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No. 1

VARDIS FISHER:

THE FRONTIER AND REGIONAL WORKS

by Wayne Chatterton



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By Wayne Chatterton

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Vardis Fisher:

The Frontier and Regional Works

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Always defiant of labels, Vardis Fisher produced a variety of literary works: a collection of sonnets, some poetic character sketches, and a few occasional poems; several regional and frontier novels about life in the heart of the Rocky Mountain West; three guides to the history and topography of his native state; an autobiographical tetralogy; a number of historical novels about the West; an almost Swiftian allegory upon man's subterfuges; a handbook for young writers; a psychological novel exposing man's self-deceptions; a history of Idaho's Caxton Printers; a twelve-volume series of novels exploring the development of man's moral consciousness and conscience; a historical investigation into the death of Meriwether Lewis; a massive illustrated study of the Western gold rushes and mining camps; a scattering of unique short stories; a number of reminiscences; some literary criticism; dozens of provocative essays in a bewildering variety of journals; and a steady stream of controversial journalism. At the age of 73 on July 9, 1968, he died in the midst of work, having begun his autobiography two weeks before, and having written 3,000 words of a volume to be called *The Western United States, The World's Greatest Physical Wonderland*. These two books would have been his thirty-seventh and thirty-eighth.

At the beginning of his career as novelist in 1928, he peopled his stories with characters from the Antelope Hills and Big Hole Mountain country of the Western Rockies—a wilderness which, only eighty-five years before, had been empty space upon the maps

of the interior West. Today he remains the only significant literary interpreter of frontier life in that region. Critics and scholars generally regard this accomplishment as unparalleled in Western literature, but to Fisher, who insisted that he had never thought of himself as a regionalist, those early novels marked the beginning of his insistent campaign to avoid being pigeonholed. He was successful. At first, he said, the reviewers put him in a file under Hardy's Wessex, later under Dreiser, and at last wrote him off "as a bad egg" ("Hometown Revisited").

He was born in the pioneer Mormon settlement of Annis, Idaho, on March 31, 1895. In the spring of 1901, sensitive, fearful, observant, and intensely curious, he was jolted across country and into the Antelope Hills in the back of a springless wagon. With him were his little brother and sister Vivian and Viola; on the plank seat were his parents, Temperance Thornton Fisher and Joseph Oliver Fisher, Mormon settlers who had traded a cow for a piece of land shelved into the riverbottom along the south bank of the main fork of the Snake River. Thirty miles from the nearest town and perhaps ten from the nearest neighbors—save for the Wheaton family across the river—the wagon plunged downward a mile and a half below the rim of the gorge. It dragged an aspen tree as a brake; mother and children trailed on foot. Young Vardis was convinced he was dropping to "the bottom of the world." From that moment he was possessed of an unreasoning fear of the remoteness and solitude of the place; yet for five years he was not to leave it.

Throughout his life, Fisher was to remember these years as nightmare. Paradoxically free yet imprisoned by the wilderness, he learned the majesty and the cruelty of the natural order. The place was crowded with every kind of indigenous wildlife. But the dominant physical feature was the river. Its torrent caromed from rock ledges to carve the bulge of land which was the Fisher farm. Though at no season was its voice unheard, in early spring its thunder filled that bounded universe, shaking the walls of

the cabin whose floor and roof were dirt, whose only door was hinged by old shoes. The primal energy of that "tireless hunger" (*Dark Bridwell*, p. 271) seeped into Fisher's consciousness and, ineradicable, became a natural foil for characters in nearly all his novels of the Antelope Country.

Other factors magnified his experiences and marked them indelibly in his memory. Isolation turned him inward. In his loneliness and terror he overreacted to the pious schooling by his Mormon mother who, hating life in the hills, strove with relentless ambition to see her sons successful in the great world outside. He was sickened by the suffering and death he observed in a natural order where all things delicate, gentle, innocent, and beautiful were hurt or destroyed equally with the vicious and the gross. He learned to hate the domination of his taciturn and intractable father, whose faith in hard toil and pioneer independence became also the creed of his sons, but whose brutality and ill-concealed fear forced upon his eldest son an unshakable sense of the primitive nature of Man.

The first years of formal schooling were another important formative period of Fisher's life. Ronald Taber observes that the little boy's fear and hatred of the riverbottom "made an escape to civilization necessary to the development of his personality" ("Vardis Fisher," pp. 3-4). By the same token, escape was essential to the emergence of his literary talent. The riverbottom home had known few outsiders, and if Vardis had been terrified by the insular existence there, he now faced almost as fearful a challenge in adjusting to the complex society beyond the family. The two boys had not acquired even the frontier social consciousness of the village children; so from their arrival at the valley schools they were a special target of schoolyard jokesters and bullies. Vivian's crossed eyes invited the cruel humor of the backwoods, and in Allan Crandall's account of Fisher's schooldays at Poplar a girl classmate records her impression that Vardis' "pants were always baggy at the seat" and that he "was always clean but not neat"

(*Fisher of the Antelope Hills*, p. 11). Apparently sensing that his appearance justified some ridicule, he tolerated snickers; but with fearsome courage and almost demoniac energy he defended his little brother and warded off all direct threats which were aimed at either of them.

In these years he knew his first real love affairs and became confounded by the role of sex in his life. Here he began his first formal learning. Here he challenged the religion of his parents and their forefathers, rejected a call to serve a mission for the church, and in honesty to himself became an apostate. Here he developed the need and practice of exploring himself and his world in the writings which occupied the largest share of his life. Flora theorizes that an abnormally lonely childhood delayed in Fisher the development of a sense of humor, depriving his adolescence of that powerful leavening between the self and society (*Vardis Fisher*, p. 18). And perhaps these are reasons why his adolescent years established in him the responses to people and ideas which later convinced Ellis Foote that "action, with him, becomes excess of action; statement becomes over-statement; and truth becomes excess of truth" ("The Unholy Testator," p. 10).

He left the Snake Fork Country to take the B.A. degree at the University of Utah in 1920, followed by the M.A. and Ph.D. (with high honors) at the University of Chicago between 1920 and 1925. During these years, under pressures of scholarship which became almost insuperable, he married his childhood sweetheart Leona McMurtrey (the Nelo of the tetralogy), who bore two sons before she committed suicide in despair over a marriage intellectually and emotionally charged beyond her capacity. He joined the air force during World War I, but resigned from it in protest against its caste system, whereupon he trained briefly in the States as an army corporal before the armistice. Yet, such were the habits of industry ingrained in his character that he found time and energy to begin writing the nearly

half-dozen unpublished novels which preceded the appearance of *Toilers of the Hills* in 1928.

The death of Leona marked a crisis in his life which spurred him to write, providing him with that insatiable need for introspection which was the basis for most of his writing thereafter. He was shattered by the certainty that he had driven Leona to self-destruction through his failure to reconcile the warring elements in himself. Beset by a powerful compulsion to destroy himself in turn, he found meaning in his brother's declaration that he must root out the evasions which had, from his earliest years, prevented him from knowing himself. In writing he subjected his life to unflinching scrutiny; and at length he exposed the self-deceptions of all men.

Armed with his degrees, Fisher went back to Salt Lake City and to what could have been a lifetime career in university teaching. But about pedagogy and campus life his feelings were ambivalent. The response of an occasionally brilliant student did not seem reward enough to offset the mass of mediocre minds. Despite a few great men in the teaching profession, he found among his colleagues too much of the hypocrisy, self-deception, fatuous egotism, and general instability which had offended him from his earliest schooldays. In Utah he found that his politically motivated administrators would not protect him from the animosity of the church whose authority he had rejected, nor did they tolerate independent views. By this time, however, he had managed to get a novel into print; so he accepted a teaching post at Washington Square College of New York University, where he befriended his fellow teacher Thomas Wolfe, and where the general respect for academic freedom was so strong that neither his creative drive nor his iconoclasm was a threat to his career.

Even so, he had begun to see that "the daily load of teaching would erode the interest, finally, in creative work" (*Three West*, p. 8). In 1931, after a summer in Europe, he returned to live and write in the river basin home of his childhood. With him

he took his two children and the wife he had married in 1928, Margaret Trusler, a fellow student from the Chicago years. There he was ready to make a total commitment to his writing career; and this he did, to the exclusion of teaching, save for two summers at the University of Montana in 1932 and 1933, and a stint as artist-in-residence at The College of Idaho in 1968.

At the riverbottom ranch he established a routine which he observed whenever possible for the rest of his life. He balanced the hard intellectual labor of composition with equally hard physical labor. For his parents he built new buildings and modernized others. At the same time he finished another regional novel and began work upon his highly autobiographical tetralogy.

Since none of these promised to bring him any considerable money, and since the Great Depression was biting deep everywhere, he accepted a federal appointment as Idaho Director of the WPA Writers' Project. During his time on the WPA projects he averaged about ten hours of work a day for the government and spent at least six hours a day on his own writing.

