

ED WOLFE at 80

Introductory

Somehow 25 years ago, I missed Ed Wolfe at the University of Kansas; perhaps the reason was that in those days I was more involved with scholarship per se, than with creative writing, which was his specialty. The appearance of his new story collection To All The Islands Now enabled me to rectify such a lapse and undertake the following interview with him, surveying his life and work. To me, Ed Wolfe's fiction stands in the great line of solid prairie realists starting up with Hamlin Garland, through Rolvaag and Cather and to his former student Bob Day at the present time. By realism I simply mean well-told stories about the lives of common folk here in the heartlands. Ed's fiction parallels the extent of his life in this territory, from small town Kansas in the first part of the century, to remote hamlets of western South Dakota in the late Twenties, through the Depression there and back to Topeka and Kansas City, Kansas. Bill Stafford rightly compares one of the stories in Islands to the sagas of old; it's a tale of winter harshness, but also, as Ed says, of adventure too, and a delicate sense of spring's arrival: "Horned larks and meadow larks were singing, and a killdeer cried. I came down into the sweet scent and the profuse pink and yellow of the wild roses, blooming in their sheltered quiet. Pesek and I had been fools, I thought. We really hadn't needed to be in such a hurry to get away each year as soon as school was out. This was the spring Ma Piel had tried to tell us about, and I had missed it until now." I have, precisely the same feeling about having missed out on Ed's work until now....

Another story in his new book presents the Chaucerian adventures of a rooster named Hardi. Normally I'm not especially fond of animal stories, but then this fowl is irrepressible. As Ed's fellow Kansas City, Kansas artist Marijana Grisnik has shown in her paintings, keeping chickens was actually quite common in bygone decades. The third story in the book which is entitled "Instead of Bread?" is a penetrating study of a rugged old farmer who is a stubborn free-thinker, believing only in "Natooer and the Almighty Time." The conflict with his devout wife is sharply etched, arising as it did from the aftermath of the Scopes Trial. All in all, this story is surely one of our very best explorations of the dialectics of belief and free-thought in the intellectual history of the Midwest.

Someone ought to come along and reprint Ed Wolfe's novel of 1953 called Widow Man, and to publish his other work which as of this moment remains in manuscript. Meanwhile we have his new book:

To All The Islands Now. Introduction by William Stafford. Topeka: Woodley Memorial Press, 1986. 105pp. \$5.00.

INTERVIEW

HB: What can you tell us of your early life?

EW: I was born in Ottawa, Kansas in 1906...

HB: Were you on a farm?

EW: We had six acres...six or seven cows and sold milk. We had pigs and chickens and raised a lot of garden. My father was a not very successful dentist; he was a good dentist, a very honest man. A number of things accounted for his lack of success, but he did the best he could. People appreciated the excellence of his dentistry but they tended not to pay him. So he had some trouble. I think he made more from his dairy than from his dentistry. As the Depression came on it more and more got to be that way. People wouldn't pay and my father wouldn't turn 'em down. He did the best he could until he was ruined by the fact that contagious abortion got into the herd and my mother got a bad case of undulant fever and almost died. As soon as people heard about that, we had to sell all the cows. Those that were all right produced milk for which there was no sale. So he gave up his dental office and put up a chair in the front room of our house. But business was very poor; the Depression was on. He managed to find the town of Eudora not having a dentist and wanting one so he and my mother moved there and they did fairly well after that.

HB: How did you make your way to the University of Kansas?

EW: My parents saved enough money to send me. I was very bashful. In high school they had an election to see who the most beautiful girl was, the most handsome boy and the one most likely to succeed and the most bashful boy--I won that in a landslide! It bothered me a great deal. I tried to console myself, telling myself what was true, that the boy who was really most bashful couldn't get any votes. I was well known--everybody knew I was a good student and a good cartoonist--they even knew I wrote well. As a joke they elected me what I almost was--the most bashful boy. Anyhow my parents sent me to K.U., told me to spend as little as possible.

