



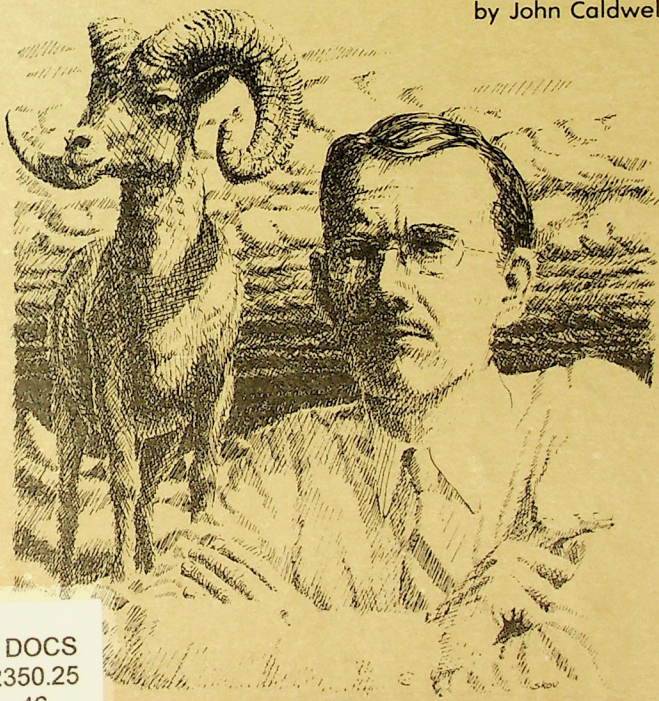
# WESTERN WRITERS SERIES

No. 46

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## GEORGE R. STEWART

by John Caldwell



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Boise State University Western Writers Series

Number 46

# George R. Stewart

By John Caldwell

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*George R. Stewart*

## George R. Stewart

When George Stewart's father, looking for better health and a new start, moved his family from western Pennsylvania to southern California, he placed them into the great stream of emigrants that crossed America in search of a better life in the West. This Western living experience has had a strong shaping influence upon George Stewart, both as a scholar and as a writer. Although his interests have been very broad, a major part of his work has been Western, centering on the San Francisco Bay area and the valleys, mountains, and plains that lead to it.

The relationship of men to the land—i.e., the effect of the land upon the people that live on it—is the theme of much of his writing and certainly of his Western work. Because the land, the environment, determines what life will be, people must be willing to conform to it. If unaware of this necessity, they will be shaped against their will and perhaps to their detriment. This truth is demonstrated again and again in all of Stewart's works. In *Bret Harte*, *Argonaut and Exile*, Harte is shaped and supported by California, and when he leaves it, he goes into a steady decline. In *Ordeal by Hunger*, the Donner Party—though strong, confident, and well-equipped—cannot cope with the demands of the land; and so it disintegrates in the snows of the Sierra. Four of Stewart's novels are specifically Western: *East of the Giants*, *Sheep Rock*, *Fire*, and *Storm*. In each of them the lives of the people are shaped by the environment, and in the latter three it is the earth, the mountains and

streams, the rocks, trees, and weather that carry the story.

George R. Stewart is a Westerner by choice. His interests are catholic, he has traveled extensively, but he has always maintained his home in California and has always returned to the Bay Area. His work covers many and varied subjects from Classical Greece through Medieval England to the American Civil War and contemporary affairs, but the preponderance of it has been Western with its focus on central California. His books have followed the overland journey of the emigrants to that region and have investigated their lives in that place. He has edited the journals and recollections of people who made the transcontinental crossing and has written biographies of three writers who lived in California and were profoundly influenced by it.

That there is an affinity between the writer and the area in which he lives is a basic tenet with Stewart. The writer responds to the climate, the terrain, and the social mores of his region. Yet this relationship means more than simply writing about the local details that he knows best. Because the writer is a participant and a part of the place just as it is a part of him, he writes not so much *about* it as *from* it.

In "The Regional Approach to Literature," a paper that Stewart read before the National Council of Teachers of English in 1948, he outlined the characteristics of a work that make it regional. He required more than the fact that it be located in a particular place or even that the setting figure prominently in the action. More specifically, regionalism requires that the work of art must draw its substance from the region.

This substance will be derived from two sources. In the first place, it will come from the natural background—the climate, topography, flora, fauna, etc.—as it affects human

life in the region. In the second place, it will come from the particular modes of human society which happen to have been established in the region and to have made it distinctive.

Although his paper is not about a particular regionalism, the application of its principles is easily discernible in Stewart's own Western writing. In *Fire*, the Spitcat is a California fire because the trees, the brush, and the mountains are Californian, as are the rangers and the loggers, the school boys, and the winos. Not an idealized forest fire, it burns across the Sierra Nevada north and east of San Francisco.

Stewart defends the proposition that all literature is to some degree regional. Its attitudes, its prejudices, even its vocabulary betray its origin. As the people of an area intermingle, as they react to one another, and, more importantly, as they react to the environment, they become different from what they were before they moved there. Problems of housing, livelihood, and communication have different solutions on the Great Plains and the Pacific slope from what they had on the Tidewater and Massachusetts Bay. Englishmen became Virginians and Yankees along the James and the Charles. Virginians and Yankees became Westerners along the Missouri, the Humboldt, and the Sacramento. Old words took on new meanings, and new words were created to describe new creatures and new experiences. Stewart insists that the influence of place is pervasive. No one escapes its molding. An English professor in Berkeley feels it: "For even through an ivory tower the wind of the country blows."

Stewart concludes his paper with the observation that since most of us are destined to be provincials in some degree, we should be good provincials, knowing our region and its literature. There is something in us, he says, that instinctively distrusts the learning of the individual who knows Homer and Dante and Shakespeare but is ignorant of the writers of his own time and place.

Stewart's specific place is the Bay Area of California, but he arrived there by a circuitous route. He was born on May 31, 1895, in Sewickley, Pennsylvania, on the Ohio River west of Pittsburgh. His early boyhood was spent in the small western Pennsylvania town of Indiana, which was his mother's hometown and to which the family moved before George's second birthday.

George Stewart, senior, had married late, and he was forty-eight when George, junior, his second son, was born. He was an affectionate parent, but being naturally reserved and considerably older, he was not much of a companion for his sons. A graduate of Vassar, Ella May Wilson Stewart was twenty-nine, nineteen years younger than her husband, when young George was born.

Both the Wilson and Stewart families were old-line Americans. All of their ancestors, Scotch-Irish and English, had arrived in America before 1810. These early settlers were farmers, but in the later generations there was a heavy representation of professional men — at least two doctors, a Presbyterian minister, and a number of teachers and businessmen.

The Stewarts had three sons. John, three years younger than George, died at the age of six; Andrew, three years older, was an active, aggressive boy who eclipsed his younger brother and with whom George found it impossible to compete. This situation encouraged the younger boy to withdraw into himself and to find his satisfactions in reading and daydreaming.

Turn-of-the-century Indiana was a county seat of about five thousand people and the commercial center for the surrounding agricultural area. Because the population was predominantly of Scotch-Irish descent, much of the family's life revolved around the services and activities of the Presbyterian church. While college graduates were no rarity in the town, and while their presence in the community might have made it slightly more advanced than the



typical small town of the period, the area offered few cultural opportunities. Music was limited to what the town's vocal groups could produce, and theater was restricted to the nickelodeon and an occasional traveling company, both of them suspect in the eyes of Presbyterian parents. Staffed by young women, the elementary school stressed the basics of reading, arithmetic, spelling, and music, with the result that George Stewart was not presented with a wide range of opportunities, though he was given a thorough grounding in the fundamentals.

Although Indiana was a small town, George Stewart was neither a Tom Sawyer nor a Penrod. He did not roam the countryside and the streets of the town getting into one boyish scrape after another. He was a bookish youngster whose pre-adolescent adventures came vicariously through reading. Although Indiana had no public library, the Stewarts had a considerable book collection, including sets of the standard authors. In these George read widely, roaming through Dickens and Thackeray, Kipling's *Just So Stories* and *The Jungle Book*, Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, and the stories in the Bible. There were also *St. Nicholas*, *The Youth's Companion*, and innumerable volumes of the adventure stories of George Alfred Henty.

During the winter of 1906-1907 the elder George Stewart had pneumonia, which was at that time a very serious illness. His doctor advised him to migrate to a milder climate in order to prevent a recurrence. For the Stewarts this was a major decision, since their family lived in Pennsylvania and one did not lightly strain those ties by moving across the continent. Nevertheless, the Stewarts decided to move to southern California. This complete break with a known environment and total immersion in a new one were important formative experiences for young George Stewart.