In 1939 he was divorced from Margaret, who had borne his son Thornton Roberts in 1937; and with the new wife who was to survive him, Opal Laurel Holmes, he moved to an idyllic but undeveloped plot of "waste land" among the Thousand Springs on the Snake river near Hagerman, Idaho. Here he went about building a home and tenaciously writing the long series of novels he called the *Testament of Man*.

This rugged chunk of untamed land, as great a challenge to Vardis as the Antelope Country had been for his father, was to be his home for the rest of his life. His residence was continuous except for trips abroad and for some research expeditions.

Looking backward, one might be surprised to remember that Fisher worked with both plays and poetry before he turned seriously to fiction. What kinds of plays the wrote as an undergraduate at the University of Utah, none of his critics or biographers has made clear, probably because Fisher has not publicly described

these early efforts. However, in the tone of one who winces at his own callow yearning for praise, he tells of being the "darling" of advanced composition teachers. With equal wryness he describes his wish to drown himself after his Chicago teacher Robert Morss Lovett had scathingly criticized a one-act play which a Utah professor had earlier praised as better than anything of Lord Dunsany's ("Novel Writing Is My Trade," p. 7).

Fisher's truly serious writing dates from the beginning of his last year of work on the Ph.D. in Chicago, when Leona's suicide drove him into a period of relentless self-examination. An immediate result of this program was a sequence of poems which he called *Sonnets to an Imaginary Madonna* (1927). In later years, Fisher insisted that they were "the kind of thing an author wants to forget" (*A Critical Summary*, p. 6).

Whatever their quality as poetry, however, their composition helped Fisher to acquire an extraordinary degree of self-discipline. Moreover, the unflinching probe of motives, the iconoclastic peeling away of man's protective layers of illusions about himself and his world, all the deep concerns which made of Fisher's work an act of self-discovery first took root in these early sonnets. If they are too cerebral for high poetry, they are nonetheless the earliest medium through which Fisher unleashed his lifelong desire to unmask delusions. And because their composition was directly tied to an emotional crisis, they are far less the "pensive poetry" (Fox, "Vardis Fisher: He Wrote for the Ages," *Intermountain Observer*, Boise, Idaho, July 20, 1968) of conventional love-verse than a blend of E. A. Robinson's despairing courage in the "Tilbury Portraits" and Meredith's wry optimism in the "Modern Love" sequence. Fisher's penchant for this kind of sonnet is, in fact, a bridge between the poetry which he ceased to write seriously and the regional fiction to which he turned. This bridge was formed by a set of "local color" sonnets called collectively "Antelope People"—some Robinsonian portraits created in the mood of Masters' *Spoon River Anthology*, but de-

picting characters from the Antelope Hills country, many of whom appear in Fisher's regional novels.

Here at the beginning of his career, Fisher had found the mission and taken the stance which would characterize "almost all his writings" (Flora, *Vardis Fisher*, p. 20). Hereafter, with "sustained indignation" (Swisher, "A Man of Rare Talent," *Intermountain Observer*, Boise, Idaho, July 20, 1968), he would lay siege to the lies that formed the "citadel of righteousness" (sonnet XLVI), and would dedicate himself to uprooting man's self-delusions wherever and by whatever means he could.

Like most of his regional novels, *Toilers of the Hills* (1928) is more strongly and directly autobiographical than other works of its kind. Though Fisher had been writing novels for some time, the basis for many had been his intimate knowledge of life in the Snake Fork country. With the death of Leona and his writing of the "Imaginary Madonna" sonnets, he must have found an even greater compulsion to rake out of his childhood those bleak and frightening years.

At first he avoided using his own *persona* as the subject of these initial excursions into the past. But though his regional novels began with a nominal attempt to keep his own image out of the fiction, he worked rapidly toward making himself the center of it.

Opening *Toilers of the Hills* with the scene he uses later in *Dark Bridwell* and *In Tragic Life*, Fisher draws upon his earliest vivid memories of the Antelope Hills. On the slab seat of a springless wagon, Dock Hunter (the first of the thinly disguised Fishers to become the fictional Hunters) hauls his new wife Opal along a cattle-trail wagon-track from the rich valleys to the infinitely bleak and inhospitable hills bordering the South Fork of the Snake River. Unlike Dock, Opal is married for the first time; and made uneasy by her husband's facile optimism and self-deceptive boasting, she instantly hates the barren hills. Throwing together a cottonwood cabin, he drags his plow to the hills in late

August. "Watch me take them brush out liken they was only pigweed," he says brashly (p. 23); but after attacking the brick-like sod he cries, "Who in the jumped-up Jesus could plow such land as that-air land is!" (p. 24). In his "boyish eagerness" (p. 42), however, there is a will too stubborn to accept the defeat of his dream. "I'll conquer them brush or I'll bust my worseless neck," he vows (p. 26).

The point of view is prevailingly Opal's. Before her eyes unrolls the unending sameness of the seasons, the monotonous cycles of drought and downpour, of heat and freeze, of life burgeoning and life dwindling. Her universe is a vista of barren hills, her world the cabin to which she is increasingly childbound. Of all that lies beyond the horizon she learns only through talk. Much she learns through the endless gossip of sly and ugly Lem Higley, who tells always "of queerer people, or stranger things" (p. 73), and his unconscious humor is lost upon her. Most she learns through Dock's constant reportage of the advance of the settlers and all that pertains to them. She actually sees only a handful of people.

Most critics have felt that the conflict lies between struggling man and indifferent or antagonistic nature. But Fisher seems to have dramatized a conflict which is antecedent to the physical one, and which is its underlying cause. This basic clash pits the eternal Dream against stubborn Reality. Approaching the zenith of her despair, Opal realizes that all the Hunters are "too eager with their dreams to see much at all save hope" (p. 236). But after what seems a hundred years she realizes that Dock's apparently futile dreams have miraculously added up to a modest triumph over locusts, crickets, grasshoppers, woodchucks, weeds, mustard seed, the killing seasons, the recalcitrant earth, and the greed of politicians.

Up to this moment, her life with Dock has been merely a pageant of dissolving dreams. By the summer of the first year, she sees that Dock's brash confidence is only "a mask behind

which hid disbelief" (p. 114). Listening to his talk of other farmers, she senses that "upon these hills there was unfolding a great drama . . . a matching of tiny human strength and ingenuity against the immeasurable and pitiless power of this rolling desert" (p. 162), and she is shaken by the sudden perception that her husband's feeling for the earth is "strangely like love" (p. 170). Subjected endlessly to his static dreams of a golden future, she cries, "You're dreamun yourself crazy. You'll just get all tangled up in your dreams like a fly in a spider's web, and there you'll be for good" (p. 171). She looks back upon her life and concludes only that "love had given her an ugly shack and eight dirty children and a cry for death" (p. 319). But with the success of Dock's "scientific" farming methods she realizes that, though she hates the hills, they have become a part of her being, whereupon she closes forever "the door to her dreams" (p. 360).

Though Fisher has denied that he was ever consciously a regional writer, the distinctive regionalism of his first novel caught the eye of the critics. In *The New Republic*, Fisher's Chicago professor Robert Morss Lovett called it "the very apotheosis of the pioneer novel in its secondary or growth of the soil stage" and declared that Fisher had "brought a new speech into American fiction and made it an organic element in a new variation upon the essential American theme" (p. 50). All in all, reviewers in England and America reacted with surprising enthusiasm toward an unknown author writing about a remote part of the world (see *A Critical Summary*, p. 6).

To the critics, in fact, *Toilers of the Hills* (Fisher never liked the title) appeared to be a singularly auspicious addition to the burgeoning schools of regional fiction in America. That Fisher had not read Garland and that he was consciously reacting against the "romantic tosh" of Willa Cather's early novels ("Hometown Revisited," p. 120) was not at that time, and is not now, really important. To the critics and the literary historians, Fisher

had created "a new regional literature" (Flora, *Vardis Fisher*, p. 99) to join that of Sarah Orne Jewett in the East, Garland and Cather in the Midwest, Erskine Caldwell and Faulkner in the South.

The regionalist impact of *Toilers of the Hills* delayed discovery that this novel has a deeper texture and a greater complexity than most other American "farm fiction" (Flora, "Early Power of Vardis Fisher," p. 15; see also Meyer's survey). Even the most casual reader cannot miss the keen local flavor of a dialect whose orthography captures the rhythm, sound, and sense of rural Western speech. Nor can he miss the localization in the minute descriptions of foothill and mountain; in the specific catalogs of indigenous plants, animals, birds, insects; in the medicinal uses of local flora: quaking asp leaves for the blood, yarrow for the liver, kinnikinnick for the kidneys (p. 168; see also Hanks, "Antelope, Idaho, in the Novels of Vardis Fisher," Master's Thesis, University of Idaho, 1942, *passim*).

Even so, these are hardly more than trappings. The essential story is a psychological study of people bound to the land, losing track of self and time, snared in their manifold ambivalences.

