

FORTUNATE LIVES: A.B. FACEY AND IVAN DOIG, MEMOIRISTS OF THE FRONTIER

by
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I would like to begin, actually, with several endings. Albert Facey's *A Fortunate Life* ends with the lines, "I have lived a very good life, it has been very rich and full. I have been very fortunate and I am thrilled by it when I look back" (323). Ivan Doig concludes *This House of Sky* with: "Then my father and grandmother go, together, back elsewhere in memory, and I am left to think through the fortune of all we experienced together. And of how, now my single outline meets the time-swept air that knew theirs" (314). A.B. Facey and Ivan Doig, memoirists of two frontiers separated by many miles and years, both choose a form of the word *fortune* in summing up their lives' experiences. Considering the tales of hardship, struggle, and loss which precede these concluding paragraphs, to call either life fortunate seems incongruous at best. In fact, the incongruity extends to each writer's choice of specific usage: Doig, who appears to have had the easier life, uses the word *fortune*, which implies the action of random chance, of fate both good and bad, while Facey, who seems to have had the more difficult journey, chooses to use *fortunate*, a form whose usage implies specifically the action of good fortune or favorable chance. Yet in each case, the choice represents the essential tone of the work. To oversimplify, Facey is an optimist while Doig is an existentialist: but taken together, their works present a complementary view of some basic thematic elements of frontier literature, as well as reflecting some specific differences between the cultures of the American and Australian frontiers.

At first glance there is little in common between Facey's and Doig's stories, other than large amounts of livestock. As disparate as the two memoirs are, however, they are both excellent examples of the myths and realities of their respective frontier cultures. In a way, the memoir form is a reflection of an essential frontier myth: the narrator is the unvarnished I, the perfect mixture of aloneness and insularity, the tall figure silhouetted against the landscape that has been celebrated in representations of the frontier. What sets both *A Fortunate Life* and *This House of Sky* apart from more stereotypical accounts of frontier life is the way in which each author works with specific stylistic and thematic elements to find a place for his own experiences within the context of

the created-myth of the frontier.

The mythology of the American West has a profound influence on all aspects of American culture. Doig's *This House of Sky* is a particularly distinctive examination of the Western myth, as it gives us an example of a native memoirist to compare against the fictional and folkloric characters of the frontier. Some of my favorite sources regarding the American West are the essays of Wallace Stegner, and in "Variations on a Theme by Crèvecoeur" he describes one aspect of the frontier myth that is especially apt when examining *This House of Sky*:

. . . the West never got over its heightened and romantic notion of itself. The pronounced differences that some people see between the West and other parts of America need to be examined. Except as they involve Spanish or Indian cultures, they could be mainly illusory, the result of the tendency to see the West in its mythic enlargement rather than as it is, and of the corollary tendency to take our cues from myths in order to enhance our lives. Life does sometimes copy art. Not only drugstore cowboys and street-corner Kit Carsons succumb. Plenty of authentic ranch hands have read pulp Westerns in the shade of the bunkhouse and got up walking, talking, and thinking like Buke Duane or Hopalong Cassidy. (102)

While there are many examples of outside artists interpreting the West, from Owen Wister to Albert Bierstadt, Ivan Doig is an example of the "authentic" voice who, according to Stegner, may be just as susceptible to "talking. . . like Hopalong Cassidy" if he is not careful and persistent in examining the deeper truths of Western life and culture.

A source that I find similarly useful in examining aspects of the Australian frontier and its relationship to *A Fortunate Life* is Ross Gibson's *The Diminishing Paradise: Changing Literary Perceptions of Australia*. Gibson sees the origins of some of the primary images of mythic frontier Australia in literature of the period 1830-1850, centering on the concept of the "diminishing paradise," based on the common belief of the time that a fertile, edenic land lay somewhere at the unexplored center of the continent. Gibson describes how such incomplete geographical knowledge migrated in cultural mythology:

The discovery of fertile land beyond the barrier of the Blue

Mountains seemed to validate the fantasy, and the interior glowed alluringly in the imagination... The fact that known regions of bleakness encircle the interior and must therefore be traversed before a paradise is achieved only serves to validate the quest...The preoccupation with the interior is a part of the attempt to resolve the conflicts between settlers' knowledge of suffering in Australia and the traditional aspirations for a southern paradise. (90)

