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## More Names on Inscription Rock: Travel Writers on The Great Plains in the 1980s

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# MORE NAMES ON INSCRIPTION ROCK

## TRAVEL WRITERS ON THE GREAT PLAINS IN THE 1980s

NANCY COOK

As in decades past, in the 1980s dozens of writers packed up their vehicles and headed west, notebooks handy. Several accounts that cover the Great Plains were published, including Mark Abley's account of the Canadian Plains, *Beyond Forget: Rediscovering the Prairies* (1986); *Out West* (1987), by Dayton Duncan; *The Solace of Open Spaces* (1985), by Gretel Ehrlich; Ian Frazier's *Great Plains* (1989); *The Necessity of Empty Places* (1988), by Paul Gruchow; British mountaineer Gwen Moffat's *Hard Road West: Alone on the California Trail* (1981); and *The Hidden West* (1983), by Rob Schultheis.

Of the works that made it into print as books, both Dayton Duncan's *Out West* and Ian Frazier's *Great Plains* garnered numerous favorable reviews in magazines and newspapers with large

national circulations. Both sold well enough to warrant paperback printings. Situating themselves within a long tradition of travel writing about the American West, Duncan and Frazier write with other texts about the Plains in mind. Duncan follows the Lewis and Clark Trail, reading the explorers' journals as he goes, while Frazier uses a variety of historical texts and narratives to create a journey of the imagination through both space and time.

I have paired these two accounts because they represent similar projects. Since neither man claims the Great Plains as his homeland, both write from the outsider's perspective. Both have worked as journalists, as professional outsiders in a sense. Portions of *Out West* originally appeared in *The Boston Globe* and in the *Kansas City Star*. Frazier's work, including sections of *Great Plains*, has appeared in the *New Yorker*. Each man undertook his odyssey alone, in a van, camping out for the most part. Both spent more than one summer traveling, between them ranging from 1982 through 1985. They take up similar topics, cite many of the same sources, and relay some of the same historical anecdotes. At times they even travel the same roads and encounter the same people, as if making stops on a predetermined Grand Tour.

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But though the two books share such similarities, their styles sometimes diverge significantly, as even their covers reveal. In the photograph that constitutes the cover of *Out West*, Dayton Duncan leans against a road marker for the Lewis and Clark Trail, smiling out at his readers. Garbed in Stetson, pearl-snapped denim shirt, faded Levis, and cowboy boots, Duncan occupies more than half the vertical space of the cover. The road sign, with its silhouettes of a pointing Lewis and a gun-toting Clark, towers over Duncan and directs him (and his readers) onward.

On the dust jacket cover of Frazier's book, the title, *Great Plains*, fills the top half, superimposed over painted clouds in a blue-green sky. Sky and clouds comprise the top three-fourths of the jacket cover. Empty highway stretches up to a vanishing point on the horizon line, less than two inches up from the bottom. In black block letters "IAN FRAZIER" spans the horizon line, poised like an enormous billboard in the distance. In this unpopulated landscape readers are invited either to lose themselves in the vanishing point or to latch on to Frazier's name. The reader's perspective becomes anchored only through Frazier's name as a linguistic construct. Duncan is shown as a genial guide, humanizing his landscape; and as a result, the cover of *Out West* seems almost cluttered when compared with that of *Great Plains*. Although authors rarely control the appearance of their book jackets, the difference in cover art suggests the contrasts in styles between the two books. Duncan poses himself in each scene and appears, as it were, in every snapshot, while Frazier constitutes himself as author rather than participant, as distant observer rather than model. Each man's relationship to his readers has been insinuated by his book's design.

#### GREAT PLAINS

Near the beginning of *Great Plains* Frazier recalls how he came to the Great Plains for an extended tour. After having fantasized about moving from New York to Montana, in 1982 he finally does so. He sublets his apartment,

packs his van, and heads west. Ready to abandon the restrictive East for the free West, Frazier finds himself in Ohio for his sister's wedding. In a gesture emblematic of the casting off of eastern strictures, Frazier remembers, "At the reception, to entertain the bridesmaids, I ate a black cricket the size of my thumb."<sup>1</sup> Presumably this ceremonial act of savagery indicates his readiness to go West. Traveling west, he finally settles not in eastern or even central Montana, on the Plains themselves, but in the mountainous western region, in Kalispell, Montana (or rather the resort town, Bigfork, Montana, according to the end-papers map), because he "finally saw a few people who looked kind of like me" (11). Even there he has difficulty adjusting for he does not "know one person in Montana" (11). More importantly, although "for years in New York [he] had dreamed of Montana," once there Frazier realizes: "Suddenly I no longer had any place to dream about. So I started to dream about the Great Plains" (12). Despite his time in the West, his eastern sensibilities remain. The West exists for him as a dreamscape and his view of the region always remains that of the outsider. Three years later he moves back to New York.

While the very fact of being an outsider may allow an observer to perceive aspects of a region grown too familiar for insiders to register, the outsider, too, brings a perspective that will determine what is seen and what is reported. For example, from a botanist's perspective, the Great Plains support a rich variety of grasses. An ornithologist might see an abundance of raptors on the Plains. While all writers bring their own discourse to bear upon their representations, Duncan's and Frazier's strategies of presentation merit scrutiny because their versions have proven so seductive and so popular.

Like several of his predecessors Frazier represents the region as empty in many ways, a space that he can now inscribe. On the opening page of *Great Plains* he proclaims that the land is "still-empty," a place where there are often fields of "nothing" (3). Although Frazier may not have the descriptive language or the point of view of the naturalist, the farmer, the Indian,

or the local inhabitant (which might enable him to see the space as other than empty) his point of view seems a strategic one. He defines the Plains in contrast to an urban East, delighting in the absence on the Plains of those things all too common in the East, for now he is “beyond newsstands and malls and velvet restaurant ropes!” (3) Fearing for the Great Plains “because many people think they are boring” (91) and because they “do not ingratiate” (92), Frazier claims that “the beauty of the plains is not just in themselves but in the sky, in what you think when you look at them, and in what they are not” (92).

