

ANALYSIS

Wolf Willow: A History, a Story and a Memory of the Last Plains Frontier (1962)

Wallace Stegner

(1909-1993)

“Mr. Wallace Stegner, now head of the Creative Writing Centre at Stanford University, lived from his sixth to his twelfth year in a place called Whitemud, Saskatchewan. His family lived in the village during the winter and in the summer engaged in what he calls, aptly, ‘wheat-mining’ on a 320-acre homestead that straddled the Saskatchewan-Montana border, perhaps forty miles southwest of the town. He left his family in the spring of 1920 and didn’t see Whitemud again until he visited it four decades later. His return to his old home settlement was an experience that yanked at the roots of his memory and chopped through to the heartwood of his emotional and intellectual being. The result is a unique book whose whole cloth is made up of the warp of memory and the woof of history, colored by the sociologist’s approach and fashioned with the craft of a very good writer indeed.

Wolf Willow concerns itself first of all with ‘...that block of country between the Milk River and the main line of the Canadian Pacific, and between approximately the Saskatchewan-Alberta line and Wood Mountain...’ Second, it is a memory of Mr. Stegner’s growing years, his Tom Sawyer years, in the town of Whitemud. Third, it is a study of ‘the place where the plains, as an ecology, as a native Indian culture, and as a process of white settlement, came to their climax and their end.’ Fourth, it is a special look at Canadian history with the above three concerns in mind. And fifth, it aims at searching out some of the thousands of reasons for Whitemud as a last frontier, as an escape, as a state of mind, as a victim and as a miracle. To gain his objectives, Mr. Stegner uses any and every resource he has discovered out of his long years as a writer, teacher, researcher.

For those of us who have lived in one of the hundreds of Whitemuds scattered throughout the west and near-north, this book will have a special meaning. I know I read it with a real sense of relief. What I thought I had remembered, Mr. Stegner went back and found to be true. He confirms my suspicion that, while history was made in Whitemud, the place existed, and still exists, with no sense of it at all. In Whitemud—all of them—between the turn of the century and the Second World War, there was a mindlessness akin to the calm at the eye of a hurricane, while the physical struggle simply to exist shut out twenty-five centuries of civilized achievement....

He remembers it well; that it was wild, cruel, elemental, terrifying, unfettered, warping, grasping, unlettered, unbearably cold, hot, dry, flyblown, wet. As a society it was a cultural desert, laughably optimistic (this perhaps above all else: Whitemud lives on dreams of financial glory), insufferably prudish, tell-taleably licentious, soul-shriveling, and oddly enough, a good place for a boy to grow up in and to have come from because—well, because life is sometimes one or the other of all these things, and certainly is as unsheltered as Whitemud, and perhaps learning early to run the gauntlet is not a bad thing....

In *Wolf Willow* you find nostalgia, some sentimentality, and melodrama, but they serve a purpose. The book is divided into four parts and an epilogue. In the first section we remember with Mr. Stegner as he tours Whitemud after forty years away from it, and almost at once the reader begins to realize that *Wolf Willow* is not going to be simply an historian’s aide-memoire. Clots of total recall begin to coagulate under the influence of the dust-dry air of reality. Here now is Whitemud, softer, greener, neater, but really only an echo that has refused to stop; and somehow, to, we sense at once the tragedy of the place: that it was born, lived briefly, died and became fossilized beneath the weight of the prairie sun without ever knowing why. ‘Our education...did not perform its proper function of giving us distance and understanding by focusing on our life from outside. Instead, it focused on outside from inside...’ Thus, ‘The one aspect of Whitemud’s history, and only one, and a fragmentary one, we knew: the town dump.... For whole civilizations we sometimes have no more of the poetry and little more of the history than this. It is all *we* had for the civilization we grew up in.’

In the following three sections and the epilogue, Mr. Stegner tells of the 'why' of the birth, life and death of Whitemud. He begins with the early explorers who did no more than pass the place by, and later who did not come within several hundred miles of Whitemud—Kelsey, Verendrye—until we and that 'as late as 1860...the Cypress Hills and the little river they mothered were still lost in an unmapped West as wide as ocean, being saved, perhaps, after all the rehearsals on other frontiers for the staging of one last drama of white settlement.' From the Indians, to the Metis, to the Company of Adventurers...and finally to Whitemud, 'the capital of an unremembered past, we follow the mainstream of Canadian history, seeing always with the eyes of the boy who has become a man, a story-teller and a disciplined thinker. It is probably more meaningful history about our frontier west than you can read in any other book.

