

The following article, based on the lecture Kathie Anderson delivered at the North Dakota Heritage Center in February 1994, was originally published in *North Dakota History: Journal of the Northern Plains* (62.3, Summer 1995) and is reprinted here with the permission of the State Historical Society of North Dakota. Her appearance was part of a program co-sponsored by the North Dakota Center for the Book and the State Historical Society of North Dakota in conjunction with a traveling exhibit on loan from the Library of Congress. The exhibit, "Language of the Land: Journeys into Literary America," identified American authors and explored how their writing became an interpretation of their regional landscapes.

## **A Journey into Literary North Dakota** by Kathie Ryckman Anderson

Dakota. The name itself evokes images of a land, a people, and a particular type of life. Dakota is the symbol of the American West, of the Native American and pioneer spirits, of independence and hard work, of lives of adventure, freedom, and opportunity. Like the first Dakotans, immigrants recognized the power of the land and the greater power to control their lives.

"Dakota is the image of the American West. . . ." <sup>1</sup> With those words, I opened *Dakota: The Literary Heritage of the Northern Prairie State*. The images and symbols of Dakota have had and continue to have mythic and mystical appeals for most North Dakotans and for many others only passing through—in their travels or in their reading.

When our family returns to North Dakota both winter and summer we often drive through the Great Plains and to several areas of North Dakota, but I am most fond of my home area along the Missouri River. For me, as for all of us, either consciously or unconsciously, our home area—the land—provides a touchstone for all our other experiences. Our journey into literary North Dakota is a journey into our own experiences.

The land is an important character and theme in North Dakota literature. Writers focus on the beauty of the land or the unforgiving land; the solace the land provides or the starkness and sameness; the labor required. Many writers focus on the relationship of the people and the land. Depending upon one's point of view, the land can be life-giving or life-threatening. The reality of the land is not always beautiful.

The landscape has changed little since the first impressions were recorded, and the relationship between the people and the land has changed little. The images of the land are constant from early through contemporary writing—in fiction, poetry, autobiography, drama, history, and travel publications.

. . . Our journey begins with the First People, represented by Charles A. Eastman and Marie McLaughlin. Eastman and McLaughlin both write about their lives in Dakota from the perspective of their education and knowledge of the dominant culture, but they both remember and record aspects of their early lives.

Eastman, a Santee Dakota Sioux who spent his youth in the Dakotas, wrote a number of books about his life and Sioux culture, including *Indian Boyhood*. Among the sections in *Indian Boyhood* are "A Legend of Devil's Lake" and "A Winter Camp" on the Mouse River. During his time at the winter camp he encountered white people and was

. . . initiated into some of the peculiar customs of our neighbors. In the middle of the

night there was a firing of guns throughout their village. Some of the people thought they had been attacked, and went over to assist them, but to their surprise they were told that this was the celebration of the birth of a new year! . . . I never knew before that a new year begins in mid-winter. We had always counted that the year ends when the winter ends, and a new year begins with the new life in the springtime.<sup>2</sup>

Marie McLaughlin's *Myths and Legends of the Sioux* includes classic retellings. In the foreword she writes, "The stories contained in this little volume were told me by the older men and women of the Sioux, of which I made careful notes as related, knowing that, if not recorded, these fairy tales would be lost to posterity by the passing of the primitive Indian."<sup>3</sup> Of particular interest to North Dakotans are "Legend of Standing Rock" and "The Mysterious Butte."

The State Historical Society of North Dakota has been home to a number of scholars, including Orin G. Libby, Gilbert L. Wilson, and Melvin R. Gilmore, who have written about Native Americans. Libby, the father of North Dakota history, edited "The Arikara Narrative of the Campaign Against the Hostile Dakotas, June 1876," based upon interviews with scouts who had served with Terry and Custer. Among Wilson's publications are the biographies of two Hidatsa, *Waheenee, An Indian Girl's Story Told by Herself to Gilbert L. Wilson* and *Goodbird*. Melvin R. Gilmore dedicated one of his volumes, *Prairie Smoke*, to the "Real Pioneers of the Great Plains." Through the efforts of these and other scholars, the oral tradition was recorded.

