

"DEAR OLD KANSAS": TOWARD A NEW HISTORY by Thomas D. Isern

I think I'm going to write a history of Kansas. This isn't just cocktail commentary, I'm serious.

Because I teach the history of Kansas, and because I consider state history a worthwhile branch of the discipline, I have long contemplated writing a one-volume history of Kansas. During the past several years I have been moved closer to that endeavor by repeated solicitations from two university presses that I submit a proposal for such a book. In addition, through coauthorship of the textbook, *Kansas Land* (Gibbs Smith, 1988), I have become more familiar with the contours of the state's history and more confident in interpreting it.

There are two good histories of Kansas currently in print: Robert W. Richmond, *Kansas: A Land of Contrasts* (St. Charles: Forum Press, 1974, and subsequent reprintings), and William Frank Zornow, *Kansas: A History of the Jayhawk State* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1957, and subsequent reprintings). (I omit Kenneth S. Davis, *Kansas: A Bicentennial History* [New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1976], from consideration here because it makes no claim to be a comprehensive history). These are both competent books, but neither does all that could be done. I say this first by comparison with some other states of the same region; I compare the Kansas histories with those of North Dakota (by Elwyn Robinson), Nebraska (by James Olson), or Oklahoma (by Arrel Gibson), and it's not that I find the Kansas histories inferior, but that I see aspects of the others that I like better. Regardless of comparisons with other

states, each of the Kansas histories has a weakness. That of Zornow, except for substantial treatment of the frontier era, is a standard political history without much consideration to the cultural history of the state. That of Richmond has an avowed emphasis on social history, but lacks interpretive themes to bring the diverse threads together. I am troubled by the subtitle, "Land of Contrasts." Surely there is plenty of diversity in the state, but there is some commonality of character, too, and it is up to the cultural historian to chart both the diversities and the commonalities.

We should take a lesson here from Missouri, a state of wonderful diversity, both physiographic and cultural, but without a usable past. Missouri has no common legacy, no great themes, no state mythology of consequence. History, after all, is one of the humanities, and as the Mormon folklorist Austin Fife has pointed out, it is the duty of the humanities to forge mythology for nations, states, and peoples. Historians have a peculiar role among the humanities in this great work: historians are the disciplinarians of myth; but they are participants, nevertheless. When I say that historians have the duty to forge myth, I am not taking up with the naive and misguided folk who insist that history directly instill patriotism through force-feeding. Rather I take inspiration from William McNeill, exponent of modern world history, and author of the essay, "Mythistory."

One of the editors who has discussed this project with me becomes visibly uneasy when I begin to talk like this. Between the lines of his brow I read the

impatient questions: Why don't you just get on with it? You know the state, you know the literature, you can turn out craftsmanlike prose. Writing a state history isn't such a big deal. Crank it out by Christmas. Do it safe. A state history need only be a summary, cover the standard topics, fill the bill. Why do you want to do something risky?

The truth is that I am too selfish to be interested in writing a state history as a mere service. It interests me only if in so doing I can extend my own understanding and craft well beyond where they stand at the outset. I aim, too, to compose an exemplary history, one that will be a model for other states.

Understand, also, that this is a long-term project, for more than one reason. First, it has competition for the front burner. There are other books to put to bed before this one, which I expect to chip away at over the next few years. Second, this Kansas history requires enormous research. It is not to be merely a synthetic work. The reading of secondary sources must be exhaustive, and that in primary sources extensive. And third, I find that being Chairman (of the Division of Social Sciences, my administrative position) is a lot like herding pigs. Hogs will not herd, you know, because they know no fear of man. They act like they have tenure. You have to bribe them, outmaneuver them, occasionally sic the dogs on them.

Farm dogs, incidentally, are a lot like literary critics. They're about equally worthless. They both bark all the time, whether there's anything worth barking at or not, and so you can't rely on their vigilance or judgement. But they do bite now and then, and so you have to watch your step, nevertheless. A critic will want to know why a publisher and I feel justified in bringing another history of Kansas before the public--what is peculiar, new, interesting, or superior about it. Here

are my intentions along those lines.