In the fall of 1907, Mr. Stewart and Andrew left for California. George and his mother followed in February on the "Scout" of the

historic Santa Fe railroad, a slow train that made frequent stops, including three stops a day for meals in Harvey Houses. Across the Kansas plains, through a corner of Colorado that offered a distant glimpse of the Rocky Mountains, over the high plateau of New Mexico and Arizona, through Flagstaff, and on to California, the train ride allowed twelve-year-old George to see mile after mile of the new country. As the train neared their destination, a fortuitous blockage of the track caused it to stop part way up "the slope of Cajon Pass." As Stewart remembers the episode in his "Autobiography," "The sun shone. The air was soft and warm." He and his mother walked some distance from the train, "luxuriating in the balmy morning. . . ." "Nothing—no introduction to California—could have happened in more fortunate or lovelier fashion."

Until they moved to Pasadena in 1911, the Stewarts lived in the little town of Azusa, a service-center for the citrus ranches in the area. A raw, new town of palm trees, cactus, and sunshine, Azusa stood on the edge of the wilderness but also within twenty-five miles of Los Angeles by the route of the red cars of the Pacific Electric. Although smaller and newer than Indiana, Azusa provided the cultural opportunities of a larger urban community. Mr. Stewart kept a horse and buggy for family transportation, but the bicycle was a boy's way of getting around. Sometimes riding "no hands," George soon explored the countryside and nearby towns. In a few years he had his first wilderness experiences, when with a young companion he took frequent day-trips into the steep, rough, uninhabited Sierra Madre and through the canyon of the San Gabriel River, where in the dry stream bed he killed his first rattler and carried home the rattles. In the summer of 1911 he took his first camping trip, exploring, with two other boys and a burro, the San Bernardino Mountain country north of Redlands.

Mr. Stewart had invested in an orange grove in Ontario, and he

sold it at a profit and subsequently bought a better one near Anaheim. When these ventures proved successful, the family had been moved into the small city of Pasadena. Although rather shy and withdrawn, George was always at or near the top of his class. But not until his senior year at Pasadena High School did he make a social breakthrough by writing a humorous poem extolling the prowess of a high school football hero. That year he was an outstanding debater. He also played as second man on the tennis team, helped decorate the float for the Rose Parade, and published a story in the school magazine.

Throughout his last two years of high school, George had prepared for entrance into Princeton University, but his four years at Princeton were somewhat disappointing. The teaching was good enough and student-faculty relationships were satisfactory, but there was, as he remembered later, no "wide-spread and serious intellectual ferment" and very little sense of social responsibility or political awareness. Social and athletic activities were very important, scholarship much less so. Although he was active in the Arch Club and played the flute in the orchestra, he was interested most in scholarship, language, and literature. He was elected to Phi Beta Kappa in his junior year, and one of his poems, "The Knights of Rhodes," appeared in *A Book of Princeton Verse, 1916*. Even though scholarship was not particularly acceptable socially at Princeton, he had begun to think of making it a career.

Princeton awarded him a B.A. in the spring of 1917, just after the United States had entered World War I, and that June he entered the U.S. Army Ambulance Service. He served for over two years, and although he was never sent overseas, he contracted a severe case of pneumonia which left him with a permanent disability and a recurring illness that eventually required the removal of a lobe from his lungs.

In August 1919, when he began his first period of residence in the Bay Area as a graduate student at the University of California, he could not have imagined what a profound influence his graduate studies would have on his life. Here, under the influence of Chauncey Wells, he began to shape and refine his writing skills; and, in a course in Western history that was taught by Herbert Bolton, he discovered the American West as a subject for serious study. Work on "Stevenson in California," his M.A. thesis, led him to the discovery of a previously unknown essay by Robert Louis Stevenson and to his first scholarly-popular publication, "San Carlos Day, an Article in a California Newspaper" (*Scribner's Magazine*, August 1920). At Berkeley he also had his first experience in college teaching, and he found that he liked it. These three discoveries—writing, teaching, and the study of the American West—made this as formative a year as any that he was ever going to experience.

If the graduate English program at California had been stronger, Stewart would probably have remained there to get his doctorate. Instead, he went East again, this time to Columbia, where, with a dissertation titled "Modern Metrical Techniques as Illustrated by Ballad Meter (1700-1920)," he was awarded the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in 1922. Columbia had little effect upon him, however. Having determined to become an English professor, he approached the Ph.D. program as something to be endured so that he could get on with his proper work.

This work, which was to be both teaching and writing, began with an appointment in 1922 as an instructor of English at the University of Michigan. His first full year of teaching proved to be one of concentrated work, but it was good experience, and he enjoyed it. However, another event made this year even more notable. At his first faculty tea, the new Dr. Stewart was introduced to Theodosia Burton, the daughter of the president of the university. Before the

end of that academic year they were engaged, and they were married in Ann Arbor on May 17, 1924.

Since Stewart had taken a position as instructor at the University of California in 1923, the young couple spent their honeymoon driving an old Studebaker across the northern tier of states to Glacier Park and into Canada, across the mountains and south along the Pacific Coast to Pasadena, and then back to Berkeley for the beginning of classes. It was a true overland experience.

After publishing several journal articles related to his dissertation topic, he began to follow his interest in the West and in the use of Western material by collecting information for a major social and cultural study of the Gold Rush period, but he dropped the project when it began to turn into too big an undertaking. From this effort, however, he salvaged the material on Bret Harte, who was the first Californian to become an authentic American literary figure—a nationally recognized and applauded writer. His choice of Bret Harte was as much academic opportunism as anything, since he needed a subject and very little serious research had been done on Harte. From this enterprise came "Bret Harte on the Frontier; a New Chapter in Biography" (*Southwest Review*, 1926), a series of further articles, an anthology of Harte's stories and verse, a bibliography of his California publications, and the biography which is still the definitive study of Harte's life.

Most of the material for the biography came from original sources that Stewart found in California and from interviews with people who had known Harte. For example, Stewart got an important diary from Harte's sister who was still living in Berkeley. The research had been completed when the Stewarts left in June of 1930 to spend a sabbatical in France, where the book was written.

Although he does not deal with Harte specifically as a Western writer in *Bret Harte, Argonaut and Exile*, Harte emerges as a

Western writer, and there is little doubt that Stewart sees Harte as a Westerner. Stewart shows that the year of Harte's birth, 1836, is unremarkable save for two events: Richard Henry Dana's return to Boston with the notes that were to become *Two Years Before the Mast*, which is the first great book about California; and the death of a small band of Texans at the Alamo, a legendary moment in Western history. Stewart links these events by saying, "By many tricks of fortune the new-born baby was to become interpreter to the world of the romance of such hard-handed frontiersmen in that distant California" (p. 4). Harte's death was sudden, and Stewart closes the biography with one of the oldest of Western clichés: "In spirit and almost literally, like a Western hero, 'he died with his boots on'" (p. 326).

When he arrived in San Francisco in 1854, Bret Harte was a young man without training or experience. As Stewart explains, by that time the day of the Forty-Niner was over, the big strikes had played out, and gold mining had become a work-a-day occupation. However, this waning of the Gold Rush era was unimportant to Harte, for although he had vague literary ambitions, he made no connection at that time between the gold fields and literature. Whether he had any real experience in the camps is a matter of speculation that Stewart probes thoroughly, concluding that Harte probably had some limited contact with mining life during the mid-1850s. More important to his experience was the period from 1857 through March 1860, which he spent working on a newspaper in Union on the northern California coast. This raw, new town, similar in many ways to the Sierra towns of a decade earlier, existed to service the gold strike on the Trinity River. Miners and mule-skinners were a common sight in its streets and saloons.

First as typesetter, then as occasional contributor, Harte began his San Francisco career on the eight-page weekly, *Golden Era*. A sketch

published in this paper brought him to the attention of Jessie Benton Frémont. The first person of taste and discernment to show an interest in him, she introduced Harte to her influential friends, had him to dinner every Sunday, and read and criticized his work. Through her influence he was appointed to the first of the political jobs that for the next eight years gave him the financial security that made it possible for him to develop as a writer.

Stewart portrays Harte as a young writer whose work was subjected to knowledgeable criticism and who was smart enough to learn, but who wanted to write "literature" and therefore avoided the low experiences and people around him. During these years, Harte, established as a writer and editor, became a leader in the Bohemian literary group of the Bay Area. He edited *Outcroppings* (1865), the first anthology of poetry by California authors, and in 1867, he published two collections of his own work, *Condensed Novels and Other Papers* and *The Lost Galleon and Other Tales*. In the following year, Anton Roman founded *The Overland Monthly*, and Harte was a logical choice as its editor, since he was considered by many "as the leading man of letters of the Coast."

