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Review of *Montana Ghost Dance: Essays on Land and Life* By John B. Wright

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Montana Ghost Dance: Essays on Land and Life.
By John B. Wright. Austin: University of Texas
Press, 1998. Map. xiv + 198 pp. \$35.00 cloth,
\$17.95 paper.

Late in the nineteenth century, Native Americans of the Plains attempted, through a sacred dance, to bring back a time before the bison all but vanished, before whites came with diseases, greed, and guns, before treaties evicted Indians from ancestral lands. When John B. Wright alludes to the Ghost Dance in his collection of essays, he knows his readers will make connections with that earlier, desperate attempt to restore the past. In Wright's version, however, that past would be before mining companies stripped mountains and polluted rivers and streams, before loggers denuded forests, and before developers converted wilderness to condominium communities. And although Wright focuses on Montana in these "lessons on land and life," the problems he addresses are not exclusive to that state. The Great Plains may be referred to as "The Big Empty," but there have been—and still are—collisions aplenty in all that space: disagreements over water rights, land

use, indeed over the very history and spirit of the region.

Wright's essays are not exercises in nostalgia, however. He knows that things probably never were the way things used to be. One of the strongest pieces in the collection is "Myths," in which Wright takes up a number of fervently held beliefs about the past and the present, among them that the western landscape was once "pristine," that so much space exists in the region that it can easily absorb any increase in population, that life is safe and cheap in the West. In place of these and other myths, he substitutes truths about the region's economy, its population density, even its climate.

Wright frequently begins an essay with a tight, personal focus. He recalls, for example, when he first came to Montana to work as a land use planner, a job that in those less enlightened times required that he do little more than "make sure the septic tanks worked and the roads were built to county specs." Or he visits an old friend, and the two reminisce about Missoula in the 1960s. In each case, Wright gradually moves outward to a larger environmental concern—the diversion of waterways, the preservation of family ranchland, the reintroduction of wildlife species to Yellowstone. The technique is especially effective because it provides illustration after illustration of how geopolitical issues affect individuals.

Throughout the collection, Wright manages to strike a number of difficult balances. He comes across as opinionated and reasonable, authoritative and affable, idealistic and practical, hopeful and realistic. He can, as in his essay on elk, use the language of both the scientist and the poet. It is a testament to his skill as a writer that the collection provides considerable pleasure, no matter how many hard truths it may contain.

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