CHAPTER NINE

WALLACE STEGNER: GEOBIOGRAPHER

CURT MEINE

At the end of his *Conversations with Wallace Stegner*, Richard Etulain posed the inescapable question: "What has Wallace Stegner attempted to leave for his readers?" Stegner must have seen it coming. He responded bemusedly to Etulain's effort to dredge up "the philosophical residue, the sludge at the bottom of the cup." Stegner then offered up this concise summation: in his writing he attempted "to say how it was," to represent "the human response to a set of environmental and temporal conditions."[1]

Stegner examined that human response through all the genres in which he worked—novels, essays, short stories, criticism, memoir, history. One senses that, like a batter who ignores the bunt sign and hits a home run, Stegner had a mind of his own when it came to literary strategy, and would not have confined himself to any one of these approaches even if his editors, critics, and readers had told him to. The techniques available through these varied genres allowed him to respond to opportunities with all the skills he possessed, to meld his voices to suit the story he wanted to tell, the truth he felt compelled to explore.

Stegner also seized the opportunity to examine the "human response" through his biographies. In a sense, biography may have been the form for which the genre-bending Stegner was best suited. "Truth, Candor, and

Honesty," Virginia Woolf once wrote, are "the austere Gods who keep watch and ward by the inkpot of biography."[2] In his definitive commentary *Writing Lives*, Leon Edel distilled into a single sentence the creative tension that drives biography and with which every biographer must learn to live: "A writer of lives is allowed the imagination of form but not of fact." In this sense, Edel writes, "the writing of lives is a department of history and is closely related to the discoveries of history. It can claim the same skills. No lives are lived outside of history or society; they take place in human time. No biography is complete unless it reveals the individual within history, within an ethos and social complex."[3] But the skills of the novelist also come into play as the biographer seeks to illustrate character, motivation, conflict, growth. Achieving at once the veracity of history and the narrative strength of fiction is the biographer's challenge.

Compounding the challenge is the fact that each biographer's task is unique and requires an approach particular to the subject. Each subject calls forth a new species of biography fitted to the life, times, and historiography upon which it rests. "The biographer truly succeeds," Edel writes, "if a distinct literary form can be found for the particular life."[4] To realize this distinct form, the biographer is allowed—indeed, required—to range as widely as the subject demands. For this reason, biography will always remain a bastion of interdisciplinary endeavor, where integration of knowledge is of the essence.

Now we can begin to comprehend the task that Wallace Stegner took on when he chose to write the lives he did. For his two major subjects, John Wesley Powell and Bernard De Voto, it was not enough to reveal them only "within history, within an ethos and social complex." In the sub-sub-genre of environmental biography (if such a thing can be said to exist), proportionately greater attention must be given to the spatial dimension, to the environmental conditions of the life under examination. For Stegner, the writing of lives was as much a department of cultural geography and natural history as it was history per se. Slightly amending Edel, we might say that no lives are lived outside a biophysical and biogeographic setting; they take place within a geological and ecological, as well as social, complex. The ethos we must take into account pertains not only to the human community but to the larger and longer-lived community of life in which human lives and cultures are embedded.

These peculiar demands stand in interesting contrast to the dominant

trends in the development of biography in the twentieth century. One of the tenets of Edel's "New Biography" is that the emergence of psychology has fundamentally altered the biographer's trade, augmenting the toolbox of techniques, redefining both the methods and the product. Edel writes that "biographies which do not use [psychological] knowledge must henceforth be reckoned as incomplete; they belong to a time when lives were entirely 'exterior' and neglected the reflective and inner side of human beings."[5] On this foundation, Erik Erikson and others have built the entire specialty of psychobiography. But all thoughtful biographies now partake, to one degree or another, of psychology's insights into the development and expression of personality.

Yet our lives are never entirely "interior" or "exterior" but always a dynamic interpenetration of both. And while biography has moved toward deeper examination of the inner self, little attention has been given to the environmental context of biographical subjects—the places a subject both shapes and is shaped by. Let us grant that, for many subjects of biography (especially the supermarket best-sellers), it is hard even to think of them as inhabiting a real, vital landscape. Many of the lives we deem worthy of biography seem almost to be defined by the degree to which they are removed from the soil, the waters, the plants and animals. The critical scenes of these lives take place in offices, studios, machines, crowds, arenas, convention halls, and boudoirs. Yet even as psychology has revolutionized our perception of the inner world, advances in the natural sciences have revolutionized our perception of the world around us. Biographies—of some subjects at least—can never be the same.