When asked, once, whether he liked growing up in the Antelope Country, Fisher answered, "Well, that's an ambivalent thing. I both liked it and disliked it" (*Three West*, p. 4). His awareness of his own ambivalent response to life in the Antelope region is a clue to the unresolvable counterpoise of opposites which is the basis for all his novels of the "Antelope People," most of whom are among the fantastic gallery of hill folk whose stories Opal hears endlessly but whom she never meets. To her, they are the fascinating legendry of the Antelope Hills.

In *Dark Bridwell* (1931), he turned to the legendry whose main figures he had introduced in *Toilers of the Hills*. He would also use them in the tetralogy and in *April*. Between his first and second published novels he wrote two others, destroying one and rewriting the other five times until it appeared in 1937 as *April*.

All of these dealt with the lives of the "Antelope People" and were part of an unfulfilled idea for writing a series or saga of regional novels—a Rocky Mountain saga similar to the Yoknapatawpha cycle which Faulkner was beginning in the South. Not long before his death, Fisher defended the notion that both Hardy and Faulkner were essentially regional writers; and he said that he had no objection to being considered a regional writer in the same sense (*Three West*, pp. 31-32).

Dark Bridwell would have been the second novel in such a regional saga. Fisher avoided reworking the same material or repeating structural patterns, however. Instead he chose as his central figure a man whose attitudes were the opposite of Dock Hunter's, and he shifted his viewpoint from omniscient observer to a third-person narrator who knew all about the people but who saw them as one sees legends—by looking back upon the action as completed events. Further, he was now a novelist who was working also as a folklorist-historian. In the writing of frontier and regional fiction, Fisher was to find these attributes his most valuable stock in trade.

Writing for the first time as both fabulist and historian, he begins and ends his second published novel with a prologue and an epilogue, a device which frames the story as a record of past times. To the wild tangle of the north-bank bottomland of the Snake had come, in 1889, one Silas Bane and his wife, who had fought the wilderness for seven years until, almost insane with loneliness, she had abandoned the place—as Lela Bridwell was to do after her twenty-one years there with Charley. In those two decades, beginning just before the turn of the century, all the Bridwells became legendary persons, known in the lore of the Antelope Country as "those strange Bridwells." The epilogue leaves the Bridwell place empty and crumbling, with only a few fading signs that anyone had ever lived there.

Having begun with the honest pioneer of the soil, to whom ceaseless labor is itself the highest virtue, Fisher turns to the op-

posite type of frontiersman. Based upon the family of Charley Wheaton, whose real farm was the counterpart of the fictional one across the river from Hunter Bottom, *Dark Bridwell* is the tale of the anachronistic mountain man to whom the Dock and Joe Hunters of the world, forever grubbing, are symbols of "the stupidity and folly of life" (p. 20). Like many among that breed of "natural man" who fled Westering before the advance of a despised civilization, the bear-like Charley Bridwell is less a man than an elemental force. He seeks and finds a primitive haven, but he is destroyed at last by a civilization that has outrun all frontiers.

Bringing his bride to the riverbottom from the ugly railroad-town "hellhole" of Pocatello, Idaho, whence he feels he has rescued her from "men who stared at her with lewd eyes" (p. 22), he installs her in loneliness among rocks and rattlesnakes. Here he tries to keep her "forever an idle princess, a fair jewel of silence" (p. 270). But deeper than he knows, she is an ambitious and independent woman, and after many years she rebels against the "chloroformed seasons of her life" (p. 271). Though the unknown narrator of the Bridwell legend tells us early that "if the years taught her hate, it was less of him [Charley] than of things she did not understand" (p. 23), she abandons him in his philosopher's paradise, as his sons had left before her. He, in turn, disappears into "the empire of solitude" (p. 376).

Charley comes to the untamed land, not to tame and use it as other men do, but to become part of it. Among people, Charley's elemental love of fun emerges as the joshing and exaggerated tale-telling which can enthrall the children of neighbors. His sense of mischief is translated into practical joking of a cruel and thoughtless kind, one instance of which brings upon him the revenge of Adolph Buck, who deliberately seduces Charley's daughter, thereby becoming an unwanted son-in-law and hastening Lela's ultimate revolt.

Charley's primitive cunning is one of his strangest attributes.

Frequently taking the form of honest and unfeigned duplicity, it allows him to borrow from neighbors without paying back in kind and to pursue his own way of life without accounting to his family. Sometimes, however, it becomes subterranean cunning which helps destroy his paradise, as when he secretly teaches his youngest son to curse and to chew tobacco—an act which serves as the culminating blow to Lela.

To friends and neighbors, the truest paradox is that this shrewd and dangerous charlatan is “a jolly and contented parasite, who took what he wanted from other folk, and gave in return, not gold, but a sense of humanity and fellowship” (p. 144). Everybody likes Charley except his son Jed and the vengeful Adolph Buck, and the intensity of their hatred is enough to disintegrate his paradise.

In the threefold organization, titled sequentially by the names of Charley, Jed, and Lela, the main character is Charley; but the most powerful opposing force is Jed. Among the most savage and fearsome characterizations in all of Fisher's novels, Jed is the embodiment of everything malign in his father, from whom he inherits none of the humor, generosity, or broad humanity. An abstraction of the dark side of his father's nature, he seems more demonic than human. The single-mindedness of his will to dominate, the recklessness of his devilment, and the intensity of his hatreds drive him to contrive tin armor so that he can walk among rattlesnakes and destroy them, to war against all mules, to persecute Vridar Hunter for fancied wrongs, and to plan the murder of his father whom he hates above all men. The last is the only act of revenge he fails to achieve, though he seems born to “excel his father's cunning ingenuities” (p. 153) and to deprive Charley of everything meaningful, even Lela.

As the sons leave, one after another, and as Lela discovers her resentment of Charley's possessiveness and her need to perform the constructive work which is anathema to her husband, their story becomes the legend of the “dark” Bridwells—people whose lives

are forever an unsolved riddle. That the sinister tangle of their lives becomes legendary is the inevitable result of ambivalences which remain so firmly balanced that all the violent opposites, though exploding at last, can never be resolved. And so ends Charley Bridwell's "weird fumbings toward a philosophic plan" (p. 316).

The reception of *Dark Bridwell*, though mixed, was surprisingly favorable, considering the degree of shock it created among even the most admiring critics. *The New Republic* (Oct. 28, 1931) said that "the cumulative effect of the book is tremendous" (p. 308). In the *Boston Transcript* (July 1, 1931) C. B. Sherman spoke of Fisher's "rigorous discipline," and *Nation* (July 4, 1931) declared that the story revealed the author as "a novelist of the first rank" (p. 19). In *Bookman* (Aug. 1931), however, Mildred Seitz found Charley's lovable qualities "less than convincing" (p. 642), and E. L. Sabin's remarks in *The Saturday Review of Literature* (Aug. 8, 1931) called for less outward sensation and greater reliance upon intuition (p. 40). It is important to note, though, that "even those repelled by him [Fisher] never questioned his power" (*A Critical Summary*, p. 8), and that the power of *Dark Bridwell* carries over into *In Tragic Life* and the rest of the Vidar Hunter tetralogy, of which *Dark Bridwell* is the "unofficial predecessor" (Kellogg, "First Man of Idaho Letters," p. 94).

In Tragic Life (1932), the first segment of the tetralogy which Fisher had been planning for some time, begins as another movement in the unrolling saga of the Antelope Country. Like the other novels of the tetralogy, it is written in the tradition of the naturalistic 1930's versions of the "apprenticeship novels" with an overlay of the "novel of ideas" (see Flora's dissertation, Chap. II, and his Twayne volume, Chap. 2). At the same time, the opening pages of *In Tragic Life* are a significant prelude to the historical novels which were to be among Fisher's most important contributions to the literature of the Western frontier.

The beginning suggests that the series is intended as part of the broad literature of the Westering movement. Vridar's grandfather is the Joe Hunter who traces dim trails westward from Missouri in 1869, has a heroic confrontation with a grizzly bear, lives for weeks on roots and wolfhides, marries an Irish girl who came West with Brigham Young, and takes her northward into Idaho to become the first settler in the Snake Fork town of Annis. Vridar's ancestry, then, is compounded of materials which are later to become historical novels—*Children of God*, *The Mothers*, *Tale of Valor*, *Pemmican*, *Mountain Man*.

In the first volume of the tetralogy the strange union of Prudence Branton with the pioneer Joe Hunter's eldest son, also Joe, accounts for the lifelong stresses in Vridar's precariously integrated character. The origins of his self-divisions and self-delusions lie in his having a father who is "morbidly taciturn" and a mother who "had been taught, by a stern and unrelenting mother, that sexual passion was base and unclean" (p. 23). Moreover, Vridar is a product of that form of frontier alliance which occurs when local marriage-mongers force together a man and a woman without thought of their fitness for each other. As a result, Joe and Prudence have a courtship and a married life "of few common interests, with all passion shut away in darkness, with all conversation stripped to its bone" (p. 23). Grant to such a union the birth of a sensitive soul, and much of Vridar's tortured life is foreshadowed. His parents have endowed him "not only with his physical inheritance but also with a tragic psychic inheritance" (Foster, "Freudian Influences in the American Novel," Ph.D. dissertation, Vanderbilt University, 1941, p. 33).

