

# In search of the big sky Unabomber militia

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*Bad Land: An American Romance, Jonathan Raban Pantheon / 324 pages / \$25*

Jonathan Raban came looking for America at age 47, pulling up stakes in his native England to start fresh in the Pacific Northwest. “Arrived at Seattle, I worked hard to make the new life stick, but I was short of roots and reasons,” he writes in *Bad Land*, a kitchen-sink book that is part memoir, part travelogue, part “Prairie Home Companion.” “Lacking an American past of my own, I hoped to find someone else’s cast-off history that would fit my case.”

Though he intrudes in the narrative though out, Raban says little about his reasons for dragging a wife and young daughter across an ocean and continent to the state of Washington, where the climate is just as damp and melancholic as in dreary old England. “It wasn’t,” he allows, “a long- or well-considered move,” and *Bad Land* is his attempt to justify the freight charges. “I took to making long drives eastwards (which in the West means backwards in time), always looking out for some point of connection between my own careless flight west and that of my precursors.”

He finds that connection in eastern Montana, where early-twentieth-century homesteaders fought unbeatable odds. “Government and big business had worked hand in glove to stiff the homesteaders,” writes Raban, undoubtedly a staunch Labour supporter in his former life. “They had spun a merry tale of the New Eden, and put it across with the insidious techniques of twentieth-century mass advertising. It had been a classic con-man’s pitch.”

The railroads had opened up that New Eden just a few years before. The Northern Pacific had laid its rails along the Yellowstone River in 1881; the Great Northern drove its spikes into the banks of the Missouri River in 1887; then the Milwaukee Road plowed through the middle of the state, furrowing the vast prairie as if it were already full with wheat. Transportation needs towns and trade, so railroad lobbyists prodded Congress into passing 1909’s Enlarged Homestead Act, an optimistic piece of legislation offering 320 acres for a nominal fee to anyone, citizen or no, who “proved up” the land within five years.

But the land was unprovable. Despite spiritual sustenance gleaned from Campbell’s *Soil Culture Manual* (a new-ageish guide to dry farming), and a few good years of rainfall that produced prize-win-ning turnips, most immigrants and eastern tinhorns who’d bought into the Montana dream were belly up by the early twenties—more than a decade before the Great Depression wiped out the Okies in a cloud of dust.

Raban lets the capitalists and bureaucrats off the hook, ascribing the Montana failures to unfortunate Progressive-era boosterism “shared equally by the western emigrants and the powers-that-be.” The author seems willing enough to walk a mile in the other man’s shoes, be they the polished wingtips of greedy moguls or the scuffed brogues of impoverished farmers; but on the whole, Montana homesteading comes off as an ill-considered experiment marking the end of agrarianism—and the beginning of tourism.

“Tourism thrives on picturesque poverty,” Raban declares, noting that the automobile brought sophisticates from the cities to the plains, where they could commune

with rubes and cows from the comfort of their Ford touring coupes. “The homesteaders, with their quaint costumes and rodeo skills, were photographed in much the same spirit as ‘the natives’ of Africa.” He lavishes some of his best prose on the subject, developing for readers a picture of the noble homesteader on horseback, reduced to photographic fodder for Sunday drivers.

Yet even as he laments the exploitive and reductive nature of tourism—and, by extension, the society that commercializes leisure time—he calls attention to himself as an impostor of sorts, scurrying across the prairie in his Eddie Bauer khakis and cell-phone-equipped Jeep. Raban wants to be a part of the rugged tradition of the American West, but he can only scratch the surface of that life. He winks at the reader, for example, while watching contemporary ranchers castrate calves and complain (justifiably) about incompetent federal agents and damned city liberals. Of the subfreezing weather that Montanans take for granted, he remarks: “To breathe at all, one had to sniff—gently, slowly, ouch!—and conserve each sniff for as long as possible before the next painful, cautious in draft.” A little of this goes a long way, and while Raban writes well, he is better off sticking to history.

