

Preface

This is a book about literary place, focused on writers with strong attachments to particular rural landscapes in the American Midwest. Following a general introduction and a chapter on the historical background of midwestern pastoral ideology and literature, I devote separate chapters to five major writers: Willa Cather, Aldo Leopold, Theodore Roethke, James Wright, and Jim Harrison. Why I choose these five to represent midwestern pastoral writing is a topic that I take up in the introduction. To clarify the relation of these writers to recent trends and to demonstrate the continuing development of midwestern pastoral as a literary tradition, I turn in chapter 7 to three contemporary authors: novelist Jane Smiley, poet Ted Kooser, and essayist Paul Gruchow, whose writings echo and modify themes developed by their predecessors.

My choice of representative authors and my overall perspective on midwestern culture owes something to my own midwestern upbringing and experience. Because midwestern pastoral writers relate to place emotionally as well as aesthetically and intellectually, I find it necessary to anticipate my discussion of their work with a brief personal essay, an approach consistent with established practice in ecocritical scholarship. Books such as John Elder's *Imagining the Earth: Poetry and the Vision of Nature* (1985) and Frederick Turner's *Spirit of Place: The Making of an American Literary Landscape* (1989) are at once pastoral texts and analyses of pastoral literature.¹ Readers interested in the inclusion of first-person narration in scholarly writing will continue with this preface; those preferring to enter directly the argument of this book may move ahead to the introduction.

I grew up near the industrial city of Flint, Michigan, in a typical suburban neighborhood of aluminum-sided houses surrounded by manicured lawns and blue spruces. Meadows and forests, fortunately, remained nearby for me to explore. My rambles most often proceeded south, over our rail fence into an old pasture that had yet to be subdivided. There I

would consider my options. I might investigate the edge of the local lake, a flooded gravel pit that had been reconstituted as a swimming club. In fall, when the sunbathers and shrieking children had abandoned the beach, the lake attracted geese, ducks, even an occasional heron. By keeping low as I approached the lake, concealed behind the Queen Anne's lace and late blooming asters, I could glimpse these birds from a distance. A painted turtle might slip from the sandy bank into the water before me, or a largemouth bass silently cruise the drop-off in search of prey.

Usually my walk took me to the woods. That part of Michigan, where water flows to the Flint River and thereby to Saginaw Bay of Lake Huron, lies within a transition zone of forest types. To the south, deciduous trees (oak, hickory, maple, and beech) dominate, whereas northward, thinner, sandier soils support pine-oak forests. I lived where Ohio hardwoods meet the white pines of upper Michigan, where one knows both the fiery exuberance of autumn colors and the scent of evergreens in every season. Walking from that field, across the road marking the township border into a reforested quarter section of white pines (maples and oaks forming an emergent lower canopy), I entered the heart of the local landscape. Trees, including an old oak with massive horizontal limbs and a certain tall, swaying pine, marked the stations of my pilgrimage. In a hidden spruce grove, where skunk cabbages rise in spring, and spotted touch-me-not in autumn, the four cardinal directions and the axis linking heaven and earth converged. As I sat on the exposed roots and soft fallen needles of those trees, the rest of the walk—the hidden spring, the city cemetery with its sweeping vista and Depression-era gravestones—dropped away, along with thoughts of the future and of the past. I was simply there, in the place and in the moment.

Unlike some parts of Michigan, that area is not a tourist destination. The Flint River flows murkily, its sediments contaminated and its banks strewn with broken cinder blocks and twisted rebar on the stretch near my old home, a section that includes the city sewage plant. (Years later, Wright's Ohio River poems would resonate strongly for me.) A five-lane highway borders the eastern edge of the city cemetery, connecting major retail areas to the north and south. Interstate 75 slices through the country only a mile away, a wide ribbon of asphalt running from Miami to Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan (and Ontario). Another road parallels the river upstream to Flint, county seat and birthplace of General Motors.