In Tragic Life tells the story of Vridar Hunter from the time of his earliest pioneer forefathers through that formative epoch of his life in which he gropes toward maturity among the Antelope Hills. The epoch ends at about his eighteenth year, when he leaves for the university. Thereafter he returns only sporadi-

cally; and the series of novels remains regional only in the sense that Vridar strives to overcome the effects of his frontier childhood, using his memories as a measure of his clearer insight and changing values.

Because it is the only truly regional novel of the four, *In Tragic Life* must serve also as that segment of Vridar's apprenticeship which lays the foundation for all the others. Flora has shown that the whole tetralogy is analogous to the four movements of a symphony, the first novel being the statement of all the themes, and the others supplying in sequence the lyrical movement, the scherzo, and the recapitulation of the themes (*Vardis Fisher*, p. 29).

To serve these purposes, Fisher adopts the looking-backward technique of *Dark Bridwell*, save that the narrator is no longer an anonymous observer relating a legend of the Antelope People, but the central character himself, a young writer trying to discover the crucial stages by which he has become what he is. To mark these stages, Fisher uses also the *Dark Bridwell* technique of introducing sets of episodes by enumerating the experiences; but it is a more sophisticated use of the device, since it is less an ordering of legends than a method, almost clinical, of recording psychological states revealed by ruthless introspection. To this extent, the tetralogy is a psychological study of Vridar's schizoid personality, based primarily upon Vivian Fisher's auto-corrective theory that people must continuously strive to balance the divisive tension between their selfless and their selfish drives. Though critics persistently label Fisher a Freudian, he replies "I am not and have never been" (Preface to Rein, p. I).

Whether Freudian or not, *In Tragic Life* is a painfully graphic study of the ways by which Vridar's frontier childhood creates almost insuperable barriers to the healthy balance of his personality. By nature a shy and sensitive child, he is endowed with opposing drives of ego and of race which are extreme but equal. He overreacts to otherwise ordinary stimuli and identifies himself immoderately with several things. Two of these are signally

important: the clash between the sex drive and religious doctrine; and the impact of the lonely, wild, brutal life of the frontier upon his sensitive and fearful nature. In an extreme way, Vridar's life illustrates Fisher's conviction that the American adult remains anchored to his childhood—too intimately identified with one parent, overmotivated sexually, and a distorted personality altogether.

Born with a caul, made to feel he will be a prophet, steeped in the Bible stories which he reads precociously, Vridar becomes so thoroughly imbued with a sense of destiny and divinity that he has both seizures and "visions." But life on the harsh and primitive frontier denies this exalted promise. From his mother's teaching that all women are pure, not to be defiled by unclean thoughts or touch of the flesh, Vridar gains only a sense of shame. Kept ignorant of sex and birth, he learns the "truth" by witnessing the birth of a calf, by the gross reporting of Jed Bridwell, and by the lewd demonstrations of Hankie McGard, who reveals to him the futile experimentation of "playing house." Later, *Orphans in Gethsemane* indicates that Vridar had tried to take part in the experimentation with his sister, but that he was already overcome by the fear and guilt which made him impotent during parts of his young manhood.

Neither the wanton Bonnie Adams nor the mature and sensuous Betty Mill can overcome his paralyzing fear; so his true goddess is the golden-haired Helen with whom he ice-skates in Poplar. She is aloof and tantalizing, and she never threatens his psyche. Yet one of his deepest disillusionments in *Orphans* lies in the scene where Vridar returns to find that, at thirty-seven, the radiant Helen is a toothless, wizened, nearly bald, slow-witted grotesque, whom he mistakes for an old man (pp. 730-31).

The tragic result of his conflict, however, is his ambivalent love for Neloia Doole, the Danish and Scotch-Irish girl whose ineffable attraction for Vridar is a native amorality far healthier in its way than Vridar's destructive inhibitions and schizoid ten-

dencies. In his mind he enthrones her as pure and undefiled, and he treats her accordingly. The marriage is a nightmarish impasse, full of recriminations but cemented by need, ending in her suicide near the end of the third volume, *We Are Betrayed*. Knowing that her death is a direct result of his failure to reconcile the warring X and Y of his schizoid personality, Vridar tries to see his failure objectively by writing his life story from its beginning. He marries twice again before he comes to grips with his conflicts.

An equally powerful disruptive force in Vridar's character is his reasonless terror of the remote and savage land. This oppression overcomes him when he first sees the riverbottom, and he does not conquer it until he has honestly faced himself in the last book of the tetralogy. Often a marginal insanity, his fear springs partly from the impersonal cruelties which the primitive life imposes upon every order of living creature, and partly from the aloneness which deprives Vridar of normal social adjustments, substituting an excessive identification with the irrational moods of nature. The instances of savagery are many and explicit; and Vridar's immoderate identification with all suffering creatures sickens him, giving him an abiding fear of death. Later he realizes that he is much like his father in being "a mountain man and a river man" (*Orphans*, p. 951), but as a child he feels "a strange alloy of reverence and fear" (*In Tragic Life*, p. 68) for the stubborn, scowling, cursing, and sometimes dispassionately brutal father-giant who is part of the child's terror of the wilderness.

Looking back he remembers only the frightful things, seeing "the four years as one moment, bound with one uninterrupted terror, drawn into one nightmare" (p. 46). Before he leaves the bottomland home, having written a clumsy novel and having learned to laugh at himself, he knows that the land will be forever part of him: "He would be both soft and hard, like this place; both ugly and beautiful, happy and yet lonely, aggressive and yet afraid . . . like a detached part of this home-bowl, no matter where

he went" (pp. 336-37). His insight is true. As John Peale Bishop has said, "Though the accidents of his story carry Vridar to many places, the determining background is always the Idaho benchland" ("The Strange Case of Vardis Fisher," p. 57).

The fear remains through far wanderings and repeated homecomings. In one sense, it becomes "the crucial test of his life" (Hanks, p. 31). In the last three novels of the tetralogy Vridar returns periodically from college in Salt Lake City, from graduate work at the University of Chicago, from New York, from war training camps, even from Europe. Each time, he approaches the riverbottom apprehensively, hoping that the old fear is gone, hoping that the stabilizing forces in his life have triumphed over the instability. But as in his younger school days, when the sight of the homeplace made him physically ill, the fear is always there—until he manages to resolve most of his inner conflicts in *No Villain Need Be*. Then, having cleared away his self-delusions, he comes back and finds the fear replaced by love for the beauty and the solitude, as though his childhood had not belonged to him.

The twelve-volume *Testament of Man* was a direct outgrowth of the tetralogy. Fisher was aware that all "total" confessionals, from the essays of Montaigne through Rousseau to the novels of Thomas Wolfe, had found that goal unattainable. By the time he had finished his own contribution to that *genre*, through the writing of the tetralogy, he seemed dissatisfied on several counts. Critics had noted that the character of Neloia was the emotional unifier in the series and that, dramatically, the series terminated with her suicide at the end of the third volume. There was strong feeling among reviewers that, however fittingly the last volume recapitulated the major themes, the narrative was too static. To many, this static quality was the zenith of a tendency which they had noticed in Fisher's work as far back as *Dark Bridwell*—that it was "a book for those who like to think while they read" (*A Critical Summary*, p. 8). But most disturb-

ing to Fisher was the realization that he could not reach any satisfactory conclusions about an individual without going all the way back into the past and discovering "some of the basic human motivations that might allow me to understand why I made a fool of myself in the fourth volume of the tetralogy" (*Three West*, p. 15).

For a capsulized summary of the *Testament*, the interested reader can see the November 1961 issue of *MD, Medical News-magazine*, pp. 145-46; and for a thorough analysis, he can refer to Flora's dissertation and to his Twayne volume on Fisher. *Orphans in Gethsemane* is particularly significant in the series because it is more than a culmination of the *Testament*; it is also the tetralogy revised, reevaluated, and extended to include Vridar's life through the writing of the *Testament*. This reevaluation is itself "an important assertion that Vardis and Vridar are regional—though much more" (letter from Joseph M. Flora, Jan. 6, 1972). It is an achievement unmatched in the history of American letters, or perhaps in the literature of any nation: a local and regional fiction expanded historically to embrace the entire development of mankind.

The tetralogy did not terminate Fisher's regional fiction, however. While writing the tetralogy he had been working on another novel of the Antelope People. Revised five times within seven years, *April; A Fable of Love* (1937) is one of his most remarkable achievements. It is the story of June Weeg, a squat and dumpy girl with a pretty smile but with arms and legs like saw logs, a girl whose kiss makes hired men disappear forever from the Antelope Hills, a girl who is "even too homely for sin" (p. 144). For eleven years, since her childhood, she has been courted every Sunday by Sol Incham, the homeliest man in Antelope, whose quiet and unromantic attentions have become merely fixtures in her life. Because she is as sensitive, imaginative, and beauty-loving as she is homely, she refuses to believe that life holds no more than a drab eternity of household toil

and child-bearing among the Antelope hills, as it had for the Opal and Prudence Hunters and the Lela Bridwells.