Once we know why Whitemud was born, we must know why it died. It died in the winter of 1906-07, when the cattle industry was wiped out. Mr. Stegner tells the story through the eyes of fiction. For a hundred pages we leave off remembrance and history and watch while the spirit and the edge of frontier are blunted by the hard facts of the climate of the region. It is a good story; it stands well within the bounds of the author's plan for the book. It is meant to loom larger than its telling, and it does. We know from it why men of tremendous strength and purpose gave up and left, and we know, too, a little of why some stayed and turned the land and plowed it to dust and lived on to watch it blow away.

The final section brings us again, full circle, to the Whitemud that Mr. Stegner knew and left as a boy. Here, the historian turns sociologist as he quietly brings us up to date on Whitemud, whose keynote is now struck in a phrase from Sinclair Lewis' *Main Street*: '...the humdrum inevitable tragedy of struggle against inertia.' This is the final 'why' of Whitemud. 'It emphasized the predictability and repetitiousness of the frontier curve from hope to habit, from optimism to a country rut...' Wallace Stegner could have settled for writing another *Main Street* or a *Winesburg, Ohio*.... I doubt if he thought of writing a straight historical account. But, in fact, there are elements of all three of these approaches, and the result is certainly history as it may very effectively be written."

Robert Harlow
"Whitemud Revisited"
Canadian Journal (1963) 63-66

"Can we preserve the best of our cultural traditions and still fit ourselves for life in the modern world? Henry Adams defined the problem in *The Education*, and Wallace Stegner continues Adams' inquiry in *Wolf Willow*. Adams and Stegner view education as the human process of resolving the problem.... Wallace Stegner's *Wolf Willow: A History, a Story, and a Memory of the Last Plains Frontier* is a contemporary western-American version of Adams' *Education*—at least the institutionalized part of it—as hopelessly inadequate to the needs of a person growing up in his boyhood home of Whitemud, Saskatchewan, and *Wolf Willow* is, at least in part, intended to redress that inadequacy....

While Adams thought himself irrevocably separated from the traditions of the European past, Stegner laments the inadequacy of that same European tradition taught in a place rich in regional history.... The implicit argument of Stegner's *Wolf Willow* is that their actions might very well not have been the same had they known and understood the cultural traditions from which they came. Stegner's book is one attempt to provide a coherent statement about the cultural traditions of his home place. It is a symbolic attempt to connect himself and others, spider-like, to the traditions that grow from that place....

Wolf Willow...conveys in history and fiction the meaning of the Cypress Hills present interpreted by the light of its regional past.... The book covers a sixty-year span from the first European intrusion of Lewis and Clark in 1805, to the Metis (French and Indian) settlements of the 1860's, to the survey of the 1870's that politically divided a unified geographical area, to the brief reign of the cowboy from 1882 to 1906-07, the end of the plains frontier. What is most interesting about *Wolf Willow*'s mixture of history, autobiography, and fiction is the philosophical statement it implies about the truth of a people's connection to a place. Stegner argues implicitly through such a mixture of fact and fiction that a sense of place is a poetic creation, both real and imaginary, that explains our relationship to a place and to its past. It is the task of the artist-historian to convey the memory, to teach the tradition. The Cypress Hills country of Stegner's boyhood as recreated in *Wolf Willow* is not a dead material fact of the world but a symbolic cultural expression. That is, it reveals an ordered expression of the dynamic interplay between nature and

the human imagination, and so overcomes the alienation of humanity from the world that Adams perceived to be our technological inheritance.

The railroad was the symbol of Adams' alienation from the world. For Stegner, the imposition of the 49th parallel on a unified landscape is symbolic of the same sort of separation. The artificial line 'split a country that was topographically and climatically one,' and did not follow the natural line of the Cypress Hills divide that 'had been established by tradition, topography, and a balance of tribal force.' The Medicine Line was one of the most significant manifestations of the civilizing forces of the modern world acting to fragment the natural order of the Cypress Hills country and to separate the human world from it.... *Wolf Willow* is Stegner's means of transcending the limitations of civilization for it unifies the human and natural landscape that was divided by the artificial boundary of the 49th parallel. As a boy in Whitemud Stegner was able to realize Emerson's directive to establish an original relation to the universe....