Few would disagree with the following statement by Elwyn B. Robinson, who wrote the standard *History of North Dakota*: "Most of the writing done in and about North Dakota appeared in the newspapers, but actually it all began with the arrival of white men in the region. The first literary effort sprang from curiosity about the strange country and a desire to record adventures there."<sup>4</sup>

Our journey continues with these early travelers or tourists in North Dakota, those people with a particular mission—the explorers, adventurers, fur traders, and missionaries. And, of course, it wasn't enough for these men—mostly men—to have a great adventure unless they would also write their own books—and many did, satisfying the growing and continuing curiosity about this area. We may consider whether North Dakota is again at that point, when the East and West are such a mess that folks are again turning to Dakota for what it has always offered—the primary struggle of people versus nature, and a lifestyle more pure and calm and simple.

Among those many early tourists were Verendrye, who wrote a report in 1739; Lewis and Clark, who were here in 1804 and 1806; John James Audubon, in 1843; and George Catlin, who wrote several works, including *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Conditions of the North American Indians Written during Eight Years' Travel (1832-1839) amongst the Wildest Tribes of Indians in North America*. Catlin, who is well known for his paintings, spent much time on the Upper Missouri River. . . . The following Catlin observation is particularly appropriate for long winter days:

Since they live in a climate in which they suffer from cold in the severity of winter, they have very naturally reversed our ideas of Heaven and Hell. They describe Hell as a country very far north, barren and hideous, covered with eternal snows and ice. They

describe the torments of this eternally freezing place as most excruciating. Heaven they suppose to be in a warmer and more delightful latitude, where nothing is felt but the keenest enjoyment, and where buffaloes and other luxuries of life abound.<sup>5</sup>

According to Elwyn B. Robinson, the most valuable description was written by Maximilian, Prince of Wied, who wrote *Travels in the Interior of North America*. With Maximilian was artist Karl Bodmer, who kept both visual and written records. In one entry Maximilian describes the scene at Fort Union:

June 24, 1833. Following the numerous windings of the Missouri, from one chain of hills to another, we reached, at seven o'clock in the evening, the mouth of the Yellow Stone, a fine river, hardly inferior in breadth to the Missouri at this part. . . . A little further on lay Fort Union, on a verdant plain, with the handsome American flag, gilded by the last rays of evening, floating in the azure sky, while a herd of horses grazing animated the peaceful scene.<sup>6</sup>

Henry Boller, an adventurer, lived at Fort Atkinson from 1858 to 1866. Boller represents many who went West during those years. He had a comfortable life in the East and could have entered his father's import company, but he had an itch to scratch. He was, in the words of Ray H. Mattison, "imbued with the spirit of adventure. As a boy, he was an enthusiastic reader of stories of Indian life and of the trans-Mississippi West."<sup>7</sup> Boller's journals include everyday happenings and his reactions to Dakota. He is not unrealistic about the cold of winter, and he also reacts to the beauty:

When it is not too cold, I occasionally get on the roof, at night, & 'discover'. The full moon shining with noontide brilliancy, and lighting up all the snow-covered rolls & buttes of the prairie, throwing into strong relief the dead bodies of the warriors scattered here and there on scaffolds. Almost at my feet, the frozen river, fringed on the opposite bank with a line of timber, beyond which again rises, a row of lofty bluffs, terminating in a boundless prairie.<sup>8</sup>

. . . Boller records both positive and negative reactions to the land, the latter reflected in this journal entry dated September 16:

I was struck while travelling with the barrenness and desolation of the country, no trees, the grass on the prairies parched and scanty, no limped streams, only vast and numerous lakes of stagnant rain water, muddy and full [of] sedge & wild fowl, and highly flavored with buffalo urine. I don't think that this country will ever be fit for the use of civilized man, and must ever remain a wilderness.<sup>9</sup>

The next group to come to Dakota dreamed grand dreams and had grand schemes for their investment dollars. The potential of the land for ranching and farming brought Theodore Roosevelt, the Marquis de Mores, other ranchers, and bonanza farmers. Roosevelt's descriptions of ranching life, land, and people remain fairly contemporary, though influenced by the romance

of his Eastern background. In *Ranch Life and the Hunting Trail*, Roosevelt provides a factual description of his ranch, but his description of winter storms is poetic: “[Furious gales] . . . roar in a thunderous bass as they sweep across the prairie or whirl through the naked canons; they shiver the great brittle cottonwoods, and beneath their rough touch the icy limbs of the pines that cluster in the gorges sing like the chords of an Æolian harp.”<sup>10</sup>

Ventures of the Marquis de Mores, another dreamer, have been described by several writers, including Bertha Rachel Palmer, who interviewed Gertrude E. Foley, caretaker of the chateau:

De Mores saw great prospects as he thought, for a packing plant to be established out west to ship the meat ready dressed, from slaughter house to the table, competing with Armour and Company and the rest of the great packing companies, to establish retail meat markets, build ice houses and have his own refrigerator cars. . . . He spent a million and a half dollars before he started to ship meat. . . .<sup>11</sup>

The packing plant was built and operation commenced. He employed 200 men and they dressed 150 head of cattle per day. Five hundred people lived in Medora, and everything looked flourishing. The plant ran only two years before it closed, but the operation did not go into bankruptcy as the Marquis had many millions of dollars behind him. A contemporary reader may consider whether the Marquis and his backers had actually decided to “downsize” their operation and also consider the parallels to contemporary dreamers, now called entrepreneurs, those who have established egg-packing plants, pasta plants, fish farms, and travel businesses.

Bonanza farmers also had grand plans for the land. Mary Dodge Woodward, who lived on a bonanza farm near Fargo from 1884 to 1889, kept a diary, *The Checkered Years*, with emphasis on changes in weather and fortunes. For this February lecture I’ve reviewed some of her thoughts about this month. In 1884 she records:

February 8 A bright, pleasant day with no wind. This morning there was a splendid mirage, one of the most beautiful features of this country.

February 11 Wind blowing, snow flying, cold and blustering and unpleasant and lonesome. . . . The Lord help those who have no warm houses in this cold country, how else could they live through the winters! No man could have walked to Green’s today and lived.

February 20 Oh, the dreary winter, how the storm has raged all day! . . .<sup>12</sup>

The land has also influenced the state’s playwrights. Frederick Koch represents another type of dreamer, one who came in 1905 to an obscure and youthful University of North Dakota and encouraged his students to write and perform their own “folk plays.” Koch organized a grand outdoor play, “The Pageant of the North-West,” a communal production based on native people and native history. The Little Country Theatre was established later at North Dakota State University. Professor Fred Walsh of North Dakota State University designed outdoor theaters at Medora, where he participated in production of *Old Four Eyes*, and another theater near Fort Lincoln, for which he co-authored *Trail West. A Dusty Echo*, one of Ev Miller’s plays which follows the tradition of the folk play, was presented in thirty communities in 1976.

Playwright Maxwell Anderson has achieved the most critical and scholarly attention of any North Dakota author. *White Desert*, an early play influenced by his study with Koch, had a brief run in New York. *White Desert* takes place in December 1888 “on a snow-covered Dakota Prairie,” where newlywed immigrants Michael and Mary have established a land claim. . . .

Immigrants struggled on the land, and most of the writing about those years by those who remained has a common theme: overcoming problems and achieving success. Among the state’s early immigrant population were people well educated in their native countries who believed in that same education for their children. In his autobiography, Arctic explorer Vilhjalmur Stefansson writes, “A background for all my early recollections is reading and being read to.”<sup>13</sup>

For a study of the state’s immigrant population, one should begin with Bill Sherman’s *Prairie Mosaic: An Ethnic Atlas of Rural North Dakota* and Sherman and Playford V. Thorson’s *Plains Folk: North Dakota’s Ethnic History*. Some collections of the lives of immigrants include: George Aberle’s *From the Steppes to the Prairies* (1963) about the Germans from Russia; Thorstina Walters’ *Modern Sagas: The Story of the Icelanders in North America*; Mary Ann Barnes Williams’ *Fifty Pioneer Mothers of McLean County*; Angela Boleyn’s *Quarter Sections and Wide Horizons*; Aagot Raaen’s *Grass of the Earth and Measure of My Days*; Sophie Trupin’s *Dakota Diaspora*; and Lucy Johnston Sypher’s four wonderful books about her experiences as a young girl in North Dakota in 1916-1917.