As the country is explored and it gradually becomes apparent that no physical paradise exists in the interior, Gibson describes how this particular myth transfers from the physical to the psychological, from the land itself to the patterns of belief about life in the land:

...the fact that for every Australian aspiration there always seemed to be a concomitant disillusionment...As the image of the diminishing paradise become established, people developed a paradoxical ability to tolerate disappointment while continuing to expect some Australian felicity. Indeed, the frustrations might have even been interpreted as integral to, if not prerequisites of, the benefits which were attended. (32)

This pattern of disappointment and hope is the basic theme of *A Fortunate Life*: the "paradoxical ability" to suffer the greatest hardships in hopes of receiving some measure of "Australian felicity" is both the myth and reality with which Facey deals. And like Ivan Doig, Facey is an insider, and "authentic" voice, who as a writer faces the same balancing act between being both a creator of the frontier mythology and its product.

Facey's connection with the "diminishing paradise" mythology is established with the pattern of hardship and reward being one of this first life lessons. Living in a barely subsistence economy, he is farmed out to his first job at the age of nine. He finds himself working from dawn to dusk at ranch chores for an extended family whose main source of income he discovers afterwards is rustling livestock. Denied his promised wages and clothing, underfed and threatened with violence if he even thinks to quit or complain, the boy spends a year in a state amounting to slavery. The situation comes to a head when, in an act more of self-preservation than rebellion, Albert and one of the teenaged sons of the family make off with a large part of the store of

alcohol gathered for the annual Christmas celebration, which Albert had seen the previous year turn into a days-long "brawl." When the theft is discovered by one of the men of the clan, Fahey related a scene reminiscent of accounts of penal-colony Australia:

... I was very tired and fell asleep and when I woke up...standing over me was Bob with a stock-whip in his hand. I had not undressed for bed. I still had on my pants and a shirt, and an old rag hat. These, along with my red blanket, were all my belongings. ... I didn't speak, just stood looking up at him. He gave me a cut around the legs, then he lashed me three or four times around the shoulders and body. I jumped and tried to run out of the stable. As I got out of the doors, he caught me around the legs again and I fell to the ground. He continued to whip me. The whip was the one he used to tame the horses with and he was an expert. He knew how to use that whip. I don't know how many times he cut me because I must have fainted. (36)

After months spent recovering from his flogging, Albert executes a desperate and ingenious plan to escape this abusive family. At this point the reader might expect a respite from hardship and suffering, but Fahey immediately follows this story with a story of seeing a neighbor woman die as a result of a snake-bite, the tale of his next job at which he was again denied his promised wages, and the story of yet another job where he not only went unpaid again, but was fed only fried eggs and damper at every meal until he could no longer hold his food down.

The end result of the memoir of Fahey's youth is to put the lie to the myth of the elusive paradise, achieved through the acceptance of hardship and suffering. Everywhere he goes, he finds people just barely getting by, living from season to season in an unforgiving environment where the inevitable drought or fire scatters families and ends livelihoods and lives. The myth that the frontier holds promise for those who persevere is dashed in a particularly personal way for young Albert in the adoption episode. After many failed attempts, Albert finds gainful employment with Mr. and Mrs. Phillips. This childless couple begin by treating Albert with dignity and respect as an employee, and in the course of time reach the point where they propose adopting him as their own son. The outcome of the proposal becomes a telling

comment on the effect of frontier culture on familial relationships, as normal family bonds are inverted: the adoption, for which Albert yearns, is blocked by a letter from his absent mother, who had left on her own for Perth following her husband's death. While he never learns the details of her refusal to consent to the adoption, Facey's speculation reflects both the poignancy of the moment and the confused and unnatural state of family ties brought about by the harsh economic forces of the frontier: "all my hopes of a permanent home were dashed because of the actions of an unworthy mother. I never found out what actually happened, but I think that she probably asked for money in exchange for me" (76). Following the failed adoption, the Phillips' attitude toward young Albert noticeably cools, and his final scene with them before leaving their employ is the pointed episode in which he takes apples from a tree that Mr. Phillips has forbidden him to touch. He claims that no one ever knew it was he who took the apples, but the fact that days later he strikes Mr. Phillips, his would-be-father (albeit with some provocation), is clearly an edenic parallel. From this point on, Facey's is a post-lapsarian world where the frontier paradise is unattainable.