He proceeds to fill the space selectively and speculatively, for the marvelous feature of the Great Plains, as Frazier represents them, is the room they allow for the imagination to roam. Throughout *Great Plains* he employs the past tense extensively, placing himself imaginatively into the region’s past, often with an eye toward correcting old myths and misnomers. His consistent use of the past tense, both for his own travels as well as for the history he recounts, helps blur the distinction between past and present. All becomes part of the same narrative. Even the living persons he encounters talk about the past, though usually at his prompting. He revises stories of Bonnie and Clyde, Custer, Kit Carson, Buffalo Bill, Billy the Kid, Sitting Bull, and Crazy Horse. Frazier reconstructs the history of the Great Plains for those who are not of the place—those who, if they know of the region at all, know it *only* by its myths. Recasting the journalistic “fact piece” as Romantic history, Frazier makes the present serve the past.

Readers are encouraged to place Frazier’s account at the top of the literary heap from the book’s outset, as soon as they see the end papers. As one opens *Great Plains*, one sees two maps: “The Great Plains, c. 1850” on the left, and “The Great Plains Today” on the right. Both maps represent the same geographic space, but the names and superimposed boundaries differ. The first map indicates the routes taken by Coronado, in 1541; Lewis and Clark, 1804-6; Stephen Long, 1819-20; Francis Parkman in 1846; and Zebulon Pike, in 1805.<sup>2</sup> Within its bound-

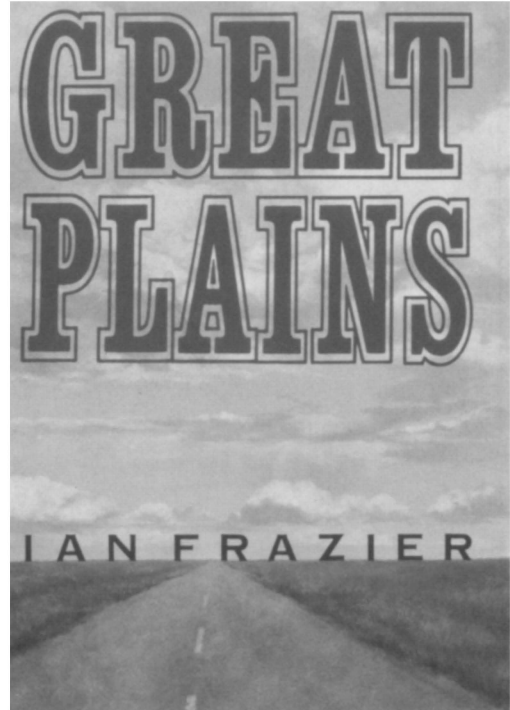


FIG. 1. Jacket designed by Cynthia Krupat, painting by Honi Werner for Ian Frazier’s *Great Plains*. Reproduced courtesy of Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.

aries it labels major rivers, as well as regions identified with Indian tribes. In addition, a few forts have been indicated along with the Black Hills in what is now South Dakota. Opposite, “The Great Plains Today” shows the boundaries of Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, New Mexico, Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska, South Dakota, and North Dakota. It names some of the rivers shown on the other map, but not all. It indicates one route, Ian Frazier’s, and names only those places taken up by his narrative. The second map no longer represents, in any way, the major points of navigation, commerce, or community that were noted on the first map. It represents instead a past and a present determined by Ian Frazier’s account of them. Consequently, Last Chance, Colorado, makes the map, but not Denver. Lincoln, New Mexico, makes the map because of its associations with

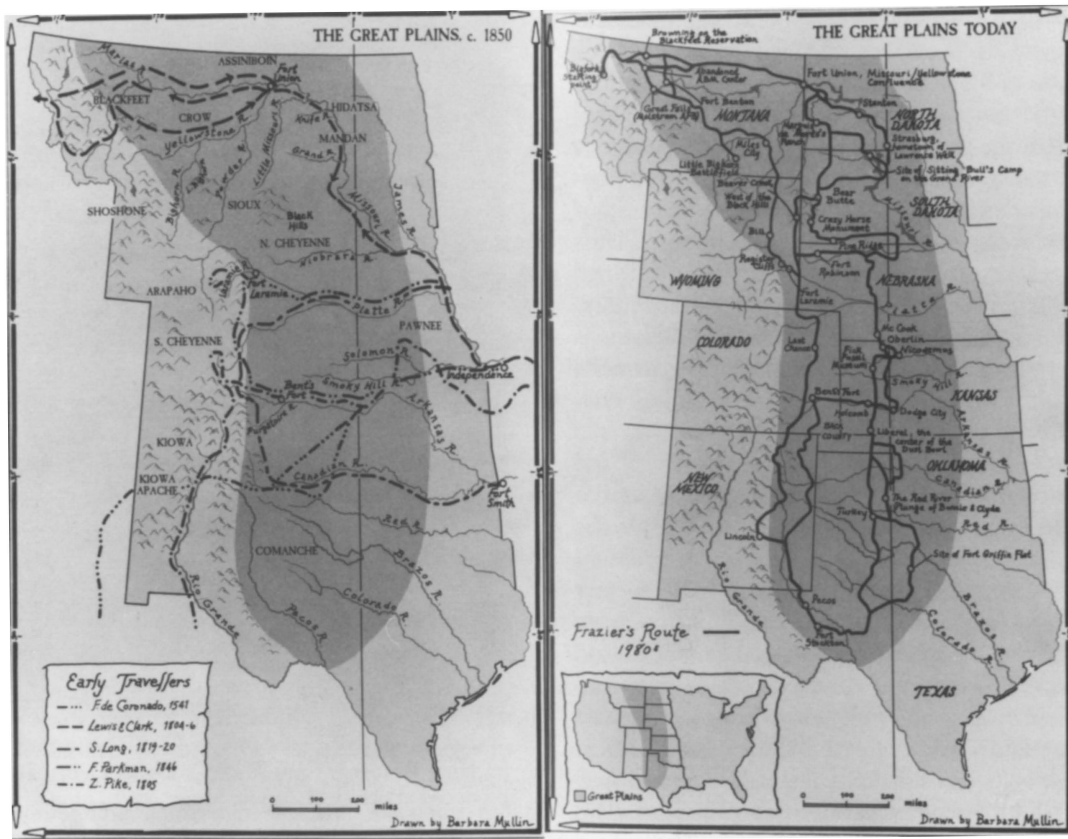


FIG. 2. Endpaper maps drawn by Barbara Mullin for Ian Frazier's *Great Plains*. Reproduced courtesy of Barbara Mullin.