To a notable degree Stegner wrote his two biographies, not exactly *against* the modern grain of psychologically informed biography, but *across* the grain. Stegner endeavored to connect inner and outer worlds, to limn lives through integration of the personal, social, political, biological, and environmental. *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian* and *The Uneasy Chair* are distinguished not only by their examination of the relationship between biographical subject and biogeographical space but by the way Stegner uses this relationship to examine forces, tensions, patterns, and themes at the heart of North America's cultural development. Place becomes not simply a background against which human lives are played out but a milieu within which, and with which, human beings interact. For most biographical subjects, perhaps, the impact of climate, geology, biogeography, ecology, and

anthropology might be considered of little direct relevance. For John Wesley Powell and Bernard De Voto, these issues are central.

Having taken on the biographical subjects he did, how did Stegner respond to this expanded spatial dimension of biography? Leon Edel again gives us a useful lead. At one point Edel defines biography as "truth seen . . . through a certain temperament. Biography is most itself . . . when it is a life offered us through a personal vision."[6] And so, we must ask another question: what vision, what perspective, did Stegner bring to his studies of these two lives?

The answer involves the large theme that, like a great river, unified so much of Stegner's literary landscape: the attitudes and adjustments of people to the North American land, and the response of that land to those who have lived upon it. But the answer also involves Stegner's conviction that much of any narrative's strength draws upon the interactions between people and their local place. In *One Way to Spell Man*, Stegner writes:

> Identity, the truest sense of self and tribe, the deepest loyalty to place and way of life, is inescapably local, and it is my faith that all the most serious art and literature come out of that seedbed, even though the writer's experience goes far beyond it. Much of the felt life and observed character and place that give a novel body and authenticity . . . comes ultimately from the shared experience of a community or region.[7]

The same, he might have added, pertains to biography. It too gains "body and authenticity" from the power of the subject's life to reflect and illuminate the shared experience of a locality or region.

And so we find Stegner constantly working through the concept of regionalism, which he distinguished from mere provincialism: "You can get stuck in the provincial," he told Etulain. "It's a very small hole. On the other hand if you use the regional as a springboard or a launching pad instead of a prison, then you can be interested in the world; but you're interested in it from, somehow, the Western view, which is different from the East Coast view. The difference is probably instructive. It should be."[8]

This sharp distinction between regionalism and provincialism is recurrent in Stegner's writing and, as we shall see, woven through his biographies. It is what Stegner had in mind when he described William Stafford

as "a poet who is clearly western without being limited by his Westernness."[9] It defines the difference between those who strive toward a continental vision and those whom he described as "locally patriotic." It suggests that to develop an appreciation of your region, you must come to know it from both the inside out and the outside in. "The only way to get perspective on your own culture," Stegner observed, "is to step outside of it." In the case of the American West, he added, "you're stepping out of your own culture and into some culture which is vaguely a world culture, or a national culture, and learning to look upon your narrower provincial culture with some kind of perspective."[10] To this breed of true regionalists, Stegner implies, falls the hard work of integrating local interests with broader regional, national, and global interests.

But another issue complicates the Stegner view. Acting as a thematic complement to the sense of place in much of Stegner's work is the sense of movement—felt most dramatically in *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* and *Angle of Repose*. Rootlessness and restlessness are deeply American traits and formative features in Stegner's own early life. He appreciated the difference between colonizing and peopling, between booming and sticking, between seizing "the main chance" and accepting responsibility. He had an unerring feel for the specific pressure points and personalities through which these tensions have been expressed in American history.

The personal vision that Stegner brought to his biographies incorporated all of these enriching and complicating factors: a critical understanding of regionalism; an awareness of the stultifying effects of provincialism; an appreciation of the regional perspective in developing a viable literary tradition; the experience of movement; a sensitivity to issues of personal commitment and responsibility; the connections between all these elements and the conditions (inherent and invented) in the North American landscape. All of these he brought to the biographies. Throughout their lives, Powell and De Voto addressed the primal relationship between American people and the landscape itself. So, too, of course, did Stegner. And this shared experience allowed Stegner to pour himself into their stories with the full energy that biography demands.

