

## Chapter 1

**CONQUEST** On August 4, 1930, Byron Clark, an Omaha, Nebraska, attorney for the Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy Railroad, spoke to a local homecoming festival. The *Custer County Chief* of Nebraska printed his address, which began with his solemn musing that a pioneer “goes before, as into the wilderness, preparing the way for others to follow.”<sup>1</sup> As Clark praised the fore-runners of civilization, he recalled a time when the land before the people was a “Great American Desert”:

But you pioneers by your own initiative came through the gates to this western wilderness. You prepared the way for the people; you have and are casting up the highways. You have gathered out the stones, but above all you have lifted up a standard for the people. . . . Pioneers of the flesh, in the evolution of this community since the advent of this pioneer railroad in 1886, you have progressed from the sun baked sand duned land to the friable fertile soils, from prairie grass and cactus to vegetable and cereal crops, from the desert to the oasis.<sup>2</sup>

Although he could only imagine the trauma that men and women would soon experience, his story celebrated an epic of conquest.

An epic exists across a great plane of interconnected myths. Myths constitute real or fictional stories, whose recurring themes embody the identity

of people by expressing the complex emotions of their psyche. The deepest and the broadest dimensions, wrote the anthropologist of religion Mircea Eliade, inform consciousness of nature and history.<sup>3</sup> Traceable in modern as well as traditional archetypal patterns, the formal devices of language punctuate the cultural awareness of a landscape with a sense of time and place. Through originary tales, the lofty, luminous, eerie, scary, and wondrous features set the stage for ongoing evolution. The more disorienting the environment, though, the more magical the human agency becomes at the outset. Out of the chaos, the transcendent spirit of a culture dwells within the majestic mountains, vast oceans, dark forests, or great deserts distinguishing a homeland. With spatial relationships fixed through the angles of vision, myths attempt to grasp an environment and give it life.<sup>4</sup>

Through narrative, myths come to terms with the mysteries of nature. That is not to deny *a priori* nature but to underscore the artifactual nature of stories. With eras of referential layering, the artifacts accumulate and embed in linguistic strata. The layers of meaning cover the ecological imagination, wherein deep knowledge takes root just below the gloss of the surface. Narrative, in effect, recognizes terms as real as the referents in the environment. While organizing reality through beginnings, middles, and ends, a metanarrative continuously recycles localized stories as a grand and unified one. It creates a world wherein signifiers have no holistic relation to the signified but only relative or relational coherence. Mythopoetic tales enable people to ground themselves as well as to imagine the matrix of the cosmos.<sup>5</sup>

The extension of Western civilization and its dream of living space after 1492 generated a metanarrative reaching mythopoetic proportions. As conquerors of Native America proclaimed the manifest destiny of their crusades, popular millennialism allegorically inspired revisions of the landscape. Crusading patriarchs claimed dominion over an invented wilderness before them, charged by providence for a mission to subdue the earth. Furthermore, the mission was accelerated by the projection of the Enlightenment, which called the cadence of an imperial march. While moving away from a state of nature toward an emancipation of humanity, the premises of development harmonized national liberation, modern science, and institutional power. Through codes, ideologies, and metaphors,

cultural narratives created colonial realms, placing the terra incognita under new authority. The new authorities then projected the anxieties of conquerors across the continent. As the border lands became enclosed, transplanted storytellers recorded the process of westward expansion while often ignoring the stories of indigenous people. This process, or at least the grand stories about the movement, enabled strangers of disparate backgrounds and perspectives to possess the occupied territories.<sup>6</sup>

While dispossessing others, people from around the world encountered enigmatic turf at the center of Native America—the Great Plains. The uncommon physiography contained contours and waves of living polycultures, with eccentric variations of swales, coulees, potholes, moraines, gullies, rimrocks, buttes, and dips. Extreme temperature shifts and visible irregularity appeared in this landlocked country. Over the millennia, vast fans of sands and stones displaced from the Rocky Mountains by wind, water, and gravity formed a sloping landscape eastward toward the Missouri River. Along the one hundredth meridian, rainfall ranged from seven to twenty inches annually. While resting in a rain shadow, the short-grass prairies experienced drying winds.<sup>7</sup> The indigenous people, who lived through the droughts, localized horticulture in the river valleys of the region and devised sophisticated bison-hunting cultures. The Comanche, for instance, claimed to have emerged from the clouds of dust. Cycles of above-average precipitation alternated with those of below-average precipitation, although the weather could be extreme. When a wet cycle broke with a sudden force, unsettling conditions ensued.<sup>8</sup>