Billy the Kid, but no other spot in the state warrants a mark. "The Great Plains Today" offers a disorienting view of the region—disorienting at least until one has read Frazier's book.

Maps, as Wayne Franklin suggests, have often functioned as "charts of 'idea,'" rather than as charts of geographic data. The map of Frazier's route offers readers a guide to Frazier's attitude toward the Great Plains instead of a road map they might actually follow. Frazier's map, in its refusal to locate places in reference to common landmarks or main thoroughfares, insists that his journey, as exploration, remains idiosyncratic and that it cannot be duplicated, except

by means of his text. Yet, "what is lost in the process," in Franklin's terms, "is a sense of the real terrain as a place of action rather than grand plot." In essence the map guides us not through the Great Plains but through Frazier's narrative. In this regard, as in many travel books, the author labors so that his readers don't have to. Franklin quotes Crèvecoeur on maps: "Nothing is so easy as to travel on a map; actually to traverse a track . . . this is to meet with a thousand unforeseen difficulties."<sup>3</sup>

The modern traveler's difficulties, to be sure, are slight in comparison to those of the eighteenth-century traveler, but Crèvecoeur's point

remains valid. In a sense, readers are encouraged to peruse maps, even trace routes with their fingers, with an ease that duplicates the ease with which they can now fly over the region on transcontinental flights. Frazier himself hints at the problems with such effortless views, as "most travellers who see the plains do it from thirty thousand feet" (4). He counters the airline view with a description of the means and the time necessary for transcontinental travel in the mid-nineteenth century. The airline view tends to overlook the Plains altogether: "Crossing high and fast above the plains, headed elsewhere, you are doing what rain clouds tend to do. You are in a sky which farmers have cursed and blasted with dynamite barrages and prodded with hydrogen balloons and seeded with silver-iodide crystals and prayed to in churches every day for months at a time, for rain. Usually the clouds wait to rain until they are farther west or east" (5).

Both fliers and map readers may remain indifferent to topographical diversity and human activity that occurs on the Plains. Frazier promises to deliver what the airline cannot—a closer view. He knows what others do not: "If you ask the flight attendant about those green and brown rectangles, chances are he or she will not say . . .," and he goes on for over half a page on the development of strip farming on the Plains (5). Yet despite all his good intentions, one consequence of both mapping and Frazier's own means of representation is that (as Franklin puts it) the "human line comes to dominate the natural ones which first engrossed [a traveler's] attention."<sup>4</sup> In his short history of farming developments, as in his map of "The Great Plains Today," Frazier's attention moves to and remains on himself rather than on the Plains. For Frazier's *New Yorker* audience, many of whom will see the Plains only from "thirty thousand feet" (presumably those addressed as "you" in the passage quoted earlier), the book is appealing because Frazier wrote it, not because it is about the Great Plains. His use of the second-person pronoun "you" is particularly telling here because although the *New Yorker* audience includes inhabitants of the region, the text en-

courages them to ally themselves with the unknowledgeable transcontinental traveler rather than with the farmers below. In fact throughout *Great Plains*, readers, regardless of their regional affiliation, are invited to identify with east-coast urban readers by means of pronoun usage and metaphor.

The human landscape of the contemporary Great Plains is relegated to the background in much the same way. The present in *Great Plains* most frequently serves as a pretext for a discussion of the past and the mythic. One of the greatest myths surrounds the Sioux chief, Crazy Horse, who becomes the center of the text. As Frazier notes, Crazy Horse never told his own story, never allowed himself to be photographed, never traveled to the land of the white men. In fact he never left the Plains. He becomes an emblematic figure in Frazier's text precisely because his history leaves so much room for speculation. Crazy Horse, that is, can be imbued with the heroic qualities that meet Frazier's needs and expectations. His mythic stature, unrestrained by consistent historical data, allows Frazier considerable imaginative space. After cataloging at length reasons why he loves Crazy Horse, Frazier concludes his list with the avowal that "in the mind of each person who imagines him, he looks different" (118). He then expands to connect Crazy Horse with broader national and mythic concerns:

I believe that when Crazy Horse was killed, something more than a man's life was snuffed out. Once, America's size in the imagination was limitless. After Europeans settled and changed it, working from the coasts inland, its size in the imagination shrank. Like the center of a dying fire, the Great Plains held that original vision longest. Just as people finally came to the Great Plains and changed them, so they came to where Crazy Horse lived and killed him. Crazy Horse had the misfortune to live in a place which existed both in reality and in the dreams of people far away; he managed to leave both the real and the imaginary place unbetrayed. (118-19)



This deification of Crazy Horse removes him from any complex historical analysis, one that might allow for an Indian point of view, and places him in the role of an emblematic noble savage-victim. In the process, Indians come to occupy a timeless place on the Plains as a group separate from the "people [who] finally came to the Great Plains and changed them" (118). Frazier, at least temporarily, forgets that the Plains Indians are immigrants, and that they modified the environment to meet their needs, changing it in the process. Frazier sets Crazy Horse apart not only from other Indians, who changed their new home (and perhaps even betrayed it), but also apart from all other inhabitants of the Great Plains who have "the misfortune to live in a place which exist[s] both in reality and in the dreams of people far away" (119), even the living people about whom Frazier writes.

