



View of Siouxland from Blue Mounds

Row of stones at Blue Mound



SACRED SIOUXLAND: WAKAN PLACES IN SOME NOVELS BY FREDERICK MANFRED¹

by
Nancy Owen Nelson

At the end of a visit to Fred Manfred's home on the Blue Mounds near Luverne, Minnesota, novelist Frank Waters broke a day's silence to tell his host, "Listen Fred, you built your house on a sacred place. You'd better live *right* here . . . this is a sacred place, and don't offend it."² Waters' awareness, Manfred concurs, has to do with the special, spiritual quality of the Blue Mounds, which are believed to be *wakan* or holy by the Sioux. Dating back three and a half billion years and the result of glacial action on a mountain range stretching from Mitchell, South Dakota to Mankato, Minnesota, the Mounds are, to Manfred, as to the Native Americans, a "special and odd and strange place".³

This strange and special spirituality of place has played a key role in the novels of Frederick Manfred. Growing up one of six sons on an Iowa farm, Manfred developed a sense of the fertility and potentiality of the land in his boyhood years. In his early novels *The Golden Bowl* (1944), *This is the Year* (1947), and *The Chokecherry Tree* (1948), Manfred sang the spirituality of the land while cultivating his poetic voice.⁴ His *Buckskin Man Tales*, dramatizing the development of the American West from 1800 to 1892, expounded on the primary significance of land to the development of character. Even later works such as *Milk of Wolves* (1976) and *Green Earth* (1977) dwelt on the importance of man's identification with land.

Indeed, in his native Siouxland (the area where South Dakota, Nebraska, Iowa, and Minnesota meet), Manfred finds a "usable past" which is as legitimate as the pasts employed by the great classical writers.⁵ According to Western literature scholar Max Westbrook, Manfred's works depict a "sacrality," or an awareness of our spiritual connection to the land and to our past. In Westbrook's words, ". . . the dark and inner self has been given its due, . . . the mystic unity of sprite [sic] and home results in a sense of the sacrality of all life".⁶ Indeed, critic Peter DeBoer has aptly seen Manfred as a "spiritual naturalist," or one who finds a spiritual quality in his relationship to the land.⁷

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Manfred's discovery of the Native American wakan concept may well be the result of his own intuitive understanding of Indian culture. In *Conversations with Frederick Manfred* (1974), moderated by John R. Milton, he talks of his motive behind writing books about Indians:

We are living on their land. They were already adjusted to it and used to it. They were a piece of it. The land and they were one. We are not. . . . So I wanted to show how the Indian lived at that time [1800, the setting of *Conquering Horse*]. Why he did what he did. His beliefs and his fate came up out of the land.⁸

In another interview, Manfred states that

. . . the Indian is related too, closely and warmly related to the soil of this country; he is part of the ecology and got along with it and was doing fine. . . . It's as if this land has its own souls and it evolves its own souls—the Indian has his particular soul. . . . there is something going on in the relationship of the human being to his environment.⁹

Through Manfred's concept of the "Old Lizard," or our "primate nature"¹⁰, he has explored the deeply symbolic world of the Indian, a world in which everything is connected and many natural substances, such as the rocks (called "Inyan"), are holy.¹¹ James R. Walker, in his *Lakota Society*, details the centrality of the wakan concept in all aspects of Sioux culture, including ceremonies, buffalo hunts, and religious customs.¹²

Three Manfred novels in which he uses wakan places illustrate his 'native' understanding of the wakan concept: *Lord Grizzly* (1954), *Conquering Horse* (1959), and *The Manly-Hearted Woman* (1976). A brief synopsis of these novels will clarify the centrality of the sacred landscape.

In *Lord Grizzly*, Manfred traces the adventures of legendary mountain man Hugh Glass after he is mauled by a grizzly bear and left to die. The novel follows Hugh's literal crawl of 200 miles to safety; his progress through certain wakan territory contributes to his spiritual journey as he moves from revenge to forgiveness of his deserters. *Conquering Horse* and *Manly-Hearted Woman*, unlike *Grizzly*, deal entirely with Indian culture; the wakan concept is integral to the progression of event and character in both novels. *Horse* follows a young brave, No Name, through his vision quest and coming of age. Certain locations and natural substances play significant roles in his rite of passage to manhood. *The Manly-Hearted Woman*, likewise, illustrates the importance of wakan places to the vision quests of two Native Americans, Flat Warclub, a feminine man who finds his destiny in seeding a tribe of Yankton women, and Manly Heart, a woman who takes on a male role in her tribe, receives a vision, and returns ultimately to her womanliness.

