

Book Reviews

EDWARD A. GEARY. *The Proper Edge of the Sky: The High Plateau Country of Utah*. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1992. 282 pp. Illustrations, map, index. Paperback, \$14.95.

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Edward Geary is noted for the power and warmth of his writing about Utah country. *The Proper Edge of the Sky* will do much to enhance that reputation. It mixes geology, geography, biology, history, and folklore into an engaging narrative that draws the reader through the complex patchwork of geological and human mountains, canyons, faults, and monoclines that makes up Utah's High Plateaus.

Properly speaking, the High Plateaus, as Geary points out, are "a group of elevated tablelands that form the boundary between the Colorado Plateau and the Great Basin" (2). To those whose spatial sense is informed more by highway tourist maps than geological charts, the High Plateaus stretch south from Nephi, Utah, to the Colorado River and east from Sevier Lake to the Green River. They include chains of mountains built of uplifted horizontal strata. Because the strata are more or less flat, they are often not sharp and jagged at their higher elevations, but rather stretch into expansive "parks" and tablelands. As the late Wallace Stegner put it, these "are not mountains at all but greatly elevated rolling plains" (8). The Gunnison and Wasatch Plateaus stretch south to nose into the Pavant, Fishlake, and Thousand Lake Plateaus. The Sevier, Aquarius, and Hurricane Cliffs Plateaus continue to where they begin to break into the Pink, White, and Vermilion Cliffs that drop past the Kanab, Kaibab, and Kaiparowits Plateaus to the Grand Canyon of the Colorado. There is, simply stated, not a more "strange and beautiful country" on earth.

The terms *High Plateau* and *Colorado Plateau* were coined by geographers to type the landforms that stretch across the greater part of Utah. But, as Geary so memorably relates, the region is much more than a maze of ancient bunions on the planet's integument. The region was witness some twelve thousand years ago to an aged Columbian mammoth, stricken with arthritis, who wandered up into a plateau far above his normal habitat and then, wearied by his exertions, lay down to die. His bones remained virtually intact until the eighth day of the eighth month in 1988, when a backhoe operator working on a reservoir dam dug into them (5).

During the millennia since the mammoth died, a procession of human adventurers and explorers tracked the same country, finding the grace to forgive the region its hardness because they were touched by its beauty. There were Spanish traders, trappers such as Jedediah Smith, government explorers John C. Frémont and C. E. Dutton, writers like Wallace Stegner, and ordinary people—Mormons, Italians, Greeks, South Slavs, and Finns—who made the place their home. The voices of all are part of Geary's High Plateaus.

Settlers include folks from the Sanpete bursting their buttons at their hundredth hearing of the prayer of "Brother Petersen," a Dane, who explained to God in time of drought, "Ve vant a nice, yentle rain dat soaks down to de roots, not like dat tunderbumper you sent last summer. . . . And if you tink about it, Lord, you vil see dat it is a good ting for you as vell as us. If ve don't get no crops, you don't get no tithings" (127).

Among the stories are those from Carbon County mining camps of the perils faced by picture brides. A young Greek woman, after making her way painfully to the railroad siding of a Utah mining town, was shocked to realize "that the thin, hook-nosed man approaching her was not the man whose picture she held in her hand. Papakostis [her husband-to-be] had sent his handsome brother's picture instead of his own" (229).

Perhaps not surprisingly, the most powerful stories Edward Geary spins from the High Plateaus are those that come from his own youth. He remembers that during a visit to his Grandma Ungerman, "I first developed a conscious admiration for country women. Not Grandma, whose strength I took for granted, but the

handsome Johansen girls,” whose father “had discovered that farm-bred women can do anything men can do and had made ranchers of his daughters” (133–34).

To Geary, country women were no less women for doing farm work. He thought they looked “plenty feminine” in the pastel summer dresses they wore to church, and when he “peeked through the currant bushes and caught sight of them in their blue jeans later in the day, they still looked just fine. The tart, pulpy taste of wild currants still brings back the sensation of peering through the thick bushes, hoping for a glimpse of the Johansen girls” (134).

Geary remembers that the vitality of these and other girls was so intense “that I occasionally find myself fantasizing that they still exist just as they were then, still riding horseback down farm lanes or making fudge on the coal range on winter evenings or strolling in their Sunday dresses along dusty summer roads lined with Lombardy poplars in some country of the young from which I alone have been exiled” (135).

Though filled with history and lore, *The Proper Edge of the Sky* is, quite properly, not a narrative history of the High Plateau country. One sees little in this book of ethnic rivalry, conflict between miners and operators, or misunderstandings between the Mormons and others who peopled the region. Though wonderfully informative and replete with carefully chosen observations of a broad range of the people who crossed here or settled down, the parts of this narrative that sing are the rosy memories of a sensitive and intelligent Mormon man recalling his youth in Huntington, Utah.