Despite her scorn of her mother's method of escaping into the unreal world of Romantic fiction, June measures her own everyday world against the Romantic one, and finds hers lacking. Confronted with every young Antelope girl's choice between life as it is and life as it ought to be, June prefers fantasy over the mundane. She cannot accept Sol, since his wistful remarks about his empty house, dirty dishes, and unclean floor have become symbols of that dreary self-sacrifice and disillusionment which love has meant for all Antelope people. So she tries to build a better world inside herself. For June Weeg she substitutes April, the only month "beautiful and sweet to think of" (p. 65). She thinks of herself as beautiful and demanding, after the fashion of the Romantic heroines, and she looks for attributes of the Romantic hero in the real men of Antelope. But even though the new hired man, Willie, is a poet of sorts, she finds him a "sorry piece of architecture" (p. 101). Bill Dugan, the most popular swain in Antelope, seems stupid; a chance passerby who drives her home from the dance is only a foil for her fantasies; and of course, Sol's plodding devotion seems to her the antithesis of Romantic fulfillment.

Urged by her mother to find in herself the mysterious "way" by which even homely girls can make themselves irresistible to men, June strives to project herself as ravishingly beautiful; but the "feeling" of beauty invariably makes her appear ridiculous, and she ends by clowning grotesquely. Her story becomes an intense but ironic odyssey of the spirit, in which her search for beauty results in a series of confrontations with herself, most of them arising from interviews with her embittered father, with the old maid Susan Hemp, with the incredibly lovely Virgin Hill, and with the worldly-wise scarlet woman, Ella Hansen—all of them leading her home again to the faithful Sol Incham, whose stature as a human being seems larger with each experience.

This novel appears to have been Fisher's favorite, and in many ways it commands special attention among his regional works. It is by far the shortest and probably the most tightly knit of the Antelope novels. It features an amazingly intimate creation of a female character, by a writer whose artistic province had seemed predominantly the portrayal of male characters in a frontier world dominated by the male. Further, it shows in Fisher a sense of the comic which has been largely misunderstood or neglected. And it is in many ways the happiest blending of his distinctive regionalism with his psychological probing of self-delusions and the ways by which they must be eliminated.

Part of its compression was the result of Fisher's careful restriction of viewpoint to the consciousness of a character basically different from the autobiographical self of the other regional fiction. In confining his tale to the sensitive female mind and heart of June Weeg, Fisher proved himself capable of that final act of creation by which a literary artist becomes convincingly another creature than himself.

Equally astonishing to his critics was the comic tone. It was surprising to find a strangely compelling blend of irony and fantasy in a story by an author whose previous work had been judged not merely humorless but painful, brutal, even depraved—"too strong meat" for the publisher's table (*A Critical Summary*, p. 8).

But the true nature of Fisher's comic sense has been widely misunderstood, even by those who recognize his capacity for creating farce and broad comedy from time to time. It is difficult for American readers to comprehend why Fisher considered his apparently serious tetralogy to represent a comic view of life; yet, to him, the deadly earnestness of Vridar's self-image, the utter self-consciousness with which Vridar saw in himself the center of the objective universe, was not a tragic delusion but more truly a kind of cosmic joke. There are strongly autobiographical elements in an episode at the end of *In Tragic Life* where Vridar's favorite high school teacher shows him how to

laugh at himself for the very things which most ponderously burdened Vridar's conscience. Moreover, Fisher wrote a doctoral dissertation upon George Meredith, who insists that the Comic Spirit looks "humanely malign" upon men who are conceited or falsely humble or unreasonable. Above all, Fisher wrote his own essay upon the comic spirit, which he included among others in *The Neurotic Nightingale* ("How's Your Sense of Humor?" pp. 22-38). Here he contends that our national syndrome of sustained adolescence makes it impossible for Americans to develop a mature sense of humor. Our characteristically open and ready laughter is not a recognition of "a conflict between two irreconcilables" (p. 27), but of something to which we must feel superior. We require of our humor that it be a "gentle ministering to our self-esteem" (p. 29) rather than a perception of the "difference between what we can reasonably expect from life and what we were led to expect" (p. 29). In any humor compounded of strong ironies, we are less likely to recognize the spirit of comedy than to "vaguely recognize an enemy" (p. 28). Hence we screen ourselves from any acknowledgment that "a sense of humor is nothing but a defense against life and an admission of partial defeat" (p. 30).

Fisher's sense of comedy requires that we make that admission about ourselves; and in our incapacity to do so, we have been unable to concede the possibility that his literary legacy might be more important for its searing comedy than for what has too often seemed a brutal and depraved naturalism.

The comedy in *April* is deceptively obvious, and for that reason it, too, has been frequently misunderstood. Though June Weeg appears consumed by fantasies, she is always aware of the difference between fantasy and reality. The real June is always there as a scathing and ironic commentator. For this reason, among others, the tale is unlike the tender and haunting fantasies of Robert Nathan, though some critics have made the comparison. Fisher proves himself capable of unsuspected deli-

cacy of tone and touch, but his tale is not at bottom the delicately fanciful one which its surface suggests. June's fanciful flights are self-delusions of the most obvious kind. There is no happiness or salvation in them. Only by accepting herself as she really is can June learn the simplest but, for her, the most profound of lessons: that it is better to love than be loved.

The truly surprising thing about this "fable of love" is that, in turning to the female viewpoint and unmistakably to comedy, Fisher achieved his best self-contained treatment of the psychology of evasions in a regional setting. And this was not only the last of the "regional novels" but nearly the last of what he frequently called his "psychological novels." His next effort, almost universally misunderstood and therefore unsuccessful, was *Forgive Us Our Virtues* (1938). But by the time he had put together portions of several unpublished novels to form this basically clinical, non-regional study of the auto-corrective theory, he had begun work on the WPA Writers' Project.

Though the early novels established Fisher as the leading Rocky Mountain regionalist, he solidified that position with a substantial gloss of lesser writings. The "Antelope People" sonnets provided some biting ironic insights into the twisted lives of characters in the novels, notably Joe Hunter ("He clubbed the desert and he made it grow") and Susan Hemp ("all the hunger of her soul was dust"). Seriously if not extensively, he used short fiction as the laboratory for experimenting with storytelling techniques; and though he felt his talent unsuited to the short form, he produced over a dozen short stories, of which more than half are significant contributions to the regional fiction.

The Antelope stories are frequently variations of incidents which are particularly memorable in the novels. "The Scarecrow," for instance, is a study of the kinship between men and animals, much like the tetralogy episode in which a horse is impaled upon a gate, to die slowly, but somehow suffering nobly with its torn intestines sewn back into its abdominal cavity. Vridar

Hunter narrates the short story, as he does "The Mother," which repeats one of Vridar's "experiences of death" wherein Brig Murden kills a newborn colt. But in the short story, told nearly thirty years later, Vridar sees in the eyes of the dead colt's mother the dead expression of Murden's own wife. "Joe Burt's Wife" is an Antelope country variation of the "mail-order marriage" motif, and "The Legend of Red Hair" is another episode in the affairs of the notorious Ella Hansen; but both are about characters who appear regularly in the novels of Antelope legendry. In "Charivari" Fisher dramatizes the ways by which the crude frontier treatment of sex creates a divisive self-consciousness in a newly married couple, much like the impact of the gross Hunter clan upon the sensibilities of Prudence Hunter in the early pages of the tetralogy; and "The Storm" is the study of the frustration and loneliness of a country school teacher, written in the vein of Sherwood Anderson. Besides these additions to the regional novels, Fisher began writing a stream of articles about the Rocky Mountain West, and he was still producing them within months of his death.

Beginning in the 1930's, when most of the regional short stories appeared, these articles were among several offshoots of Fisher's unique but frustrating experiences as Idaho State Director and later as Regional Director of the WPA Federal Writers' Project. Under his irrepressible direction, and utilizing his own energetic research and composition, the *Idaho Guide* was published by Caxton within eleven months after he started work. Knowing that the first WPA publication off the press would get maximum review space, Fisher had badgered his superiors, sliced and spliced red tape, traveled and logged his own tours, written most of his own copy, and eventually ignored Federal orders to withhold publication in order that larger states and the national Capital would not be embarrassed as laggards. The writing and editing were so good, however, that Fisher's judgments upon matters of organization and presentation were adopted as national standards

for the other projects to follow. In "Vardis Fisher and the 'Idaho Guide,' Preserving Culture for the New Deal," Ronald W. Taber has told the full story of this remarkable literary *coup d'etat*, and Fisher provides his own fictional account in *Orphans in Gethsemane*, pp. 732-57.