Each Man Is An Island

To all the islands now I cry
my lesson in geography.
We are all, however close, apart
and disparate, but yet alike,
being of the one, great, growing
Archipelago of Man,
which, crowding close, lies dense in groups,
or else, much thinned, strung out for many
a thousand miles across the reaches
of our sea, but still, alas, in every
case, above the Primal Fault,
whose constant breakings, tiltings, crackings
account for all these quakes we have,
upheavals, tidal waves, and storms,
and even cause that we must each
of us in time be taken down,
immersed and drowned, while constantly
new islands are upheaved to break,
in every season, every weather,
the astonished surface of the sea.

Edgar Wolfe - prefatory poem
from To All The Islands Now



Photo by William Stafford

HB: Did you major in English?

EW: Yes, I majored in English. I thought I would major in journalism when I went there, but I just didn't do well in journalism. I really was bothered by shyness and was no good at gathering news. I wrote a few good feature articles and teachers were impressed by them. I was lazy, didn't understand that in journalism unlike in English classes, you don't get incompletes, you turn in your assignments on time, or you miss the publication. So I just wouldn't do as a journalist.

HB: Were there teachers who impressed you during those days?

EW: I was most impressed by Professor O'Leary. He was my favorite and I was kind of a favorite of his.

HB: You got your degree in '28...

EW: Yes, in the last year I woke up to the fact that I had no idea what I could do to get a job and make money, so I got in some education courses--maybe I could teach. Typically I dawdled around about applying for a job. I got in with a teachers agency, and got an inquiry from Stoneville, South Dakota, a three-year high school. A member of the school board wrote me and described the school, said they were new, they were way out there on the plains, 40 miles from the nearest railroad town. Stoneville had a population of about 11. This rural high school would probably have 25 or 30 students. I wrote back enthusiastically that I was excited about the prospect. Then I heard no more from them. All of a sudden in August I heard from them. They included a contract and assumed everything was settled, when of course it wasn't. I decided the place in South Dakota sounded like an adventure. You can see

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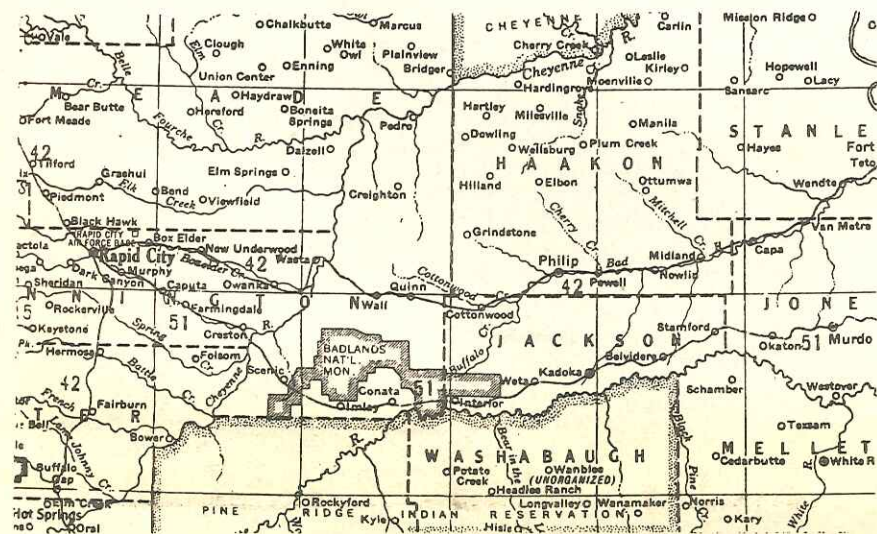
where I got the idea of the town of Coyote, in "Nor the Furious Winter's Rages." Stoneville was just like it. I taught there for 2 years. The second year was kind of bad; my shyness just about cost me that time because I didn't tell them I was getting married. I knew that if I had been married when I first applied for the job, they wouldn't have given me the job. I got married during the summer without telling them. I didn't know what they would do. As it turned out, they liked me and held a school board meeting and decided it was no crime. If I could manage to find a place for my wife and me to stay, well, O.K. they'd let me teach another year. That's where I got my idea for that shack that the store clerk and his wife lived in, in "...Rages." My wife and I lived in that very cold shack, which wouldn't have been so bad if we'd had room for a decent-sized stove. We had to have a cooking range and had to get what heat we could from that.