Sometime during 1868, probably influenced by Roman, Harte came to the realization that there was a wealth of new material all around him, pure literary gold waiting to be mined. His first strike, "The Luck of Roaring Camp," appeared in the August issue of *The Overland Monthly* and was an instant success, not only in San Francisco but in the literary capitals of the East. "The Outcasts of Poker Flat," "Miggles," "Tennessee's Partner," and "The Idyl of Red Gulch" followed in succeeding issues. Harte had found a subject, and California had found a chronicler. In 1870 the Boston publisher Fields, Osgood and Company brought out *The Luck of Roaring Camp, and Other Sketches*. A London edition followed shortly, and California had her first national literary success—a home-grown

writer of a Western book.

As Stewart demonstrates, Harte was a reluctant Westerner. At his earliest opportunity, with ten thousand Eastern dollars in his pocket, he left San Francisco never to return. But he was a Westerner in spite of himself, since it was the only role that he was permitted to play and the only success that he had. To some extent he had invented California as a literary subject, but it proved to be the only subject that he had, and although his memories of it dimmed through the years, its influence stayed with him until the end.

Stewart's *Bret Harte* was well reviewed in the literary magazines and scholarly journals, usually being hailed as the long overdue first real biography of an important writer. Since Stewart had by this time published nine journal articles and a textbook, *The Technique of English Verse*, he felt that with the Harte biography he had earned promotion to Associate Professor. Disgruntled at the University when he was not advanced, and believing that he had nothing to lose, he began looking for a project that would be fun to do. He had read C. F. McGlashan's *History of the Donner Party* and felt that this was a good story which he could tell better than McGlashan had. Assuming, mistakenly, that most of the material would be available in printed sources, he began the research that would result in *Ordeal by Hunger*. He found that much of what he needed was still in manuscript and some of it still in private collections. To establish the geographical background, he had to go over much of the trail himself. In doing this research he began his love affair with the overland trails and the people who travelled them.

The tragedy of the Donner Party is the most widely known of all Western stories; told and retold with various degrees of accuracy, it has passed into legend. In *Ordeal by Hunger*, George Stewart has carefully reconstructed the story, basing it solidly upon known facts, avoiding hearsay, and dealing directly with the journals, letters, and



recollections of the participants. Without moralizing and without judging the actions of the people or second-guessing them, he attempts to state what happened. It is a tale of heroism and horror, of dedication and pettiness, of courage and cupidity played out in a majestic mountain and desert wilderness.

By all rights the company of overland emigrants that came to be known as the Donner Party should have breezed through to California. That they did not was a disaster compounded out of human error, sometime poor judgment, and an ignorance of the land and of the demands that it would make upon them. They were, for the most part, well-to-do farmers and businessmen from Illinois and Iowa, some of them past middle-age, but hardy, outdoor people who had successfully made a living from the land. They were plenteously supplied with food, equipped with substantial wagons drawn by strong, carefully chosen oxen, and possessed of a large herd of miscellaneous cattle and riding horses.

Until July 20, 1846, they had been part of the general migration, but on that day they turned aside from the established trail to follow the "cut-off" urged by Lansford W. Hastings, a route that would save perhaps three hundred and fifty miles. Hastings, an experienced overlander, had written *The Emigrants' Guide to Oregon and California*, which some of the Donner Party had with them, and he was waiting himself at Fort Bridger, only one hundred miles distant, to guide all who would join him. When they arrived at Fort Bridger, they discovered that Hastings, guiding a large train, had already departed, leaving directions for any future group to follow. Jim Bridger and his partner Vasquez, both experienced mountain men, urged them to follow Hastings' route.

On July 31st, under their elected captain, the elderly "Uncle George" Donner—but without an experienced guide of their own—they left Fort Bridger to follow Hastings' wheel tracks into the

wilderness.

This was, as Stewart points out, a company of hardy people by now inured to the routines of the trail and camp, but

. . . they were lacking in all sorts of skills needful to one who would cope successfully with the strange new environment. . . . To read trail sign, to find water where no water met the eye, to talk sign-language, to know when to smoke with an Indian and when to shoot him, to hole up in a canyon in a snow-storm—the whole lore of the farther west, of desert and plain and mountain—all this was a closed book to these solid farming people plodding along by their oxen. . . . (p. 19; 1960 ed.)

Without this knowledge and experience they lost much time cutting a trail through the Wasatch Mountains, crossing the great salt flats, and wandering through the mountains beyond. In the waterless stretches, panic turned the journey into a rout and the company disintegrated into individual family units each out to save itself. Many wagons and oxen were left in the desert. Fear caused them to send some men on ahead, and hatred led to the banishment of James F. Reed, the best leader and organizer among them. Dispirited, disorganized, harassed by Indians, they arrived, by way of the canyon of the Truckee River, at the eastern slope of the Sierra Nevada in late October. Under normal conditions they should still have had time to make a crossing, but the winter of 1846-47 was to be, in these mountains, one of the worst in history.

They were hit by an early storm, but were sure that since it was so early in the year, the snow would melt after the storm, and then they could go on. But the storm lasted from October 28th until November 11th and effectively sealed off the mountain route with snow that did not melt for months. During the next month two additional storms

left eight feet of snow on the ground in the camp that they had hastily constructed at the little lake that would later be called Donner. Untrained in mountain life, they had "neither equipment nor skill for luring mountain trout" from the lake, and their attempts at hunting proved virtually fruitless. "Had they been mountain men," Stewart says, "they would have known what to expect," but this weather simply baffled them. They settled gradually into a lethargic waiting during which they consumed everything edible in the camps including, ultimately, their own dead.

Two attempts by small parties to cross the pass on foot failed. Then on December 16th a group of ten men, five young women, and two boys, on crudely fashioned snowshoes, made it over the pass and beyond. Two turned back, but the rest continued toward the West, frozen, starving, snow blind, hysterical, and lost most of the time. They endured a three-day storm which extinguished their fire and left them huddled under a snow-covered pile of blankets. When their meager supplies were gone, driven to the extremity by starvation and exhaustion, they ate the bodies of those who died. After thirty-three days, delirious, more than half crazed, their feet swollen and bleeding, two men and all five women arrived at a ranch in the Sacramento Valley.

From this point Stewart has two stories to tell: the suffering and degradation of the people camped along the lake, and the various attempts to rescue them. There are many strands to be handled, but Stewart weaves them into a grippingly unified story.

James Reed and William McCutchen, who was one of the men sent ahead to bring back food, started back across the mountains with a pack train on October 31st, thinking that they would find the party somewhere west of the pass, but they were unable to force their way through the deep snow of the first storm. Not until the seven snowshoers came out of the mountains on January 18th did the people in

the Sacramento Valley know of the desperate condition of the emigrants at the lake. A hastily organized relief party, which was composed of recent emigrants and of sailors who had jumped ship, started into the mountains on January 31st. As these inexperienced men were starting into the snow, a major relief expedition was being organized in Yerba Buena. Under the direction of Selim E. Woodworth, who was a former naval officer, and Caleb Greenwood, who was a long-time mountain man, this was to be a well-financed effort that would send expert mountain men over the pass and support them from a base camp with caches of food and equipment.

Stewart tells these stories simultaneously, moving smoothly back and forth. His admiration for the heroism of those in the first relief party is undisguised. Despite Greenwood's claim that if those farmers and sailors went into the snows none of them would come back alive, Glover, Tucker, Sels, Moultry, Coffeemeyer, and the two Rhoades brothers survived a brutal five-day storm. Floundering through soft snow, they reached the lake on February 18th, and four days later they started back with twenty-four refugees, seventeen of them children. The party composed of Greenwood's trappers and hunters made the crossing in good weather in six days. On their way out, however, they had been caught in a great storm and had "broken down completely. Rescuers and refugees alike were scattered in small isolated groups, each as helpless and in as precarious a position as another" (p. 237). Under Woodworth's timidly inept leadership the relays of supplies that were to be thrust out to meet them never materialized, and the mountain men ". . . in spite of all their training in the craft of the mountains . . . had suffered almost as badly as greenhorns."

Of the eighty-seven in the Donner Party, forty died on the trail or in the mountains. The others lived through unthinkable horrors, but as Stewart points out, their "disaster was the most spectacular in the

record of western migration," so it was in no way typical of the overland experience. Though they followed the best advice that they could get, "they had . . . left behind . . . their familiar natural environment," and against the implacable desert and mountain, their ignorance had cost them dearly.