The unsettling conditions obtained notoriety when nonindigenous explorers, scientists, and colonists reached the trans-Missouri region. After the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, United States army officers such as Meriwether Lewis described the lack of timber and scarcity of water in parts of the country he called “the Deserts of America.” Lieutenant Zebulon Pike in 1806 compared the bewildering space to the “sandy deserts of Africa,” a conclusion based on his journey into Spanish provinces. After Major Stephen Long’s expedition in 1819 labeled the rolling tract of land stretching to the Rocky Mountains as the “Great Desert,” that caption remained on maps of the United States as late as 1870. Delimiting the area as inappropriate for cultivation and uninhabitable by a people dependent on

agriculture, the reports invented the “Great American Desert” of legend and lore. Without a doubt, the ostensible emptiness of the midcontinental belt became one of its most puzzling features. The early Anglo-American visitors conceived of a nation born in the primordial forests but not in a vision of distance and scarcity.<sup>9</sup>

Across the wide Missouri River, Thomas Jefferson’s chosen people, the virtuous yeomen, still craved more land. It was no coincidence, then, that unjust federal Indian removal policies made the undesirable interior the destiny for dispossessed Native Americans of the eastern United States. Concerned about the degradation of civil society, writer Washington Irving of New York cautioned that any European population moving into the West might become nomadic brigands, violent mercenaries, or worse. Artists such as George Catlin and Karl Bodmer entered the perceived nothingness and captured in portraits a mysterious exoticism of deserted ruins enclosing pagan peoples. Some of these troubling depictions appeared in journals, periodicals, and books. In 1844, the merchant and entrepreneur Josiah Gregg opined in *Commerce of the Prairies* that “some favorable mutation should be wrought in nature’s operations to revive the plains and upland prairies,” which seemed fit only for “their migratory lord, the Prairie Indian.”<sup>10</sup> To a tourist facing the shape of things to come, crossing this rugged terrain was a dangerous undertaking.

Consider the stories offered by the historian Francis Parkman, who published an exhilarating chronicle, *The Oregon Trail*, in 1849. Although several of the New England elite considered the desert a barrier to westward expansion, he recognized the landscape as a challenge to masculinity. In the narrative, he beheld a barren, trackless waste, extending for hundreds of miles to the Arkansas River on the one side and the Missouri River on the other. Undaunted, he envisioned a challenging path for a savvy traveler:

Should any one of my readers be impelled to visit the prairies . . . I can assure him that he need not think to enter at once upon the paradise of his imagination. A dreary preliminary, a protracted crossing of the threshold, awaits him before he finds himself fairly upon the verge of the “great American desert” those barren wastes, the haunts of the buffalo and the Indian, where the very shadow of civilization lies a hundred leagues be-

hind him. . . . As he advances, indeed, he will see mouldering in the grass by his path the vast antlers of the elk, and farther on the whitened skulls of the buffalo, once swarming over this now deserted region.<sup>11</sup>

An unattractive climate alarmed visitors across the trails overland, or so the travel literature of Parkman suggested. Imagining an uninviting locus fraught with peril, the romantic impulse prepared for the headlong drive westward through hellish winds.

The epithet for the “Great American Desert” did not interrupt that drive for long, though, as argonauts, trappers, bullwhackers, and migrants moved through Indian country. The savage nature of the middle passages—the sterility of the soil, absence of fuel, scarcity of water, scantiness of vegetation, and isolation of the experience—punctuated travelers’ vignettes.<sup>12</sup> One journalist reported that the conditions recalled a scene at “the death of Christ.” Horace Greeley, a prominent newspaper editor and propagandist for the West, lamented grim contours on his overland journey. *Freedom’s Champion* in Atchison, Kansas, appraised the howling tempests as similar to those “in the desert of Sahara.” One memorable account came from the British adventurer and writer Sir Richard Burton, who proclaimed in 1860 that the “desert is mostly uninhabited, unendurable even to the wildest Indian.” The *Southern Quarterly Review*, *De Bow’s Review*, *North American Review*, and *Lippincott’s Magazine* were among the national periodicals introducing the fierce and harsh region to readers in graphic features. Emigrant guides echoed the troubling sentiments about the continental interior, warning readers about the dreariness of the prairies as they moved westward toward greener pastures. For a nation engaged in a great Civil War, the fate of “free soil” was crucial to the Union.<sup>13</sup>