Though it is a poetic creation, *Wolf Willow*'s vision of reality is not a solipsistic dream. When Stegner returns to his boyhood home, he relates that he is afraid to visit his family's homestead for fear that all trace of their contact with the land will have been erased. If his family's mark on the land is gone, he fears, he will be convinced that his vision is only a dream disconnected from reality. But the small shrub named Wolf Willow allays that fear. Its smell, like the odor of *madeleine* and tea to Proust, convinces him immediately of the reality of the vision. Stegner's family's impact on the Saskatchewan landscape had been puny and little evidence of their struggle on the Plains is left. His proof that they had truly been there, and that *Wolf Willow* is history as well as fiction, is the smell of this small shrub....

Our transient imprint on the world should define our tragic and frail humanity. For Stegner as for Adams, the modern technological world keeps us from learning this lesson. The simple notion of wearing paths in the earth's surface, Stegner's metaphor for meaningful human activity, is banished forever in the modern world.... *Wolf Willow* becomes, like Henry Adams' *Education*, a statement about the failure of education. Stegner's book teaches us that the European experience in the Garden of the West contained the seeds of its own destruction, and the cultural vision expressed in *Wolf Willow* is one that few, if any of us, can experience in our own lives today.... Like *The Education*, *Wolf Willow* conveys the triumph of the technological dream over the poetic vision of place even as it recreates that poetic vision of an earlier time.... Stegner does not solve the dilemma of education, but he illuminates the problem."

Jamie Robertson
"Henry Adams, Wallace Stegner, and the Search for a Sense of Place in the West"
The Westering Experience in American Literature
eds. Merrill Lewis and L. L. Lee
(Western Washington State 1977) 135-43

"*Wolf Willow* is a remarkable book which has not received the recognition it deserves partly because nobody knows how to label it. The publisher added a subtitle with which Stegner himself was not satisfied: *A History, a Story and a Memory of the Last Plains Frontier*. Part of the problem is the repeated indefinite article. The book is in fact divided into three sections, but the first is memory as well as history, and the history is comprehended in terms of what is remembered upon Stegner returning to Saskatchewan. The second part is 'a memory' as well as a novella and a short story. The third part is memory, some history, and contemplation—a coming to terms. Even so qualified, the subtitle is misleading. Although what is memory, what is history, what is fiction, and what is speculation are all clearly delineated; they are used in their relationship to a central quest by a central intelligence.

Almost any attempt to describe the book is likely to give the false impression that it is not a single, unified whole. Perhaps if it had appeared after Truman Capote made such a stir over the 'nonfiction novel,' *Wolf Willow* could have adopted that label, different as it is from *In Cold Blood*. Malcolm Cowley has said that he wrote *Exile's Return*—a nonfictional account—deliberately as a novel. Like *Exile's Return*, *Wolf Willow* is a search into the past in an effort to understand and assimilate it whole. The basic difference—other than the fact that one book is concerned mostly with Americans in France in the Twenties, and the other with a frontier child in Saskatchewan some fifteen years earlier—is in Stegner's use of the novella and short story in the middle of his nonfictional account. Yet even though the voice changes from that of

Stegner himself to third person narrative—the point of view is that of a young cowboy in the novella, *Genesis*—the fictional portion of the book is fully integrated in tone, structure, and development with the nonfictional.

The sequence works so well that the reader feels no need to justify it in theory; yet one major reason for the use of fiction is readily apparent—in keeping with Stegner's general approach, it is in fact, virtually stated. The book begins with an account of Stegner of the Saskatchewan he knew as a child in comparison with its appearance as he revisits it; the account—without changing point of view—moves into history of the place as he did not know it when he lived there, but wishes he had; then it focuses upon one specific crucial time in that history, the winter of 1906-07, about which he had 'heard some stories...but...never heard enough,' and later read about 'in the middens where historians customarily dig.' It is at this point that observed fact and researched fact become blended by the imagination into a fictional experience which Stegner introduces directly: 'If we want to know what it was like on the Whitemud River range during that winter when the hopes of a cattle empire died, we had better see it through the eyes of some tenderfoot...'