In *Ordeal by Hunger* George Stewart successfully applied to the writing of history what he has called a novelistic technique. By skillfully weaving together the exploits of the rescuers and a record of life as it struggled to continue at the lake, he solved the problem of recording dramas that were going on simultaneously. In translating journals and reminiscences into dialogue, he gave immediacy to the story—an immediacy which approaches that of fiction. From the large cast of characters in *Ordeal by Hunger*, many stand out as fully rounded individuals. William Eddy, one of the snow-shoers, is in some ways a better realized character than some of those in Stewart's later novels.

*Ordeal by Hunger* was awarded the Silver Medal of the Commonwealth Club of California in 1936. A new edition, published in 1960, includes "three accounts by survivors." Stewart also added a supplement in which he summarizes the new research on the Donner Party and how it affects some of the story's details, but he concludes that nothing had appeared to make major revisions necessary.

Stewart's next subject was George H. Derby, a West Point graduate, who served creditably, if briefly, in the Mexican War. Although he had a reputation as a wit and practical joker, it was not until he was posted to California in 1849 that he was able to give full rein to his talents. George Stewart first became aware of Derby in the early twenties, but it was not until 1933, when he received from the Derby family a voluminous collection of family records, that he began seriously to consider doing a biography of this literary figure of early California. The result of Stewart's efforts, *John Phoenix, Esq.*,

*the Veritable Squibbob; a Life of Captain George H. Derby, U.S.A.*, portrays two divergent personalities in one person—a dedicated, professional Army engineer and an inventive jokester, ancestor to Mark Twain.

Derby was born of an old New England family in Massachusetts in 1823 and died there in 1861, but he was a Californian by choice, for it was there—among the convivial fellows gathered at Barry and Patten's Saloon in San Francisco, "where convention had not yet had time to lay a heavy hand . . . and a good joke was above the price of rubies!"—that the spirit of John Phoenix rose up and laughed. San Francisco was fast becoming the literary center of the Far West, for it was the only community with the wealth and cosmopolitan population to support a literary press. Here in the *Alta California*, the *Pioneer*, and the *San Francisco Herald*, first as Squibbob, then as John Phoenix, Derby published the hoaxes and burlesques that convulsed Californians: his outrageous report of the meeting of "The Ladies' Relief Society," the description of "Sandyago," the "Musical Review Extraordinary," and "A New System of English Grammar" that gave numerical weight to adjectives.

Admitting that the humor of Phoenix is dated, Stewart describes it as a "demonstration of a basic quality of the American frontier," a quality too often ignored in later histories. "I doubt," he contends, "if there was ever a community in which humor was more enjoyed, fostered and admired than in California in the years following the gold rush" (p. viii).

In San Diego, Derby built for the Army a dam that returned the San Diego River to its original channel. But as John Phoenix, temporary editor of the *Herald*, he used that Democratic paper to promote the Whig candidate for governor in a hoax that had the whole state laughing. *Phoenixiana*, a collection of sketches and burlesques published in New York in December 1855, was an immediate suc-

cess. Highly praised by the Eastern press, it was, Stewart says, "a widely ranging satiric comment upon life in California in the years following the gold rush" (p. 174). The Californians loved it and Derby. The *Alta California* called it "the first work of any pretensions to literary merit written by a Californian," and claimed that "John Phoenix is 'our John,' a part and parcel of us [whose mother wit] has been strengthened and quickened by the peculiar circumstances attending a California experience of some six years' duration" (p. 171).

The California experience had made Phoenix, Stewart concludes, because it had given Derby the freedom to be both army officer and humorist. It had provided the "congenial environment which had fostered his eccentric humor. . . . the West had given him his opportunity, appreciated his efforts both written and acted, and fostered him" (p. 181).

Before the appearance of *John Phoenix*, which was his sixth book, George Stewart had decided that he was going to write a novel. As other projects then underway were finished, *East of the Giants*, a story of early California, began to take shape. The novel is in three parts, each covering a specific period: 1837-1838, 1844-1850, and 1856-1861. These segments are connected by inter-chapters which carry the action forward through the intervening years.

Unlike many Western stories which begin with the arrival on the frontier of a tall, blonde young man who falls in love with a Mexican or Indian girl, *East of the Giants* introduces into the life of Mexican California a New England girl so blonde that she is later referred to as Señora Blanca. Judith Hingham arrived in Monterey in April 1837 aboard her father's ship, the *Spanish Belle*. After a head-long courtship of less than a week, she is carried off to Rancho Amarillo as the bride of Don Juan Godoy.

Rancho Amarillo was an "outer ranch" consisting of 19,000 acres of frontier grass land that was granted to the Godoys to provide a

buffer between the Indians and the more settled areas of San Francisco Bay and Monterey. The arrival of Judith, the good white woman, signaled—as the arrival of such a woman has in Western fiction from Red Gulch to Yellow Sky—the passing of this frontier, the end of a man's world, and the coming of civilization. In the eighteen thirties and forties, California, a land filled with cattle, was at the height of its prosperity as Mexican territory. Each year the natural increase of the herds was slaughtered, and the hides were sold to the trading ships that came to the coast. Yet Juan Godoy, a natural leader, sees himself less as a rancher than as a defender of the frontier. Always ready to lead his neighbors and his own vaqueros against marauding Indians, he lets the ranch look after itself.

During her early years on Rancho Amarillo when she sometimes feels so remote that she can believe she is just east of Brobdingnag, Judith feels her love for Juan, which had sprung suddenly to life in Monterey, grow and mature. She learns to understand his impetuosity and even his infidelity. Her love for Juan parallels her love for the place, the valley, and the rolling hills. At first she sees the brown summer hills as dead and ugly, but she learns to accept Juan's admonition that the grass is not dead, but ripe. But when she begins to love the land, she determines to change the life on the ranch in order to bring some gentleness and beauty into it. When he came to Mexico four generations earlier, Antonio Godoy had been a cultured Spanish officer, but the Godoy family had steadily degenerated until it reached the level of Juan, the primitive frontiersman who worked beside his Indians and vaqueros on the slaughtering-ground and who lived little better than they. Judith is galvanized into action when she sees a little half-breed boy squat and relieve himself "in front of the house . . . as unthinkingly as an animal. Judith felt a wild rage rising inside of her. It was not at the child. It was at the whole way of life. Why think of beauty—first she must build latrines!" (p. 136).



She builds not only latrines, but also a large extension on the house, new storerooms, a patio with a fountain, and a wall to separate the house from the quarters. She has four children—Luis, Guito, Leticia, and Enrique—all dark like their father. Despite the shake roof on the house, the ranch and the life on it remain Californian, and New England drifts further into the past.

A child within her, and one in her arms, and another pulling at her skirts—but there was much more. There was always Juan with his handsome dark head, and his hard body. And more and more there was the ranch itself—servants to be managed, and accounts to be kept and building to be superintended. . . . More and more she took over the marketing of the hides and tallow. . . . She planted an orchard . . . and . . . planted a vineyard on the hill behind the house [and] a rose-garden in front of the house. (pp. 139-40)

But in the midst of change, Judith realizes that when her walls have crumbled and her peach trees have died, “the line of the hills would look just the same, and the trees would still grow along the ravines” (p. 169).

Although Judith is the central character in *East of the Giants*, the two principal male characters are metaphors for California. Daniel Melton, merchant-hide dealer, has been a friend of Juan for many years. Melton had returned to California on the *Spanish Belle* when Judith arrived and had been in love with her since that time. Juan, the frontier caballero, is California's immediate past; Melton, the businessman, is her future.

The second part of *East of the Giants* covers the chaotic period from 1844 through 1850: the uprising of the California ranchers against the Mexican governor, Micheltorena; the Bear Flag Revolt;

Frémont's military adventuring; and the surrender after the Mexican War, the Gold Rush, and the rising tide of American emigration.

Rancho Amarillo, prosperous and secure, is a semi-feudal estate. Juan and Judith, master and mistress, are the center of a community of half-breeds and Indians who are neither servants nor tenants but retainers whose service must be accepted and to whom a livelihood is due. His vaqueros, Miguel and Ramón, ride behind Juan wherever he goes. He leads them off against the governor and faces him down, but in a punitive expedition against the Tokolumnes—Indians that he has always defeated in the past—Juan is severely wounded and nearly dies. Powerless to stop a raid on the ranch by Frémont's men, Juan and his vaqueros ride into the hills as guerrillas. It is a struggle that they do not want for they would be content to live under American rule if their property and their dignity were respected. The Californians control the hills. The Americans, however, hold the towns and are better armed and organized, so it is obvious that they will win. In one last skirmish, provoked by Juan to prove to his men that they can defeat the Americans, they annihilate a five-man scouting party. In the fighting, Ramón is killed, and Juan realizes: "Things would be different now; Ramón had been riding behind him ever since they were children" (p. 249).