Ivan Doig's memoir deals in his similarly contradictory experiences with the mythology of the American West. The specific aspect of the Western myth I would like to examine in Doig's work concerns the image of the independent, self-reliant frontiersman; characters who value individualism above society and reflect the Jeffersonian ideal of the "natural aristocrat"—the person who comes to rule through natural ability and ingenuity tested against the demands of frontier life. The one figure in the literature and the mythology of the West who is the most iconic representation of all these ideals is, of course, the cowboy. From Owen Wister's *Virginian* to Clint Eastwood's *Man With No Name*, these lone figures and their accompanying, distinct characteristics are the predominant image of the American West. Both the myth and reality of this image are the subject of another part of Wallace Stegner's essay:

... The notion of civilization's corruption, the notion that the conscience of an antisocial savage is less calloused than the conscience of society, is of course a bequest from Jean Jacques Rousseau. The chivalry of the antisocial one, his protectiveness of the weak and oppressed...is from [James Fenimore] Cooper, with reinforcement from two later romantics, Frederic Remington and

Owen Wister, collaborators in the creation of the knight-errant in chaps...

There are thousands more federal employees in the West than there are cowboys-more bookkeepers, aircraft and electronics workers, auto mechanics, printers, fry cooks. There may be more writers. Nevertheless, when most Americans east of the Missouri-most people in the world-hear the word "West" they think "cowboy."
(109-110)

Ivan Doig's *This House of Sky* is a memoir of all those westerners who aren't cowboys. It is a meditation on the rootlessness of Western life, on the constant struggle to create relationships and bonds in an environment particularly hostile to such endeavors. A sense of loneliness and insignificance in the face of awesome surroundings pervades the book, the only relief for which comes in the form of a feeling of belonging-whether to family or community or simply to the tiny Montana towns themselves, all of which seem in danger of being blown away into nothingness by the next winter's fierce storms. The interweaving necessity of family, friends, and relations is a constant theme, and while self-reliance and independence are admired, they are clearly character traits forced upon people by the harsh demands of frontier life.

The rootless nature of the Doig family's life is a reflection of the personal consequences of the political and economic conditions of the West, conditions that have strong parallels in Facey's Australian frontier as well. When Doig's grandparents, newly emigrated from Scotland, took up a homestead in the Montana Rockies they were fulfilling the Jeffersonian concept of the yeoman farmer, the essential instrument of spreading European settlement across the continent. The image of the independent, self-reliant immigrant family carving civilization out of the wilderness is typically American, yet Doig immediately sees from the experience of his own family the hollowness of this concept:

. . . Those homesteading Scots families of the Basin...could not know it at first, but they had taken up the land where the long standing habits and laws of settlement in America were not going to work...At first, the hill country did pay off with its summers of free pasture. In the bargain, however, came Januaries and Februaries-and too often Marches and Aprils-of hip-deep snowdrifts...Simply, it came down to this: homestead of 160 acres,

or even several times that size, made no sense in that vast and dry and belligerent landscape of the high-mountain west. As well try to grow an orchard in a window-box as to build a working ranch from such a patch. (28)

The Doig family, in a pattern repeated throughout the American West, follow the trail of Manifest Destiny into an unconquerable maze. In an antipodean version of Australian pastoralism, small immigrant farmers and ranchers are settled onto frontier land essentially as placeholders, surviving (or not) cruel physical hardships while eking out a marginal existence until some unmanageable tragedy—the death of a family member or a livestock-killing blizzard—forces them to sell out their homesteads to absentee landlords or corporate ownerships and spend the rest of their lives as hired hands. In the vast arid land of both Montana and Western Australia, families are scattered as widely across the country as the flocks of sheep and cattle they tend.

Mobility becomes the basic trait of frontier life, but it is not the mythic mobility of the independent, self-reliant cowboy, rather a mobility enforced by a cycle of work, reward, and failure. When Ivan's grandfather—the founder of the original Doig homestead—dies, his sons hire themselves out to other ranches, their wages going to support the homestead until a devastating blizzard forces them to spend all their savings on a futile attempt to save their own livestock. When the snow finally clears, in June, Doig writes, "...the losses killed whatever hopes had been that the Basin ranch would be able to bankroll Dad and the other brothers in ranching starts of their own. Like seeds flying on the basin's chilly wind, they began to drift out one after another now" (36). The simile is apt: not with the purposeful, inexorable stride of Wister's mythic Virginian, but with the caprice of nature is Doig's family propelled across the valleys and ranges of Montana.