The fate of free soil, no less than the land itself, precipitated the reconstruction of the Union. The explorer, military veteran, Colorado territorial governor, and land speculator William Gilpin published *Mission of the North American People* in 1874, musing that the expanses were no longer “deserts.” The author prophesied with great promotional effect redemption for the environment, where a “Garden of the World” would feed an expanding population. His geographical conception emphasized population moving westward and transforming what he once called “an immense disc

of howling wilderness.”<sup>14</sup> The scientist and director of the U.S. Geologic Survey John Wesley Powell saw things differently. In his *Report on the Lands of the Arid Region of the United States* in 1878, he concluded that “no part of it can be redeemed for agriculture, except by irrigation.” Worried about the potholes on a path to glory, he asserted that recovery of fertility from the wastes necessitated a “new phase of Aryan civilization” to adapt pastoralism.<sup>15</sup> Beyond the hundredth meridian, then, an agrarian republic would defer to a cattle kingdom extending from the Bad Lands of the Dakotas to the Llano Escatado in Texas.

While ranchers laid trails and enclosed ranges, speculative zealotry spread like prairie fire and transplanted new fields from old dreams. Irrespective of topographic features, the rectangular grid of townships and ranges, sections and quarter-sections, divisions and subdivisions, was imposed on the landscape. Meanwhile, the notion spread that even rainfall “followed the plow.” That is why climatological experts such as Professor Samuel Aughey of the University of Nebraska divined that the breaking and cultivation of the sod altered climate by stimulating local showers and heavy dews.<sup>16</sup> Charles Dana Wilbur, a town builder and amateur scientist, argued that eternal law guaranteed the plowed dominion of a settler society. He scribed:

To those who possess the divine faculty of hope—the optimists of our times—it will always be a source of pleasure to understand that the Creator never imposed a perpetual desert upon the earth, but, on the contrary, has so endowed it that man, by the plow, can transform it, in any country, into farm areas. . . . It is indeed a grand consent, or, rather, concert of forces—the human energy or toil, the vital seed, and the polished raindrop that never fails to fall in answer to the imploring power or prayer of labor.<sup>17</sup>

Even while studying the climate with calm statistics, the voices for progress declared that intensive cultivation regenerated the unfortunate landforms.

That regeneration paralleled a last stand for an indigenous population resisting violent dispossession. The subsistence environment for Indian people collapsed as the U.S. Army, railroad companies, federal government

agents, professional hunters, and deadly diseases virtually exterminated the bison. Kiowa, Comanche, and Cheyenne nations living near the Red River participated in an uprising during 1874, trying to save the remnants of the great beasts from buffalo skinners. U.S. Colonel Nelson A. Miles, who commanded a company of men during the buffalo war, described a dreadful ordeal with “intense heat” in a territory “parched, blistered, and burnt up in universal drought.” He observed deposits of mineral gypsum blanketing vast areas at the base of the Staked Plains, exposed to erosion from high winds. The streams were nearly all dry during late summer, and what water he did find in stagnant pools was polluted with gypsum, alkali, and salt. Although the tribes devised different strategies for survival, the collapse of the bison ecology confined them to an ever-shrinking world of government reservations.<sup>18</sup>