The first peculiarity of the book I envision is that I have a broad definition of what constitutes a historical document. Inasmuch as I am able in a one-volume history, I intend to employ sources not commonly used in state histories--photographs, oral traditions, motion pictures, fiction, poetry, recordings, material culture, the landscape itself--alongside the standard written sources. I mean to use these truly as documents (not merely as illustrations) and at certain key points as symbols. In teaching methods of historical research, I often comment that I have two tasks--first, to get the students into the library, and second, to get them out of the library. Except that you can't get out of the library, because if you have the right definition of what constitutes a document, then the whole landscape is a library.

Second, I will apply a cultural-environmental perspective to the history of the state. Kansas is by definition a political entity, but understanding the state requires a study of much more than politics and a point of view conducive to broad explanation of diverse topics. I begin with the proposition that people are naturally conservative and will not change unless they have to. Consequently much of what has made up Kansas at any time has been persistence in cultural ways brought here from earlier places of residence. Cultural heritage is thus one source of the culture of Kansas, and it generally works in the direction of diversity, because people came here from diverse places. Another source is environmental adaptation. Much of the cultural heritage introduced here was unsuitable to new environmental conditions and failed, forcing adaptation to, and sometimes manipulation of, the environment. Adaptation to the environment would be a force for commonality in the state, except that the

environment itself is diverse. Complicating the equation further are two more sources of the culture (or cultures) of Kansas, technological innovation (the automobile, for instance, or hybrid grain sorghum) and external forces (Jay Gould, for example, or the international grain trade). If I were a social scientist instead of a humanist, then I would call what I have just outlined a model, but of course, I'm not going to do that.

It should be evident from what I have just said that when I talk about cultural history, I am not talking about culture in the sense of symphony and galleries and runny brie and dry chablis and getting together with friends someplace in Lawrence with exposed brick walls to talk about how benighted the rest of the state is. I'm talking about the great and prosaic commonalities of life that constitute culture in the anthropological sense, the ways and things that make people effective and happy where they are. It is the commonalities of our state, not the uniquenesses, that are important. The very word, "unique," almost makes me reich, not only because it is a trendy word now bankrupt of meaning, but more because uniqueness is by nature trivial.

People passing through Kansas on the way elsewhere know this without articulating it. They laugh at the folks in Greensburg who claim to have the World's Largest Hand-Dug Well and the fellow at Oakley who has the World's Largest Prairie Dog. They know that to be uniquely large is a pitifully trivial distinction. On the other hand, I don't dismiss these local landmarks with their claims to fame. I just point out that if they are important, it is not because of their uniqueness, but because of their typicality. The Big Well in Greensburg is important as the representative of all the other big hand-dug wells on the plains--scores of them along the Kansas Pacific Railroad alone--and all the wells

together symbolize the common struggle to secure water on a semiarid urban frontier. The big prairie dog, too, has a perverse significance: he represents the efforts of roadside entrepreneurs in Kansas to flag down some share of the custom that passes through, to get people somehow to stop a little while. He is just like Governor Hayden's silly Coleman jugs.

To return from my digression: a third peculiarity of my proposed work is that while using diverse documents and reading them from a cultural-environmental perspective, I intend also to incorporate a more inquisitive and critical approach than is common in state histories. This means that I aim for more than just a synthetic history summarizing and collating general knowledge. I wish to inquire not only what is known or thought about the state but also how and why it has come to be so known or thought. Each chapter thus will be an intellectual history. For example, the topic of Chapter 2 will be the physical geography of Kansas, but its approach will be not the customary descriptive but rather narrative and analytical, tracing how through explorers, naturalists, geographers, and ecologists our geographic knowledge of the state took shape. Historiography will be important to the approach in later chapters, but I hope never to over-emphasize historical thought to the neglect of other sources of insight. (Students of Kansas historiography will recognize in these remarks the influence of James C. Malin, especially his theoretical approach to *Grasslands of North America*.)

This third point, my determination to do intellectual history in each chapter, is a lot like playing dare base in the old schoolyard--it's a complicated game, hard to explain without pitching in and doing it. My idea comes from my disappointment with certain standard portions of all state histories. Every state history has a chapter of physical geography, a chapter on

prehistoric human inhabitants--certain chapters where the author, a historian, flounders about because he forgets what he is--a historian. He tries to write geography, or he tries to write archeology, and it's no good. In my chapter on prehistoric human occupation of what was to be Kansas, the protagonist is not going to be Archaic man; it's going to be Smithsonian man, Waldo Wedel discovering the cultural riches of Quivira that Coronado disdained. Every chapter will be about discovery. There is going to be intellectual action.