A look at selected passages in these novels allows us to share Manfred's awareness of the "sacred" quality of the territory called Siouland and its surroundings, his imposition of myth upon history,¹³ and the importance of place in shaping the destiny of his characters.

One area of South Dakota which warrants attention in Manfred's works is the Badlands, located in the southwestern part of South Dakota on the edge of the Black Hills. Noted for natural ruggedness, as their name indicates, the Badlands are not specifically holy places for the Native Americans; yet according to John Madson, a writer for *National Geographic*,

The Sioux attributed the existence of the Badlands to Wakan Tanka, Creator of All Things, who had destroyed a tribe of evil hunters in a cataclysm whose form was preserved as a lesson to men. . . . Not far away are the Black Hills, said to be holy ground for the old Sioux. The Badlands were born of those Black Hills; did they inherit none of their medicine?¹⁴

Manfred remembers that there was one particular butte where the Indians sought a vision, though he cannot recall the exact name.¹⁵

Much of the earth's primordial history is recorded in the Badlands, as Manfred illustrates in *The Golden Bowl* when he surveys the burial grounds of dinosaurs, the saber-toothed tiger, and the three-toed horse.¹⁶ The novel traces the search for identity and place of a young bindlestiff, Maury Grant; ironically, he finds home in the ravaged dust bowl of 1930s South Dakota. His passage through the Badlands contributes significantly to his identification with the land.

While Manfred uses the Badlands as a visionary experience for Maury,¹⁷ his most striking use occurs in *Lord Grizzly*, when Hugh Glass, having crawled to Fort Kiowa driven by vengeance against Jim and Fitz for their supposed desertion, passes through the Badlands and is followed by the "ghost bear." Hugh reflects on his vengeance while

Sitting in the moonlight on a rock overlooking a gutted saffron valley of a million acres, with Vampire Peak and Cedar Butte rearing up over the far wall beyond and the driving south wind playing organ music in the great pipes of the deep earth, . . .¹⁸

Experiencing visions in the "fantastic valley, while the moonwhite peaks and the ghostly spires and the trembling pinnacles moved, began to sail by,"¹⁹ Hugh comes to see this mystical place as having special powers: "Tis a bad place for a bad conscience, it is," he says to himself.²⁰ Hugh's pilgrimage toward forgiveness is aided by the trek through this "fantastic eroded land."²¹

Thunder Butte, more so than the Badlands, is a site which represents the Native American vision quest. The Thunders, or Thunderbirds, which are called

"wakan oyate" or "the spirit nations," are part of the "Great Spirit . . . the greatest power in the whole universe."²² These voices in *Conquering Horse* once spoke to No Name's father, Redbird, telling him to keep shiny the copper tip of his lance and spoke to No Name to give his vision. Here, on Thunder Butte, No Name receives his vision. In *Lord Grizzly*, Manfred makes Thunder Butte a focal point for Hugh's progress during the crawl. In researching to write the novel, Manfred states that he climbed Thunder Butte "to get a feel for how it would look from Thunder Butte down to where Hugh was crawling."²³

Joseph Flora, in the Introduction to the Gregg Press edition of *Lord Grizzly* (1980), notes that, in the process of the novel, "Hugh becomes increasingly like both the American Indian and the animal in his discovery of self."²⁴ Hugh's identification with the code of the red man, who "still knew the old and true religion . . . still walked with Grandfather Wakantanka on the bosom of Grandmother Earth,"²⁵ gives him a response to the land which is akin to the Native American mysticism. Thus, when he crawls past Thunder Butte, he sees it mystically as "like some altar of sacrifice . . . The red dark reality . . . the vague dark red memory."²⁶ The profile of the butte remains a "black silhouette," a symbol of retribution like Mount Sinai,²⁷ hanging "stubborn and high"²⁸ "holy, solemn, and high as ever."²⁹ Thunder Butte disappears from view just as Hugh is cleansed by the bear, but it continues to haunt his journey.

While Thunder Butte remains a distant symbol for Hugh, for No Name, in *Conquering Horse*, it becomes the vehicle for his received vision. After traveling three days along to the Great Smoky Water (the Missouri River), No Name and his cousin Circling Hawk approach the butte on the sacred fourth day.³⁰ The events which occur for No Name on Thunder Butte will determine his destiny as chief of the tribe. Finding the butte "like unto the sacred power of a stallion [which will be the object of his vision quest]," No Name states: "There is the place. I see it. I am happy."³¹ Awaiting his vision for four days, No Name is confronted with the wakan stones, has three dreams, and finally, in a fourth dream, receives the first part of his vision from the white mare.³² Finally, back at the camp, as he faces the last part of his vision—to kill his father—the Thunders speak, striking Redbird's copper tip and taking him into the other world. Thunder Butte and the associated spirits, the Thunderbirds, have shaped the destiny of the newly named Conquering Horse.