For the first people of the Great Plains, the cosmos was crumbling. Plenty Coups, for instance, remained a Crow chief on a reservation, but his cultural reservoir evaporated with the end of the traditional hunts. In a dream, he envisioned the Four Winds blowing a great storm that destroyed a small forest, which tribal elders interpreted as a prophecy about impending doom. He ended his story about a lost world abruptly: “After this nothing happened.”<sup>19</sup> Sitting Bull, a visionary warrior and shaman for the Sioux, in 1876 communicated with Wakantanka, the great living spirit, at the top of a butte overlooking his homeland. Months before the battle of Little Big Horn, he dreamed of a great dust storm propelled by high winds advancing from the east. Behind the tempest, he could see soldiers, their weapons and horse trimmings ablaze from the sun. When the approaching fury crashed into a cloud, the dust storm dissipated and left the vapor intact under an open sky. While living on the banks of the Grand River in the 1880s, he again foretold of the disappearance of rain, the withering of vegetation, and the evaporation of the waterways. If the Lakota accepted subsistence farming and stock raising on the “Great Sioux” reservation, then heavy droughts would come and “cause considerable suffering for man and beast.”<sup>20</sup> In other words, the presence of a new regime generated an ecological nightmare for the tribes.

Under the new regime, the short-grass prairies offered a geography of hope for aliens, who found inspiration even in the darkest shadows. The

*Salina Herald* of Kansas maintained that the dramatic blows of dust were the “historic pillar of cloud that guided the Children of Israel.” Even the names of new communities—Garden City and Zionville in southwestern Kansas, Nazareth in the Texas panhandle—announced the anthems of a great pilgrimage. One Oklahoma colonist explained his family’s yearning for a chance to begin life anew in a sodhouse: “We were going to God’s Country. We were going to a new land and get rich. Then we could have a real home of our own.” The public domain constituted a “land flowing with milk and honey” that would “blossom like the rose,” exulted the pioneer. By the 1880s, more than fifteen thousand African Americans migrated to Kansas in search of “free soil,” earning the name “Exodusters” for their trek. Homesteaders and sodbusters from across the United States and Europe carried their dreams into the area, but thousands of them eventually drifted elsewhere in disappointment. When severe drought arrived, covered wagons in the 1880s carried the bittersweet phrase: “In God We Trusted, In Kansas We Busted.” Others referred to the Oklahoma panhandle as “God’s Land, But No Man’s Land.”<sup>21</sup> The sirens of failure thus told of paradise gained but soon lost.

Newcomers told their stories through folk songs, expressing ambivalence and uncertainty about the dips in the country. Hymnbooks were filled with lyrics such as “Canaan’s Land” and “On Jordan’s Stormy Banks I Stand,” and many people knew these lines by heart. “Starving to Death on a Government Claim,” however, appeared in Kansas folklore with the bitter refrain: “Hurrah for Lane County, the land of the free, the home of the grasshopper, bed-bug, and flea.” While the cautionary tale admonished the hungry to “stick to your homestead and battle the fleas,” the old bachelor farmer confirmed his manhood by returning to the East for a wife. Consider the ballad “Beulah Land, Sweet Beulah Land,” which gave new life to an ancient motif in local parodies. In South Dakota the words commiserated: “We’ve reached the land of desert sweet, where nothing grows for man to eat; the wind it blows with feverish heat, across the plains so hard to beat. O Dakota land, sweet Dakota land, as on thy fiery soil I stand.” In a different version titled “The Kansas Fool,” the lyric testified of grasshoppers, debt, and bankers, that is, unforeseen parasites.<sup>22</sup> Although such themes echoed a forlorn hope, they also suggested self-creation in that only an exceptional people persevered in an unpromising land.

An essay titled “The Great American Desert” illustrated such claims in 1888. Writing for the popular *Harper’s Magazine*, Frank H. Spearman appraised the rimrocks and the buttes with the positivist assumptions of Darwinian naturalism. Despite woebegone days, “the pioneers of a true civilization,” he continued, “will build anew; and if the second attempt fails, success crowns a third effort.” Therefore, the law of survival of the fittest reigned on the Great Plains in full effect. Indeed, a yeoman “will emerge from his barren one hundred and sixty acres of desert land with melons, potatoes, pumpkins, and squashes of simply prodigious size, capturing the premiums at the local fairs, to the intense chagrin of the farmers who have been laughing all summer at his lunacy in locating on sand.” Whatever the barriers, the landscape sustained those cunning people who learned to overcome adversity. According to Spearman’s irrational exuberance, “there is no known limit to the richness and depth of this desert soil.”<sup>23</sup> While highlighting the aridity of the wilderness, the struggle to survive made the fit stronger and the land richer.