Wallace Stegner wrote two biographies. *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian: John Wesley Powell and the Second Opening of the West* appeared in 1954. Twenty years later he published *The Uneasy Chair: A Biography of Bernard*

De Voto. His interest in the possibilities of biography, however, seems to have been present long before. For his dissertation at the University of Iowa, Stegner examined the work of Clarence Dutton, whom he described as John Wesley Powell's "left hand." This early interest brought Powell into his awareness, initiating the process through which Powell would eventually come to occupy center stage. When *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian* finally did appear, it included a biosketch of Dutton inlaid within the book as a whole.

Stegner's next significant brush with biography was his fictionalized account of the final years of labor martyr Joe Hill, *The Preacher and the Slave*. First published in 1950, the book was reprinted in 1959 as *Joe Hill: A Biographical Novel.* To gain a sense of the peculiar nature of *Joe Hill*, we can turn to a bit of bibliographic arcana. Every book entering the Library of Congress carries on its copyright page what is known in the trade as Cataloging-in-Publication (or CIP) information. The CIP data correspond to the Library of Congress' main catalog and allow librarians to place the books on their shelves quickly and properly. Of course, more than a few of Wallace Stegner's books defy the best efforts of librarians and other catalogicians. Open to the copyright page of *Joe Hill* and you will find the following CIP information: its first listing is "Hill, Joe—1879–1915—Fiction"; its second is "Industrial Workers of the World—History—Fiction." As an expression of the tension in Stegner's work as historian and fiction writer, it doesn't get much more austere than this.

And what of biography, the odd orphan of the middle ground? It exists, as Edel adamantly notes, as a distinct genre of its own with its own inherent tensions, forms, obligations, aims, pitfalls, opportunities. *Joe Hill* may be read as an indication that Stegner had yet to arrive at the optimal means of accommodating his varied interests and his possible voices. *Joe Hill* is, by Stegner's own account, a work of fiction. Yet it is one in which its author went to extraordinary lengths in serving those "austere gods" of Truth, Candor, and Honesty—to the point, for example, of being blindfolded and led through a mock execution in Utah's state penitentiary. Further, Stegner separately published two articles detailing the findings from his background historical research. "I knew as much about Joe Hill as I could find out," he told Richard Etulain. "*If I had been writing his biography* I couldn't have gone any deeper."[11]

Although *Joe Hill* is as firmly affixed in place as any of Stegner's fictions, it reveals no special focus on the West or Utah as regions nor interest in the differences between them and other places. Yet the impacts of geography can be found in its genesis and in its impact on Stegner's subsequent work. He conceived the project during his Cambridge years, when he could look back to Utah with both distance and familiarity: "The place of Joe Hill's end was all familiar territory, and the more I read about [him], the more it seemed that I had some kind of natural interest in him."[12]

When the book came out, it was not what most readers expected. It attempted, not to report or explain or vindicate the life of its subject, but to dramatize it. As Robert Keller notes, the book was a fictional treatment of "a real person whom [Stegner] had made violent and immoral, a real person with a real name, a hero who meant much to other people."[13] *Joe Hill* received, in Stegner's words, "a feeble press and no notice and didn't sell anything, and nobody understood it. I was irritated that reviewers thought I was writing a proletarian novel, which I wasn't. They thought of the book as a belated trailer from the thirties."[14] Between these lines, we can read the impact of Stegner's own experience in Madison and the sophisticated yet independent political outlook he gained there and explored in his 1941 novel *Fire and Ice.*

Joe Hill may have been less significant for what it taught Stegner to do with biography than for what it taught him not to do. The lackluster public response and the misreading of critics led him to conclude that he was "on the wrong track" in his fictions.[15] He seems also at this time to have recalculated his bearings on the middle ground between history and literature. At any rate, in his next venture into the territory of biography he stayed well on the documentary side of the border.