Frazier's idealized Crazy Horse then sets the standard by which all other Indians are compared and makes the other Indians represented seem to be either pale imitations of the great chief or decayed remnants of those Indians who betrayed Crazy Horse, their people, and their region. While on the subject of hitchhikers, for example, Frazier describes Lydell White Plume, a Fancy Dancer enroute from a powwow on the Crow Reservation to a funeral on the Wind River Reservation. White Plume's funeral trip offers a chance to mention the high suicide rate among young men on the reservation, but Frazier provides no space for an adequate discussion of this matter. When they reach his incapacitated car, White Plume shows Frazier his dance costume, but readers get very little of the conversation, and then only via indirect discourse. The subject of tribal dances gets dropped rather quickly, for Frazier seems to have decided that while his readers may wish to know that Indians can still look colorful, they don't really care about any particular Indian or about what life is actually like on a reservation.

While looking for the site of Sitting Bull's cabin, Frazier later encounters hitchhiker Jim Yellow Earring. He shows his readers a Yellow Earring so desperate for booze that he expresses interest in the writer's bottle of gasoline addi-

tive. At the cabin site Frazier encounters a rattlesnake, which Yellow Earring goes after "like a man chasing a bus." He then offers to "snap his tongue out of his bone head," but Frazier asks him "please not to" (44). On the way back to the highway Yellow Earring tells Frazier many things, among them "about how the Crow Indians in Montana drink Lysol, also known as 'Montana Gin,' which will sure get you drunk, but which can collapse your lungs if you don't mix it right" (46). When Frazier drops him off, Yellow Earring asks for a "loan" of a few bucks, then asks for more before he sees the denomination of the bill Frazier gives him. Frazier also picks up hitchhiker Doreet, a Hunkpapa Sioux who "was big, pretty, with scars up both arms" (124). Doreet wears a Cornell tee-shirt. He asks her if she went to Cornell and she replies, "'Where's that?'" He points to her shirt and she responds, "'Oh, probably—I've been all over the country'" (124). For Frazier's readers, a joke has been made, possibly at Cornell's expense, but at Doreet's expense as well, for she isn't "in" on the humor. Whether through direct quotation or indirect discourse, Frazier has the Indians he meets indict their contemporary existence, but he leaves out a context for that indictment. He includes no extended interviews, really no interviews at all, with any Indian. Deceased and legendary Indians get far more coverage in *Great Plains* than any living ones.

Through quotation, Indians are given voice to condemn themselves, but never a voice with which to defend, explain, or praise any aspect of their lives. Thus Frazier's encounter with Yellow Earring is intercut with accounts of Sitting Bull, Ghost Dancers, nineteenth-century Indian customs, the rise of the cattle business, and the demise of the buffalo. Against the grand sweep of history, Yellow Earring fares poorly. This technique of juxtaposition, which Frazier uses throughout the book, always serves to diminish the lives of contemporary Indians. For Frazier, contemporary Lysol-swilling, hitchhiking Indians are interesting only to the degree that they invoke irony or (better yet) make a mythic past seem more rich for being unattain-

able. Certainly Frazier's representation of contemporary Indian life can be considered accurate in many ways, but again, the issue is one of emphasis. By suggesting that living Indians have pathetically degenerated from the real Indians, Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse, they become the betrayers of their ancestors. Ironically, Frazier himself becomes the truer descendant of Crazy Horse. Contemporary Indians have little room in Frazier's book, for they are judged only in relation to their traditions, which recall a mythic past. It is not surprising then, that in the dreamy reverie that ends the book, the Great Plains become "the place where Crazy Horse will always remain uncaptured. They are the lodge of Crazy Horse" (214).

As with most writer-travelers who have represented the Great Plains during the last 150 years, Ian Frazier does not write to or for those who inhabit the region, but primarily for the eastern urban reader, as constructed by the *New Yorker* in this case, where most of his work has appeared. He allies himself with his readers through a series of narrative maneuvers that foreground his status as an outsider on the Great Plains. Not surprisingly, the book begins with an eastern, rather than a western perspective: "Away to the Great Plains of America, to that immense Western short-grass prairie now mostly plowed under!" (3) The view is distinctly nostalgic, lamenting what has already been destroyed while celebrating, with exclamation points, what remains. The distancing effect here echoes that found in the first edition of Francis Parkman's *The Oregon Trail* (1849). As Carl Bredahl has noted, Parkman's book, which was originally titled *The California and Oregon Trail*, opens Chapter One with an epigraph from Shelley: "Away, away from men and towns/ To the silent wilderness."<sup>5</sup> While Parkman, or those close to him, chose to remove the epigraph (and all others) from subsequent editions because it seemed too romantic, for Frazier, the oblique allusion sets an appropriately romantic, even elegiac tone. Although Frazier doesn't cite the first edition in his notes, the first nine sentences in his book begin with "Away," so he aims for a particular rhetorical effect (3-4). He flees from

others in order to find a contemplative spot, where he can fill the silence as he sees fit.

Like many travelers before him, Frazier tells greenhorn stories on himself. He gets his van stuck in the mud, he gets lost, he gets caught nosing around someone's family homestead. As ruins, abandoned homesteads intrigue him (and, presumably, his readers), for he asserts that "Whenever you see an abandoned house, you wonder" (74). The second-person pronoun here allies the reader with Frazier, but it's an alliance, as it turns out, against the locals. When Frazier snoops around one abandoned house in Texas jotting notes, a man who grew up in the house drives up. Frazier is unsettled, even embarrassed by the man's look of "mild, complete puzzlement," for he adds, "As my van pulled out of the driveway, it slunk" (74). Calculated to gain sympathy with one kind of reader, these anecdotes can put off another. To an inhabitant of the region Frazier might seem both invasive and smug.