Though living in a potential disaster area, pioneers faced the dangers with great expectations and measured success. While Hard Spring wheat dominated the Dakotas, Turkey Red was introduced into Kansas by the Mennonites. Improved milling accompanied the rising waves of grain. Bonanza farms in the Dakota land boom drove agriculture into the wastes, even as homestead laws were amended to incorporate more acreage. While commercial agriculture forced a greater use of mechanization and accumulation of debt, an unexpected dry season returned to the Great Plains after 1887. Meanwhile, protests by farmers initiated a political attack on processors, railroads, elevators, and outsiders. Blistering populists demanded access to “nature’s bounty” and to relief from distant plutocracy, falling prices, rising costs, and unexpected drought.<sup>24</sup> The farm novelist Hamlin Garland depicted a sweltering scene, where the “free land” of the West was nothing more than a “shanty on a barren plain, hot and lone as a desert.” The intense political and social upheavals rendered frightful imagery of a lonesome prairie, parched fields, sterile poverty, hapless paupers, and unfulfilled dreams.<sup>25</sup> The darkening of the sun by dust, failures of crops in dry land, the foreclosures on debtors by creditors, and plagues of grasshoppers denoted an apocalypse.

By the end of the nineteenth century, westward expansion had seem-

ingly reached its end. With the passing of a continuous line of settlement, a young historian, Frederick Jackson Turner, wrote an essay in 1893 titled “The Significance of the Frontier in American History.” The frontier, which he denoted as “the existence of an area of free land,” represented the key to unlocking the mysteries of American history. Turner’s narrative accelerated through the “obstacles” along the path of that civilization, that is, vast forests, mountainous ramparts, the desolate, grass-clad prairies, barren oceans of rolling plains, and arid deserts. As a social evolutionary trope, his thesis cast a transformative experience wherein the trajectory of the population movement blended the parts of the nation into a whole. It staged progress, he mused, from “the buffalo” and “the Indian” to the “paternal enterprises of reclamation of the desert.” Moreover, the trader, rancher, miner, and farmer developed nascent characteristics of civilization when and where America as a “free land” existed. With a mythic closure of an open continent, Turner thus defined the word “frontier” and presented it as a generalized or universal place.<sup>26</sup>

The place, in other words, existed nowhere in particular but on a mythic plane. While curving to demonstrate movement in time and space, the plane was surveyed as a baseline connecting ordinal points. A baseline of development achieved coherence through emplotments, which delineated the rise and fall of civilizations. In particular, the plots for romance and tragedy constituted meaning through different trajectories. Sloping upward, plots of romance departed from an incomplete stage but ended with a positive resolution. That line appeared ascensionist, moving from bad to good places. Sloping downward, plots of tragedy created tension that culminated with a scene of disaster, or at a negative conclusion. That line appeared declensionist, moving from good to bad places.<sup>27</sup> A linear movement in a narrative cast the plot in one direction and, in momentary lapses, reversed the plot toward the other. While the reversal of slopes recovered one domain, the presence of one denoted the absence of the other. With each oscillation, passages of a metanarrative moved back and forth between referential polarities. Through the cycles of an eternal return, romantic and tragic emplotments informed a scalable lineage of conquest. In its totality, conquest entailed both the romance of the garden and the tragedy of the desert.<sup>28</sup>

With the dawn of the twentieth century, the stories about the conquest underscored the ascension of a progressive era. While deploying science and modern institutions, the United States began reengineering nonarable lands. Fearing a future deficit of food with a rapidly exploding population, the federal government acted to support irrigation through the Carey Act of 1890 and the Newlands Act of 1902. Frederick H. Newell, a U.S. Geological Survey engineer and director of the Reclamation Administration, typified a new generation of empire builders. Since underdeveloped realms became “dry and brown, given over to the prairie wolf” during drought, he insisted that natural resource management stimulated “excessive fertility” and a “salubrious climate.” Nebraska journalist William E. Smythe’s book *The Conquest of Arid America* (1900) selected places where the lowest orders of society asserted mastery when aided by irrigation enterprises. They became partners with the state for creation, he foretold, empowered to accomplish in arid places what had been accomplished in the Nile valley of Egypt and in the Tigris-Euphrates valley of Mesopotamia. These cooperative efforts would uplift the best civilization yet known in “the desert and in a virgin area,” where the hydraulic society created opportunities to begin life anew. On the cusp of modernity, the visions were of a western empire that would rise above geophysical constraints.<sup>29</sup>