Yet another location which is central to the wakan experience of *Conquering Horse* is Pipestone, in southwestern Minnesota, which, according to *The WPA Guide to Minnesota*, "Indians have held . . . sacred for many centuries, . . . [they] have traveled great distances for the stone from which they carved their peace pipes."³³ Indeed, the red rock ("Inyan sha"), also called "catlinite," exposed from earlier glacial activity, is considered the "lifeblood" of the people.³⁴ Lame Deer relates this legend about the red rock:

... there was an Omaha woman called *Wahegela*. She was married to a Sioux warrior. One day she found herself face to face with a white buffalo. She followed this sacred animal as if in a trance. She watched the buffalo kicking loose large chunks of red stone and knew right away that these were the petrified bodies of her forebears. In this way she discovered the quarry. The Sioux and the Omahas were enemies, but they agreed that they would never fight each other at this sacred place. The land belonged to the Sioux, but the stone belonged to all Indians who honored the pipe.³⁵

Indeed, we learn early in *Conquering Horse* that the Yanktons "were known as the peaceful keepers of the sacred Place of the Pipestone, a Shining People",³⁶ and that even defective pipestone "was the flesh of their ancestors turned to stone."³⁷

Manfred displays the wakan power of the red rock when he describes No Name's brother Pretty Rock (certainly a symbolic name) and his death because he challenged the sacredness of the Two Maidens at Pipestone. Leaping across the Boulder with Wide Lips, Pretty Rock was caught by the maidens, who lived under the rocks. His remains, given to them in "marriage," were buried under the Boulder with Big Lips.³⁸

Throughout the novel, in fact, the wakan pipestone is integral to the Sioux culture, in the numerous references about the use of the pipe in ceremony. On one occasion, moments before No Name receives his vision, he carries the "red pipe" to a pyramid of stones on the south side of Thunder Butte.³⁹ Among numerous other examples of the use of the wakan pipestone is Moon Dreamer's ceremonial pipe, which he lifts to the six great powers while counseling Conquering Horse on the second part of his vision.⁴⁰

To the south of Pipestone lie the Blue Mounds, a three-mile long bluff of quartzite, where, legend has it, the Indians drove buffalo over the bluff to their deaths.⁴¹ Manfred writes in his recent Introduction to the reprint edition of *The WPA Guide to Minnesota* that

from a distance the Blue Mounds ridge looks like an ordinary height of land, a good-sized hogback, but when one stands on its highest point one discovers that the land on all sides slopes gradually up to it.⁴²

He relates the first time he saw these "mountains," as his father called them. Skeptical that they were indeed *mountains*, he was amazed to reach the highest peak at the southeast corner and to be able to see thirty miles away.⁴³ After further investigation, Manfred discovered that the ridge was believed to be a mountain range perhaps higher than Mt. Everest, 30,000 above sea level.⁴⁴ Manfred's sense of the awful quality of the Mounds is analogous, says critic Robert Wright, to his reverence for the "Old Lizard," or primordial nature of

man: "As the primordial mountain range was worn down by glaciers, wind, and time, so one might say our primate natures have been worn away by civilization, worn away but still there as the quartzite is."⁴⁵



Buffalo Jump - Blue Mounds
View of Siouxland from Blue Mounds

Paul Gruchow, writer for the *Minnesota Monthly*, identifies the mystical quality of the Blue Mounds, or the "Ghosts of the Lost World of the Prairies," as his title suggests. He mentions the "sacred" row of stones which run east and west on the Mounds and are aligned exactly with the rising sun in the spring and fall equinoxes.⁴⁶ Though some scholars have responded skeptically to Manfred's claim that the stones were laid down by a Mississippian culture, Manfred holds to the mystery of the place.⁴⁷ Interestingly enough, Manfred's former home (the one which Frank Waters visited) is now the Interpretive Center for the Blue Mounds State Park.