Judith reluctantly adapts, but Juan cannot.

He . . . felt the old life with its deep satisfactions crumbling away beneath his feet. No longer would the ever-present thought of Felipe's Tokolumnes give him the touch of excitement that he needed. The ranch might go on after a fashion, but it would not be as before. It was the end of an era; perhaps the only graceful thing they could do would be to die. They had money now, but what could they buy with it to equal for Juan the established ways of living to which he had

been born. (p. 277)

Attempting to find his excitement by drinking and gambling in the saloons of San Francisco, Juan becomes flabby and sullen. He loses what he had made in the gold fields and begins to sell cattle and then parts of the ranch. When Miguel is killed in a skirmish with Texans squatting on the ranch, Juan's gloom deepens and his deterioration quickens. Melton's early purchases of property in San Francisco have made him wealthy, and he attempts to protect his friend, but it is impossible to do so. Backed by the last of his vaqueros, Juan is killed in a brawl in a gambling den. His death marks the end of a way of life. "Now they were all gone," Judith muses, "the dark-faced men with knives in their boots, who had ridden behind their master. . . . And their master was gone too. . . . He had needed the hard life of a fighter. As soon as life had got easy, he had gone to pieces . . ." (pp. 309, 311).

After the passing of the age of the rancheros, California life shifts to San Francisco, the California of the merchants, bankers, speculators, and politicians. Judith marries Daniel Melton and moves the family to a mansion on Stockton Street. For the next ten years, she lives there as wife of one of the wealthiest men in the city. Luis and Enrique change their names to Lewis and Henry, and Leticia eventually becomes Mrs. Kelly. Influenced by a utopian visionary, Tony Burke, and needing some outlet for her strength and energy, Judith supports the establishment of a communal society at Rancho Amarillo. Although there were to be many actual experiments of this type in California, there were none at this time and place. Stewart seems to introduce this unhistorical episode only to contrast the idealism of the communal society with the crass political and commercial interests of the city and to show the conflicts between the two groups. Intent on subduing the earth in order to make it produce

those things that the commune needs, the earnest utopians take no time to stop and enjoy it.

The commune fails but it does precipitate an attack from its neighbors which leads to a fire and the virtual destruction of all of the additions that Judith had made to the original ranch buildings. It also brings about newspaper insinuations about Judith's virtue that lead Melton to issue a challenge to the editor, Pennington. Melton is killed in the subsequent duel, and the whole incident ends with a real Wild West shoot-out in a saloon. Knowing that he has no grounds upon which to challenge Pennington, but knowing also that "there was another code of even older standing in California," Lewis Godoy confronts the editor with, "You shot an old man this morning; defend yourself, you bastard!" When Pennington draws first, Lewis guns him down, and those present agree that "Mr. Godoy drew and fired in self-defense" (pp. 454-55).

*East of the Giants* is a fine novel of early California. It might have been a better one if Stewart had stopped after the first two sections. If the third part does not satisfy, it is perhaps because it is the beginning of a new story rather than the end of the original one.

An interesting side light in this novel is the introduction of two incidental characters, not important in themselves but examples of a way of relating *East of the Giants* to Stewart's earlier work. To one of her dinner parties Judith invites Lieutenant Grainger, a known practical joker who is surely George H. Derby. And it seems likely that Zutano, the rising author who is taken to visit Rancho Amarillo after the fire, is the young Bret Harte.

*East of the Giants* was completed in Cuernavaca, Mexico, where the Stewarts were spending six months of sabbatical leave. It was awarded the Gold Medal of the Commonwealth Club of California as the best work of fiction published about the state in 1938. Because he had finished *East of the Giants* in March, which was earlier than he

had expected, and because he was never one to waste time, George Stewart began another novel, *Doctor's Oral*, which he completed in Berkeley later that year. It was also during the spring of 1938 that Stewart first conceived the idea for *Storm*, after reading in Mexican newspapers accounts of storms off the California coast and realizing that something like a big storm had universal interest.

*Doctor's Oral* recounts one day in the life of a mediocre graduate student, Joe Grantland — the day in which he faces the oral examination for his degree. Although set in a Western university that is obviously Berkeley, it is not a Western novel. With only minor changes in detail, it could have been located at any major American university.

Stewart's next book was *Take Your Bible in One Hand*, a biography of William Henry Thomes. Stewart first learned about his subject when he was asked to do a sketch of Thomes for the *Dictionary of American Biography*. Thomes spent two periods in his youth in California: along the coast from 1843 to 1847 as a hide-drogher on the *Admittance*, and later, from 1849 to 1851, as a miner and shiptender in the gold fields and San Francisco. He returned to Boston by way of the South Pacific and Australia and spent the remainder of his life as writer and publisher. He wrote a series of adventure stories based on his experiences. The best of these is *On Land and Sea, or, California in the Years '43, '44, and '45*, based on the diary of his father-in-law, Captain Peterson of the *Admittance*. Stewart says that *On Land and Sea* deserves to be remembered, for it is second only to *Two Years Before the Mast* in its depiction of early California. In his later years, Thomes twice visited the Golden State; and having been placed in Bancroft's Pioneer Register, he became a confirmed Californian. As founder and president of the Society of California Pioneers of New England, he led a grand progress through the state in 1890.

*Ordeal by Hunger*, *East of the Giants*, and the three biographies had each been individually researched, but they were all supported by Stewart's growing familiarity with early California.

In a different kind of research, through two winters, Stewart drove the roads to Donner Pass during storms, rode on the snow plows of the Southern Pacific, observed the highway superintendent and his crews along U.S. 40, and watched telephone and electric company linemen in action. He secured introductions to the staff of the Weather Bureau in San Francisco, visited them during storms, and learned to draw his own weather maps.

Stewart's *Storm* was enthusiastically reviewed in the major newspapers when it appeared in December 1941. His idea of making a storm the central character of a novel was hailed as original, as a triumph of meteorological research, and as a new novelistic type—if not science fiction, then scientific fiction.

Given these perimeters, *Storm* does not seem to be a Western novel. It is the story of Maria, a storm that happens on the West coast, but whose location is not important. It is the story of air masses and cold fronts, of highs and lows, of rain and snow. A first reading confirms the impression that *Storm* is not a Western novel, since each major division of the book begins and ends with abstract discussions of weather lore, the creation of storms, and the atmosphere and its effects on human history. There are also detailed descriptions of how weather information is gathered, how weather maps are drawn, and how predictions are made. But if we look more closely at *Storm* and place it into the body of Stewart's work, there is a shift in emphasis. As Wallace Stegner noted in the *Boston Sunday Globe* (December 7, 1941): ". . . the storm is not the heroine. Maria is nothing but the crisis. . . . Stewart lets us look . . . at the mortar that holds a civilization together." This civilization is that of the mid-twentieth century West, specifically of George Stewart's West: San Francisco, the Bay,

the Central Valley, and the Sierra.

Maria was born in the north Pacific and died twelve days later buffeting the Sierra Nevada in California. She broke an extended winter drought and brought the expected rain and snow to California. It is in this expectation of the winter conditions that Stewart demonstrates the Western life. The story moves on three levels: the life cycle of the storm itself; its effect on those whose professional responsibility it is to deal with it; and the lives of those who are affected by it. The professionals are all anonymous; they represent the agencies and utilities that make modern Western life possible.

When *Storm* begins, Maria is discovered and her track plotted at the Weather Bureau in San Francisco by the Chief Forecaster and the Junior Meteorologist. Six other men, directing the efforts of hundreds, attempt to keep twentieth-century life functioning during the course of the storm: the Load-Dispatcher of Power-Light; the Road Superintendent of U.S. 40; Railroad's General Manager; Telephone's District Traffic Superintendent; the Chief Service Officer of Bay Airport; and the Flood-Control Co-ordinator for the Sacramento Area. These men have accepted the weather. They know that their operations must conform to the conditions of the land. They expect to fight the elements, but they know that to win means only not to lose. To win is to survive, not to force man's will on nature by trying to change it or to make it different. Using the experience of their predecessors, the six professionals prepare for the winter storms that they know will come in this country. But in spite of their preparations, there will be failures. As the Load-Dispatcher of Power-Light knows, "here and there must lie countless flaws—faulty material, slips of workmanship. . . In rain, wind, snow, and clinging ice, many might let go all at once and under conditions which would make their repair a tenfold problem. It was a condition of his life" (p. 60).