Even if the luminaries of the great transformations planned to benefit from imperial projects, the vision resonated with the people who imagined what the environment might become. The *Earth*, a magazine published by the Santa Fe and Topeka Railroad, quoted experiment station and government reports about the bountiful future. One article noted that an inexhaustible shallow water belt, which originated from distant mountains or glacier water, resided below dry land.<sup>30</sup> Through the power of technological force, “the land of the underground rain” emerged as one of the most extensively irrigated areas in the United States.<sup>31</sup> In celebration, the *Earth* proclaimed:

It is evident that the Panhandle, as it has been and as it is now regarded in the popular mind, will soon be a thing of the past. The great cattle ranches, the wandering masses of cattle, the rounding cowboy, the vast circumference of unpeopled desert. . . . All these, it can be foreseen, will

give way perhaps almost entirely in time, as they are now fast giving away to the spreading farming element. To have begun to conquer, by new methods, what has long been considered a repulsive desert, is in itself a monumental tribute to man's patience, ingenuity, and enterprise.<sup>32</sup>

Summoning forth the deepest impulses of the culture, the boosters of the region materialized their dreams in a progressive formula.

Material dreams, in fact, elevated the expertise, bureaucracy, and devices for modernization. Without much rainfall, a few communities on the Great Plains developed deep wells and built windmills but rarely obtained enough capital resources to thrive. By 1902, wheat farmer and propagandist Hardy Campbell of Nebraska advocated dry land farming. Using the principles of scientific management, he outlined ways in which his techniques could maximize the efficient use of water resources. Husbandmen were encouraged to develop proper cultivating motions—deep plowing, soil harrowing, and dust mulching—to prevent evaporation of scarce water. The Department of Agriculture's annual reports, moreover, included titles such as "The Weather Bureau and the Homemaker" (1901) and "The Water Economy of Dry Land Crops" (1912). Guides laid out the enticing "treachery" of the "region of periodic famine," where the hand of government sustained agriculture in an uncertain landscape.<sup>33</sup> With a state of nature under modern forms of cultivation, the advancing line illustrated that the frontier remained open for development.

An idyllic golden era of expansion and specialization appeared on the horizon, then. One promotional pamphlet in 1912 noted that "following the first flush of conquest over the desert we are prone to think our measure of success is full." More human sacrifice promised fulfillment of the American dream, which helped those with "slender means" and "broken health" to continue producing the staples of the wheat kingdom. The pamphlet assured that immigrants with both traits were the beneficiaries of reclamation. The occasional drought, sparse vegetation, and frequent dust storms marked only temporary setbacks. Of course, federal government calls to patriotism during World War I accelerated the development of arable land. To plant more hardy grains was to make the world safe for democracy. Also, favorable prices and an overseas mission drove farmers during this great plow-up to destroy native grasses. The profits gave rise to

the “suitcase” farmer, or remote townspeople working the soils only to plant and to harvest a crop. While an extensive wheat monoculture appropriated even the marginal areas, it mustered a rising generation of self-made men in agribusiness.<sup>34</sup>

An impressive gain in economic productivity followed, opening opportunities for social mobility and community building. Waves of migrants arriving from humid realms of the United States and Europe continued to break the sod. The peak for internal colonization occurred from 1910 to 1920, when toilers in the region transformed more than one million formerly unplowed acres into farms. In Oklahoma, 1,179,178 residents in 1930 had been born elsewhere, nearly half of the entire state’s population. In Kansas, likewise, the population in 1900 included 708,336 persons who had been born elsewhere. In 1930, the same figure remained remarkably high at 664,352, while the number of persons born in the state but living elsewhere had reached 728,311. Clearly, the turnover of population suggested a tenuous sense of place for people without deep roots.<sup>35</sup> With a deep desire to escape their pasts, however, the strangers who had come to a strange land looked to the horizon with anticipation. Whatever environment awaited the outsider, the transplanted migrants clung to stories about the frontier and desired to build a better future for their families.