Gruchow effectively describes Manfred's primal connection to the Mounds:

The ghost of Frederick Manfred himself, to be sure, lurks there. Historic enough to be equipped still with a powerfully beating heart, Manfred lives and writes on a hilltop with a view of the Blue Mounds. Once he

lived on the Mounds, . . . and made books and saw visions there and told immense stories in the evening around a table carved out of bedrock. He wrote in a stylized version of a tepee with a commanding view of the countryside he calls Siouxland, and when he wandered on the Mounds in the twilight, he cast a shadow as tall and well-limbed as a burr oak.⁴⁸

The Manfred novel which, of the three books, best depicts the wakan power of the Blue Mounds is *The Manly-Hearted Woman*. This novel was praised by James R. Frakes in *The New York Times Book Review* as "a strange and haunting novel" with "evocative and fresh" language. Frakes finds this account of a Sioux woman-turned-brave exceptional for Manfred's "absorption in details and fascination with words . . . [reflecting a] holistic purity of his imagination and the iron delicacy of his craft".⁴⁹

The awe that Manfred experienced as a child on the Blue Mounds is evident in the novel when he describes the Mounds through the eyes of Flat Warclub's revenge party; he is a warrior who has been chosen by the gods to seed the Yankton tribe and die in battle with the Omaha to win for the Yanktons the Buffalo Jump of the Blue Mounds:

All eyes were on the looming blue rim. It was a sacred place. Along the east base of the long red cliff lay heaps of white buffalo bones. Sometimes the heaps lay so thick they appeared to be snowdrifts strangely blown across deep green grass. Flat Warclub noted some earthen mounds on the bluffs across the river. . . . High Stomach said the bones of the Old Ones lay under the mounds.⁵⁰

Here Manfred uses the legend of the buffalo jump mentioned earlier.

However, Manfred makes his most striking presentation of the sacredness of the Blue Mounds when Manly Heart achieves her vision at the "Top of the World," or Eagle Rock, where "it is as big and as tall as a tepee. From it she could see everywhere, to all horizons."⁵¹ Here visited by the eagle who says that she will receive the "vision of a man," Manly Heart is told to change into a man's dress and follow the row of sacred stones to its end to find her helper. The eagle voices Manfred's view of the significance of the stones:

It is a row made by The Old Ones a very long time ago. It was built by very wise men who wished to lay down for all time the true path to the east and the true path to the west. The sun rises and sets over this row of stones during a certain day in The Moon of Sore Eyes.⁵²



Sundered Rocks, Blue Mounds



Frederick Manfred at work

At the end of the row of stones, Manly Heart finds her spearpoint helper, beyond The Sundered Rocks, which were by legend split by black lightning.⁵¹ Thus the Top of the World, the Blue Mounds, is a sacred visionary place.

The novel resolves itself with the Yankton's acquisition of the buffalo jump, as predicted by the gods, through a battle with the Omaha. At the moment of his destined death, Flat Warclub hears his last words, as Bitten Nose says, "The enemy flies. The Buffalo Jump on The Blue Mounds will now be ours forever".⁵⁴

The Manly Hearted Woman, like many of Manfred's works dealing with Native American culture, is based squarely on Lakota mystical beliefs in the oneness and totality of nature. By means of his own concept of the "Lizard" or "Old Adam," Manfred has achieved, according to Robert Wright, a "union with nature, an ability to communicate with the animal kingdom and to draw power from the elements of nature".⁵⁵ Through his direct interaction with Native Americans, through research, and through intuition, Manfred has been able to depict a "strong sense of the wholeness, the health of the Indian society"⁵⁶ in a unique and convincing way. Perhaps the greatest accolade Manfred could receive came from Michael-Her-Many-Horses, an Indian man who praised him at the end of a meeting about *Conquering Horse* at Oglala Community College: "We thank Wakantanka that he gave us Frederick Manfred so he could tell us how we used to live".⁵⁷ Today we, too, can thank Fred Manfred for helping us, through his books, to experience the many sacred places that distinguish the Siouxland heritage.

NOTES

1. This essay was composed prior to Frederick Manfred's death on September 7, 1994. Consequently, the writer feels even more strongly about Manfred's contribution to the literature of the Great Plains.
2. Quoted by Manfred in "Milton, Manfred, and McGrath: A Conversation on Literature and Place," *Dakota Territory* 8/9 (Fall/Winter 1974-75), 24.
3. Manfred, "Milton, Manfred" 24.
4. See my article "Frederick Manfred and the Anglo-Saxon Oral Tradition," *Western American Literature* 19.8 (February 1983), 263-274.
5. See Manfred's "Usable West," in *South Dakota Review* 18:4 (Winter, 1981): 64-80.
6. Max Westbrook, "Conservative, Liberal, and Western: Three Modes of American Realism," *South Dakota Review* 4.2 (Summer 1966), 17.
7. See Peter DeBoer's article, "Frederick Feikema Manfred: Spiritual Naturalist" in *Reformed Journal* (April 1963): 19-23, for a survey of several of Manfred's works under this theme.
8. Frederick Manfred, *Conversations with Frederick Manfred*, Mod. by John R. Milton (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1974), 129.
9. Frederick Manfred, "West of the Mississippi: An Interview with Frederick Manfred," *Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction* 11 (1958-59), 53.
10. Manfred, *Conversations* 43.
11. John (Fire) Lame Deer and Richard Erdoes, *Lame Deer: Seeker of Visions* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1972), 96-97.
12. James R. Walker, *Lakota Society* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982).
13. In the broadest sense, the word "history" is here applied to local geography.