THIS RECALIBRATION may have come out of the changed circumstances in the lives of the Stegners. The emerging emphasis on regionalism in Stegner's work seems to have been connected to his own return, in 1945, to the land beyond the 100th meridian. Several of the essays in this volume take their lead from the passage in *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* describing Bruce Mason's cross-country drive west "beyond the Dakotas toward home."[16] Just a few years after Stegner wrote the scene, he and his family lived it out again. Stegner's recollection of this personal migration is itself a gloss on regionalism and worth quoting in full:

> Teaching at Harvard, which should have gratified my highest ambition, didn't fully satisfy because I didn't much like the place where Harvard was situated. I took the first opportunity that offered a

> chance to get back west. . . . I grew up western, and the very first time I moved out of the West I realized what it meant to me. . . . Wider worlds, but with one foot always kept in the center circle. . . . By the time we arrived in Palo Alto I was already involved in the biography of John Wesley Powell, the quintessential student of the West, and had pretty well committed myself to a lifetime of writing about the country I had grown up in. . . . I was at home, where I belonged, and thought I had lived away from home long enough to know where it was and to have some perspective on it. It is not an unusual life-curve for Westerners—to live in and be shaped by the bigness, sparseness, space, clarity, and hopefulness of the West, to go away for study and enlargement and the perspective that distance and dissatisfaction can give, and then to return to what pleases the sight and enlists the loyalty and demands the commitment.[17]

Stegner's return west to take up his post at Stanford, his deepening relationship with Bernard De Voto, and his entry into western land policy disputes in the late 1940s all contributed to the opportunity that Stegner recognized and seized in *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian*: the role of place in telling lives.

The CIP information on *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian* advises librarians first to shelve it under "Powell, John Wesley, 1834–1902," then "West (U.S.)—History—1848–1950," then "Scientists—United States—Biography." In Leon Edel's typology, it is an unusually expansive example of a "chronicle life," the more or less traditional approach to biography in which the biographer integrates documentary materials (usually in chronological order), supplies extensive background materials, and allows the subject's voice to be heard consistently throughout. "The result," Edel writes, "is a work of history created around a central figure . . . [and] a heavy autobiographical component is introduced into the biographical creation."[18]

Stegner's approach in *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian* reflects the peculiar opportunities and limitations that Powell as subject presented. Stegner was motivated by his historical interest in the subject, his familiarity with the plateaulands of Utah, and his mentorship with De Voto. In Powell he found the one compelling figure that could not only bring unity to large and diverse themes in America's cultural development, but also hold the biographer's strong personal commitment. And that it would certainly take. Stegner devoted twelve years to the effort.

Stegner, of course, did not personally know his subject in this case. For a biographer, direct experience with one's subject always involves tradeoffs. What one gains in intimacy, one risks losing in detachment. As Edel notes, every biographer must seek to be a "participant-observer" in the subject's life; in *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian*, circumstances dictated that Stegner must be more observer than participant. There were few opportunities to peer into Powell's inner life—and in any case that was not Stegner's primary goal to begin with. The Powell we encounter is the public Powell. Stegner recognized this: "I wasn't really writing a biography of Powell in the sense of personality, I was writing a career, and the career dealt with the plateau province."[19] Where he could, Stegner the frustrated novelist did take full advantage of the dramatic potential of Powell's story. His account of the initial trip down the Colorado is told with a narrative intensity that ranks with that of his account of *Wolf Willow*'s beleaguered cowhands in the story "Genesis." Edel proposes that biographers "borrow some of the techniques of fiction without lapsing into fiction."[20] Stegner would have appreciated that proposition, the opportunities it allows, and the tension it implies.

Taken as a whole, *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian* was unlike any other biography in the annals of American literature. One could find others set in the same region and period. One could even find prominent contemporary biographies of conservationists: Linnie Marsh Wolfe had received the Pulitzer Prize in 1946 for her treatment of John Muir's life, *Son of the Wilderness*. Stegner provided something quite different: a painstakingly reconstructed account that rescued Powell from obscurity and placed him at the very center of the nation's effort to catch up with its own "forward-leaning disequilibrium of advance, progress, boom, growth."[21]

Even as Stegner's own "life-curve" was turning west and rechanneling his intellectual energies, he found in John Wesley Powell's life-curve a trajectory that illustrated the shifting cultural energies on the American landscape. Though born in 1834 in New York, Powell was a son of the Midwest, moving peripatetically among Wisconsin, Illinois, and Ohio until the Civil War, then settling into a teaching life in Illinois. These first thirty years of his life account for about twenty pages in Stegner's large book. It is only when the axis of Powell's life extends east and west that Stegner takes full advantage of the storytelling promise of this life. The western end of that axis rests in the southern Rockies and the Colorado Plateau; the eastern end rests squarely in Washington, D.C. For the remainder of the

biography, it is the dynamic interplay of these regions that drives the narrative.

