

RIVER IN A DRY LAND : A PRAIRIE PASSAGE

TREVOR HERRIOT. 2000. Stoddart, Toronto. 356 pp. Hard cover \$34.95 ISBN 0-7737-3271-3

"I may not know who I am, but I know where I am from". Quoting Wallace Stegner, another writer shaped by his early years in prairie Saskatchewan, Trevor Herriot emphasizes the importance of place, in his case the eastern Qu'Appelle River Valley, in shaping his destiny and convictions.

River in a Dry Land, Herriot's first book, fully merits the acclaim it has already received. It is a complex and beautifully rendered account of the history — geological, natural and human — of the Qu'Appelle River and its valley. Trevor began writing the book after an extended exploration of the entire watershed in the summer of 1996. *River in a Dry Land* is many things: reflective, critical, searching; exuberant, sensitive, witty; always eloquent, occasionally bitter, and in the end, modestly hopeful.

The book begins with a prologue which contains a brief portrayal of the native people who have lived in the valley for 10,000 years, an indication of what attracts him to the valley, and reflections on the road he, and all of us, will have to take if the integrity of the valley, indeed of Saskatchewan, is to be restored. Part I looks at the natural boundaries of the Qu'Appelle watershed, man's place in the scheme of things, and the centrality of water, "a visible sign of the interconnectedness of all living things." Part II deals with Herriot's exploration of the upper

Qu'Appelle, the building of the Gardiner and Elbow dams, and the demolition of Mistaseni, a huge erratic sacred to the plains Indians. Part III continues the exploration down river, through Eyebrow Marsh, Buffalo Pound, the south end of Last Mountain Lake, the chain of lakes east of Regina with their towns, resort villages and First Nations reserves, and finally a wetter landscape, Round Lake and the densely wooded eastern end of the Qu'Appelle Valley. Part IV is a history of settlement in the valley, seen chiefly in the vivid account of three generations of Herriot's family, their neighbors, and their connection with the village of Tantallon. The book ends with a brief epilogue: Trevor takes a long walk, past pond, through woods, to the knoll above the river, and down to Little Cutarm Creek before it enters the Qu'Appelle. It is a misty, early autumn morning; migrant warblers, frogs, a muskrat, "a healthy stand of big bluestem as high as [his] shoulders," suggest that the Little Cutarm, "Kiskipittonawe Sepesis," survives. And he concludes, "For a moment, in the increasing light of that blessed morning, I was able to forgive and to hope."

River in a Dry Land is in the tradition of the great books that reflect upon the earth's riches, wonder and beauty and man's treatment of the planet. In Herriot's work I find echoes of the reverence for nature found in Barry

Lopez's *Arctic Dreams*; the realization of place, perfected in Wallace Stegner's account of pioneer life in the Frenchman River Valley in *Wolf Willow*, and the sympathetic depiction of people in a challenging environment in W. O. Mitchell's *Who Has Seen the Wind?* Saddened by man's failure, thus far, to come to terms with the environment, Herriot can only hope that we will be "able to head off ecological catastrophe and find deliverance." Where to begin? He knows there are no easy answers, but at one place in the book, after he has visited the Piapot Reserve, he writes: "Nothing less than respect will do for even the least in Creation, even for the dirt and stones beneath our feet. ... A people who will at least pause in respect before they plough their gardens, gather field stones, or take a hillside's store of gravel are capable of gratitude and of recognizing limits, the community of ownership, the need to conserve. Respect — a gesture, a prayer, an invocation, a recollection —

intervenes as the pause between desire and use, between appetite and acquisition. Respect alone may not reunite us with the prairie, but it seems a fair place to start."

His book is not an easy read. He deals with complex issues, fortunately with extended examples and in lucid prose. I strongly advise a dictionary (you may want to check out words like inosculation, intaglio, topiary, divot-resistant, *in situ*, atavism, gibbous and geomancy) and a good atlas or a set of the appropriate Geographic Survey maps. And if you're like me, you'll enjoy the second reading even more than the first. In particular, return to the Prologue and Chapter One, "Lines on the Circle." Having read and reread the book you will appreciate more fully the wisdom of this prophet, still young, living in our very midst.

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"Given the means and sufficient leisure, a large portion of the populace backpacks, hunts, fishes, birdwatches and gardens. In the United States and Canada, more people visit zoos and aquariums than attend all professional athletic events combined. They crowd the national parks to view natural landscapes, looking from the tops of prominences out across rugged terrain for a glimpse of tumbling water and animals living free. They travel long distances to stroll along seashore, for reasons they can't put into words. These are examples of what I call *biophilia*, the connections that human beings subconsciously seek with the rest of life."

Edward O. Wilson, *The Diversity of Life* (1992).