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Review of *Crossing Frontiers: Papers in American and Canadian Western Literature* Edited by Dick Harrison

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BOOK REVIEWS

Crossing Frontiers: Papers in American and Canadian Western Literature. Edited by Dick Harrison. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1979. Notes, appendices. 174 pp. \$10.00.

Crossing Frontiers asks its readers to think comparatively about the literatures of the Canadian and American Wests. The practice, as these proceedings of the 1978 "Crossing Frontiers" conference show, tends to loosen the grip of parochial notions of what "western" literature is and how it ought to be studied. The conference's six major papers, intelligently introduced and edited by Dick Harrison, are presented here along with the critiques and summations of a distinguished group of Canadian and American scholars. The volume conveys the intellectual excitement participants experienced at Banff in April 1978, and it reveals the status of comparative work in both countries.

The vital relationships between history and literature and the complicated roles that myth plays in both modes of perceiving the West are recurrent themes in the *Crossing Frontiers* papers. Don Walker's "On the Supposed Frontier between History and Fiction" focuses on the record of individual drovers "in that moment of ultimate historicity, death" to suggest the limitations of cliometrics and conventional fiction in "bringing understanding to human existence." Walker argues that the meaning of western experience discloses itself through an imaginative apprehension of the consciousness of particular cowboys, cattle queens, or homesteaders. Uncritical literary rehashes of popular western myths are no more helpful than compilations of bare statistics. The frontier between fiction and history, jointly administered, ought to be a domain of profound human interest. Howard Lamar's "The Unsettling of the American West: The Mobility of Defeat" demonstrates how an imaginative apprehension of individual

lives can reshape historical knowledge. An attentive survey of overland diaries, Lamar explains, reveals patterns of social organization, sexual politics, and cultural values obscured by purely Turnerian versions of the human meaning of western American mobility.

In "Prairie Settlement: Western Responses in History and Fiction; Social Structures in a Canadian Hinterland," Lewis G. Thomas examines the egalitarian settlement myth abroad in the prairie provinces in the light of the realities of eastern imperial policy and elite interests that have historically dictated the colonial status of most of western Canada since confederation. The human meaning of the conflict between myth and imperial design and policy is suggested in Thomas's ironic inquiry as to whether "the discomforts of living in a society that suffers from a widespread delusion about its nature affects the way in which that society's denizens write about its experience."

The specifically literary papers in the volume converge in their concern for mythology and what it reveals and hides. Leslie Fiedler's "Canada and the Invention of the Western," a flamboyant "meditation" on the Myth of the West, the myth of escape into an Edenic wilderness and the transforming influence of contact with an aboriginal Other, distills ideas that have fascinated Fiedler in all his major probings of the American imagination. Canadians may view the ease with which American popular mythology is superimposed on the Canadian West with justified misgivings. As Thomas's paper implies, the distinctive etiology of myths on either side of the border may be more telling than surface similarities.

Canadian poet and novelist Robert Kroetsch avoids conventional myth in favor of the self-invented metaphors of serious prairie fiction. In "The Fear of Women in Prairie Fiction," an ingenious study of Cather's *My Ántonia* and Sinclair Ross's *As for Me and My House*,

Kroetsch proposes an "erotics of space" to explain how these paradigmatic works exemplify a Great Plains literature "in which marriage is no longer functional as a primary metaphor for the world as it should or might be." "How do you make love in a new country?" Kroetsch hears prairie fiction continually asking. How do you establish intimacy in a place physically characterized by distance?

Comparative mythic Wests are most subtly dealt with in Eli Mandel's "The Border League: American 'West' and Canadian 'Region,'" an astute discussion of *Slinger* by the American poet Edward Dorn and *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and *Seed Catalog* by Canadians Michael Ondaatje and Robert Kroetsch. Mandel examines poetic responses to space; he detects a western American inclination to turn space into spiritual quest and a western Canadian tendency to contract space into a regional communal home. The distinctions and insights along the way reveal the grasp of the literary and cultural traditions of both Wests that sensitive comparative thinking demands.

Crossing Frontiers demonstrates the attractions and difficulties of looking at western literature from dual perspectives. Its excellent summations by Richard Etulain, Henry Kreisel, Roscinary Sullivan, and Max Westbrook suggest the formidable comparative work that lies ahead. We are indebted to Dick Harrison for urging us out of national and disciplinary parishes in order to get that work underway.

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