Altogether the three volumes which Fisher edited—*Idaho, A Guide in Word and Picture* (1937), *The Idaho Encyclopedia* (1938), and *Idaho Lore* (1939)—are a storehouse of regional information, containing over 240 pictures, maps, and drawings, as well as accurate and exhaustive statistics, description, and folklore. If many of the statistics are no longer valid, and if freeways have made some tours obsolete or difficult, the rest is of permanent value. Some of the descriptive prose in the *Guide*—as in the section on the Salmon River—is comparable with the best descriptive passages in Fisher's novels. The 200 or more items in *Idaho Lore* become more valuable with the steadily increasing interest in folklore, and perhaps more so in view of Fisher's candid declaration that "if not all of it is honest-to-goodness folklore, that is because the compilers were interested in good stories rather than in fine distinctions" (Introduction).

His four years of work on the WPA Writers' Project was a crucial phase in Fisher's development as an artist, a phase in which he established an inveterate habit of historical research. Foremost among Western historical novelists, Fisher has used historical fiction to achieve not merely an illusion but a reconstruction or a re-creation of the past, undistorted by the values and attitudes of the present, which is the outgrowth of the past rather than its cause. By immersing himself in the past, Fisher has used the past-present continuum in ways which are unique to him. Unfortunately, the uniqueness of his method has most often been considered an extension of the historian's technique rather than a variation of the novelist's.

Recent scholars have praised Fisher for his ability to create believable scenes, appropriate dialogue, and other external mani-

festations of setting and character, verifiable by the best historical evidence. Yet this alone is no more than any good historian could do if he wished, without significant exercise of the imagination or any training in the writing of fiction. Fisher's triumph, however, lies precisely in this: that in combining scholarship with art, he has created novels that are undeniably art rather than scholarship; that without invalidating the verifiable facts of history he has effectively dramatized them. In so doing, he has discovered a new significance in the relationship between the past and the present—a significance which only fiction can establish for the reader.

If the novelist is to "leave his own world and enter the world he is determined to portray" (Taber, "Vardis Fisher: New Directions for the Historical Novel," p. 287), he must do so with a completeness unknown to the historian, and with a different objective. However soundly based upon historical evidence, the narrative must transcend the evidence. It must be ultimately an exercise in the creative use of intuition and focused imagination.

The first and still the best-known of Fisher's six historical novels of the Western frontier was *Children of God*, subtitled *An American Epic*, which won the \$7,500 Harper Prize in 1939. According to his own account, he had been planning a novel on the subject even before writing the Antelope stories; and while he was on the WPA project he pursued an orderly plan of research, reading first the anti-Mormon documents, then the pro-Mormon, then everything else he could find—all the while determined "to be impartial, to see the whole matter in reasonably clear perspective, and to avoid all editorializing and moral implications" ("Creative Historical Research in Fiction, Drama, Art," p. 127).

Children of God is a three-part novel. "Morning" covers the history of the Mormon church from its founding in the 1820's to the martyrdom of its originator and prophet, Joseph Smith in the early 1840's. "Noon" depicts the epic migration to the Great Salt Lake Valley under Brigham Young, the building of the city,

the temple, and the tabernacle, and the successful defense of the faith against outside interference to the time of Young's death in 1877. "Evening" presents the failure of the church to defend itself following the loss of Young's leadership, after which two aged church presidents gradually succumb to outside pressures, leading to the renunciation of plural marriage and to the loss of faithful church members, represented by three generations of McBrides who leave the valley to found a new Order in Mexico.

As an augury of Fisher's later triumphs in the methodology of historical fiction, *Children of God* is remarkable in several ways, but especially in the successful creation of lifelike, believable, and engaging characters founded upon real personages whom history, myth, and religion had invested with a precarious duality. Whether Joseph Smith was mere opportunist or true prophet, his mortality and his possible divinity remain so carefully balanced that the reader can believe in either or both simultaneously. Out of boyhood trances, revelations, and agonizings which are much like Vridar's in *In Tragic Life* (see Flora, "Vardis Fisher and the Mormons," pp. 50-51), Joseph Smith emerges as the true prophet, all others in that welter of doubt and atheism being false in the eyes of God. To his disciples he seems a true Saint, but to others he is fallible and fleshbound, as with his first wife, Emma, who scorns his exalted motives as downright lies. After the novel was published, Fisher characterized Smith as "a mystic and dreamer and a very sensual man" ("The Mormons," p. 39).

Brigham Young emerges as the practical Saint, as the apostle of action, common sense, and the expediency of survival, as "the hardheaded man . . . with shrewd knowledge of men and what men were made of" (p. 121). From the time he joins the church in Ohio, when he prays "in the Adamic tongue," he beats down the false prophets, outwits and outmaneuvers the enemies who persecute the Saints and murder their prophet, seizes con-

trol of the church when it needs him most, leads the Saints forty-thousand strong out of United States territory and into a desert which blossoms "like a rose," creates industry and banks and schools, builds temples and tabernacles, and resists invasions by United States armies until overcome by false promises and mining stampedes and overwhelming numbers. Yet here is a man who sleeps alone while defending plural marriage, uses "destroying angels" to eliminate his enemies, and in his ripe years succumbs to the attractions of a young woman who drives her own bargain.

This "American Epic" is not, however, the story of individual men or even of great prophets and leaders, but of the Children of God, the Latter-Day Saints—those numberless believers who suffer and die or somehow endure to build Zion in the great salt desert, where they can live the Word of Wisdom and flourish under the Book of Mormon, which an angel of the Lord has revealed to Joseph Smith for translation from golden plates. Fisher aids the epic panorama and at the same time maintains coherence by means of the generation-story of the McBride family—fictional representatives of the chosen People, whose devotion to basic church doctrine endures even after the faith has renounced its principle of plural marriage.

City of Illusion (1941) is the story of Virginia City, Nevada, whose spectacular but ephemeral history Fisher depicts through the lives of two legendary characters, Eilley and Sandy Bowers. Rocketed to wealth and eminence by their stakes in the great Comstock silver lode, this unlikely pair becomes the embodiment of all the futile plans, all the grandiose visions, all the precious misplaced values of those hordes who pursued their dreams endlessly through the phantom Western mining camps.

Among the gold-seekers in Gold Canyon, Nevada, near the middle of the Nineteenth Century is the parasitical, illiterate, diseased Henry Comstock ("Old Pancake"), who steals a map drawn by the Grosch brothers; and thereafter the fabulously rich

silver deposits shown on the map are known the world over as the Comstock Lode. Alison Orrum Cowan, a Scotswoman twice married to Mormons and twice divorced, is a cook and washer-woman in Gold Canyon when the silver is discovered. Beside her claim on the Comstock is the claim of Sandy Bowers, a simple, unpretentious, illiterate ex-teamster from Missouri, whom she marries to have a partner in the wealth which her "second sight" has promised. Possessed of a boundless passion for "culture," Eilley dreams of being "Queen of the Comstock." Wealthy beyond her comprehension, she dresses Sandy in fashionable clothes and "jools," tries vainly to make him a polished gentleman, takes him to Europe to absorb "culture" and to help furnish their "mansion" with all the best things that Europe can supply. With the mansion finished, a marvel of conspicuous expenditure, Eilley tries to enthrone herself as "Queen of Virginia City," but succeeds only in being dubbed the "Washoe Seeress" by Steve Gilpin, the newspaper editor. Unwilling to believe Steve's warning that the city "doesn't want any damned culture" (p. 109), she gives ostentatious parties and wages war against the brothels, saloons, and dog fights in the theaters. Sandy, who is "just a common man likes to smell horses" (p. 306), leaves the mansion to live in his old shack near the mine, pretending to be watching their business interests. Here, where he feels at home, he dies without knowing that all the papers he had signed with his X had given the mine to the speculating banker, William Sharon. Eilley is left alone in the mortgaged "mansion," with her family buried nearby on a hill—two of her own children, an adopted child, a husband—while the wars of manipulation strip her of everything else. She spends her last years in a Reno hotel, a toothless, garrulous old woman full of wild fantasies. When she adds her grave to the four on the hill, the few aged mourners cannot believe that "thousands" had ever banqueted within the crumbling walls of the old stone house.

Fisher's novel contains not only a cross-section of the people who created these cities but also a study of the ways in which the

illusions of wealth and power affected each of the persons. William Mackay lives the whole evolution of man's susceptibility to illusions: at first wanting only \$25,000; then learning that money itself "is the least of all things a man wanted" (p. 319); then understanding that man is not fully satisfied without being "the only sun in the sky" (p. 320); then, having become "King of the Comstock," he lives in memory as the founder of the state university. But the basic illusions are shown in the life of Luff McCoy, a fat and contented man whose beautiful daughter gains wealth and power as the town's leading harlot, and whose grasping wife forces him reluctantly into the scramble for wealth. Waiting vainly for his investments to rise so that he can pay Eilley the \$42,000 he had borrowed from Sandy, he is caught in the big, final crash. Stumbling home drunk, he falls into an old mining shaft, where he finds dying beside him a goat that has fallen there, too. Dying slowly with his hand upon the goat, he realizes that between them at that moment is "the same uselessness of mind, of wealth and position, of pretense and purpose and power. They needed only a spot to lie on and come together in the final fellowship of death" (p. 378).

