

WILLIAM H.
MACLEISH



THE DAY
BEFORE
AMERICA

CHANGING THE NATURE
OF A CONTINENT

THE
DAY BEFORE
AMERICA

William H. MacLeish

Illustrated by Will Bryant

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For Marion W. and Ida E. Boggs
Friends in Law, Friends in Love

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BOOKS BY WILLIAM H. MACLEISH

Oil and Water

The Gulf Stream

The Day Before America



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It is my hope that these interactions have taken some of the glare out of my authorial errors. I know they have left me beset by a need to travel further, to see, in the day *of* America, how the Red Queen runs her race.

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments • vii

1 • *Existence in Reality* • 1

2 • *Across the Border* • 12

3 • *A Land Without Us* • 32

4 • *Children of the Ice* • 56

5 • *Among Animals* • 82

6 • *Hands in the Leaves* • 114

7 • *Costs of Living* • 140

8 • *The Day Before America* • 164

9 • *Up Till Now* • 185

10 • *This One Is Ours* • 208

11 • *A Native Sense* • 233

Notes • 250

Existence in Reality

TRAVEL WORRIES ME. But the actuality of passage is so often wonderful, so often an experience that brings all my senses into resonance, that I rarely can turn away from it. Even in my dreams and nightmares, on empty roads, in huge rooms full of strangers, I am, despite myself, a wayfarer.

Travel brought me this book. It was the fall of 1986, and I was aboard the topsail schooner *Welcome* as she sailed from Portugal to Madeira and the Canary Islands and then across to the Caribbean. My intent was to get as close as I could to the track of the voyage that opened the Americas to Europe. I had with me reports of that westering. Off watch, I would read of long-tailed white birds and brilliant bull dolphins playing around *Santa Maria* as they were playing around *Welcome*. I would read that the Admiral had fine weather, the air "soft and refreshing," that he wanted for nothing "but the singing of a nightingale," and I would look down the moon track and hear the trades in *Welcome's* rigging and compare contentments.

I had other histories of the European conquest of the Americas with me and in one read a passage selected for the Admiral by his son Fernando. It is part of a myth recorded by the Roman writer Seneca: "An age will come after many years

when Oceanus will loose the chain of things, and a huge land lie revealed; when Tiphys will disclose new worlds and Thule be no more the ultimate." Fernando wrote, "This prophecy was fulfilled by my father . . . in the year 1492." It was a boast but not a blind one. Tiphys had been pilot to Jason and the Argonauts. Christopher Columbus was pilot to all Europe.

I was at *Welcome's* helm one night when my watchmate, a Cornish sailor with years of experience in Atlantic crossings, remarked on a certain odor on the wind. It reminded me of bacon frying. What you're smelling, he said, is dust from the Sahara drifting west. I thought of the specks of desert trapped in our sails. In my reverie, everything around me seemed to be moving toward Seneca's huge land: my ship, the ghost ships a couple of hundred miles to our north, the very soil of Africa. The myth said the land was beyond Thule, itself the symbol of the unimaginably remote. Anything at that remove must have seemed beyond time, a place without a past. Distance would have guarded it as dragons guarded other mythical beauty, and it could have been brought back to the world only by the hero's touch.

It seemed possible to me, musing at the helm, that the first Europeans to cross the Atlantic might have sensed something of the myth. If they did, they would have looked at the land rising where the sun set and they would have called the ancient land they saw the New World, new because strange, but new also by virtue of their seeing it, releasing it in their minds from its strangeness, its isolation. Even a modern Euro-American could take comfort from the fallacy of 1492. I found myself thinking of my much used homeland, a thousand miles distant beyond the bow, as somehow still fresh, still new.