On the surface, Doig's memoir can be read as the story of an outsider, a bookish young man from the West who grows into being a writer, which seems to go against the grain of the mythic image of the Westerner. The real revelation of *This House of Sky* is, however, the subtle manner in which Doig shows just how typical each of his characters is—how much he and everyone around him are products of the forces of nature and the landscape. A perfect example of this comes with Doig's descriptions of the shocking suddenness with which both the seasons and personal relationships change in the Northern Rockies. The same page encompasses the endings of both the devastating

winter of 1948 and Charlie Doig's second marriage:

[Charlie] kept looking out at this kind of a red knob out here on the hill. He looked and he looked and pretty soon he jumped up and yelled: 'It's broke, it's broke!' and he ran outside. And that winter was broke. The hired man and I came riding home with our earflaps rolled up and our coats off, and our mittens stuck in the forkhole of the saddle. Just like that. (102)

With equal suddenness comes the end of Charlie and Ruth's marriage, in simply declarative sentences that resemble a frozen stream shattering under a chinook: "...Ruth announced she was leaving, this time for all time. Dad declared it was the best idea he'd ever heard out of her" (102). This juxtaposition is strikingly pointed—the environment exerts its influence not only over the physical conditions of life, but on the inner life as well.

Unlike *A Fortunate Life*, where Facey participates as a simple, common man in some of the defining moments in Australian cultural history (the western gold fields, Gallipoli, unionist movements), all of Doig's characters are only tangentially affected by historical concerns and clearly none are meant to represent the stereotypical Westerner. The Doig family and the other inhabitants of the Big Belts are portrayed as ordinary people under the influence of an extraordinary land; they are all of Stegner's Westerners who aren't cowboys—shepherds, farmers, bartenders, teachers, and even the one young boy who grows up to become a writer.

Stylistically, Facey and Doig seem at first glance unrelated, Facey's being a straightforward, descriptive narrative, while Doig's work is more reflective and compositionally complex. Both works, however, are based in aspects of the oral tradition. Jan Carter, in her afterword to the Penguin Books edition of *A Fortunate Life* compares Facey directly to John Bunyan, and describes Facey's style as "... the artistry of a true story-teller. an ear for the rhythms of natural speech; he observes and explains" (326). Facey's chronological progression of his life story from birth to his eighty-third year reads like an oral history—events are related in a realistic, unembellished style accompanied most often by specifics of dates and place. Unlike Doig, there is no backgrounding of Facey's story; he begins with the words "I was born in the year 1894" (3) and his entire family, unrelated characters, and in fact all of

Australia seems to snap fully-blown into being in that very instant. There is no description of how his family came to be in Australia, where or how his parents and grandparents lived before he was born, and with the exception of a few instances germane to explicating the point of the story, all the characters in the narrative are seen strictly from Facey's point of view. He relates only what he sees and any judgement as to character or motivation he draws is based solely on personal experience.

In fact, Facey's style resembles nothing so much as the style of the writings of the "heroic age" polar explorers from the turn of the century. These stories were also presented in descriptive language, with a matter-of-fact tone deliberately understanding episodes of perseverance through times of incredible suffering and hardship. Compare with *A Fortunate Life* this passage from Sir Ernest Shackleton's *South*, a passage written following a year and a half during which he has been trapped on a ship beset in the Antarctic ice pack, seen his ship crushed, floated for months on a steadily-deteriorating raft of ice, sailed an overgrown row-boat across 800 miles of the worst ocean in the world in the middle of winter, then climbed through what was considered an impassable mountain range to reach help:

. . . To go up again was scarcely thinkable in our wearied condition. The way down was through the waterfall itself. We made fast one end of our rope to a boulder with some difficulty, due to the fact that the rocks had been worn smooth by the running water. Then Worsley and I lowered Crean, who was the heaviest man. He disappeared altogether in the falling water and came out gasping at the bottom. I went next, sliding down the rope, and Worsley...came last. At the bottom of the fall we were able to stand again on dry land... We had flung down the adze from the top of the fall and also the logbook and the cooker wrapped in one of our blouses. That was all, except our wet clothes, that we brought out of the Antarctic. . . That was all of the tangible things; but in memories we were rich. We had pierced the veneer of outside things... We had seen God in his splendour, heard the text that Nature renders. We had reached the naked soul of man. (205)

Facey's description of the end of his part in the Gallipoli campaign is rendered in similar language, with the worst suffering described in a flat, observational

tone, and summarized with a simple, reflective statement:

...Not long after delivering the prisoners and returning back to my unit, my part in the campaign ended. While I was on look-out duty, a shell lobbed into the parapet of our trench and exploded, killing my mate. Several bags filled with sand were blown on top of me- this hurt me badly inside and crushed my right leg. I had difficulty walking or standing upright, and then, while moving through the tunnel to go through to the doctor, a bullet hit me in the shoulder.