In one story he tells on himself, he spends an afternoon with Gerard Baker, an Indian Park Service ranger. Baker invites him to share a pipe of "kinnikinnick (a mixture of tobacco and the dried inner bark of the red willow, which Indians used to smoke)" (29). They take turns throwing an ax, with Baker showing Frazier the technique. Later Baker suggests they take a ceremonial sweat bath ("an important part of many Indian religions," Frazier notes) but he declines (33). Baker tells him that according to family legend, they are near an old Indian burial site. Frazier relates the end of the exchange:

'Really? Could you maybe go up there and find those burials and find beads and pipes and stuff?' I asked. Behind his brown eye, a shutter dropped. '. . . Well,' Gerard Baker said, 'I suppose you *could*. . . .' (34)

Baker's response lets us know that Frazier has stepped out of bounds. And in relating the incident Frazier, like precursors Parkman or Custer, seems determined to remind us that he remains an outsider. Whether burial sites or graveyards, "ruins" or homesteads, places are



valued differently by the tourist and the resident.

Indeed, Frazier seems to relish his outsider status. Often he notes the lack of human contact during his trips. Just before his visit with Baker, he notes, "I had been driving for several days, talking only to order in cafes, and sleeping in my van at night" (29). Frequently he refuses invitations offered him by locals, as if too much contact with inhabitants might upset his reveries about them. Often the excuse he gives is that he must be going. Like some harried businessman, Frazier seems compelled to keep moving. Though he uses Montana as his base of operations, Frazier seems unwilling to surrender either the pace or sensibilities of Manhattan Island. For a man who eats bugs to amuse new acquaintances and who talks "a blue streak" (33) to Gerard Baker, Frazier's distance seems strategic rather than symptomatic of shyness. After turning down an invitation for dinner with a Wyoming ranch couple, Frazier segues into a quotation from Francis Parkman upon encountering emigrants along the Oregon Trail. The quotation recalls Parkman's urban disdain for the common persons, who "'tormented'" him with questions (162). In rendering his encounters with assorted locals, Frazier suggests that while the locals may be colorful, one ought to keep one's distance.

In addition to the anecdotes, Frazier's metaphors also depend upon an urban sensibility for their effect. In his postindustrial perspective, western gunfights are "closer in spirit to drug wars in the Bronx than to duels of honor" (141), lightning flashes are "like the Fourth of July in New Jersey seen from an airplane" (138), and Fort Union is "like the Times Square of the plains" (19). Yet despite the proliferation of similes such as these, Frazier ignores the cities of the Plains. Only Dodge City, the setting for the television series *Gunsmoke*, merits a write-up. Denver, Bismarck, Billings have no place on Frazier's Plains.

Frazier's scrupulous avoidance of urban areas seems in keeping with the anxieties he shares with many of his literary predecessors. He turns away from large groups of living inhabitants of

the Plains in favor of the dead, the lonely, or the disenfranchised. These inhabitants are voiceless, or nearly so, and thus they allow "free" space for Frazier's own imagination. In speaking for such voiceless figures he often laments the despoliation of the Plains by the white men. This too places Frazier within the tradition of nineteenth-century writer-travelers, for as Lee Clark Mitchell notes in *Witnesses to a Vanishing America*, many travelers were troubled by the destruction of America's vastness.<sup>6</sup> For Frazier, as well as for some of those before him, lamentation serves a strategic purpose. He repeatedly evokes the blankness of the Plains, and upon this "piece of paper" (139) he writes his text. Frazier scrawls his particular view of the region in *Great Plains* almost as literally as the travelers he names scrawled their names on Register Cliffs, on the North Platte River (161).

Anxious about the status of his story among all others, as well as against the places themselves, he complains of the defilement of that very space. He bemoans the way modernity evacuates meaning, drains significance, and defaces ruins. Like many of his predecessors, Frazier's lamentations sometimes read like an alibi. He has come to the Plains to mine a unique, powerful, even successful narrative from them. If he has failed to inscribe his name there successfully, along with Francis Parkman and Walter Prescott Webb (two precursors with whom he is compared on the book jacket), we might not perceive that he has failed, but rather that the Plains have failed him, that the terms of comparison have been stripped away by a coal mine. The tone of regret suggests that what he represents *was* there, and that if we fail to see *his* Great Plains, it isn't because of a failed narrative strategy, or even an inferior facility for description, but because the artifact itself has been exploited or destroyed. Readers who might venture out West can never really compare notes with Frazier, for as he repeatedly suggests, what *he* saw will be radically changed or gone. According to this model, the space represented must always be dying or dead, historical or mythic. By erasing, in effect, a given landscape or artifact and documenting its demise, Frazier

strives to leave his own *imaginative* work unsailable. The pedestrian, quotidian, contemporary Great Plains, with their Denvers and Bismarcks, must not be represented, for they survive and invite comparison.

*Great Plains* offers an imaginative reconstruction of powerful myths, one designed to keep the Plains a pastoral space for those who don't wish to be there, but who want it always to remain an imaginative potential. On the Plains, there remains "plenty of room for the past," but it is a tourist's past, for Frazier notes: "Often, as I drove around, I felt as if I were in an enormous time park" (82). Fittingly, his book ends with the evocation of an imaginary Great Plains, suitable for dreams, a space "enormous, bountiful, unfenced, empty of buildings, full of names and stories" (214). Such empty spaces form a literary construct in line with a powerful tradition in American letters. Ian Frazier's Great Plains are "the territory" that promises escape from contemporary urban life: a time park, a playground, but not a home.