On free weekends or their annual two-week vacation, people climb into their cars to join the suburban exodus from Detroit seeking respite “up north,” as the expression goes, in the last good country of campgrounds, lakes, and summer cottages. The area near my childhood home suffices for houses, a cluster of restaurants near the freeway off-ramp, and a miniature golf emporium, but who wants to “get back to nature” where they live? Who cares for trilliums and mayapples in the corner of a potter’s field when they can race recreational vehicles through a state forest or seventy-horsepower motorboats across Houghton Lake? On my walks, I approached the edge of wild nature, but to what avail was a child’s momentary dissent from the cult of money and mobility? An absentee landowner cleared the grandest oaks from the woods north of our neighborhood. Developers studded the field with identical condominiums, lawns mown to the edge of the diminished lake. The city neglected the pine forest, planted a half-century earlier in the rigid rows of old-time conservation, until the trees started dying off because they were too close. The forest remains, but in a tangle of fallen timber and bramble left by a timber company contracted to thin the trees. When I return to those woods I seek the spruce grove because no one has “improved” that hidden spot. It is a sad commentary on our stewardship of nature (or lack of it) that the loveliest places are often those that have not been maintained at all, those nooks and bowers that enjoy, for the present anyway, a welcome neglect that allows ecological succession to take its own slow course in restoring the local biota.

Discovery of local history and literature deepened my appreciation of the changes that had shaped the land. I read how repeated glacial advances and retreats formed the hills, carved out the valleys, and deposited the gravel that underlies the soil of southern Michigan. Archeological treatises informed me that soon after the last ice age ended, about ten thousand years ago, the earliest inhabitants, the Paleo-Indians, established a hunting camp on the high north bank of the river a mile from my childhood home. I spent the second grade at Warner School, built on the site shortly after the Civil War. The school has since been converted into a duplex, and the road to Flint runs over much of the site, effectively protecting the old fire rings, burials, and remaining artifacts. People drive over at high speed, but the place remains, made sacred by time if profaned by disregard.

I read of the 1819 Treaty of Saginaw, in which leaders of the Ojibwa nation signed over their land to the United States, and of Alexis de Tocqueville crossing the Flint River on his way from Detroit to Saginaw in 1831. I tried to imagine my home country as he describes it in *Journey to America*, with giant trees forming “an immense and indestructible edifice under whose vaults eternal darkness reigns” (383). Tocqueville viewed the forest with melancholy, anticipating the changes that would follow the arrival of American settlers. Within a generation the old-growth trees had been girdled, felled, and burned in a process the pioneers called “windrowing.” While clearing was necessary for farming, the extent to which the pioneers denuded the land was greater than can be explained by the exigencies of survival or even ambition.² Like the killing of the area’s last bear, an event that occurred within sight of my accustomed walk in the city cemetery, the burning of Michigan’s hardwood forest expressed a desire to dominate nature, to bring light and order to what the pioneers perceived as chaos, waste, and danger.

While regretting their destructiveness, I admired the pioneers’ energy and much in the culture they transplanted from New York and New England: Greek Revival architecture, Romantic poetry, public schools, and representative government. Not everyone was included in their idea of democracy, not women, blacks, or Native Americans. Their love of nature, sentimental and bucolic, preserved more than a little Puritan fear of darkness and the wild. But their ideals, both republican and Romantic, would bear fruit generations later, when social movements brought reality a little closer to the cherished images of myth.

I also learned about Flint’s role in the automotive industry, which has elevated mobility far above place in the American imagination. My maternal grandmother left her parents’ farm to sew carriage covers downtown not long before the companies switched to cars. My grandfather, a skilled tradesman, made tools and dies for the production lines. While I honor their work and cherish their memory, my feelings about Flint are decidedly mixed. What D. H. Lawrence said about the United States strikes me as especially true of the place the Ojibwa called Pewanogow-ing, Place of the Fire Stones: “When you’re actually *in* America, America hurts” (60). The gifts of my home country—natural abundance and beauty, as well as a grand prehistory and a democratic heritage—seem to go unappreciated.