Those who felt they had inherited a great state from their immigrant parents are best represented by authors such as Bertha Rachel Palmer, whose *Beauty Spots in North Dakota* remains one of my favorite travel books. *Beauty Spots* was published in 1928, about the beginning of the Great Depression in the state. . . . Let there be no doubt about Palmer’s attitude about her state:

There is nothing the matter with North Dakota except that we need more optimists who will talk. At present the optimists are “making hay” and keeping still, while the pessimists are all standing around making a lot of noise. . . . We have everything desirable and worth while in North Dakota; mountains and plains, rivers and lakes, hills and dales, cities and open spaces, rugged acres and fertile fields. We have a history and a future. Let us concentrate upon the doughnut and not talk about the hole.<sup>14</sup>

Palmer and many other North Dakota writers have only praise for North Dakota. Later, Erling Nicolai Rolfsrud would encourage students to appreciate the special qualities of the state and its people through his series of books about extraordinary North Dakotans.<sup>15</sup> Palmer also praises James Foley, unofficially recognized as the state’s poet laureate. Palmer writes of Foley: “Every North Dakotan should be on speaking terms with Foley’s ‘Letter Home’ for he says just what we would say if we were poets with the ability to speak what we see and feel.”<sup>21</sup> Foley wrote hundreds and hundreds of verses about commonplace events and about the advantages of life in this land—though he moved to California in 1913 and lived there until his death in 1939.

Many writers of this period—and not only in Dakota—choose to see primarily the beautiful. Among these writers are the poets represented by another of my favorite volumes, *North Dakota Singing*, which was published in 1936, a time when one might expect more outward migration than singing; yet the poems are about the emotional appeal of the state’s

natural beauty and the inner strength of the people. The volume includes some of Louis L'Amour's early work—in poetry.<sup>17</sup>

To truly understand the land and its people, however, one should be able to see and experience both the beautiful and the ugly, the strengths and the weaknesses, the good and the bad, the emotional and the logical. Literary periods may range from romanticism to realism to naturalism, but authors see and experience both the sweet and the bitter.

Those who write most powerfully about the state and its people have a firm understanding of the land. They—and we—know that the land and its climate provide, in large part, for our well-being or lack of well-being.

Those who survived the Great Depression—and those who didn't—write powerfully about their understanding of the land and the people. It is not surprising that a period of intense conflict, such as the Great Depression, is the subject of much of the state's finest writing and that the state's finest writers have written about the struggle during this period. Many of these writers, including Tom McGrath, Era Bell Thompson, and Eric Sevareid, discover the importance of neighbor helping neighbor and values based upon a person's inner self rather than exterior.

In *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*, Tom McGrath writes about his journey, which begins near Sheldon. For McGrath, his experiences in North Dakota are a measure for all other experiences, and he writes, almost in refrain, "North Dakota is everywhere." Whether McGrath is in New York or Los Angeles or Greece, he writes about Dakota:

Man is the fate of his place and place the fate of the man  
And of time. . .  
Had arrived there  
—North Dakota, the farmhouse  
the old  
Dominion of work and want (but all in a new style now)  
My turnaround point and my old time stomping ground  
To find the place we went wrong and blaze the trail through the dark,  
to make the kachina. . .<sup>18</sup>

In another section, McGrath writes: "The land failed them; or else they failed the land."<sup>19</sup> McGrath often spoke at conferences about his heritage, beginning with his grandfather, who "homesteaded in one of the Fargos" in about 1880. McGrath summarizes his grandfather's years on the land: "Like others who came early, after the first few years he was very fortunate. There were good crops, he bought more land, eventually he was very rich in terms of land, and eventually, naturally, he was bankrupt."<sup>20</sup> McGrath also spoke about the community—or communities—created by boundaries of religion, shopping, schools, medical care, and shared labor which created "solidarity, neighborliness." As these immigrants learned, "There was no way of surviving without helping each other."<sup>21</sup>

As a young girl, Era Bell Thompson reacted with excitement to her new home:

It was a strange and beautiful country my father had come to, so big and boundless he could look for miles and miles out over the golden prairies and follow the unbroken

horizon where the midday blue met the bare peaks of the distant hills. No tree or bush to break the view, miles and miles of grass, acre after acre of waving grain, and, up above, God and that fiery chariot which beat remorselessly down upon a parching earth.<sup>22</sup>

In *American Daughter*, Thompson writes about both the good and bad experiences—her mother’s death; her three brothers who hated farmwork; the kindnesses of their immigrant neighbors, who brought food; being turned away from a home in Grand Forks and a hotel in Bismarck because of the color of her skin—and how her friends helped her. Throughout her lifetime she returned to visit those old friends and to make new ones.