This interplay can be seen in any of a dozen themes that Stegner develops along the east-west axis. To name just a few: the role of eastern and foreign capital in the development of the West; the role of artists and illustrators in creating the West in the public imagination; the image versus the reality of the native tribes that Powell so concerned himself with. One theme of special relevance—the post–Civil War transformation of Washington, D.C., into the nation's scientific hub—may make the point. A third of the way into the book, at the beginning of a chapter aptly titled "Center and Frontier," Stegner describes how centralization bred by the crisis of the Civil War did not cease with the peace:

> Powell himself, from 1870 on, was a forceful part of that Washington which had formed during the war and which compacted itself in the dozen years afterward. . . . Less than twenty years after the war, Washington was one of the great scientific centers of the world. It was so for a multitude of causes, but partly because America had the virgin West for Science to open, and in Washington forged the keys to open it with.[22]

The fate of government science, especially at the hands of provincial politicians from the West, then becomes the principal organizing theme for the remainder of Powell's life and Stegner's book.

It is not simply the differences between regional perspectives, but the interactions among them, that Stegner exploits in conveying the larger meaning of Powell's experience. Stegner's readers are familiar with the repeated emphasis he places on aridity as the West's defining feature—a theme we can trace back from Stegner through De Voto, Walter Prescott Webb, and Powell. But we sometimes overlook the point that it is the contrast between the dry West and the incrementally moister East, between conditions on both sides of the 100th meridian, between the traditions and social institutions that evolved to meet these conditions, that provides drama, conflict, insight, and vision. It is not the provincial mind that grasps the inadequacy of "wet weather institutions and practices" in "dry-weather country." Or vice versa. This requires continental experience and a continental vision.

Stepping back from this mountain of a book, we can see that *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian* both defined and illustrated Stegner's convictions regarding regionalism. It took someone intimately familiar with the plateau

province, but not wholly of it, to do the job. We see, too, the manner in which subjects often choose their biographers—at least as much as biographers choose their subjects. Others could have written a life of John Wesley Powell; in his generation, only Wallace Stegner could have written such a biography of Powell.

THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS INFORMATION on *The Uneasy Chair* captures the intermingling of experiences, influences, and styles that resulted from Stegner's decision to write a biography of Bernard De Voto. The first category is plain enough: "De Voto, Bernard Augustine, 1897–1955." Then "Authors, American—20th century—Biography." Then "Historians—United States—Biography." The lives of Stegner and De Voto had first intersected, appropriately enough, in midcontinent, at the 1937 meeting of the Modern Language Association in Chicago. (Stegner had traveled down from Madison, De Voto west from Cambridge.) They met again the following summer at the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, and through the war years both were based in Cambridge. As De Voto took up the cudgels in the western land grab battles of the late 1940s, Stegner was writing himself more deeply into the canyonlands with Powell. If Stegner was the one person who could do full justice to Powell, De Voto was the one person who could provide a fully appreciative introduction to *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian*, which he did.[23] And in the years to come, Stegner would assume a role—conservation's literary standard-bearer—that De Voto had practically invented.

The crisscrossing of backgrounds, geographies, interests, roles, and attitudes in the De Voto–Stegner relationship would ultimately make, in 1974, for a more complex, personal, and nuanced biography than *Hundredth Meridian*. The richly stratified life presented in *The Uneasy Chair* again reflected as much on the biographer as the subject. Here Stegner was working not just from documents but from life. De Voto, like Stegner, had been a native westerner, a Utahan, a willing expatriate in the East. As De Voto's was a literary, not scientific, life, Stegner could appreciate and communicate it even more fully than he did Powell's. And Stegner wrote, not from a distance on the Inside Washington politics of science, public policy, and land law, but from within a rapidly coalescing environmental movement.

The result is an example of Edel's "third type" of biography, which combines elements of the chronicled life with more stylized portraiture, carefully sketched, placed within a sharply defined narrative frame. In this type

of biography, documents are "melted down and refined so that a figure may emerge, a figure in immediate action and against changing backgrounds. Such a work tends to borrow from the methods of the novelist without, however, becoming fiction." It is "not concerned with strict chronology; it may shuttle backward and forward in a given life and seek to disengage scenes or utilize trivial incidents . . . to illuminate character."[24] In this case Stegner was as much participant as observer in the life he wrote. And to keep the austere Gods of Biography at bay, Stegner regularly injects himself into the narrative as the "skeptical" or "assiduous" biographer (perhaps a second cousin to Joe Allston and Lyman Ward).