14. John Madson, "South Dakota's Badlands: Castles in Clay," *National Geographic* April, 1981, 534-535.
15. Frederick Manfred, Telephone Interview May 18, 1992. Madson confirms this possibility in his *National Geographic* article, citing Oglala Sioux Chief Frank Fools Crow's vision quest in the Badlands years ago. See Madson, 533.
16. Frederick Manfred, *The Golden Bowl* (Brookings, SD: South Dakota Humanities Foundation, 1992), 148.
17. John R. Milton. Afterword to *The Golden Bowl* by Frederick Manfred (Brookings, SD: South Dakota Humanities Foundation, 1992) 231-232.
18. Frederick Manfred, *Lord Grizzly* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 245.
19. Manfred, *Lord Grizzly*, 246.
20. Manfred, *Lord Grizzly*, 247.
21. Manfred, *Lord Grizzly*, 250.
22. Lame Deer and Erdoes, 228-229.
23. Manfred, *Conversations*, 70.
24. Joseph Flora, Introduction to *Lord Grizzly* (Boston: Gregg Press, 1980), xi.
25. Manfred, *Lord Grizzly*, 142.
26. Manfred, *Lord Grizzly*, 138.
27. Manfred, *Lord Grizzly*, 143.
28. Manfred, *Lord Grizzly*, 163.
29. Manfred, *Lord Grizzly*, 164.
30. In Walker's *Lakota Society*, he states that "For the Sioux the number four was a mystic number and when possible was applied to almost everything pertaining to their conduct and to all of their ceremonial and mythology," 62.
31. Frederick Manfred, *Conquering Horse* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 106.
32. Manfred, *Conquering Horse*, 129.
33. Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration. *The WPA Guide to Minnesota* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1985), 100.
34. Lame Deer and Erdoes, 102. "Catlinite" is a soft, sedimentary rock of the Cambrian period, a clay substance which can be carved with a knife. See John Stephan Sigstad's dissertation, *The Age and Distribution of Catlinite and Red Pipestone*, University of Missouri, 1973.
35. Lame Deer and Erdoes, 248.
36. Manfred, *Conquering Horse*, 17.
37. Manfred, *Conquering Horse*, 15.
38. Manfred, *Conquering Horse*, 16.
39. Manfred, *Conquering Horse*, 128.
40. Manfred, *Conquering Horse*, 337.
41. Federal Writers' Project, 342.
42. Frederick Manfred, Introduction to *The WPA Guide to Minnesota* by the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1985), xxi.
43. Manfred, Introduction to *WPA Guide*, xxii.
44. Manfred, Introduction to *WPA Guide*, xxii.
45. Robert C. Wright, "Frederick Manfred," *The Literary History of the American West* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1987), 792.
46. Paul Gruchow, "On the Blue Mounds: Visiting the Ghosts of the Lost World of the Prairies," *Minnesota Monthly* July, 1986: 20.
47. Gruchow 20; Manfred, Introduction to *WPA Guide*, xvi.
48. Gruchow, 20.
49. James R. Frakes, Review of *The Manly-Hearted Woman*, *New York Times Book Review* May 23, 1976: 38.
50. Frederick Manfred, *The Manly-Hearted Woman* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985), 20.

51. Manfred, *Manly-Hearted Woman*, 50.
52. Manfred, *Manly-Hearted Woman*, 51.
53. Manfred, *Manly-Hearted Woman*, 54.
54. Manfred, *Manly-Hearted Woman*, 173
55. Robert Wright, *Frederick Manfred* (Boston: Twayne, 1979), 144.
56. Joseph Flora M., *Frederick Manfred*, Western Writers Series (Boise: Boise State University, 1974), 27.
57. Quoted by Manfred in "Great Plains Literature" [with John R. Milton and Nancy Owen Nelson] South Dakota Public Television, 1984.