The dry hiss of bow slicing water brought me back to *Welcome* and my watch. I was struck by the power of Fernando's selection, angry that for a moment I had succumbed to it. With the anger came purpose: I would go looking for the past that Seneca's myth had done so much to diminish. I suddenly

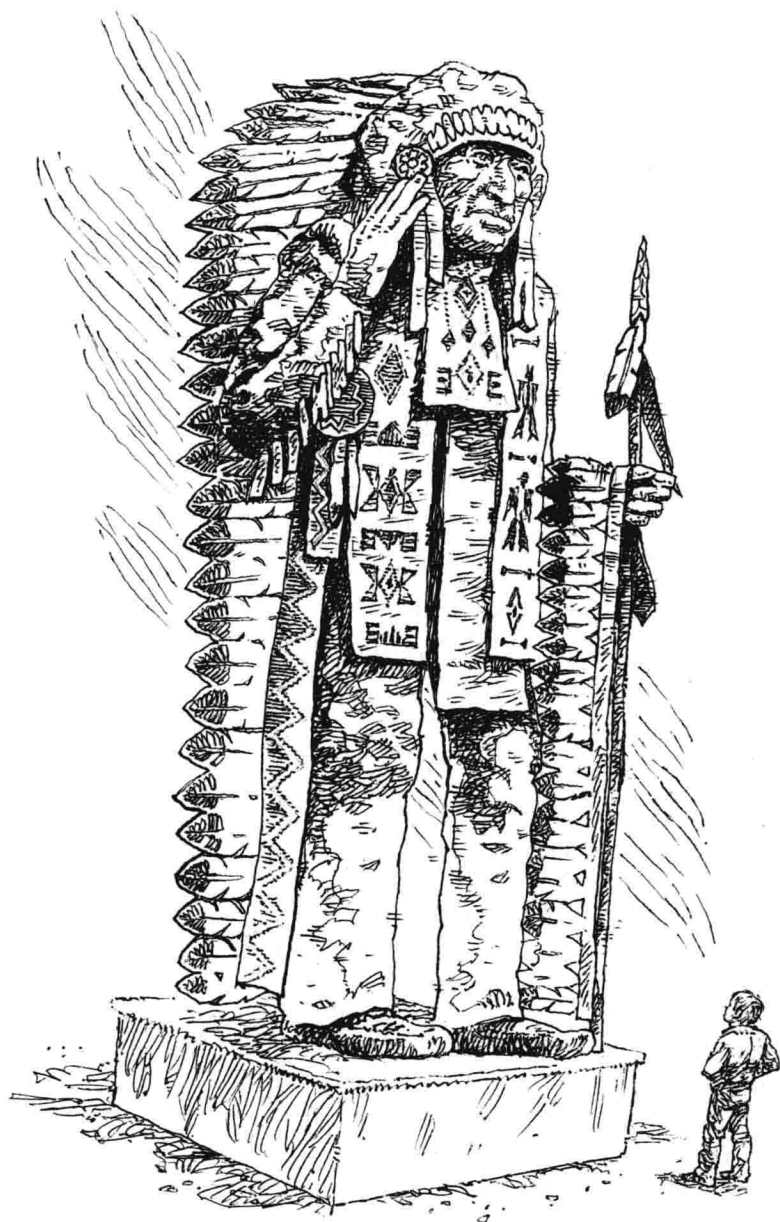
needed that past — to travel in it, to learn about the ways in which my homeland acquired its aspect, its landscapes, its assemblages of life. I needed to understand what I could of its changing: ice to raging flood, to river; parklands to grasslands, tundra to forest; a country without people to a country changed by the fires and settlements and clearings of people.

I wanted to link that long past with the short one I was born into, the day of America. To do that, I would need to learn how Europeans lived on their lands; how their livestock and their ideas and their energies, transported west in the caravels of the Spanish and the brigs of the English, transformed my homeland in ways glacier and flood and first people never did. I would need to learn something of what my society has lost in its gaining.

Might as well get started, said the wayfarer in me.

I hesitated, I worried, but I did start — five years ago. Almost immediately it became apparent that I was unprepared for my purpose. For one thing, my culture kept getting in the way. I was beset by stereotypes. I pass one every time I drive to the nearest big town. It is a statue of a native American, all twenty-eight fiberglassed feet of him, in front of a tourist place on the Mohawk Trail, the road that runs along the Deerfield River at the foot of our hill and on west across the Berkshires of Massachusetts. On his pedestal are the words “Big Indian Shop.” His owners advertise him as the biggest Indian chief in the state, yet he is pure Plains, with a feathered head-dress that would have impressed Buffalo Bill. There is a pretty good version of a grizzly bear around the side of the shop, and a couple of tepees. When I asked why the Western motif on a road named for one of the most famous of Eastern tribes, I was told, “People think of one thing when they think of Indian.”