#### OUT WEST

Dayton Duncan utilizes traditional strategies of representation in *Out West*, but for a different effect from Frazier's. Viewed in light of Frazier's book, Duncan's project seems less ambitious and more narrowly focused. To begin with, he has a definite plan—to follow Lewis and Clark's trail, and respond both to the places they encountered and to their narratives of the journey. He chooses to identify with the introspective and troubled Lewis rather than the more stolid Clark. Lewis sometimes becomes a touchstone for Duncan's own responses, which brings a self-consciousness to *Out West* that is missing from *Great Plains*. Lewis's doubts, as recorded in his journals, allow Duncan to question his own motives and methods, and even the project itself. Unlike Frazier's idealization of Crazy Horse, Duncan clearly admires Lewis, but he doesn't see him as a repository of all that remains elusive. In pursuing his task, Duncan writes a travel book in which the past guides the present and provides coherence, but never dominates. The

past may frame the present, but in contrast to Frazier's book, the present refuses to serve only the past. In Duncan's book, the voices of the living, in direct quotation, take precedence over voices from the past.

Although *Out West* and *Great Plains* share some Library of Congress subject classifications, Duncan's audience is constituted differently from Frazier's. Frazier's audience may well read *Great Plains* because it is written by Ian Frazier, rather than because they seek to know more about the Plains, whereas Duncan, in his preface to *Out West*, anticipates his readers' interest as being in the topic rather than in his representation of it. He recalls his own entrance into the cult of Lewis and Clark buffs as a motivating force behind his journeys. Duncan's readers, as he seems to imagine them, might one day themselves travel the route he has in three separate trips: during the summer of 1983, in February of 1985, and during the summer of 1985. Moreover, he situates himself as being on the periphery of the literary profession by noting that he has the time to undertake his journeys because he had worked for a political candidate whose bid for office failed. Unlike *New Yorker* staffer Ian Frazier, Duncan is between jobs when he decides to write his book. We might suspect that Duncan here is disingenuous, a kind of folksy fraud. But this seems less the case than that Duncan speaks to a largely different audience, both geographically and socially, than that addressed by Frazier. Throughout the book he demonstrates that Lewis and Clark buffs come from different classes and different regions, including the regions he traverses.

Where Frazier implies his sense of audience most frequently through his choice of metaphor, Duncan's subject itself implies his readers. Throughout his journey, Duncan writes about his interactions with the inhabitants of the region. He shows his readers his attempts to move from the position of outsider to that of benign guest within a community. He is successful, in part, because he can read many of the local codes. He pulls off the highway to talk to a farmer driving a team of Belgian horses, figuring "a man using horses instead of a tractor can't

be in any hurry.”<sup>7</sup> They chat for awhile, then the farmer mentions “how his son is participating in some new seed experiment in planting which [he] thinks is just so much foolishness since it takes up too much time. The mention of taking too much time is his way of saying that ours is up” (26). Later that day Duncan stops to watch another farmer with a team of horses. The farmer sees Duncan watching him and stops. They talk, and the farmer indicates that he is Amish. He asks Duncan for news of a movie about the Amish that has just come out (*Witness*), and Duncan assures him that there were no real Amish in the film. The conversation flags, and the farmer

wipes his forehead again and looks down the straight stretch of highway, where a big truck has crested a rise about a mile away, then at my vehicle in the road.

“He’s movin’ right along.” His signal that I should, too. (30)

They part and Duncan adds, “I return to the road, knowing enough about his faith not to ask for a picture” (30). Not only does Duncan understand the codes well enough not to make himself a nuisance, he transmits that knowledge to his readers, so that they too may be enlightened travelers.

While this strategy imposes certain limitations, it offers his readers a different relation to the inhabitants who are represented. Duncan explains:

Visitors in the small towns of the Plains are greeted with a friendly curiosity, instead of the suspicion and reticence of an Eastern hamlet, or the callous indifference of a big city, or even the Chamber of Commerce boosterism of a medium-sized Midwestern city (“Let me show you the Eyetalian fountain down at the city park—cost \$25,000 and we’re *real* proud of her”). Just the same, it’s wise to watch what you put on postcards to mail out from the local post office; it might already have become the chief topic of conversation at the cafe when you walk in for supper. (121)

Unlike Frazier, Duncan acknowledges the consequences and responsibilities of his own forms of representation within his own text. Duncan recognizes both another point of view and another audience for his writing. This sense of exchange between writer and subject becomes even clearer when he interviews the editor of the *Eagle Butte News*, Helen Clausen. Duncan asks a few questions, scribbling notes as he listens. Then Clausen asks a few questions, taking notes as *she* listens. Duncan’s visit, she tells him, will be featured in the next issue.

The difference between Frazier’s and Duncan’s positions vis-à-vis their subjects is rendered most obvious through their encounters with the same person, National Park Service ranger Gerard Baker. As noted earlier, Frazier’s encounter with Baker takes up a portion of one afternoon and ends with uneasiness on Baker’s side at least. Frazier declined an offer to partake in a ritual sweat bath with Baker, then alarmed him by suggesting the possibility of a souvenir hunt on sacred ground. As Frazier describes him, Baker is identified by his knowledge of traditional Indian skills as well as his knowledge of Indian history, both of which are recast for readers in Frazier’s own language and which render Baker consistent with the other images of Indians in *Great Plains*.

Duncan introduces Baker with a summary of his background, including his rise through the National Park Service and his college education. Duncan situates Baker’s knowledge of “the old Indian ways” as “partly . . . an intellectual inquiry into his own roots but mainly as a conscious decision to lead his life by gleaned what he thinks is best from the two, often contradictory societies” (181). This strategy takes Baker out of the realm of the merely colorful, out of the tradition that presents, in Lee Clark Mitchell’s terms, “exotic instances of the American experience to jaded easterners,”<sup>8</sup> and begins to suggest the complexities of contemporary Indian culture.

Duncan goes on to describe several adventures with Baker, including a wintertime stay in a replica of a Mandan lodge and a Buffalo hunt. In each case Duncan plays the greenhorn

to Baker, but they both participate, *self-consciously*, in the demarcation of the roles they play. Readers discover Baker both through direct quotation and description. As Duncan portrays him, Baker participates in the shaping of *Out West*, both as teacher and as tour guide. Baker teaches Duncan more than a few lessons about quaint Indian ways. He enlightens Duncan by teasing him, an old Indian custom. He often concocts Indian traditions on the spot for Duncan's benefit and amusement.