Maria reaches California in her sixth day and, held there by a cold front sliding south out of Canada, pelts some areas with rain and covers others with snow. *Storm* is presented in twelve daily sections, each divided into segments recording the progress of the storm and the lives of the people who must live with it. These people are distinguished from the generalized figures in that they have names and their problems are personal rather than corporate. The stories have a common denominator—each of the people is aware of the demands of the weather, each makes an attempt to prepare for it, but in each case either human error or accident exaggerated by the weather works to defeat them. Rick, an experienced telephone lineman, falls on his ski poles while repairing the Transcontinental Lead, because he is preoccupied with the memory of a pair of blue eyes in a tanned face. Hurrying through the rain to a possible sale in Colusa, the flour salesman, Peter Goslin, skids—in spite of his new tires—on cow manure accidentally jostled onto the road and is killed when his car flips over. Stewart tells some of the stories in fragments over periods of the four, six, or eight days that it takes for the conditions to develop and for the final incident to happen; other stories, like Johnny Martley's solitary adventure inside the dam at French Bar Power House, take up only a brief part of one day. All these stories are about the residents of the area, the people whose lives are shaped by the country, Westerners in a Western landscape. Telling those stories of individuals with personal problems is a good device, and it gives an importance to the storm that a meteorological occurrence, by itself, would not have had.

However, the incidents involving the more abstract characters are sometimes more interesting than the stories about characters who are given names. The most dramatic episodes in the novel are those in which the Road Superintendent of U.S. 40 battles to keep open the



route over the Sierra through Donner Pass. As he throws tired men and over-worked equipment against the steadily falling snow, as he contends with the ignorance and carelessness of the drivers for whose convenience he struggles, we know that it is important to him that the road remain open, that he prove that men can live on this mountain. The drama concludes late on the tenth night when human error, fatigue, equipment failure, the snow, and bad luck converge to defeat him. The road is closed.

That night no car went east or west. From Shasta on the north to the Tehachapis on the south, every pass was blocked with snow. . . . The snow swirled around the pinnacles; it settled deep in draw and chimney; it drifted across the ledges. Peak, butte, and pinnacle; dome, ridge, and crest—over them all was snow . . . five hundred miles, against every peak and crag whirled the storm-driven snow. (pp. 286-87)

But the next day U.S. 40 was open again, because it had to be opened if men were to continue living in that part of the West. This episode is not drawn as a series of heroic struggles against a malevolent nature but simply as men doing a job in a land that is as it is. The land determines, but it is impersonal, unconcerned. It does not adjust. The men who would live there must fit their lives to the conditions that they find.

Even though it appeared late in 1941, *Storm* was the first of George Stewart's books to be a financial success. A selection of the Book-of-the-Month Club, it was also on all of the best seller lists until early May. For the academic year 1942-43, Stewart returned to Princeton as Resident Fellow in Creative Writing. During the following year, he worked as a civilian on a couple of projects for the U.S. Navy. From this period came Stewart's landmark study of American

place names, *Names on the Land*, and his first person history of humankind, *Man: An Autobiography*. The research for *Fire*, similar to that required for *Storm*, was also carried out during these years. Stewart was made a Collaborator of the U.S. Forest Service, and with its full cooperation he observed close-up the fighting of several forest fires and spent a week as the fire look-out at Sierra Buttes.

Like *Storm*, *Fire* (1948) is divided into a sequence of days recording the beginning, growth, and decline of an awesome natural event, in this case on eleven-day wildfire in the Sierra Nevada. Each day is also divided into a series of sections which describe the actions of various people affected by the fire, comment upon the action, and make general observations about fire and its relationship to man and the world that he has made. Stewart gives both a thorough description of the kindling and growth of the fire and a detailed account of the mobilization and deployment of the forces to fight it. These are, however, only superficial resemblances between *Storm* and *Fire*, for the latter more closely resembles a traditional novel in story and character development. *Fire* has a plot that builds to a climax and a resolution that gradually brings the story to a close. There is a large cast of characters, including "a tall professorial-looking author working on a book," and a love interest provided by Dave Halliday, the Junior Meteorologist of *Storm*, and Judith Godoy, the great-great granddaughter of the heroine of *East of the Giants*.

The forest fire, Spitcat, provides the occasion for the conflict between Jones, who is in his first year as Supervisor of the Ponderosa National Forest, and John "Bart" Bartley, who is Ranger of the Barlow District in the forest—men who hold opposing views on forest management and the mission of the Forest Service. After twenty years in this forest, Bart has a love, almost a worshipful awe, of the serene beauty of the great trees and quiet recesses of the forest. The Glen along Curran Creek is, to him, almost a holy place to which he

goes for refreshment and peace. This forest, he feels, must be preserved just as it is. Jones, an educated, efficient forester, believes that trees are productive plants that exist to supply lumber and that this purpose is served, and the forest best protected, when the ripe, mature older trees are removed to give growing room to the younger ones.

*Fire* is a thoroughly Western novel directly related to the land, a coniferous forest on the Western slope of the Sierra Nevada. Here the normally long, dry summer provides the natural habitat for the Douglas firs, the incense cedars, and the ponderosa, Jeffrey, and sugar pines that cover the sides of the mountains. This natural dryness contributes to the interrelationship of fire with these trees, as part of the ecology of the region. "It's just part of the way things are!" the Super remarks. "[W]here there are pine trees, there's also going to be fire, because if there's no dry season, you'll have a hardwood forest. You might say if there weren't fires, there wouldn't be pines." The people here curse fire and are afraid of fire, but they accept it and prepare for it. They live in anticipation that a fire will break out and that it must be fought. When a stenographer of the Ponderosa, home on weekend leave, is called back as part of the mobilization against the Spitcat, her father protests, "They can't make you." Her only response is, "But you see, Dad, there's a fire!" The Spitcat, although spectacular, is not an isolated occurrence. It is the 164th fire of the season in the Ponderosa.

In describing this natural phenomenon, Stewart is careful to distinguish it from the same occurrence in different country. The general environment—the terrain and the kinds of trees and brush—makes this fire unique to this place. An experienced firefighter from the Inyo National Forest, "an east-side forest where . . . brush grows thinly," is trapped when he tries to run through the impenetrable manzanita brush and burned to death because he does

not know that the resinous vapors from the fir that he climbs will ignite in the great heat. Stewart is also careful to focus on the fact that this fire is a natural occurrence. Beginning from a lightning strike, it grows and spreads as a natural event. Although he calls it beast and monster, he stresses that there is nothing malevolent about it. "The fire, like a storm or river or star or sun, felt neither love nor hate, knew neither good nor bad. The fire burned—and made no judgments" (pp. 315-16). Fire is one of the conditions of life in these particular mountains, "part of the price of the taking-over of the land."

But, like *Storm's* Maria, the Spitcat Fire is the occasion for the story, not the story itself. The contrary positions of the as-yet-untested Supervisor and the veteran Ranger are underlined from the beginning. Bart, the easy-going, companionable oldtimer, has a deep-seated dislike of the Supervisor's ideas, a dislike which he transfers to the man himself. Jones, on the other hand, envies Bart's easy friendliness and regrets his own inability to establish a relaxed relationship with the veteran. He regards Bart as a sentimentalist about trees, but he has a genuine liking and concern for him. Jones thinks that Barlow District is too big for one man to manage, but he plans to delay its division until after Bart has retired. During the course of the fire he twice has the opportunity of replacing the older man as fire-boss, but both times, against his better judgment, he refrains from doing it. Bart, on the other hand, constantly resists the plans of the Supervisor, repeatedly reminding him that this is "awful pretty country . . . some of the nicest mature forest in California." This hostility is dramatized when, as the two are cutting through a forty-inch log to clear a mountain road, Bart forces the pace on the two-man cross-cut saw only to discover that the Super can match the faster rhythm and exceed it—taking the lead away from the older man.

When the Spitcat breaks out in Barlow District, Bart naturally assumes leadership in the battle against it. Tired from his part in the suppression of a fire only the day before, and anxious to preserve as many trees as possible, Bart makes several errors of judgment in combatting the fire. He does not allow for the human frailties—the arrogance of the cat-skinner, Barney Zulik, or the fears of the wino, Bo Fox—that can ruin an otherwise workable plan. He is so intent on saving trees that he sets his fire-lines too close to the advancing flames. When his plans are not perfectly executed, the flames jump the lines, and in his agony he flares out at the Super, “This ain’t just a lumber-yard to me!” After the fire has twice jumped a major fire-line, Bart again insists on running a line that is unrealistically close to the advancing front, because “there’s some awful pretty country we got to save in there—that glen along Curran Creek.” Realizing that this is impossible, Jones tries to get Bart to step aside as fire-boss. When he refuses, the Supervisor removes him and takes command himself. With a more realistic strategy and a different deployment of forces, the Supervisor and his men bring the fire under control the next afternoon.