The doctor examined me and ordered me to be taken away...It was the nineteenth day of August 1915. I had been on Gallipoli only six days short of four months and I want to say now that they were the worst four months of my life. I had seen many men die horribly, and had killed many myself, and lived in fear most of the time. And it is terrible to think that it was all for nothing. (274)

Like Shackleton describing the dizzying descent of three exhausted, starving men through a freezing waterfall, Facey narrates his war-ending injury in the unembellished style- without reflecting on any personal feeling he may have had during the events- that make up the majority of the book. He follows this, however, with a marvelously literary passage describing his evacuation on the troopship *Ulysses*:

... The first night on the ship we didn't want any sleeping drugs; we were so tired that most of us were sound asleep before dark. When we awoke the next morning we found that the ship was anchored in Mudros Harbour at Lemnos Island. One of the men asked a nurse what had happened and she said, 'Your boys didn't sleep, you died.' She then told us our ship had left Imbros Harbour...that night before and sailed during the darkest part of the night because of the submarine menace. (275)

The beautifully drawn symbolic image of sleep and death, and the picture of the ship full of disabled warriors sailing through the mythic Mediterranean during the "darkest part of the night" becomes an eerie dream-vision from the collective unconscious of all soldiers who have survived the horrors of battle.

Facey shows he is clearly capable- despite his reputation as a simple, plain-spoken sort- of reaching a more elevated style.

In *This House of Sky*, Ivan Doig works in a distinctly literary style throughout, with flashbacks and reflective interior monologues interrupting the temporal flow of the story. The work begins with several chapters describing the lives of his parents and grandparents in the time before his own birth. Doig focuses on motivation and character and his narration has an omniscient tone due to the way in which he fleshes out the characters of family members based on the historical research he has conducted. Although Doig freely admits to being a product of his particular physical environment, he is clearly more interested in discovering himself through his family and his past. He delineates this process explicitly early on:

... That is as much as can be eked out- landscape, settlers' patterns on it, the family fate within the pattern- about the past my father came out of. I read into it all I can, plot out likelihoods, and chase after blood hunches. But still the story draws itself away from the dry twinings of map work and bloodlines, and into the boundaries of my father's own body and brain. Where his outline touched the air, my knowing must truly begin. (30-31)

For all his literary construction, however, Doig's work has a similar connection to folkloric tradition as does Facey's. Examining the relationship between folkloric and literary work, Archer Taylor in the essay "Folklore and the Student of Literature" examines the distinction, "...that folklore uses conventional themes and stylistic devices and makes no effort to disguise their conventional quality while the literary artist either divests his work of conventional quality by avoiding cliches of either form or matter, or ...charges them with new content" (Dundes, 40). In this context, Facey is clearly the folk-storyteller and Doig the "literary artist."

I prefer, however, to see them as two sides of the same coin. Doig, as befits his journalistic background, works in an investigative style, peppering his narrative with direct quotations from all manner of inhabitants of the Montana Rockies. Friends, family members, even other residents who only tangentially knew the Doig family speak in their own voices, placed within the text in italicized quotations, directly to the reader. It is as if Doig is an anthropological folkloricist, gathering and cataloging the stories of an entire culture. The

quotations are presented in such a way that you can almost hear the tape recorder running, the hiss of tape beneath the voices that speak of Charlie or Bessie or young Ivan.

In his way, Albert Facey could be one of those voices on tape. As I pointed out earlier, Facey writes with the voice of the storyteller, the oral historian. If, for example, Facey had been born in Montana, or the Doigs emigrated from Scotland to Australia, either of which being a not-inconceivable alteration of the *fortune* each man acknowledges as an essential life-force, Facey the brilliant observer and storyteller would sit and talk for hours while Doig, the student and journalist, would sit and listen for just as long.

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