Fisher never lost interest in the Western mining stampedes. With the help of his wife he compiled an impressive volume called *Gold Rushes and Mining Camps of the Early American West*, which appeared in the last year of his life. John Barsness called this book "an immensely detailed collection of everything that has been pertinent to the mining days on the western frontier" (*WAL*, 2, Fall 1968, p. 253), and John Hutchens commended the Fishers for passing along "the whole gaudy pageant" (*Sat. Rev.*, 51, Aug. 10, 1968, p. 31).

One of the earliest chapters in *Gold Rushes* is titled "The Overland Journey," a survey of Westering travel, including the notorious Donner Party, whose story Fisher tells in *The Mothers* (1943). Historians have given the known facts of this tragic story many times, most notably George R. Stewart, whose *Ordeal by*

Hunger first appeared in 1936. With habitual thoroughness, Fisher saturated his mind with the basic source materials and was able to create a gripping fictionalized chronicle of the day-by-day events in the lives of these doomed travelers.

Most fittingly, Fisher opens his narrative on that September morning in 1846 when the travelers, still far out on the desert, awaken to see frost on nearby bushes and snow on the distant California Sierras. As they move on, the infirm lag and die. Deep snow forces the travelers into separate camps near the summit. Of repeated assaults on the pass, only two succeed, but with many deaths. In the camps, packed together in incredible filth, the survivors eat mice, charred bones, boiled cowhides, and in the last extremities, the flesh of their own dead, as a snowshoe party had already done on the trail. Some become depraved, some cowardly, some sly, some infinitely patient, some heroic. Though mountain men loot the Donner camp under the guise of rescuers, Tamsen Donner refuses rescue, preferring to die with her husband. Of about ninety immigrants, only forty-eight survive the ordeal.

In *The Mothers*, Fisher had to keep before the reader the simultaneous experiences of two separate camps as well as of those on the trail and of the several groups of rescuers coming and going. He solved the difficulties by exercising the novelist's selectivity rather than by distorting events or by changing their order. Though the center of interest is the main camp, the narrative oscillates between the Alder Creek camp and those on the trail. Part Two of the three-part narrative begins with seventeen people leaving the main camp for Sutter's Fort, and it ends with the rescue of five survivors, whereupon Part Three returns immediately to the main camp. Except for a one-sentence remark, Reed's desperate five-month campaign to organize a rescue party in California is ignored.

True to his concept of historical fiction, Fisher seizes upon the innately dramatic, underplaying everything that has been sen-

sationalized, and restoring the proper perspective. The true pathos lies in the naivete of Midwestern farm folk, to whom the vast Western spaces and mountain heights are incomprehensible. On the trail and in the snow they do almost everything wrong: they travel in isolated family units instead of as an organized train; they believe those who urge the "cutoff" and those who scoff at warnings of early snowfall; they bicker about inconsequential matters while precious cattle and mules are lost; they build flimsy shelters; they consistently underestimate distances, temperatures, and snow depth. Had they known anything at all about mountain survival, they would have suffered but they need not have died from hunger and exposure.

Though Philip Van Doren Stern speaks of "the seldom-used theme of cannibalism, which, to the average civilized person, is perhaps more deeply horrifying than any other" (*Sat. Rev.*, Nov. 6, 1943, p. 20), Fisher avoids all the sensationalism for which this aspect of the Donner incident has become notorious. Presenting everything from the viewpoint of the starving immigrants, he develops the "theme" of cannibalism as one among many inevitable consequences of the struggle for survival.

On the other hand, Fisher has seen in the frequently over-sensationalized historical accounts a scarcely noticed but coherent theme: the innate toughness and will-to-live which allows wives and mothers to survive while strong men perish. With the earliest sense of disaster, every immigrant mother is dominated by the "single and calculating devotion" (p. 38) of placing her children's lives before her own. Driven by this fierce and exclusive energy, wives and mothers forsake ordinary amenities and generousities, using every atom of their strength to feed and protect the young. Fisher's novel is a celebration of the primal mother-mystique: a source of physical, moral, and spiritual toughness which surpasses everything else in man's capacity to survive.

Fisher's overwhelmingly detailed knowledge of the physical and psychological effects of cold, hunger, and exhaustion carries over

from *The Mothers* into *Pemmican* where it blends with other knowledges to create a story quite different from that of the Donner Party. *Pemmican* (1956), *Tale of Valor* (1958), and *Mountain Man* (1965) can be loosely grouped as "mountain man" stories, and with them Fisher rounds off his career as frontier historical novelist. All three of these novels are notable for the wealth of precise and convincing detail with which they depict the hazards of travel and survival in the mountain wilderness, the relationships between Indians and white men, and the thin veneer which separates the civilized from the primitive and bestial.

Pemmican (a Cree word meaning "mixture," dried and pounded buffalo meat) is the first of Fisher's frontier novels to use fictional characters and events within a historical framework, in the fashion of conventional historical novelists. Basically a love story between an early mountain man and a white girl raised as a squaw, it has for its historical foundation the crucial years (1815-1816) of the "Pemmican War" between the Hudson's Bay Company and the North West Company. A twenty-two-year-old, six-feet-two-inch Scotsman who has spent eight years as Chief Trader and "bully boy" for an HB post on the Saskatchewan River, David McDonald is returning from a solitary expedition high in the Canadian Rockies, scouting the half-continent which King Charles had casually chartered to the HB company in the Seventeenth Century, but which the North West "pedlars" now threaten to usurp.

On his way back to the post, David kills a grizzly bear, shoots an old buffalo bull to save it from torment by wolves, and sees a beautiful gray-eyed girl swimming naked with a band of Blackfeet. Sensing that she is a white girl stolen by the Indians, he instantly vows to have her. But he finds that she is "Princess" Sunday, the property of Chief Horned Thunder, and in some vague way promised to Chief Brave Feathers. While David takes every opportunity to woo Sunday in the white man's way but also to

negotiate for possession of her, he tries to carry on the business of the company. After several confrontations with Indians and pedlars, he wins Sunday, who saves him from an attack by the half-breed Latude; and with his woman and his baby boy David goes into the West as the Pemmican War nears its end.

Alone among Fisher's frontier and regional novels, *Pemmican* has a conventional "happy ending," with the protagonist surmounting all obstacles to win the woman he loves and to retire with her into a land where they can live untrammelled by the outside world. The love story itself is far from conventional, however. The reader must accept a historical perspective in which a supposedly civilized white man yearns for a woman who is in every basic sense a savage—in which an otherwise Romantic hero finds "adorable" a woman drenched in fresh buffalo blood, her open mouth filled with raw liver.

But because Fisher remained "an honest believer in presenting the past as it really was regardless of possible effect upon his readers" (Carl Carmer, *Sat. Rev.*, June 23, 1956, p. 16), the tale became labeled "not for the queasy" (Eli M. Oboler, *Library Journal*, June 15, 1956, p. 1614). The general circumstances of the Pemmican War are authentic, and the geography is real. Moreover, the adventurous love story is anchored to reality by the use of details so concrete that many episodes could serve as manuals: for the close-ranging shooting of the grizzly; for the Indian method of hunting buffalo; for the making of pemmican; for bargaining with Indians, handling a dog team, surviving in deep snow and sub-zero cold.

The most impressive and most authentic of the "mountain men" stories, however, is *Tale of Valor*, a novel built as solidly upon the known facts of the Lewis and Clark Expedition as *The Mothers* was upon those of the Donner Party. So thoroughly had Fisher studied the Thwaites edition of the *Journals*, so aptly did he interweave the material from every other factual and fictional source, that he was able to determine with unusual pre-

cision "the points of fact between which he would interpolate and intuit" (Taber, "Vardis Fisher: New Directions for the Historical Novel," p. 291). And because the structure of the *Journals* is basically straightline and chronological, unlike the divergent source-structure of *The Mothers*, Fisher was free to maximize his power as "perhaps the world's best intuiter" (Foote, "The Unholy Testator," p. 11). Taber's comparative study of the various treatments of the Lewis and Clark story ("New Directions") shows how and why Fisher was able to penetrate the consciousness of these heroes of "our national epic of exploration" (Coues) more deeply and more convincingly than any other author. In humanizing these heroic figures he makes them seem even more heroic, and their accomplishment seems the greater.

In only one respect does Fisher materially alter the regular chronological order of the narrative. Since he begins the tale where the Corps approaches the first crucial meeting with hostile Indians—long after leaving St. Louis—he uses "flashbacks" to fill in the background, especially the ambiguous instructions of President Jefferson. Otherwise, though he hews closely to the *Journals*, he skims or skips days and weeks of unimportant occurrences in order to fasten upon events which test to the fullest the courage and resourcefulness of the hand-picked military Corps of Discovery.