Bernard De Voto's life-curve looped back and forth from his native Ogden, the Intermountain West, and later Montana, to Cambridge, with Harvard the dominant eastern pole, Northwestern a transition point in the middle, and important side loops encompassing New England and New York. Although the west end of the axis centered on Ogden, it shifted and expanded to include, ultimately, much of the West. The other end of the axis was fixed not, as with Powell, on the political establishment of Washington, D.C., but on the literary and intellectual establishment, the "more privileged earth," of Boston and the Northeast. Along this axis Stegner chases the central paradox of De Voto's life: because of his western upbringing, De Voto both craved and resisted the established notions of literary life as defined in the East; but he achieved the fullness of his writing only when he returned to the West as the subject of his great histories and his relentless conservation advocacy. "From early in his career," Stegner wrote, "[De Voto] had mythologized his pilgrimage eastward as a quest or trial, a journey designed to let him prove himself in the intellectual East."[25] The biography thus becomes a richly ironic exercise in demythologizing a man who himself held mythmaking in contempt and, moreover, in turning back on itself the dominant myth of the westering Euro-American.

The sharp East-West comparisons in *The Uneasy Chair* may well have resulted from the heightened awareness Stegner gained through his fictional depiction of similar circumstances in *Angle of Repose* (published three years earlier). Stegner described *Angle of Repose* as "not only a comparison of the frontier and the New West; it's a comparison of East and West. It attempts to be something relatively comprehensive about certain kinds of American experiences. . . . [Molly Foote] was quite aware of the differences between East and West, much more aware than I would be, probably, though I had some notion, having lived in both. She felt it more because she felt the West for a long time as a place of exile."[26] In a parallel manner, Stegner opens *The Uneasy Chair* with a portrait of the exile-at-home: De Voto in his early adulthood, amid personal crisis, an outcast in his own hometown of Ogden. "At best I am a spore in Utah," De Voto wrote to a friend at the time, "not adapted to the environment. . . . These people are not my people."[27]

But then De Voto proceeded to exile himself from the West. In looking at his life as a whole, it is remarkable how little time he spent in the West after leaving the region. Stegner notes that, as of 1946, De Voto's extensive knowledge of the West was "more from books than from personal experience" (p. 287). De Voto had already written *The Year of Decision: 1846*, the first installment of his great western trilogy, from a distance, and was well into the second volume, *Across the Wide Missouri*. Stegner comments tartly, "This acknowledged authority on the West was just completing a book on the fur trade without ever having set eyes on much of the country over which the fur trade had operated" (p. 288). There is something epic in the manner in which De Voto's research on the Lewis and Clark expedition led him back into the western provinces himself. In the summer of 1946—the same summer that Stegner toured the West with his family—De Voto returned West on a four-month reconnaissance and found his home.

In *The Uneasy Chair*, as De Voto's life-curve crosses back upon itself during this crucial period, Stegner as biographer plays it exactly right. Describing De Voto's return to Ogden, he writes: ". . . coming back to him on this euphoric tour of all the country he had dreamed of and made himself an expert on, his hometown looked a good deal better than it ever had before; and though he had fallen in love in Montana, he had all but forgiven Utah by the time he came across the salt desert into a Utah sunrise" (p. 293). Thus De Voto came back "to his starting point, in nostalgia instead of in derision" (p. 347). De Voto returned to Cambridge "greatly enlarged." He now had a firm sense of the outlines and relationships of western geography, a sharper understanding of how the native landscape had worked on American consciousness, and an increased confidence in the geopolitical implications of the expedition whose story he had set out to tell. The trip also initiated De Voto's full adoption of the conservation cause. Essentially it opened the spigot for his outpouring of conservation polemics. The irony, Stegner noted, was that "his crusade should have been made in behalf of the West, which he had done his best to scorn; not until he had cured himself of being literary [that is, Eastern] could he give himself back to it"(p. 322).

