

“Bad Land” likely to be great read for Montanans

George McMurray

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“Bad Land: An American Romance,” by Jonathan Raban. New York: Pantheon Books, 1996. 324 pages.

“Bad Land” is the second recent book about Montana by an English writer. A couple of years ago Nicholas Evans published his best-selling novel “The Horse Whisperer” set near Choteau, and now Jonathan Raban, an English-born resident of Seattle, presents us with a poetic, nonfiction version of life in our state. Most of the “story” of “Bad Land,” available at the Choteau Public Library, takes place in eastern Montana — Ismay, Terry, Mildred, Baker, Fallon and Miles City are the towns most frequently mentioned — beginning with the rush of homesteaders after the passage of the Homestead Act of 1909, and ending in 1995, the year of the author’s travels by Jeep throughout the region to conduct his research.

Raban has interviewed numerous descendants of the original homesteaders (referred to disparagingly as “honyockers” by ranchers) who, unlike many of their contemporaries, stayed on their land despite the terrible hardships imposed on them by bone-dry summers and bitterly cold winters. Then, after their neighbors’ departure, they managed to acquire additional sections and eventually made their investments profitable. Typical of these homesteaders were Ned and Dora Wollaston, who came to Montana from Minnesota with their son Percy. Experienced farmers with some savings, they built one of the better homes of the region and refused to give up during the prolonged drought (1917–1920), when so many, like the Okies of later years, headed west. Raban struck up a friendship with Mike Wollaston, Ned and Dora’s grandson who serves as his guide and consultant.

One of the most interesting of the ten chapters deals with the photographs Raban and Wollaston come across in museums and private homes, photographs that, through Raban’s insight, vividly recreate the past. Evelyn Cameron, a name familiar to many Montanans, was perhaps the best-known photographer of the period. A native of England, she and her husband immigrated to Montana to raise horses. Their business failed, but her determination and love of the land made her a longtime survivor and an esteemed neighbor.

Another chapter described the five-to-seven miles of fences built by every homesteader to mark boundaries and confine livestock. A symbol of unity — because neighbors helped each other with the grueling labor — these fences revealed volumes about the work ethic and the eventual success or failure of each ‘settler. But fences also symbolized the hunger of the homesteaders, many of whom were European immigrants, for their own, well-defined property. Another subject of this chapter is Ismay, the smallest incorporated community in the state. In 1993 Ismay’s name was changed to Joe, after football legend Joe Montana, an event celebrated with an elaborate July 4 parade.

The first few years were relatively prosperous for the new immigrants, weather cooperating and, due in part to Hardy Campbell’s scientific farming methods, crops providing a decent living. This period was also characterized by mechanization in the

form of tractors, Model Ts, and other expensive machinery. Then the weather broke, and during the winter of 1916–1917 the temperature dropped to sixty-three degrees below zero. The following summer turned out to be the first of several exceptionally dry seasons, and two years thereafter came the awful winter of 1919–1920. By this time the exodus of homesteaders was well underway. “In a dozen years, the land had changed from the terrain of unblemished hope and possibility to hope’s own boneyard.” The villain of the day was railroad magnate James J. Hill who, for his own selfish reasons, enticed settlers with pamphlets touting the new Arcadia, “a blessed land of pastoral simplicity and happiness.”

In his final chapters, Raban described in more detail the lives of those still “clinging to the wreckage” and then takes us to other parts, including Roundup, Great Falls, Fairfield, and Lincoln where, several months later, Ted Kaczynski was arrested. Meanwhile, Ned and Dora Wollaston followed their son Percy to Thompson Falls, having-rented; and’ then sold, the family ranch.

As its full title suggests, “Bad Land” is indeed “an American romance,” that is, a medium through which the author depicts remote places populated with people whose powers exceed those of normal human beings. Despite its sprinkling of errors (Raban refers to the College of Agriculture at the University of Montana in Missoula and confuses Fairfield with Fairview), this finely crafted volume will appeal to many readers because of its nostalgic recreation of a heroic episode in recent American history. Montanans especially should appreciate it.

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