In the midst of the great migrations, profound changes in the land were observed. Charles Moreau Harger, a popular Kansas journalist, for example, called his home “the promised land.” While colonists continued an exodus into the deserts like “the fighting men who followed Moses to freedom,” he maintained that dry farming conquered soils once thought perpetually barren and that technology harnessed rivers for irrigation. When population movements reached the “gray plains where mesquite and sagebrush alone relieve the monotony,” the agencies of government accomplished the task of “redeeming it wherever the rivers can be turned upon the surface.” Through cooperation and unity, he opined, they triumphed even in the marginal areas, which meant “a more substantial civilization, a peace of mind and a strength of purpose denied to the earlier army of homeseekers.” Harger praised America’s “new vision” developing from the occupation of the continent, providing an outlook rich in the “inspiration of bright skies and cheery sunshine.” The multitudes emerged strong, sinewed with the struggle of hard labor, or so he applauded. In

time, they arrived face-to-face with a marvelous vista of possibilities in social and economic terms.<sup>36</sup> In retrospection, the travail of suffering and sacrifice had passed, and the fullness of time appeared.

Of course, the vision of the travail derived from the period of colonization. When referring to colonization, that generation glorified the waves of population migration while obliquely recognizing the volatile environment of the place. Boosters, local historians, and pioneer associations recovered memories of bad places and hard times, while the multiple forms of mediation described feats of strength and tests of manhood. The embellishment of mythic experience rendered a tale for environmental as well as social development of unparalleled magnitude. The perceived agents for the transformative process appeared to be arboreal plantings, agricultural techniques, irrigation development, local entrepreneurship, federal government programs, and good fortune. Moreover, geographies and histories around the turn of the twentieth century inscribed the “Great American Desert” into school and college textbooks. They depicted the landscape before conquest in terms of absence, thereby establishing a point of origin mapping the presence of development afterward. In a re-enactment of the Judeo-Christian tradition, a chosen people possessed the earth and stewarded it with the potent effects of labor.<sup>37</sup>

Looking backward on originary stories punctuated the age of conquest with intense social drama, which this generation of writers cast primarily in terms of romance. Frank W. Blackmar and Randall Parrish, historians who evinced the uplifting sentiments, explained that the Great Plains were once a “real desert” where only the wild things grew. Accordingly, the people and policies of the United States redeemed the arid waste and made something out of very little. According to Charles Richard Van Hise, a University of Wisconsin geologist, since “the early days the great plains were known as the Great American Desert.” He compared the region to “Palestine and Egypt,” where alternate periods of “lean and fat years” appeared periodically; the lean years occurred during periods of deficient rainfall, but the fat years followed with an abundance of rainfall. A magical mutation was achieved with the regularity of civilization, then, which managed the ostensible rhythms of nature through the rational use of resources. A similar claim was endorsed by Ralph C. Morris, who in 1926

concluded: “Slowly in some years and more rapidly in others, the work of converting this region, handicapped to a considerable extent by nature, into a land of comfortable homes and prosperous citizens continues yet today and suggests in several aspects the pioneer stage.”<sup>38</sup> Committed to the ascensionist plot, intellectuals narrated the holy work of saints.

Likewise, narratives in popular culture referred to a kind of holy land, although often with some ambivalence. By the 1920s, the imagery of wide, open spaces reached a mass audience through novels, magazines, and film. Willa Cather and Badger Clark, for instance, fashioned romantic tales about village people in a primitive locus. Modernist literature, however, could be less than positive about rural life. Sinclair Lewis in the satirical *Elmer Gantry* in 1927 created a quaint yet defective character with his description of the small town setting circumscribed by shifting eddies. While the brutish rabble were “plodding yokels” of an American peasantry, they displayed “sudden guffawing” and “milled like cattle, in dust up to their shoelaces, and dust veiled them, in the still heat, under the dusty branches of the cottonwoods.” Ole Rolvaag’s *Giants in the Earth* in 1927 reinforced the perceptions of loneliness, hardship, and drudgery with a chronicle about Scandinavian families colonizing the Dakota territory. The title of the last chapter hit home: “The Great Plains Drinks the Blood of Christian Men and Is Satisfied.”<sup>39</sup> They wrested a livelihood from nature, to be sure, but the environment seemed to diminish folks without refinement.