What makes Stegner's achievement in *The Uneasy Chair* so impressive is the seamless way in which he interweaves De Voto's exterior, geographic life and his tumultuous inner life, and reveals the connections between these worlds. Stegner was too canny to paint the inner and outer landscapes as simple reflections of one another; they aren't. What he does is demonstrate, simply, that these worlds interact in space and time and that, depending on a person's temperment and circumstance, this relationship may be at the heart of the life story. We remember De Voto's literary generation for its expatriates and its self-conscious alienation. De Voto's own foreign adventures, Stegner reports, were limited to bootlegging escapades along the Quebec border, brief auto excursions into Ontario and Alberta, and "a hypothetical trip to Mexico as a boy." Yet De Voto's view "was wide, not provincial. The perspective that others got by looking back from Europe . . . he got by looking West from Cambridge, or back from the present into the past, or forward from the past into the future" (p. 364).

▽ ▽ ▽

STEGNER, OF COURSE, WROTE one other biography: his own. He often cautioned readers not to conflate his fiction and his life or his narrators and their author. But we also find, as in his essay "The Law of Nature and the Dream of Man," acknowledgment that "without consciously intending to, I have written my life. . . . Sure, it's autobiography. Sure, it's fiction. Either way, if you have done it right, it's true."[28] As early as *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* and as late as *Crossing to Safety*, Stegner drew upon and contrasted the regional characteristics of various Wests, California, Mexico, Iowa, Wisconsin, New England, Denmark, France, Italy, Egypt, the Philippines. To read the body of his fiction is to gain a mental map of Stegner's own travels and, as well, a sense of his striving toward unity and continuity along the way.

In a recent essay, "Finding a Voice of His Own: The Story of Wallace Stegner's Fiction," Jackson Benson has succinctly described the drawn-out and often frustrating process, unfolding over a period of more than thirty years, through which Stegner finally achieved "his true originality." In Benson's analysis, the crux of the challenge Stegner faced was "to transcend the autobiographical."[29] Thus another paradox: to find one's own voice, one must learn to speak in voices not one's own. Stegner's earliest fiction lacked the sense of personal investment that would distinguish his later works. When he turned to (thinly veiled) semi-autobiography in *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, Stegner began to find the distinctive, expressive tone of voice that revealed more than just raw writing talent. As Benson observes: "An author's deep participation can bring forth superior technique, and that is the great advantage of semi-autobiographical fiction."[30]

But having mined that personal field, Stegner now encountered further frustration. When his subsequent novels *Second Growth* and especially *Joe Hill* failed to connect with an audience, he left the genre behind him. During a ten-year hiatus from novels, he devoted his energies largely to short stories and to work on *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian*. Benson attributes Stegner's eventual return to novels to his working, through the short stories, toward a narrative voice that conveyed "a sense of truth and conviction coming not . . . out of the telling of his own story, but rather out of the force of personality and belief—and, one might add, his willingness to give up authoritarian control and let his characters breathe."[31] This new flexibility and vulnerability finds its first full expression in *All the Little Live Things* (1967) and continues to mature through the later novels.

What has this to do with biography and geography? Perhaps the process of composing two substantial biographies—one during his hiatus from novel-writing, the other as he was honing his new and more complex novelist's voice—helped to reorient Stegner's work generally. The biographer participates in a highly peculiar human experience: the vicarious living of another life in another time. A biographer cannot help but be enlarged, mostly unconsciously, by the experience. And if the job has been done right, the reader shares, too, in that enlargement. To a degree at least, the biographies forced Stegner to adopt new voices and perspectives, to recombine interior and exterior worlds in new ways. This may have contributed to the achievement of voice that Benson identifies. "It is a step," notes Benson, "beyond autobiographical achievement—to bring 'other' voices fully to life."[32]

Stegner insisted his interest in history was "personal, not scholarly. . . . I wouldn't have written Powell if I hadn't known the Southern Utah plateaus, and I wouldn't have written Benny De Voto's biography unless I had known him. All the history and biography I've done has been an offshoot of personal experiences and personal acquaintances."[33] But against this statement we can weigh the observation of André Maurois in *Aspects of Biography*: "Biography is a means of expression when the author has chosen his subject in order to respond to a secret need in his own nature."[34] Leon Edel notes that when the "secret need" involves the biographer's sub-

ject itself, the emotional entanglements can place the biographer in jeopardy. In Stegner's case, the need was not so secret. And it seems to have had less to do with either Powell or De Voto themselves than with the issues they confronted, the ambiguities they embodied, the work they inspired, and the insights their lives offered. Stegner did not live through his biographical subjects. He enriched his own life and literature through them, and in so doing he enriched our national life and literature.