I did, from boyhood until I stood in the shadow of the Big Indian and asked my simple question. Efficient conquerors increase the efficiencies of their conquests by redefining the



conquered. Calling the place the New World was a good start. So was what Europeans called the people who lived here. *Indian* is generally thought to have arisen from the Admiral's notion that he had made landfall in the fabled Indies of the Orient. (There is a saying among the Iroquois of today, the descendants of those who traveled the real Mohawk trail: Thank God Columbus wasn't looking for Turkey!) When the Indian presence dwindled in the East, it was only natural to capitalize on the public's fascination with the Indian West by bringing war bonnets and silvertip bears to the tourist trade along the Deerfield.

Current stereotypes carry more than Buffalo Bill hokum. In 1990, during the run-up to our second Earth Day, a commercial for plastic garbage bags showed children picking up refuse left in a meadow by some careless consumer while ghostly but pleased tribesmen smiled at them. Today we dance with wolves and visit tribes of equestrian saints. We hear that Indians, by nature and heritage, are environmentalists and ecologists without equal. If you are going to dehumanize someone, it may be better manners to do so with canonization than with calumny. But manners don't alter the consequence.

There were other problems to contend with. I am trained to the pursuits of individualism and material advancement. When I first read of the subsistence of ancient peoples in this country, I shied from the word. *Subsistence* to me meant poverty, underdevelopment, things un-American. Even after Webster's informed me of its primary meaning — "existence in reality" — the idea of sending my imagination among foragers, among people who lived communally in and by the natural world, was frightening.

My fancy would have to sally forth from the security of its landscape. It would have to accept the disappearance of my town of Charlemont, of New York, St. Louis, San Francisco, 1.5 million square miles of farmland, 87,377 square miles of urban development, 2.2 million miles of paved roads, and

close to 200 million motor vehicles. I had to subtract some grasses and all honeybees, along with starlings, wheat, rye, brown rats and house mice, and all domesticated animals except dogs and turkeys. There would go the eucalyptus and the apple tree, the wine grape and the chickpea, and the constant conversations of our machines. And, most terrifying of all, there would go some 250 million people and with them my America.

Mythologists gave me some comfort by introducing me to the notion that there may be in all of us a sense deep beneath memory of having lived in new lands, of having been first people. But my people were not first people *here*. I am descended, through my father's mother, from William Brewster, Elder Brewster of the Plymouth colony. We came here eighteen generations ago and in time broke the cultures of those who had been here for perhaps six hundred generations. By those yardsticks, I thought, I am a stranger in my own land.

I accumulated scores of books and papers and stacks of recorded interviews. I began the research in full agreement with Alexander Pope that "the proper study of mankind is man," but it wasn't long before I fell in with companions whose ideas changed my mind. They were ecologists and other scientists who in the past couple of decades have found new ways to examine and interpret what modern society, arrogant in its literacy, calls prehistory. The tiniest bits of organic matter can now be dated and identified fairly well. Palynologists recover seeds and pollen from lake bottoms or, lacking lakes, from the urine-preserved middens of pack rats, and evoke landscapes as they evolved through millennia. Climatologists study cores from the bottom of the sea or the innards of a glacier and use what they find to model the cycles of temperature and precipitation. Health specialists can estimate how a certain people were faring at a certain time by looking at what is left of their bones. These researchers talk a lot to each other. They have learned not to departmentalize the past. From them, I learned that the full and proper study of mankind, womankind, or any

other kind of kind is neither the individual nor the species but the whole of life, seen in all its combinations, habitats, niches. What I was looking for was not people but land, lakes, streams, and seacoasts, all inhabited by plants and by animals, including that strange being with big feet, not much fur, grasping hands, and an exuberance of curiosity and cleverness.

Scientists and shamans I met on the page or in person spoke again and again of that inclusiveness. Dena Dincauze, an archaeologist who teaches at the Amherst campus of the University of Massachusetts, wrote that "it is folly to think of separating human evolution from the history of the environment; neither can be understood without the other." I determined that no matter where I found myself in telling the stories of the American land, as it was without us and as it has been and may be with us, I would not forget those words.