With the rise of an urban life, the decline of a rural one accelerated. In Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas over 60 percent of the population still lived in rural localities by 1930; and though not all residents farmed or ranched, communities depended on these activities for economic vitality. A global economic breakdown reduced the market price of the staple, wheat, from \$1.16 per bushel in 1926 to \$0.68 in 1930. As more and more acreage was turned to hardy grains, the price of the cash crop and thus land spiraled downward toward a crash. Foreign markets for grain collapsed, and the federal government abandoned the World War I price supports. Soon, all aspects of social life were descending on an unprecedented scale and scope, which further pushed producers to overextend marginal areas and to refinance their properties. As previous generations had learned through dips, paying off debts became a nightmare if a harvest failed or if livestock

starved. In years of financial panic, which arrived almost as cyclically as the droughts, rural life languished.<sup>40</sup>

The heat rose to generate extreme temperatures, which, in conjunction with a country in decline, punctuated a miserable record of experiences. Drought struck across several states in 1931, when the entire nation averaged 13 percent below normal precipitation levels. With soil baked and sod broken, ominous black blizzards blanketed the hardest hit portions of western Kansas, southwestern Nebraska, southeastern Colorado, northeastern New Mexico, and the Oklahoma and Texas panhandle. Across eroding fields, there were twenty-two dust storms in 1934 and as many as seventy-two in 1937, although the number declined thereafter. Outbreaks of measles, strep throat, respiratory illnesses, and bronchial diseases called “dust pneumonia” exacerbated the physical distress. Furthermore, volatile patterns in population demographics paralleled the climatic extremes. The hard times of the 1930s ultimately winnowed as many as three and a half million people from their farms. Refugees, mostly unemployed sharecroppers and tenant farmers, drifted with the blight. Despite the conspicuous poverty, though, three out of four people in the region persisted.<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, the intersecting forces of wind, drought, and erosion constituted a watershed in the world the neophytes had made.

In the context of the interwar years, a new world seemed out of balance. According to the historian David Wrobel, a troubled society assumed a sense of anxiety about a closing frontier. Ostensibly, the early twentieth century produced ebbs and flows of optimism about the possibilities for expansion. That is because the perception of the existence of free land, however myopic, was basic to American mythos. Therefore, intellectually charged debates often revolved around the idea of the frontier, if not the nature of the story itself. Conservative voices searched for new vistas in developing corporations and asserting individualism, particularly during the era of declining fortunes. In contrast, liberal advocates for development contended that disappearing opportunities necessitated increased state-centered capacities for relief, reform, and recovery. The discourses, in effect, formalized underlying cultural tensions about the fate of civilization.<sup>42</sup>

Of all the spectacles created by the frontier, none have been more compelling than those suggesting an unrelenting conflict with nature. The

raging winds, searing heat, and wandering fugitives were featured in newspaper and magazine articles, broadsides, works of music and art, federal and state government publications, monographs, histories, and fictions. Such artifacts articulated the omens of a catastrophe. The omens insinuated the terrors of a shocking and confusing era, but the gap between expectations and realizations extended a series of perceptions that began with the conquest of the Great Plains. The perceptions about the environment appeared in the teleological plot lines for internal colonization, which gave form and meaning to the displacement of civilization materializing in modern life. Simply put, the evidence of displacement did not disappear in a vacuum but was settled in stories about a new world. The new world, or at least its social construction through an epic of conquest, contained the deep, commonly felt fears about a post-frontier society.

From one plot to another, an epic made conquering a desert central to regional and national self-consciousness. That self-consciousness was about making the most out of perceived emptiness in the landscape. It was about moving forward through the pain of disappointments. It was also about taking chances in fleeting moments and realizing dreams deferred. Most of all, it was about overcoming a bewildering cosmos. Between success and failure, an anxious grasp of the situation laid the foundation for accommodating to the changes in the land. Embedded in the culture, conquest devised language to communicate problems, to formulate possibilities for growth, and to comprehend what seemed incomprehensible. With no way out of the predicament, a people and a nation experienced one of the most terrible disasters in American history. Indeed, empty homesteads, overcast skies, and dislocated families signaled that there was trouble ahead.