Duncan learns of a method of incorporating one's heritage into a culture often hostile to it. Baker is no casual antiquarian but rather a man trying to create a space for himself and his people that will allow for future survival. Duncan learns that Indians don't simply go around being colorful. Gerard Baker maintains traditions within the purview of a professional career. As Duncan describes it, "A day in his life might include paperwork at his office, a horse ride to check the park's buffalo herd, scraping and tanning some deer or elk hides, then a nighttime refresher course in cardiopulmonary resuscitation to maintain his emergency-medical-technician license or a meeting with fellow deputy sheriffs in McKenzie County" (181). Baker wears elkskin leggings and a deerskin shirt on occasion but often supplements traditional clothing with an Eddie Bauer parka. As Duncan tells it, Baker "hopes his career can be an example and a proof to whites and members of his tribe alike that an Indian is not a caricature" (169). For Baker, as for other Indians Duncan encounters,

the choice is not between a romantic myth or a despairing reality, idealized nobility or disintegrated culture. It's the harder work in between. "We have to understand where we came from, . . . But we're never going back . . . and we can't stay where we are. We've got to progress—without bitterness, without self-pity." (169-70)

The process Baker describes does not exclude outside help, for many Indians rely upon historical documents of the whites to tell them about their past. Baker learned of his heritage

in part from "the Lewis and Clark journals, diaries of fur-company traders, Prince Maximilian's writings, [and] anthropologists' studies" (191). Though the Indians have been victimized both historically and representationally, it has not been passively. In Duncan's narrative, where the appropriation of history and myth changes hands almost from page to page, the Indians, too, have their turn. In his work, unlike Frazier's, Indians have a chance to respond both in the present and to the past. Duncan and others have noted biased and uncomprehending representations of Indians in historical documents, but he reveals that Indians do more than passively read white histories—they use them for their individual ends.

Throughout his summer and winter stays with Gerard Baker, Duncan participates in as well as observes the activities he describes. He sleeps under buffalo robes in sub-zero weather, eats buffalo tripe, takes a sweat bath, and goes on a buffalo hunt. As part of his job, Baker must catch or kill buffalo that stray off the national park and onto private land. Baker and Duncan head off in a pickup truck to a spot where wandering buffalo have been sighted. After an extensive chase, Baker determines that the buffalo have strayed too far to be caught and transported back to the park. They must be killed, but their meat will be given to local charities. Baker shoots them, then begins to skin and clean them, a task in which Duncan joins. Duncan finds the "hot, messy work . . . harder labor than it looked" (206). Baker "slices off a piece of brownish-purple liver and offers it to the bystanders. They all decline . . . so he turns to me" (207). Duncan and Baker first eat slices of the liver, then of the kidney. Duncan expresses the bond created through his participation by a shift in his use of pronouns. By the end of the passage, the experience is no longer rendered in terms of his own individual experience, but as a communal one. As they start to work on the second buffalo he notes, "Our knives are duller, our arms are more tired, the day is hotter, and this bull is bigger than the first. Blood smears our hands, forearms, shirts, and parts of our foreheads where we have tried to

wipe the sweat away" (207). If Duncan had any remaining illusions about the "noble savage" and his idyllic way of life, it vanishes when he notices that "blood smears our hands."

In *Out West*, Duncan attempts to let the words of others into his own text. He taped many of his interviews and presents the results by means of direct quotation throughout his narrative. His is a much more expansive text than Frazier's—he covers more ground and the book is 434 pages to 290 in *Great Plains*—yet in some ways their language is similar. Both tend to use metaphor to replace descriptive prose, and both use metaphor to link a natural phenomenon to a postindustrial one. For Duncan, a hen pheasant "rises slowly, like an overloaded jumbo jet" (141), or some flathead buttes look "like a mountain range that has been lopped with a hedge trimmer for neatness' sake" (154). What is suggested in *Great Plains* but is manifest in *Out West* is that metaphoric language represents an attempt to humanize western space. Duncan frequently casts the land in human terms, as when he first visualizes a section of the Missouri River as it appears on a map, then notes that on the map, "the Big Bend of the Missouri . . . looks like a big tonsil in the throat of the river" (141). Some hills "look like the deeply lined face of a man who has been poorly shaved the morning after a hard night: stubble in the clefts, smooth on the flat spots, and a few gouges" (70).

If there is a difference between the way Frazier and Duncan use metaphor, it resides in the descriptive weight analogies are asked to carry in each case. Duncan tends to use more concrete, detailed figurative language than Frazier does. Duncan seems to assume that his readers don't need to depend on a metaphor in order to imagine a scene. Like the narrative itself, Duncan's figurative language encourages his readers to linger, while Frazier urges his readers (as he himself does) to move on. Duncan also seems to be aware of the duty metaphoric language sometimes performs for readers who are unfamiliar with a landscape or a particular experience. A dependence on metaphoric lan-

guage, Duncan suggests, may separate outsider from insider:

I awake the next morning in Gerard's house to the aroma of testes, kidneys, and small buffalo steaks frying in the pan. The smell is distinctive and overpowering, the same smell from the hillside where we skinned the hides.

"I'm trying to decide what that smells like," I tell Gerard, searching for descriptive images and comparisons.

He turns to me from the frying pan and fixes me with a look like Roosevelt's guide must have during their rainy hunt a hundred years ago—a look wondering if Easterners know anything about anything.