HB: I got the impression from the story that this was somebody who had experienced these things...

EW: Yes, it certainly was...it was bad. We stood it all right, or we thought we stood it, but I'm not sure but that enduring the cold in that shack for a year was ruinous and might have been the cause for my wife's multiple sclerosis, that developed later. Right there we lived and endured. Had all sorts of close calls. My wife got smallpox--very bad for anyone who is pregnant, so we lost our baby. That was one of our catastrophes.

HB: I assume that you had the experience of being snowed in for days or weeks at a time...

EW: Yes, that was pretty real...The original of Pesek is named Paul Talich. He taught there that year. We had our adventures going to town. The trip to get the radiator was genuine: Talich in his car and the clerk in his car. The wise farmer that makes comments and whom I represented as going on the trip to get the baby did nothing of the kind..he didn't have anything to do with that.



HB: The Depression hit and then what happened?

EW: I managed to get a job in Kansas after that second year. My wife and I thought we'd better get back to live in Kansas. I finally got a job at Axtell, Kansas teaching English and book-keeping. That didn't turn out well because the Depression was coming on, and they had some intricate politics in the district which ended in sacrificing me. They also sacrificed the wife of the principal who had been teaching music on half-time. They fired her. They fired me. Their scheme was to get somebody who could teach both English and music, who would replace us. Finally I got a job at Weta, South Dakota in the Badlands. It's not on the map any more; it's out of existence. I taught there a year where I was listed as principal. That was unusual because the job was really being the only high school teacher. It was a very irregular school. What I did was to teach all four years of high school--had to do it with lots of tall managing. There were just 9 in all four years. As soon as I arrived the boys tackled me & said "This year we've got five boys in high school; can't we have a basketball team?" And so I was willing to have that adventure of a basketball team. I anticipated losing players by fouls so I got a big 8th grade boy to be the substitute! We had no gym so we played on other schools' courts. To get to a game I had an old 1926 Chevy full of boys--my radiator had got in the same shape as Talich's had been. As soon as we got to where we were playing we'd drain the radiator and park the car near the town pump. After the game we'd fill the car with water and take off for home. The boys were good sports about it; they didn't gripe or complain. They were used to hardships, that's how it was...

HB: What was the scene like in these towns?

EW: We should have stuck it out in Weta and taught there another year, but my wife was pretty unhappy with the place. We were living down in the basement of the school, which was fairly warm and comfortable, actually. But we considered what we could do. We had a certain amount of savings by that time. We decided I would go and take graduate work in English next year at K.U., so that's what we did...I didn't get my master's finished that year. I did good work in graduate courses, but I just didn't get my thesis finished and I had to try to find another job teaching. I couldn't do it there in 1932: nobody was giving up his job, and I just didn't find a place. I was forced to try something else....I ended up by getting a job canvassing for Watkins products in Topeka. I did that for a while, but I'm a terrible salesman. I could make about \$3 a week. Times weren't as bad as they had been in '31 or '32;