Bart’s sentimentality, compounded by a fatigue that he will not admit, causes him to make mistakes that turn his love for the forest against itself. Because he refuses to sacrifice a few more trees early in the fight, the fire burns out of control for several additional days, and he is unable to preserve the things and places that he loves the most. The more cautious approach of the Super traps the fire and forces it to burn itself out.

Although he acknowledges defeat, Bart will not accept the destruction of the forest. He rides through the burned-over area with his eyes closed. The Super realizes that in controlling the fire he has proved himself as a leader and a fire-fighter, but he wonders if he will ever break through the reserve that keeps him from developing a

close relationship with others. Although the human problems persist, nature quietly begins to re-establish herself as "from high-swinging cones, opened by the fiery heat, the winged seeds drifted downward to the earth" (p. 336).

Recognized as a classic science fiction disaster novel, *Earth Abides*, published in 1949, received the first International Fantasy Award. With a setting in Berkeley and the Bay Area, it does not really grow out of that region but is concerned with the emotional and moral problems involved in maintaining human society on even a primitive level.

Although Stewart began a half-time teaching schedule at the University in 1947, from March 1949 to April 1950 he was deeply involved in the controversy between the Academic Senate and the Regents of the University. This complicated struggle, touched off by the Regents' imposition of a special non-Communist oath as a condition of employment, was delineated in *The Year of the Oath; The Fight for Academic Freedom at the University of California* "by George R. Stewart in collaboration with other professors of the University of California."

In reviewing one of Stewart's earlier books, *Man: An Autobiography* (1946), Edwin Grant Burrows wrote: "George R. Stewart has made a specialty of writing books the like of which were never before seen" (*Saturday Review*, August 31, 1946). This might very well have been written about *Sheep Rock*, a most uncommon novel. Published in 1951, it is Stewart's strongest statement of the requirements of place—of the necessity for man to adapt because, although the land does change, it does so in its own time and at its own pace. Taking as a microcosm one of the most inhospitable areas in the United States, Black Rock Spring in northwestern Nevada, Stewart investigates its basic ecology—the mutual relationship between life and its environment. At the tip of a long, narrow moun-

tain range, surrounded on all sides by salt-flats, the large hot spring is marked by a huge, volcanic black rock which towers hundreds of feet above it. Stewart calls the place Sheep Rock for a "tall mountain-ram" that he either did or did not see there, as if it were "the ancient spirit of the place suddenly manifest . . . like some ram-god of the former years" (p. 285).

Geoffrey Archer, a young poet on a foundation fellowship, brings his wife and two young daughters to live in the deserted homestead at the spring because it is cheap and isolated, and he hopes that the dry air will be good for his wife's bronchitis. The Archers arrive in the early summer to stay for one year while Geoffrey finishes a poem about the Italian Renaissance. Caught by the stark reality of the desert, he begins instead a poem "about this place where I now live." Realizing that he must learn about the place, that he must master it before he can write meaningfully about it, he begins to study the ancient beaches and to observe the bulrushes and the salt-grass, the greasewood and the seepweed, the coyote and the ground-squirrel. Well before the end of the year, overwhelmed by the power of the place, he acknowledges that he cannot master the land and gives up the second poem.

*Sheep Rock* has a rigid structure: three major parts each subdivided into pairs of six sections separated by a short story; and the whole bracketed between Stewart's account of his experiences at Black Rock. In the beginning he decides, "I could tell the story of this place!" At the end of the novel, he puts down the novelist's mask to state: "I, George Stewart, did this work." He tells how he took specialists to the area to have them explain it to him, but the act of creation is his.

So here I write of myself, for I also was there, and I am of it. I followed the old road of the covered-wagon, I traced the lines

of the beaches, I felt the stab of the sun, I shivered in the night-wind from the north. I took it all into my mind as a furnace takes lumps of ore. (p. 284)

The telling of the story is fitted into the sections in a regular pattern. Some are used by the author for recounting the rise and fall of mountains, the filling and emptying of lakes, the appearance and extinction of animals, and the thriving and disappearance of trees. In a series of vignettes, always in perfect mode and voice, Stewart sketches the army lieutenant who first reported the spring, the mountain men riding east from California who gave it names, the sick emigrant boy writing a letter to his mother between "the trots," and the entomologist, ichthyologist, and naval officers who passed through the place too quickly to know it. There were Indians—the Nunuzoho of the heavy spear-points and the Kotisdoka with delicate obsidian arrowheads—who "took the place at its own terms, and lived there." Half of the sections are given to Geoffrey Archer. By studying the topography of the place and by sifting the surface debris, he is put in touch with the ancient lake bed and the travelers who left reminders of themselves there.

Self-centered, egotistical, and rather vain when he considers his value as a poet, Geoffrey Archer is a fully realized character. His wife and daughters we see only out of the corner of his eye, so they never come into focus as people. In a series of letters to a friend, Geoffrey tells the story of contemporary life at Sheep Rock, his own experiences and what he discovers of Jeff Matthews, who built the house of railroad ties and lived in it with his family during the depression years of the thirties, pasturing cattle in the meadow watered by the spring, raising some chickens and turkeys, and generally scrambling to make a living. As the year passes, Geoffrey feels closer to the Jeff who lived there before him, not only because he



built the house but also because he too was defeated by the land despite his years of hard work: "Essentially he had not changed the place at all. It had kept its integrity again. It had conquered" (p. 79).

The surface around the spring yields relics of many others who passed that way—metates and obsidian flakes, a silver rifle bullet, a cartridge case, a spoon, the shards of a broken pitcher. Three of these artifacts are the basis of short stories that appear midway through each of the parts. These stories, all about nineteenth-century American contacts with Sheep Rock Spring, are some of the best fiction that George Stewart ever wrote. "Of the Silver Bullet" is a retelling of the Harding mine swindle that brought Dr. Edwalt Bromley to Sheep Rock on a fruitless search for the Broken Ax Mine. "Of the Blue Cartridge" tells of a massacre engineered by a U.S. cavalry troop to rid the area of the Kotisdoka. And "Of the Broken Pitcher" is the story of religious fanaticism and a young girl's defiance when an emigrant company stops at the spring in the summer of 1849. The blue-on-white pitcher, symbolizing completeness, fascinates both Stewart and his main character, Geoffrey Archer. After the poet collects the shards, he attempts but fails to reconstruct the pitcher. His failure is another mark of his inability to come to grips with the place.

As with the fragments of the pitcher, so the mosaic that is the story of Sheep Rock is incomplete, because the place is too vast, too old, and too intricate ever to be entirely known. When he gives up trying to write his poem, Archer acknowledges the impossibility of completely understanding the place. He writes, "[W]hat depresses me is really not the country, but my own sense of insufficiency in trying to encounter it . . . I do not know enough" (p. 120). He has only words with which to capture the desert, but against the power of the land, they are insufficient: ". . . I came here and the place took me"; but so it had been from the time of the Indians. Men had violated the

spring, but none had possessed it.

At the end of his year, with the poem unwritten, Geoffrey Archer withdraws, deeply stirred by the strangeness of the place and frustrated by his inability to fit words to his emotions. The spring and the rock remain, surrounded by salt-flats that stretch away to the ancient beaches on the sides of the red mountains lifting toward the sky.

Through the fall and early winter of 1952-53, the Stewarts were in Greece, where Stewart was Fulbright Professor of American Literature and Civilization. From this experience came *American Ways of Life*, based on the lectures given in Athens, and *The Years of the City*, which is in a sense a frontier novel even though it is located in the Greek Mediterranean. In 1954 he published his only juvenile book, *To California by Covered Wagon*, which is based on the adventures of young Moses Shallenberger, whose reminiscences Stewart had edited the previous year for publication as *The Opening of the California Trail*.

For distinguished achievement in the field of California and Western history, George Stewart was made a fellow of the California Historical Society in 1960, the year the Society published his brief survey, *Donner Pass and Those Who Crossed It*. After thirty-nine years at the University of California, Stewart retired from active teaching in 1962; but this was not the end of an active working life.