Some people, unfortunately, have quoted Eric Sevareid’s thoughts about North Dakota in a particular sound bite—that little phrase or slogan which has replaced context and a full reading—from *Not So Wild a Dream*:

North Dakota. Why have I not returned for so many years? Why have so few from those prairies ever returned? Where is its written chapter in the long and varied American story? In distant cities when someone would ask: “Where are you from?” and I would answer: “North Dakota,” they would merely nod politely and change the subject, having no point of common reference. They knew no one else from there. It was a large, rectangular blank spot *in the nation’s mind* (author’s emphasis).<sup>23</sup>

Eric Sevareid was a pioneer radio journalist in the London of World War II. When he writes about those experiences he begins with his experiences in Velva, and these are the lines which are better associated with Sevareid, pointing out the importance of brotherhood in Velva, where wheat was the equalizer: “Hired man or town banker, wheat was the common denominator of this democracy. It made all men equal, in prosperity or wretchedness. . . .”<sup>24</sup>

The works of these authors focus on the character of the people as shaped by the land and the influence of place in literature. . . . As we continue our journey into Literary North Dakota, we will use the literary map as our guide and await new authors and publications. May the journey be long and enjoyable as our literary tradition continues.

About the author:

Kathie Ryckman Anderson is a sixth-generation North Dakotan who grew up in rural Emmons County. In 1988 the Ryckman family celebrated the centennial of the farmstead which Fletcher Ryckman established. Kathie earned B.S. and M.A. degrees in English at the University of North Dakota and has taught in Bismarck and Grand Forks. She has won awards from the North Dakota Press Women for articles about the state’s cultural history that appeared in *North Dakota Horizons* and *North Dakota History*. Kathie is the author of *Dakota: The Literary Heritage of the Northern Prairie State* (1990), one volume in the North Dakota Centennial Heritage Series. She is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Journalism at the University of Texas at Austin.

## Endnotes

1. Kathie Ryckman Anderson, *Dakota: The Literary Heritage of the Northern Prairie State* (Grand Forks: University of North Dakota Press, 1990) p. vii.
2. Charles A. Eastman, *Indian Boyhood* (New York: Doubleday, Page and Co., 1911) p. 229.
3. Marie McLaughlin, *Myths and Legends of the Sioux* (Bismarck: Bismarck Tribune Co., 1916) p. 10.
4. Elwyn Robinson, *History of North Dakota* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966) p. 320.
5. Michael M. Mooney, ed., *George Catlin: Letters and Notes on the American Indians* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1975) p. 190.
6. Maximilian, Prince of Wied, trans. Hannibal Evans Lloyd, ed. Reuben Gold Thwaites, *Travels in the Interior of North America, in the years 1832, 1833, and 1834*, vol 1. (Cleveland: Arthur H. Clark, 1905) p. 373.
7. Henry A. Boller, ed. Ray H. Mattison, *Henry A. Boller: Missouri River Fur Trader* (Bismarck: State Historical Society of North Dakota, 1966) p. 4.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 88.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 129-131.
10. Theodore Roosevelt, *Ranch Life and the Hunting Trail* (Lincoln, University of Nebraska, 1983), reprint of first edition published in 1888, p. 73.
11. Bertha Rachel Palmer, *Beauty Spots in North Dakota* (Boston: Gorham Press, 1928), p. 19.
12. Mary Dodge Woodward, ed. Mary Boynton Crowley, *The Checkered Years* (Caldwell, Ohio: Caxton Printers, 1937), pp. 26-28.
13. Vilhjalmur Stefansson, *Discovery* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964), p. 9.
14. Palmer, pp. 61-62.
15. Among Rolfsrud's popular collections of biographies of successful and well-known North Dakotans are: *Lanterns Over the Prairies* (1949), *Lanterns Over the Prairies, Book Two* (1950), and *Extraordinary North Dakotans* (1954). Rolfsrud also wrote *The Story of North Dakota* (1963), which he dedicated to the "Young Citizens of North Dakota."
16. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
17. During his lifetime, Louis L'Amour became master of the genre of western fiction, but his earliest work was in poetry. His first published volume, *Smoke From This Altar* (1939), was a collection of poetry which included the biographical note, "His first novel is now in the hands of a publisher."
18. Thomas McGrath, *Letter to an Imaginary Friend, Parts I and II* (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1970), p. 187.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 115.
20. McGrath, "What is there to celebrate?": The Maple River Rag," *North Dakota Quarterly*, Vol. 56, No. 4, Fall 1988, p. 8.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
22. Era Bell Thompson, *American Daughter* (University of Chicago Press, 1946), p. 12.
23. Eric Sevareid, *Not So Wild a Dream* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1947), p. 5.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 4.