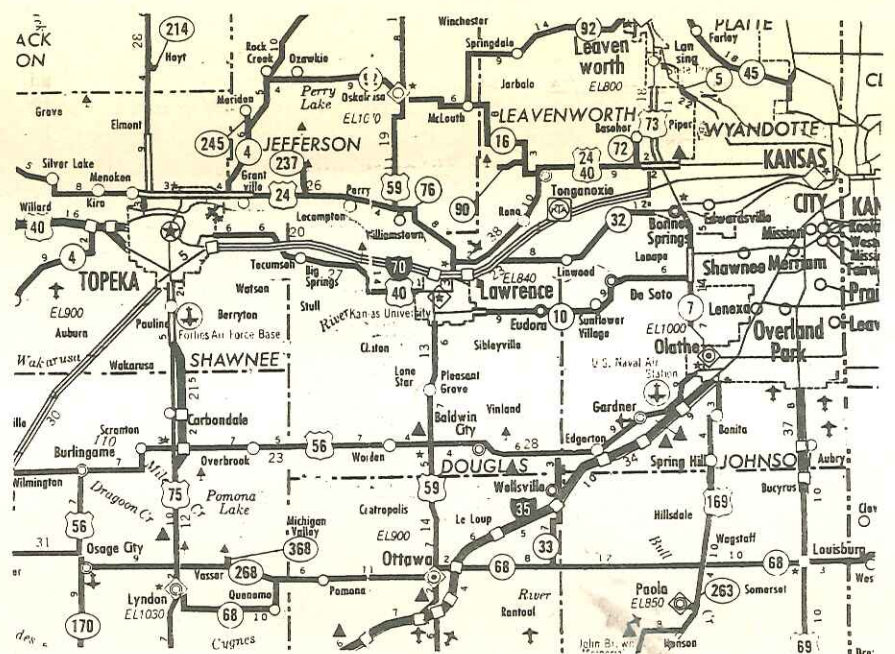
that would have meant starving to death. We found a place in Topeka where we could live in the attic of a store: White's Radio Shop. That was quite an experience. The flue was bad; we had great difficulty getting the flue so it would work. Mr. White was ingenious; he said "You go down in the basement and get some dirt, and put it in this coal bucket--mix it with water and a little sand. You can use that for plaster...You plaster around that stove pipe and that'll make it tight enough to draw." So that's what we did. Then, come to the matter of eating; he had his ideas there. He had some cats at home & everyday he got from a butcher some scrap food which was mostly fat. His idea was: "You can get some meat.. go through this fat and glean out the lean meat, and you can cook that, and you'll have some meat." He had a lot of ideas like that. We did that and managed to stay alive. We finally reached a crisis after about 8 months or so. I piled up a debt of about \$90 with Watkins Company; they decided not to trust me any further and cut off my credit, demanding that I pay up. I could not do that very well. They reached another scheme. They managed to get some poor unsuccessful preacher to take over all the Watkins dealers in Topeka. Under their scheme we would work for him rather than directly for the company. So I wasn't fired; I was just supposed to catch up with my debt in time. I kept on for a while...

HB: What happened then?

EW: Somebody told us that the State Board of Social Welfare was hiring student case workers, and recommended that I apply for that. I went down to the State office of the Welfare Board and talked to them, and explained my parlous situation. They were used to hard luck people, took pity on me and sent me to Kansas City, Kansas. For a month or so, Nina handled what Watkins business was still left, and I stayed with a friend over in Kansas City, and started working for the Welfare Board. I got the magnificent sum of \$10 a week for that; felt rich, comparatively, with that \$10 a week...renting a house for \$10 or \$15, moving our old furniture from Topeka to there. Worked awfully hard. I would start about 8 in the morning and work straight through to 8 or 9 at night, except for taking time off to eat a little something. Prices for food were cheap then: you could buy hamburger for 5¢ a pound in Topeka in 1934, or 12¢ in Kansas City in 1935...back bones or some cheap meat you could boil: 6 pounds for 19¢. So we managed...

HB: It must have been pretty bleak in those years.

EW: Yes, it was..but the welfare job was awfully interesting. Of course, you didn't feel inferior to those poor people on welfare. They supposed I was pretty prosperous, or some that I was on welfare just like them.



HB: Where was the Quarry Hill section of Kansas City, as described in your novel Widow Man?