I suspect that only a realist of the particular brand I consider Stegner to be could so skillfully and so rightly join the fiction and nonfiction, both clearly identified, into so coherent and unified a whole. Not only is the evocation of the remembered (nonfictional) scene as vivid as I have ever read, and the history as interesting and pertinent, but the mind apparent in the selection and contemplation of fact is as clear, as strong, as profound as any I have run across. It is impossible to separate the inherent quality of mind from what it has disciplined itself to become, but *Wolf Willow* is obviously the product of a talent, an intelligence which has trained itself to see and speak clearly and which takes the validity of the relationship between fact and fiction fully as seriously as that between fact and nonfiction. Both are written 'in order to reflect or illuminate life.'

Robert Canzoneri
"Wallace Stegner: Trial by Existence"
Critical Essays on Wallace Stegner, ed. Anthony Arthur
(G. K. Hall 1982) 67-68

"Wallace Stegner's writings are uniquely valuable to western Canadians because he was a border man and large enough to comprehend both sides.... Quite inadvertently...Stegner had become involved in introducing Canadians not only to their history and geography but to each other and in promoting national unity.... The appeal of this American writer to Canadian westerners arises partly out of the fact that he claimed a kinship with them, partly from his brilliant evocation of their land, but also from certain of his implicit beliefs about individual freedom and social responsibility, beliefs which may or may not have been encouraged by his brief stay in Saskatchewan but which make his work especially congenial to Canadian readers.... Stegner's Saskatchewan years, 1914 to 1920, were important not primarily because of where they took place but when—in that period between ages five and twelve that he identified as the most impressionable in a child's growth....

Stegner has, in turn, been of great importance to at least two generations of western Canadian writers, beginning in the mid-1940s when he recommended to the editors of Atlantic Monthly Press that they publish W. O. Mitchell's *Who Has Seen the Wind* (1947). That novel became an acknowledged classic, sometimes characterized as the *Huckleberry Finn* of Canadian literature.... For the following generation of prairie writers, Stegner was an inspiration by his example as well as his writing. *Wolf Willow: A History, a Story, and a Memory of the Last Plains Frontier* has been particularly influential....

That it should become so influential in the criticism of western Canadian literature without the weight of received opinion behind it is a testimony to the vitality of Stegner's ideas and his perception of 'European man's imaginative response to the prairies. Stegner himself was surprised, 'almost shocked,' he says, when he came to the 'Crossing Frontiers' conference in Banff in 1978 and discovered 'how much *Wolf Willow* was the beginning of a tradition'.... In critical commentary on Canadian prairie fiction, *Wolf Willow* has been a germinal text. A rough idea of how central it has been can be gathered from the first three book-length studies of prairie fiction published after the appearance of *Wolf Willow*. All rely in varying degrees on Stegner's images and ideas in framing their conceptions of the fiction...

Most of Stegner's influence in Canada has been felt through the 'memoir' and 'history' sections of *Wolf Willow*, but his direct contribution to fiction of the Canadian prairies is substantial in its own right. In two novels, the novella *Genesis*, and a number of short stories, Stegner created a vivid fictional presence for his area of southern Saskatchewan. The fictional Whitemud and its surrounding prairie showed signs of developing into Stegner's equivalent of Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County, with local characters reappearing, often under the same names.... Stegner's fiction is charged with the presence of the international boundary and the implications of Stegner's own crossing of it....

Increasingly in the past few years, evidence of the general diffusion of Stegner's influence has appeared in various media.... The weekly news magazine *Alberta Report*...published a lead article headed 'Reclaiming Wallace Stegner: A Great American Author is Lauded as a Founding Father of Western Canadian Literature.' The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation ran a two-hour documentary titled 'The West of Wallace Stegner'... Consistently the recurrent theme of popular tributes to Stegner is that he gives westerners their own place.... Canadian enthusiasts have tried to 'reclaim' Wallace Stegner, but he was able to make his valuable contribution to Canadian literature, in part, because he was never Canadian but 'only halfway.' His was a border experience; he understood the border between the two cultures by having lived both sides of it'.... Saskatchewan's most tangible tribute to Stegner's importance is the project, begun before his death, of preserving his boyhood home."

Dick Harrison

"Frontiers and Borders: Wallace Stegner in Canada"

Wallace Stegner: Man and Writer, ed. Charles E. Rankin
(U New Mexico 1996) 181, 183-86, 188, 190-91, 196, 198

Michael Hollister (2015)