By the astute interpretation of hints from many sources, Fisher gradually provides insight into the distinguishing characteristics of the two Captains and each member of the Corps. Under repeated trials, each man learns the strengths and weaknesses of every other, and no man doubts the leadership qualities of the two Commanders: the Captains are at the same time, each in his own way, ruthless but humane—and ultimately infallible. Lewis is impulsive, sentimental, curious, slyly humorous, but fearless and disciplined; he is an indefatigable collector of scientific information. The red-haired Clark, four years older than Lewis, is "quiet-spoken, even-tempered, methodical, painstaking" (p. 29),

a fair-minded disciplinarian, an expert on Indians, and at heart a lonely man who becomes strongly attached to Sacajawea and her son "Pomp."

Because Fisher found no solid evidence to support the widespread myth of "beautiful Sacajawea," he deduces that she is merely a Shoshoni girl, captured as a child by the Blackfeet, to whom she has served as "any man's woman" until acquired by Charbonneau, by whom she bears a child as soon as she is nubile. As Taber points out, the Sacajawea myth is largely the creation of the women suffrage movement ("Sacajawea and the Suffragettes"). But Fisher's interpretation in no way detracts from her usefulness as guide, interpreter, peace-maker, food-gatherer, and selfless servant to the Corps. In these roles she is the undisputed favorite of Captain Clark, and a true heroine.

The figure of Meriwether Lewis held a special attraction for Fisher. In the highly autobiographical third part of *Orphans*, Vridar says that Lewis has most closely approximated his father-image—that he wants to write a novel about him, and a book about his death (p. 848). Fisher eventually wrote both, the latter being *Suicide or Murder?* (1962)—an exhaustive marshalling of all available evidence concerning Lewis's mysterious death at Grinder's Stand on the Natchez Trace in 1809. This study could serve as a textbook upon the methods of thorough and scrupulous evaluation of historical evidence.

The Lewis and Clark Expedition was virtually a training-school for many of the earliest "mountain men." Though the term did not become current for perhaps another decade, men like John Colter, George Drouillard, John Potts—all members of the Expedition—were among the first pathfinders and free-trappers who helped create the image of the mountain men as rugged, fiercely independent, resourceful, fatalistic but fun-loving backwoodsmen and Indian fighters.

With *Mountain Man*, Fisher turned whole-heartedly to the writing of a novel celebrating the sheer gusto of this giant breed,

at a time when the "older" mountain men like Jim Bridger and Kit Carson had embellished their own image through the tall tales for which they were famous. In 1846 (the year before the Mormon migration), Fisher's hero, Samson John Minard, is a six-foot-four-inch, two-hundred-and-fifty-pound mountain man, aged twenty-seven. Known to the Flathead Indians as Chief Long Talons, he is on his way to buy as his wife the lovely young daughter of his "brother," Chief Tall Mountain. On the banks of the Musselshell near the Missouri, he comes upon the slaughtered family of John Bowden, who had traveled in a single wagon into the middle of Crow country before being massacred. All are dead save the now demented wife and mother, Kate, who has killed four of the Indians with an axe. Though she seems oblivious, Sam buries the bodies on a hill, places the heads of the Indians on four stakes to warn Indian marauders, builds a cabin, leaves firewood and provisions, and goes on his way. Seeing visions of her children in the moonlit sagebrush, she devotes herself entirely to watering the sage and reading the Bible aloud in the moonlight. Until she freezes to death years later, when she is a legend among the mountain men who protected her, Kate lives only to perform these two rituals.

At the Flathead camp, Sam bargains for his young bride, whom he names Lotus. Her head has not been flattened in the tradition of the tribe, and she seems to Sam "the loveliest human female he had ever seen" (p. 44). Unlike most other mountain men, Sam had been well educated, especially in classical music, which he loves deeply. Though he can play horn and flute, he has with him only two mouth organs, on which he plays the best music for his bride. Their life together is sylvan and idyllic, but when he returns to their cabin after a winter's trapping, he finds only her bones and those of his unborn son. Signs prove that Crows have murdered her, and upon a mountain-top at sunrise Sam vows solitary vengeance upon the whole Crow nation.

Though his fellow mountain men offer to join him, Sam at first

refuses, wanting the vengeance to be his alone. Twenty Coups, the Crow chief, denies Sam's accusation, and sends twenty of his best warriors against him. Sam entombs the bones of his wife and son in a rock cairn near Kate's graves and begins to humiliate the Crows in every possible way. As Sam kills the warriors one by one, always taking the scalp and one ear, he becomes known among them as "The Terror." But in a rare incautious moment he is captured by the Blackfeet, who torture and degrade him while holding him in ransom for the Crows. Before they can deliver him, however, he imperiously demands and receives treatment equal to his status; and while a guard gulps stolen rum, Sam swiftly kills him, making his escape in deep snow and severe cold, which he narrowly survives in order to reach Kate's cabin.

Now, to avenge the insults which the Blackfeet have heaped upon a mountain brother, the mountain men join the vendetta. During Rendezvous at Three Forks, Sam and the mountain men attack and destroy a band of Blackfeet led by Sam's captor, Elk Horns, whom Sam scalps and sends back to the tribe.

During the next winter, Kate Bowden freezes to death, whereupon the Crows bury her in a rock cairn near the other graves, leaving her belongings untouched. With this gratuitous act of atonement, Sam's vengeance is complete. He calls an honorable truce with the Crows, graciously refuses the Flathead chief's offer of another daughter to replace Lotus, and goes southwest to visit Jim Bridger, where for the first time he sees the endless wagon trains crawling along the Oregon trail. Knowing that his way of life is being throttled by these hordes, Sam turns and goes alone northward, as far as possible from the wagon roads.

Like David McDonald of *Pemmican*, Sam Minard is not in all ways a typical mountain man. In their fine sensibilities, their innate scruples, and their respect for their Indian wives they are vulnerable to primitive forces which typical mountain men are armed against. Both are full of boundless zest for living; both are enchanted by the beauty and grandeur of nature; both are gour-

mets of wilderness fare. Yet both are superb mountain men, one of them among the earliest generation, the other among the last. Both survive every ordeal, and though Sam (like Charley Bridwell of a much later time) "had been born too late and had come west too late" (p. 344), still the mountain men would have elected Sam the best of them all—not because he had any special capability, but because he had abundantly "all the traits and skills that made the superlative mountain man" (p. 328).

This book was Fisher's valedictory for many things. Being the last novel he wrote, it was more than a piece of historical fiction about the mountain men. It was a celebration of the free, self-reliant, untrammelled way of life and thought which he had maintained for himself and which he had persistently advocated. Though Sam and Kate were loosely modeled upon the legendary figures of "Crow-Killer" Johnston and Jane Morgan, Fisher was really turning a second time to a historical novel whose main characters were largely imaginary. These characters gave him free rein to return to the consuming force of mother-love which he had presented as fictionalized chronicle in *The Mothers*; to explore further the fine-drawn borderlines dividing beast and savage and civilized human being, as he had done many times before; to show the humanitarian side as well as the traditionally coarse and brutal side of the mountain man; to incorporate into a novel the deep love of good music which informed his own later years, as well as to show that a few mountain men (like Andrew Henry and his violin) had far greater artistic sensibilities than the Eastern establishment had wanted to believe; and to cry out against the destruction of the wilderness in the wake of mankind *en masse*, from the Mormon migration and the gold-seekers to the farmers, ranchers, industrialists, and urbanites of the present day.

With the burning present-day issues of overpopulation, conservation, and dying frontiers, Fisher appropriately closed his career as novelist. This closing was particularly fitting because,

in a lifetime of prolific work, resulting in the uneven quality which attends voluminous production, Fisher had steadily carved for himself a distinctive place as a leading American novelist of ideas. Whether he wrote as the first significant Rocky Mountain regionalist, as the principal creator of a new form of frontier historical novel, or as anthropological novelist, the artist in him had "an impossible-to-separate Siamese-twin identity with the scholar" (Opal Laurel Holmes, "Once in a WifETIME," p. 14). It is no surprise, then, that Fisher has never been a "popular" success in America, where the novel of ideas has not been congenial to the mass of readers. But in his handbook for writers, he made it clear that he had cast his lot with God, not with Caesar.

At present, there is justification for Larry McMurtry's assertion that Fisher has had the greatest success "both as scholar and artist, not in writing about Western Man, but in writing about man in the American West" (*Sat. Rev.*, Nov. 6, 1965, p. 34). Within the past decade, Flora has convincingly argued that, though virtually forgotten as a regionalist, Fisher can still be counted among America's foremost regional writers ("The Early Power of Vardis Fisher"). If Fisher has been comparatively neglected by the mass of readers and by the popular entertainment media, he has chosen that neglect rather than to seek artificial applause. In these matters, his artistic integrity has been adamant, and so he has won the deepening respect of connoisseurs, intellectuals, and other writers. Frederick Manfred sounded the keynote when he said that, even when Fisher falls short of his goal, "it's hard to fault him because the truth is he still wins" (*WAL*, Spring 1966, p. 59).

Currying no favor, still, on his own terms, he has triumphed.

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