EW: It was Graystone Heights; in a way it doesn't exist any more. You know where I-35 comes over into Kansas from Missouri? Well, the Graystone section was a very interesting place then. It's in the northern section of Rosedale. So much that used to be there is gone..where I-35 is now, used to be Fitzgerald Road, which went from 7th Street there by the hill, by Southwest Boulevard...I made up the area of Quarry Hill from the way that used to be, and also where Fitzgerald passed the hill up to Shawnee Road. There used to be occasional streets which came down to Fitzgerald Road and people lived on those rough hills. It's all gone--those streets that used to be there have all been torn out. Nobody lives on that ridge any more, except on Shawnee Road. There was an old quarry up there...

HB: You were in Kansas City, Kansas during which years?...

EW: '35 'til about '42. I left social work and got a job teaching in the disciplinary barracks at Fort Leavenworth for 4½ years or so, until 1947. I applied at K.U. for an assistant instructorship. I got the job and never lost it.

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.....A friend of mine just wrote a review of my new book. He seems to be unaware anyone could possibly live as Hazel and her husband do in that shack. It was my wife and I who lived in that shack. He almost would think we were kind of disgraced by having been that poor once, which is ridiculous. Lots of people have been that poor, and have lived and endured. I never have felt that it was a disgrace to live that way; it was survival. It's hardship all right, but it's also adventure.

"Didn't you ever think of moving? Diola an' me used to wonder--if, since you--sometimes, that is--when--"

Embarrassed, Tom stopped, but Mrs. Ewing understood.

"Why we wanted to stay on the Hill when we both have had more schooling than anyone else?"

"Way more," said Tom.

"Not so much," said Jim. "I didn't graduate."

"You did from high school."

Jim couldn't deny that.

"Certainly I wanted to move," said Mary. "You can learn to be a snob in school. Maybe you aren't supposed to. People do. Jim didn't, but this was home to him. He was born in this house."

"Well, it was a case of being too poor to live where I wanted to, and then of being too busy to move when we could. You know we both worked for years after Dorothy was born. First thing I knew, I just didn't want to move any more."

Tom and Jim both remained silent, and presently Mary said, "I suppose you want to know why?"

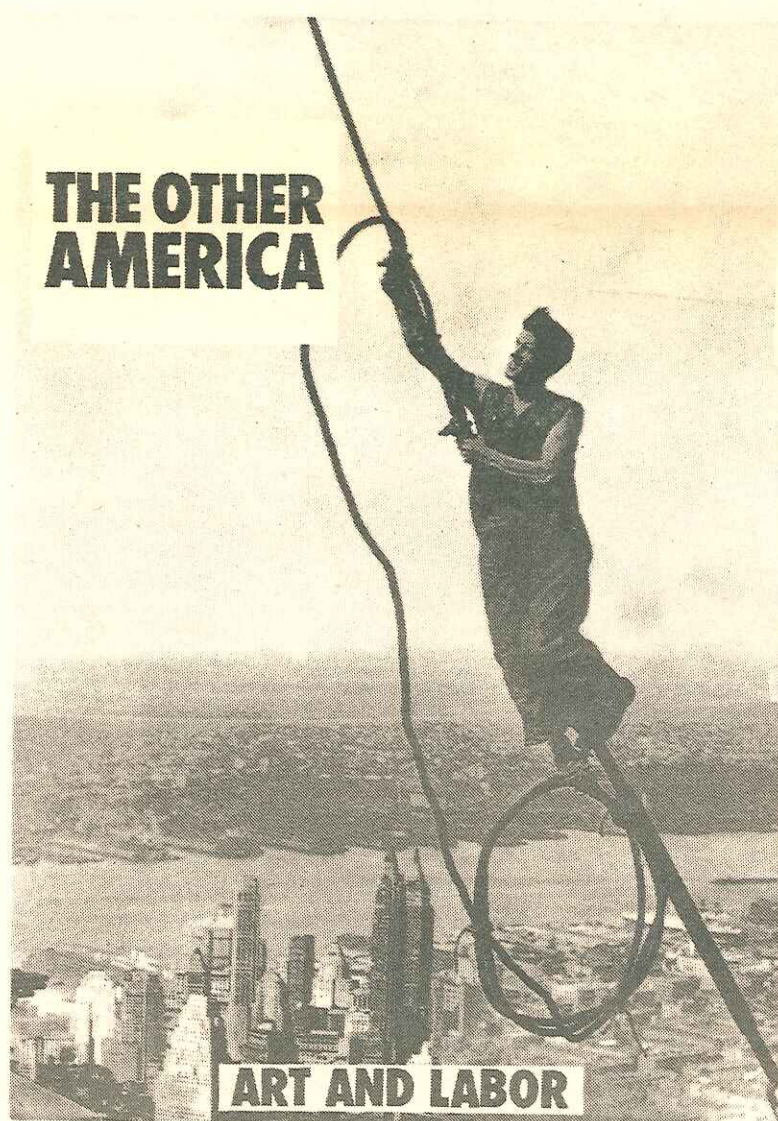
"Yes," said Tom. "I know you still had friends that don't live on the Hill, teachers and all. Didn't you want to live close to them? 'Course you got a car now an' your house is all fixed, but still--well, back then, back before you fixed it?"