Ecologists told me of a character out of Lewis Carroll they have borrowed as a metaphor for change. She is the Red Queen, whom Carroll described as "the concentrated essence of all governesses!" "Now, *here*, you see," the Queen tells Alice, "it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!" From large scale to small and back again, existence is in movement, reacting to the behavior of clouds, landforms, water tables, nutrients, predators, prey. Populations of all species fluctuate, as do assemblages of species. Each being has at least some way to monitor what is going on and to make at least some response. Whether or not an individual response is adequate to preserve an organism's place in the order of things, the sum of responses is enough to produce further environmental changes, which demand additional responses, which produce . . . the Red Queen effect.

There are, obviously, many intervenors in such a system. Some beings affect a whole landscape, as the elephant and, I gather, a porcupine work to maintain African savannas. But as a species we seem addicted to alteration. Even hundreds of millennia ago, when our numbers were insignificant, our

promise was evident. We would try one adaptation and then another, applying tools and techniques to offset a given hardship. When an adaptation worked, it made our lives more secure, and our populations tended to increase somewhat. When hardship returned, whether or not as a consequence of these actions and reactions, we would again adapt. It is difficult to argue that our choices were inevitable or that they followed any long-term strategies. Humans are sprinters. We do run twice as fast, and true to the Red Queen's words, we have traveled everywhere in the world, doing what we thought best at the time to improve our opportunities. That is all we have had to do to win the success of survival. Up till now.

Now, I came to think, we must ask ourselves whether we can survive our successes. Can Americans, still the richest society of the species, continue in our way of life, and can others who wish to emulate our wealth do so, without eventually degrading existence? I found that the more I read and listened, the less I thought that we could. It was not an easy admission, for I was, and am, still entranced by our attainments. Besides, if I *were* to address our penetrations beyond what international leaders now choose to call "sustainable development," I might find myself drawn into accepting some responsibility for my society's actions and reactions. With that acceptance, I would then have to accept that whatever else we may be — special in divine eyes, sublime in our artistry — humans have become the master meddlers of the planet.

I read, I made notes, I thought, and I became a prisoner of the wall of work I had built around me. For weeks I sat and stared at it. It diminished me. I felt like the immured wretch in Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado." I knew where I wanted to go — first back to the time of what scholars call Contact or the Encounter, the meetings between white and brown that in this country began on a scrubby beach in Florida and ended more than three centuries later in the scrub and scree of the mountainous West. Once I had thus made two pasts one, I could travel back to the ice and my story's true beginning. But

how to escape? How to get past the lowering authorities on my shelves?

The key lay in the prison. My eyes fell on the book that first turned me toward the consideration of humanity and its home. It was long and dense, the proceedings of a scientific symposium called *Man's Role in Changing the Face of the Earth*. But for me it was an introduction to the writings and conversations of some of the finest natural philosophers of the century — Marston Bates, Carl Sauer, Lewis Mumford, Fairfield Osborn, Kenneth Boulding, F. Fraser Darling, so many others. I have never recovered from reading it.

Toward the end of the symposium, the participants sat around jawing about anything that came to mind. When they started in on techniques of learning and their fit with reality, a man named Edgar Anderson, who headed the Missouri Botanical Garden in St. Louis at the time, launched into a story about workaholic graduate students. Anderson recalled one whom I could sympathize with entirely. Anderson said he “had this inherited feeling that, if one is happy and having a good time, it is not quite right. . . . One is paid to be miserable about his lifework; the easy thing is not the thing to do.”

The student submitted to Anderson a long memorandum about how he proposed to study the bejesus out of his chosen plant, the clematis, during summer fieldwork. Anderson blue-penciled most of the items and returned the memo to the student with a letter I wish I had received in my twenties, before I had set about fashioning the inner drill sergeant who has given me marching orders just about every morning for the past forty years. Anderson wrote:

These are all good ideas, but I've got something else that is very much more important. Every time you get where there is one of these populations of plants, find a large, flat rock, in the shade if necessary; sit down upon it for at least fifteen minutes by your wristwatch; and do not try to think about your clematises. Just think what a nice day it is, how pretty the flowers are, and the blue sky. Think how lucky you are to be doing this kind