As part of the American Trails Series, *The California Trail* (1962) was the only book that George Stewart wrote at the request of a publisher. In a sense, it is a summary of Stewart's many years of study of the overland migration into California, beginning with the Donners. The book details what is essentially a struggle between inexperienced men and a land of deserts and mountains that are "savagely inhospitable—strange and therefore terrifying." A year-by-year discussion of the development of the trail through the 1840s comes to a climax with the Gold Rush of '49 and closes with a sum-

mary chapter on the 1850s. At the midpoint of his account of the 1840s, Stewart separates the chronological narrative by two inter-chapters—"How They Traveled" and "Where They Went." Although the story of the California trail begins in 1841 with the early parties that struggled over the Sierra, it was not until 1844, when the Stevens Party managed to get wagons through, that the trail can be said to have opened. Those first years saw exploits that are studies of individual accomplishment. Endowed with optimism and determination, blessed with ignorance of the hardships that they faced, men and women established a trail where none had existed before. After the success of the Stevens Party, the greatly increased numbers on the trail in 1845 established beyond question the practicality of taking wagons through to California. As the numbers of people on the trail increased, competition for grass and water intensified. But the basic struggle remained between the vast, implacable land and the people who would cross it.

They came from all over the country, but mainly they were substantial, backwoods Americans from the midwest, not poverty stricken but looking for something better than what they had. Through the 1840s the migration became increasingly a family affair. A husband and wife with several children and with one or two wagons would join others like themselves in a wagon train that Stewart compares to a village on the move, an abnormal mixture of typical community and family life and a perpetual vacation. Every day they would move through strange new sights and experiences—boiling springs, alkali flats, outlandish rock formations, and towering mountains—and always they would have the consciousness of the Indians and the fear of the unknown.

The years 1849 and 1850 were aberrant, because large numbers of greenhorns from the cities came flooding through, swelling the normal migration and signalling the changes of the 1850s when droves of

cattle and sheep cut a wide swath. After parts of the trail were graded and bridges were constructed over some of the rivers, it was no longer a trail but a road. Although people continued to come to California, it was a new era and a different story.

San Francisco in 1851 was a frontier town of 30,000. Almost all of its inhabitants were young men whose principal occupations were making and spending money. Situated at the end of a barren peninsula and at the entrance to one of the world's most magnificent harbors, the city was so isolated from the rest of the country that it was virtually an island whose existence depended upon a steady flow of merchant shipping. All of life's necessities arrived there by ship and passed through to the mining towns and ranches of the interior. Commerce was the city's life blood; the commission merchants were its most prominent citizens. Merchandise and money require confidence and safety, but distrust and fear had seized the city. In *Committee of Vigilance* (1964), Stewart presents San Francisco simmering in frustration about to boil over into revolution.

The populace, mostly American, brought to their new home a tradition of respect for law and of confidence in a judicial system; it was in the working out of this tradition that problems arose. The City of San Francisco had been established with a charter, an elected mayor, and a full city government. But crime, especially robbery and burglary, was an everyday problem, violence a regular occurrence. Organized gangs flourished because the police and courts were both inept and corrupt. Although the system included a few upright, honest men, it was riddled with corruption and collusion—juries were packed, judges bought, the jail like a sieve.

A particularly vicious robbery and a series of suspicious, unexplained fires which destroyed the heart of the city precipitated the final crisis. With the newspapers calling for action, the citizens' fright and confusion led first to volunteer patrols to assist the police

and then to the formation of the secret Committee of Vigilance. This event is presented by Stewart as a deliberate step, growing naturally out of the situation: men driven to the extremity of extralegal action because the normal institutions had broken down. These organized citizens did not seize control of the city government but set up their own police and judiciary. Not an unruly mob, they were a disciplined group who carefully investigated the charges against those they apprehended, and the Committee tried the accused before hanging those who were found guilty. Although it never disbanded, when the danger to the community subsided, it gradually became inactive. The leaders of the Committee were the first men in the business community. Of particular interest is Selim E. Woodworth, who had bungled the leadership of the expedition for the relief of the Donner Party, but who served with courage and decision as president of the Committee.

*Committee of Vigilance* moves chronologically from incident to incident. Stewart handles this material—a cast of heroes and villains, honest men and thieves, upright judges and politicians on the take—almost as if he were writing fiction. He marshalls, develops, and presents the facts with great narrative skill. Here, again, he seems to be more comfortable in handling characters and plot when they are real people in historical situations than when he is working with fiction. *Committee of Vigilance* joins *Ordeal by Hunger* as a thoroughly historical Western story superbly recreated by a master storyteller. This pre-eminence as a California writer and historian was recognized when the California Historical Society presented George Stewart its Henry R. Wagner Memorial Award Medal for 1972.

The interest in ecology which is evident in all of George Stewart's work received major treatment in *Not So Rich As You Think* (1968). This work, given the Sidney Hillman Award, appeared several years

before saving the environment became fashionable, so it did not receive the attention that it deserved.

When asked which of his books is his favorite, George Stewart invariably answers: *Names on the Land*. He liked the challenge of the difficult problems that had to be solved in writing it. Nothing like it had been done before. He had no one and no model to consult in presenting the vast subject of how names were given to both the political and geographical features of the United States: to states, counties, cities, towns, and streets; to rivers, lakes, bays, and ponds; to mountain chains and individual peaks. He chose a chronological organization which, from the nature of the spreading of names across the continent, was also geographical.

His study of the naming of the land brings into focus the many talents of George R. Stewart, so perhaps it is his favorite because there is so much of him in it. It required his talent for precise and thorough research guided by a geographical grasp of the country and a knowledge of its history. Equally important was the mind that it required, a mind that could bring scholarship to life with deft organization, lively imagination, and dry wit.

*Names on the Land* is not a dictionary of American names. Rather, it is a study of how names are given, what types and kinds of names appear in various times and places, and which words are used and which are not. Although *Names on the Land* cannot be said to be Western, it does have a very strong and consistent Western component, for the West, early and late, figures large in American history. Among the earliest names given in what was to be the United States were those applied by the Spanish to the Pacific Coast and the Southwest. Little more than a century later the French were naming the upper Missouri, and early in our national life Lewis and Clark were supplying names for the hills and streams of the Louisiana Purchase. To a great extent, our whole early history is of a western fron-

tier that moves continually toward the Pacific. The principle of the regional in literature is also evident in Stewart's subject, for it is the interaction of the people with the land that produces the names: "[T]he names had grown out of the life, and the life-blood, of all those who had gone before. . . they were closely bound with the land itself and the adventures of the people" (p. 4).

*Names on the Land* was published first in 1945, then in a revised edition in 1958, and in a third edition in 1967. A foreword and three new chapters were added to the later edition but, except for a few minor corrections, the original text remained unchanged. The dictionary of *American Place-Names* was published in 1970 and was followed by *Names on the Globe* in 1975 and *American Given Names* in 1979.

George R. Stewart is one of the most original of American writers, and his interests have included the universal human experience. In the major portion of his work that is specifically Western, he has investigated the great overland migration that focused on San Francisco Bay, the people that arrived there, and the life that they built. It is a story that begins in the second quarter of the nineteenth century and continues past the midpoint of the twentieth. Many novels of contemporary life located in the West are simply American novels, but Stewart manages to make *Storm*, *Fire*, and *Sheep Rock* both modern and distinctively Western. In those three works he deals with one of the basic problems of contemporary life—man's relationship to the land. From the overlanders who dropped debris from covered wagons to those who "wreck the esthetics [of Sheep Rock] by throwing . . . tin cans and bottles into the pool," Americans have littered the Western landscape. In so doing, they have revealed their basic misunderstanding of the ecological balance, which, as Stewart portrays it, requires that men live not only on the land but with it, shaping their lives to the rhythm of the seasons and the environment that

they create.

It is a strong land, and the people who come to it are changed—Judith is hardly ashore in Monterey before she becomes a different person; between May and October the trail experience turns the emigrants into Westerners. Stewart pictures a people who have struggled to get to central California and have found it to be a land with times and seasons that they had never known elsewhere, an expansive, generous, pastoral land suddenly transformed by the discovery of gold. The turmoil of *East of the Giants* creates the San Francisco of *Committee of Vigilance*, the cradle of Harte and Phoenix, and ultimately the land swept by the *Storm*. The ox carts gave way to the station wagons, and the trails gave way to the transcontinental highways, but the deserts and the mountains remain.

While this study was being prepared, during the summer of 1980, Dr. Stewart was in very poor health. He was eighty-five years old and had been afflicted with Parkinson's Disease for several years. During the spring and early summer, he worked on a biographical study of Mrs. Stewart's father, Marion LeRoy Burton, former President of the University of Michigan. That project was never finished. George Rippey Stewart died in San Francisco on August 22, 1980.



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