"It was having Dorothy and having to teach her. We said we would teach her what was true, and when you do that you have to look and see. I tried to teach her the things that Jesus said. I told her it isn't the high and mighty or the honored or the people who take the credit or the people of one color or another who amount to something in the eyes of God. It's the learners that count. It's the learners who really live. Just the learners. 'Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.' That seems a hard saying, Mr. Way, one way you can take it, and I don't know all that it means, but I do know one thing. You can't be proud in your mind or proud of your mind and have understanding. And there isn't any life without understanding. You have to keep learning. I tried to teach Dorothy that."

"Then I started to learn to know my neighbors and I found I could live here and raise a good daughter. It always was economical to stay here, and so we stayed. I'm not very much of a snob any more, I don't think."

"No," said Tom, "no, you're not."

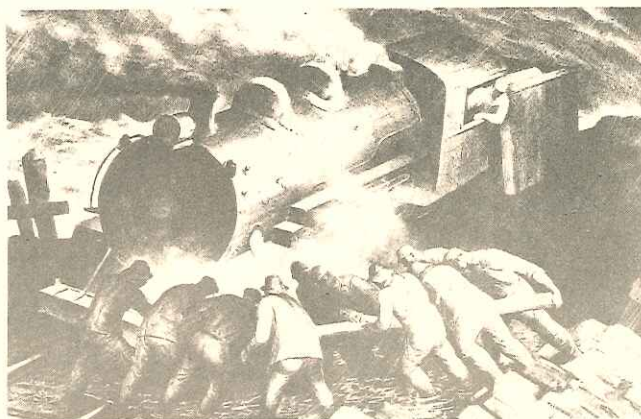
Edgar Wolfe - from Widow Man



The 1986-87 CATALOG OF MIDWEST DISTRIBUTORS offers scores of additional books on people's history, literature and culture. Among our best-sellers from that listing is THE OTHER AMERICA, a large-format illustrated catalog of an exhibition on the art of the American labor movement which has toured all over Europe in the last 4 years (though it has never come to the U.S. itself-!). At \$14.95, it's a real buy. Other strong sellers include the HAYMARKET SCRAPBOOK, MEIN VATERLAND IST INTERNATIONAL (text in German) which is a history of May Day in art around the world, and a new songbook by Pete Seeger entitled CARRY IT ON! Our catalog is free for the asking: Box 5224, Kansas City, KS 66119.



Winslow Homer. *The Morning Bell*, 1873
Wood engraving, 23 x 24 cm. Harper's Weekly



James E. Allen. *Distress*, 1938. Lithograph, 23 x 35 cm
Ben and Beatrice Goldstein Foundation, New York



John Sloan. *Class War in Colorado*, 1914