a Sense of Place* argues that the frontier metaphor has synthesized into a sense of place and that place is "home."

Frederick Jackson Turner's "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" informs Simonson's interpretation of the "open" and "closed" frontier. Simonson selects John Muir to exemplify the former and explores Mark Twain's, Ole Rølvaag's and Nathanael West's interpretive visions of a "closed" frontier. The frontier, once considered symbolic of limitless expansion and rebirth, now demands "complete severance" from one's past and "the sacrifice of [the] cultural soul" (97, 89). The American myth of the open frontier collapses into "the

tragedy of a society too proud to accept the disparity between promises and realities" (172). Thus, the closing of the frontier has forced America to confront the actuality of limitation. Simonson posits that regional literature can reconcile this duality through a "frontier synthesis" that offers "a sense of place that combines geography and the human spirit . . . [and that] roots a person in history and locality" (139). Simonson states: "Our sense of being requires this corresponding sense of place. We call such a place home. It is an abiding and sheltering place without which we drift willy-nilly toward spiritual annihilation" (140). That "sense of place" becomes fully realized in such regional works as Ivan Doig's *This House of Sky* (1978), James Welch's *Winter in the Blood* (1974), and Norman Maclean's *A River Runs Through It* (1976). These three Montana writers tellingly grasp the "power of place" as a geographical and psychological landscape of survival, of alienation, or of transcendental magnificence: "Regionalism translates into a sense of place and that into a sense of home" (174). When that "sense of home" suffuses a novel, readers know that a particular world lies within the words, and for a brief time, they too partake of it.

Simonson, nevertheless, refutes his eloquent plea for synthesis by neglecting to fuse women writers' contributions into this literary investigation; still, he does develop his argument with cogency and clarity.

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