Indeed, Raban can be compelling in his re-creation of daily life on this unforgiving stretch of what nineteenth-century maps called the American Desert. It is a dispiriting saga, punctuated with grasshopper plagues and scorching droughts and peopled with an odd lot of loners and outcasts—dreamers and risk-takers, to put the best face on it. Many were illiterate, but some left behind records of their struggles. Raban borrows heavily from two first-person sources: the unpublished memoirs of Percy Wollaston, whose family quit their homestead while he was a boy, and *Wheels Across Montana’s Prairie*, a 690-page compilation of settlers’ stories.

We learn, for example, of Evelyn and Ewen Cameron, who sailed to America planning to raise polo ponies and ship them home to England at a tidy profit. Known in Montana as Lady and Lord in deference to their dog-cared peerage, they soon found themselves in debt, having miscalculated the effect of seasickness on landlubbing colts. Ewen reverted to his first love, ornithology, and penned prose sketches of Montana birds for natural-history journals like the *Auk*. Evelyn raised vegetables and chickens and took in borders. Some were amateur photographers, who taught her the rudiments of the new art. Soon she was photographing her husband’s birds, then landscapes, and finally her fellow homesteaders, who were willing to pay for prints they could send back to Europe. In the process, as Raban describes it, she became the prairie’s Avedon:

The abundant Montana light required that Evelyn often stop-down to an aperture of f16 or less, resulting in a cruel deep focus, in which the empty foreground is as sharp as the ostensible subject of the picture. So one’s eye is caught less by the ranches themselves than by the ranchers’ litter: the dog bones, broken fenceposts, crumpled cigarette packs, old kettles, woodshavings, squashed food-cans, lying on ground that is in urgent need of a cosmetic grass transplant. Evelyn’s Montana ranches look like improvised camps, pitched by none-too-particular soldiers, and under the constraints of war.

Raban tells us also about the Zehms, Seventh-Day Adventists who found the prairie conducive to their religion. Not only were they no longer stigmatized as members of a strange cult, they took apocalyptic comfort in the biblical proportion of Montana's storms and plagues. Another character, a Brit known as Worsell, became the prairie pariah, spitting tobacco juice in his tarpaper shack and burning buffalo turds (a valuable fuel) in his cheap stove. "His reputation for dirtiness and cadging soon spread far abroad, and his name became a byword," writes Raban. "It was a noun, a verb, an adjective. A lost tool was worselled. Dishes left unwashed overnight were worsells. Anything poorly made was a worsell job."

Still, Montana was a place where even slobs could carve out a niche. "It was a land on which a man could stretch himself and feel comfortable in its bare distances. Strolling along the mile of new fence, chewing on a quid of Red Man tobacco, his pride in his place, its every knoll and tussock, came to him as sharply as a stab of pain in an abscessed tooth."

Although most Montana homesteaders were regular folk, enough were like the Zehms or Worsell to serve as archetypes for latter-day saints and sinners, those alienated drifters who have provided material for writers such as Raymond Carver, Thom Jones, and even Norman Mailer—who turned Gary Gilmore's Salt Lake City shooting spree into a Great American Novel. Homesteaders staked a claim, exhausted the land, then moved on, chasing the rumors of jobs in lumber camps and gold in sparkling streams: "The transition from a boom town to a ghost town took only days to make."

Raban ends his travelogue with visits to Lincoln, where alleged Unabomber Ted Kaczynski was arrested, and Noxon, the command center of the Militia of Montana. The implication—that the homesteaders' goal of self-sufficiency has devolved into a rabid and distorted individualism—is too pat. "In their resentment of government," he declares of these modern malcontents, "their notion of property rights, their harping on self-sufficiency and self-defense, as in their sense of enraged Scriptural entitlement, one could see the perverse legacy of the homesteading experience and its failure on the plains." Well, maybe.

Raban had wanted a past he could appropriate as his own, but he could have just as easily stayed in Seattle curled up before the fire with some Larry McMurtry westerns. Out on the road, he is too often like those tourists who motored through Montana in the thirties, stopping every so often to jot some insight into his notebook. When it works, *Bad Land* fleshes out life on the Montana prairie; more often it reads like disjointed postcards from the side of the interstate.

The Ted K Archive

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