Fourth, I intend this history to be readable. Serious intellectual intent should not drain from the book my affection for the state, but rather distill it. To communicate this will require prose a level above any work I have completed to date. Now, I am not one to shy away from a nifty conceit, a turn of the phrase. Nor do I fear when, as I traverse the landscape library that is Kansas, I face an apparently unscalable metaphorical mountain; Go around?--Never!--I climb that woolly metaphor to the summit, plant the purple flag, and claim possession.

But that is not exactly what I mean by a higher level of prose. I am talking about rhetoric enchained, forced to labor at clear communication. I want somebody to read this thing, to like it, and as they read it, learn some things. To the extent that I want to teach people things, I must write exposition, explanation, analysis, and then I run the risk of losing the reader who just likes a good story. What voice do I use to hold my readers?

I know part of the answer. I have to write off the couch potatoes, the romance readers, the education majors, and anyone else with an attention span problem. They don't buy books from university presses. At the same time, I need not worry about the other end of the continuum, that is, the people who do History for a living. They'll be interested enough. I'm going to

concentrate on that literary jackalope, that legendary beast that authors insist lives out there somewhere but is seldom captured--the elusive and carefully camouflaged intelligent general reader. She used to belong to a study club, but now she runs a day care center during the day and is the wheelhorse of the PTA in the evening. He really doesn't like History, but if it's about cows, or Kansas, he'll look at it. They're the only people in Hodgeman County who subscribe to both the *High Plains Journal* and the *Christian Science Monitor*.

Keeping these people in mind, I can write exposition, so long as it doesn't get dense. Did you ever try to read literary criticism, or modern philosophical discourse? That's what I mean by dense--no relief, just analysis, and analysis of analysis. I know good historical exposition when I read it, and I find it in works such as Walter P. Webb's classic, *The Great Plains*. The work as a whole, and every chapter in it, is expository in scheme. The expository argument provides the skeleton. The flesh hung on the bones is narrative and description, and it is the flesh that is seductive. No one wants to hug a pile of bones, but no one wants to hug the fat lady from the circus, either. You need the right amount of narrative and description to fill out the figure to pin-up form. You also need tolerant editors, and to them my plea must be, Give me as much slack on the leash as Bader gets, and I'll work within that range. (Robert Bader is author of several fine and somewhat idiosyncratic works published by the University Press of Kansas.)

A fifth task I have set myself is to wrestle like Jacob with a question still only half-formed in my mind, which is something like, "Who owns history?" At various times in the intellectual history of Kansas, certain people--William Connelly of the Kansas State Historical Society was

a good example in his time—certain people have asserted some sort of vested right to interpret the heritage of Kansas. These dominant individuals and powerful classes, however, have never, thank God, been able to suppress those local inquirers and grassroots interpreters who have insisted that they, too, are rightful heirs to history. History is the public domain, and everyone is entitled to stake a claim. I think it's dandy that four different towns have been moved to mark four different places where the martyr Juan Padilla died; that the people of Osawatomie let the inmates out of the state mental hospital so they could attend the dedication of the John Brown memorial; and that Ralph Hathaway is proud enough of the Santa Fe Trail ruts in his pasture that every time the highway department tears down his "Ralph's Ruts" sign on 56 Highway, he puts it back up again. Somebody out there likes history, and he buys books.

There is a sixth and final peculiarity to the work I contemplate, and that is the affectionate band of the native son. Carl Becker was on the right track, but he left before he knew the half of it. This new history I'm talking about, to be entitled *Dear Old Kansas* after Becker's famous vignette, will be by a guy whose idea of a good time is dragging Main on Friday night in Hays. Who buys 'em by the sack at the Cozy Inn. Who looked Samuel P. Dinsmoor in the face and grinned right back at him. Who swam in the World's Largest Free Concrete Municipal Swimming Pool. Who can name all 105 county seats. Who ran down on the field and tugged at the goalposts on the conclusion of that annual exercise in futility, the KU-K-State game. Who hung over the balcony rail at Presser Hall to make out the words of "The Passion According to St. Matthew." Whose favorite song, no kidding, is "Home on the Range." Who has traveled a great deal in Kansas.

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