My interest in midwestern literature began with writers from Michigan. One of my elementary school teachers read aloud from *The Situation in Flushing* (1965), Edmund G. Love's memoir of my hometown in the early twentieth century.³ Theodore Roethke presented himself when I was in college. It is hard to describe the initial impact of great poetry about your own watershed (the Flint River, like Roethke's Tittabawasee, is part of the Saginaw drainage, the most extensive in the state). Like Roethke I had stood at the field's edge, watching workers speed home in cars they may have assembled. I perceived in Roethke's lines the very atmosphere of the place: the gray, overcast skies of winter and fall, the profound blue of summer, and the wild shifts in barometric pressure that presage the change of one season into the next. His fields and woods, rivers and ponds, roads and cemeteries were intimately familiar to me. They were the haunts of my youth, the places where I had entered, at once, the world and my imagination. "My true self runs toward a hill," Roethke writes in his last poem. "More! Oh more! / Visible" (*Collected Poems*, 243).

Roethke and the other authors I have chosen to represent the midwestern pastoral tradition reflect my own personal geography: two writers associated with Michigan, one with Ohio, one with Wisconsin, and one with Nebraska tilt the perspective of this book toward Michigan and the Great Lakes. Since, as geographer James Shortridge has observed, the term "Midwest" has become more associated with the Great Plains (91), this apparent bias may disconcert some readers situated west of the Mississippi. (A bartender I met in Nebraska City insisted that Michigan was not part of the Midwest, and she had her doubts about Wisconsin.) The tendency to define the Midwest exclusively in terms of agricultural landscapes and rural experience means that the Great Lakes states, with their heavy industry and large cities, are perceived as less midwestern, or not at all. My "bias," then, may be a critical advantage. In southern Michigan you are never far from either a factory or a cornfield, which may explain why the modern reality of industrialism is never far from my reading of pastoral prose and poetry. Whatever else the Midwest may be, it is part of the American industrial empire, a fact that we (in Nebraska, Michigan, or any other state) ignore at our own peril.

I was startled to find how closely Shortridge's map of "The Midwest as Seen from Michigan" (91) matches one I created, plotting the locations most associated with Cather, Leopold, Roethke, Wright, and Harrison.

Both maps center on the stretch of the Mississippi River where Wisconsin touches on Minnesota, Iowa, and Illinois, the heart of the heartland from a Michigan point of view. Strangely enough, I now live in that area, in La Crosse, Wisconsin. As I write these words, looking out my window to the east, I see Grandad Bluff, the highest in the area, looming almost six hundred feet above the rooftops. La Crosse lies in the Coulee Region, an area of valleys enclosed by high hills that often break into cliffs of exposed sandstone and limestone. The place pleasantly confounds expectations about the Midwest. If the Midwest is flat, this area is anything but. If the midwestern landscape was formed by the ice ages, La Crosse lies within the “driftless” area, which the glaciers largely missed. Like many here I enjoy hiking in the bluffs and bicycling in the extensive wetland that occupies the center of town. The La Crosse River winds through that wetland en route to its mouth at the Mississippi, by the park downtown. I seem to be the only person who swims in the La Crosse, except for Hmong children, the sons and daughters of recent Southeast Asian immigrants.

Perhaps one of those children will grow up to write notable prose or poetry about the place. There is certainly precedent for it, since La Crosse is not without its literary associations. Samuel Clemens and Ernest Hemingway admired this stretch of the Mississippi, particularly the bluffs that parallel the river on both the Minnesota and Wisconsin sides. The homestead of Hamlin Garland, a central figure in American realism and naturalism, can be found a few miles north of La Crosse, near West Salem, Wisconsin. Like the horses grazing in Wright’s famous poem “A Blessing,” La Crosse is located just off the road to Rochester, Minnesota. The area is well known by Harrison, who includes La Crosse in a list of great destinations in the United States.⁴ A character in his novel *Dalva* spends the winter here before heading off to undertake missionary work among the Lakota in 1866; Northridge often climbs Grandad Bluff for an unobstructed view of the western horizon. If these writers perceived the place as charged with meaning and worthy of literary portrayal, it seems likely that future writers will also.

Such is the ground, figurative as well as literal, whereon this book makes its stand. The appeal of pastoral literature derives, in large part, from its insistence on particularities both local and personal. Thoreau comments at the beginning of *Walden* that he required “of every writer,

first or last, a simple and sincere account of his own life, and not merely what he has heard of other men's lives" (325). That account having been made, I now turn to those other lives: the writers who have shaped our understanding of the midwestern landscape.