"Buffalo," he says. "It smells like buffalo." (208)

Unlike travel writer Duncan, Baker doesn't need to translate his experience metaphorically and Duncan too suggests that any attempt to can only fail. Readers who have smelled game may feel that they can intuit the experience Duncan relates, but the smell of buffalo remains unavailable to readers in any terms other than its own; that is, the experience eludes Duncan's readers, for it resists metaphor. Baker's response makes a joke at Duncan's expense, but it also reveals one limitation of the insider's view. Without metaphoric language to translate the experience, those who haven't *already* shared the experience don't have access to it. In the exchange with Baker, Duncan self-consciously reveals one of the hazards of his trade: he must render his experience in terms that are meaningful to his audience, and yet that very rendering may alienate him from his more immediate audience of locals.

Duncan suggests that some parts of his experience cannot be adequately conveyed. A given scene may be as ephemeral as any found in Frazier's book, but Duncan seems far less concerned with establishing his own version of it. Moreover, he resists asserting his own definitive version or interpretation of historical events

in the way Frazier finds so attractive in favor of a more fluid, contradictory reading of history. Duncan mistrusts the standard version of many of the historical incidents marked on his journey, as when he comments on our notions of Jesse James and Joseph Smith: "We are left today with their myths and museums, monuments not so much to the tumultuous times of the past as to our national desire to sanitize our history" (53). Rather than gather versions of one story and piece together a single cohesive narrative from them, as Frazier does for Crazy Horse, Duncan tends to present competing stories and historical discrepancies as examples of indeterminacy. Often he goes on to show how those versions are manipulated by different interested parties. For example, after having described numerous examples along the Missouri River of grave robbing and contested claims over the bones of famous people, Duncan encounters one more, near the confluence of the Grand and Missouri rivers:

A hundred yards away is a polished granite base over the grave of Sitting Bull; the stone bust of the Sioux chief that once rested on the granite has been recently vandalized and has been removed for repairs. . . .

At Fort Yates, North Dakota (population 771), is another grave marker for Sitting Bull. He was buried here first, but we know by now what happens to famous people buried along the Missouri River. In 1953, a group from Mobridge [South Dakota] convinced some of Sitting Bull's descendants to request a reburial in South Dakota. When the requests were rebuffed, the Mobridge group snuck in under the cover of darkness, dug up the skeleton, trucked it across the state line, and buried it securely under a heavy concrete slab. By the next day, stores in Mobridge were selling T-shirts that said: "Mobridge, S. D. Sitting Bull Sleeps Here." (154)

Though the Great Bone Heist occurred in 1953, Duncan clearly indicates that the appropriation

of histories, myths, and cultures is nothing new. He discusses General Sheridan's plans for the extermination of the buffalo and its link to the demise of the Indian. As Duncan tells it,

Sheridan suggested that instead of being stopped, the [buffalo] hunters should be given bronze medallions "with a dead buffalo on one side and a discouraged Indian on the other." Years later, with both Indian and buffalo reduced in number and safely confined, a different version of Sheridan's medallion would be circulated by the government in the form of a nickel coin. (202)

Duncan goes on to remind his readers that on the buffalo-head nickel, neither the buffalo nor the Indian look discouraged or dead. American history, he suggests, reveals a series of appropriations whereby, in this case, the demise of the buffalo can be interpreted as beneficial and later idealized even further.

#### CONCLUSION

Both Dayton Duncan and Ian Frazier attempt to depict a region in terms of their own discourse about it, but the effects differ. Frazier provides amusing anecdotes about curious aspects of plains reality, but he maintains the underlying myths. In *Great Plains* past and present meet within Frazier's slick, seamless narrative. Frazier ends with a reverie that delights in the imaginative possibilities of the Great Plains as myth, "bigger than any name people give them. They are enormous, bountiful, unfenced, empty of buildings, full of names and stories. They extend beyond the frame of the photograph. . . . They are the place where Crazy Horse will always remain uncaptured. They are the lodge of Crazy Horse" (214). The ideal Plains for him are those that serve as a setting for his dreams.

For Duncan, however, the act of inscription (whether physical or imaginative) always leaves a mark. At the close of *Out West*, readers are left to ponder not the lodge of Crazy Horse, but

a dinner-cruise meeting of the Lewis and Clark Trail Heritage Foundation on a St. Louis paddlewheeler called the *Huck Finn*. As the great-great grandson of William Clark, whom Duncan informs us, "like his ancestor, [is] always willing to leave his name marked on something," signs another autograph, Duncan sees that a "beacon light at the top of the Rainbow Arch shines in the night" (416). Duncan ends his book not in dreamy idealism, but with an acknowledgement that all travelers, whether explorers, settlers, or writers, leave their mark on the land. For Duncan, the Great Plains continue to change as each generation builds its Rainbow Arch, celebrates its heritage, or writes its stories. In Duncan's account, the Great Plains are not, in the end, a blank sheet, but a palimpsest.

#### NOTES

I am indebted to Michael Kowalewski for his helpful criticism.

1. Ian Frazier, *Great Plains* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989), p. 9. Subsequent references in parentheses in the text.

2. Although Frazier ends his book with sixty-six pages of notes, which give readers the impression that he has been attentive to historical detail, there are occasional lapses. Robert Thacker reminded me that the dates supplied on the end-paper maps are misleading. While Frazier cannot be blamed for inaccuracies contained in these maps, their casual misrepresentation of the journeys of Coronado, Pike, and Long seems at odds with the extensive notes included by Frazier. It would seem that, as with the jacket design, the publisher is concerned more with selling Ian Frazier than with representing the Great Plains accurately.

3. Wayne Franklin, *Discoverers, Explorers, Settlers: The Diligent Writers of Early America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 29.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

5. Francis Parkman, *The California and Oregon Trail* (New York: George P. Putnam, 1849), quoted in A. Carl Bredahl, Jr., *New Ground: Western American Narrative and the Literary Canon* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), p. 36.

6. Lee Clark Mitchell, *Witnesses to a Vanishing America: The Nineteenth-Century Response* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

7. Dayton Duncan, *Out West* (1987; rpt. New York: Penguin, 1988), p. 25. Subsequent references in parentheses in the text.

8. Mitchell, *Witnesses to a Vanishing America* (note 6 above), p. 69.