MANFRED, HIS LIFE AND WORK

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My subject this afternoon is Frederick Manfred as Dutch, or, in this case, Frisian American author. For the record, we know that Manfred has published twenty-five books, which have appeared in over fifty editions and which have been translated into Italian, Spanish, Frisian, and Yugoslavian. Individual sales of books have ranged from under 2,000 copies for Milk of Wolves to several million for Lord Grizzly. On the collector's market, first editions range from $20.00 for The Primitive, $50.00 for Morning Red, $100.00 for Wanderlust, and $150-200 for Arrow of Love. He has been showered with awards, all but the big ones--the Pulitzer and the Nobel, both of which he has been nominated for. He is proud of his ethnic heritage, has drawn upon it richly in his work, and has never turned his back upon his people. He is a magnanimous, generous, courteous person, blessed with delightful humor and patience as long as his six foot nine inch frame. Will his works win a place in American literary history? Are they classic works, deserving of our attention now and in the years to come?

Classic, enduring literature is not determined, of course, by best-seller lists. When Thoreau's A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers sold a scant 219 copies in five years of his self-paid, 1,000 copy run, the author remarked with his wry humor: "I have now a library of nearly nine hundred volumes, over seven hundred of which I wrote myself." The back of that volume boldly announced that Walden was forthcoming. Its coming forth was belated; but it sold better, 2,000 copies in seven years.

A classic should, at least, possess the following traits: 1) Aesthetic excellence--it must be a work of fine art. 2) Universality of meaning and significance--it applies to peoples of different times and places. 3) Anchorage in history and a life experience--it must have something significant to say about the time in which it is written or about which it is written. 4) Spiritual significance--it must be revealing of man's quest for human and spiritual meaning. Those are elementary traits in what could be a lengthy list. Several of Manfred's major works bear clear evidence of such traits.

But how does Manfred fit into the American literary tradition? What typifies his work?

First, he is a writer of tremendous vision, one who doggedly pursues that vision even when the publishing world has spurned it.

Second, he is a writer whose Dutch American roots are clear in many of his works, even to specific detail. Works like The Primitive, Green Earth, and This is the Year are not only autobiographical, but deal explicitly with the Dutch and Frisian people in America.

Third, he is a writer who has been enamored, through his own geographical area of northwest Iowa, Minnesota, South Dakota, and an area he has named Siouxland, with the American west, its history and its myth.

I believe we can best understand these points by considering three major phases of Manfred's career and the works produced in those phases.

But first, what does it mean to be a western writer, for Manfred is commonly referred to as such before anything else. And this single fact,

his willing appropriation of the label "Western Writer" has, in his estimation, caused most of his considerable publishing difficulties with the eastern establishment, the literary marketplace which, Manfred claims, is clearly prejudicial to the work which he wants to write. A curious irony threads through this in that his most successful books in terms of sales and popular reception have been the five historical westerns called the Buckskin Man Series. To get at this in a logical way, it may be helpful to make some distinctions in kinds of western literature, to try to arrive at some categories. Many people read westerns; truck drivers, slum landlords, college professors, and cowboys who wanted to find out how they were supposed to behave. It is one of the most successful commercial genres ever engineered by man, threatened nowadays only by the trained baboons who grind out Harlequin Romances. Westerns are a cut above that fare, but still distinctions need to be made. Let me suggest these distinctions in what I call the ABC's of western writing.

The first category I will call the C western. The C, in this instance, stands for Cellar. This is the drivel of the western myth cranked out in endless volumes by human machines. It is what Frederick Faust, who under the pen names of Max Brand, Evan Evans, and others, writing at a pace of 50 pages a day from his villa in Rome, producing dozens of books, noted as an author most for his sheer stamina, called in a rare moment of candor "brainless drip." It is the literature of Louis L'Amour, macho pablum for puerile palates. As a result it is very popular and sells well from drugstores and certain national chains.

The second category is the B western, and here the B stands for slightly Better. Occasionally Frederick Faust, who under his real name was a failed epic poet, managed to attain this level in three or four of the Max Brand novels. That's about one out of every 10 books so the percentage works out for sheer luck rather than skill. The B western has two things the C western does not. And the C western has nothing. First, is historical accuracy. Many of these pieces are valuable simply as historical documents and as marvelous evocations of a life that has passed. In his novel Sam Chance, for example, Benjamin Capps spans a 60 year slice of Texas life that is both moving and illuminating. Among the best in the B's are several works by Henry Allen who writes historical western novels under the pseudonym Will Henry and fictional spellbinders under the name of Clay Fisher. When his picture appears as Clay Fisher, it usually includes him with a cowboy hat and a Winchester. As Will Henry the Winchester is absent.

A second item the B western has is aesthetic merit. All westerns have to keep the reader turning pages, but with the B's it is more than just whether Jett Harley will get the pretty gal Shirley Gaugin. Ernest Haycox, who sometimes dances the C/B line like Nureyev nonetheless can produce some startling prose and sophisticated artistry.

The A western is a classic. It is first of all a work of art. It endures not only by what it evokes of a bygone age but also by what it says to our own time through that age. It has enduring spiritual significance. Here the names are more familiar: Vardis Fisher, who was Harvard educated, who remarked "My daddy was a mountain man, my grandaddy was a mountain man, and I want to be a mountain man too," and who packed up his cum laude degree and went back to the hills of Idaho to write; A.B. Guthrie Jr. in his first

two novels; Walter Van Tilburg Clark; Jack Shaeffer when he works at it; and, in several works, Frederick Manfred.

There are many other ways to characterize the ABC's of western writing. For example, in the C western sexual relationships are as prim as Sunday School. In B westerns there is much ardent romance typified by kisses--seldom more than three or four and those brief, many longing looks, and the good guy always gets the pretty girl in the end. That's how you can tell he's the good guy. In the C western all he gets is his horse which given the real, historical nature of the western woman of this period may have been the better deal. In A westerns there are not only broken hearts but broken lives. To put it still another way. In the C western the hero shoots the bad guys. In the B western he makes some effort to get to know him first. In the A western he tries to understand him and even, at times, would lay down his life for him.

My reason for pointing these things out is my belief that Manfred might have become a very successful C/B western writer. It remains a fact that the two books that have made him the most money are Lord Grizzly and Conquering Horse, in my estimation in the high B, for the former, and A, for the latter, categories. These works are among the best of the west. They share a sense of western myth, that is, a sense of spiritual presence behind the reality of the land. They share aesthetic qualities which mark them as works of fine art. They are outward looking in vision rather than the often nearly neurotic inwardness that typifies the modern mainstream novel. While the modern novel is often an exercise in ennui, broken up only by sexual fireworks--like a sea of torpor disturbed by one occasional wave every fifty pages, to mix the metaphor--the western novel always relies on story--strong plots involving characters as complex as man himself. Manfred might have been a very successful writer of westerns. This hasn't been his choice, however. He has felt possessed by an artistic vision and goal throughout his life. This has had a direct and significant bearing on the books he has published and those he has only tried to publish.

I would like to trace the evolution of that career, its publishing history, by focusing here upon two works from the early career, one from the middle career, and one from the recent or late career.

The story begins in 1934. Since his graduation from Calvin College, Manfred has been writing diligently, but not always with diligent or demanding criteria. Several manuscripts of the time were scrapped, such as one abortive effort of 101 pages called "Millions of Morons." Others were kept as notes. His latest novel, Sons of Adam, was sketched in part during the 30's under the title A Time to Remember. The manuscript he kept coming back to was titled The Golden Bowl is Broken, a work that he put through seven different drafts, including two drafts as a play when for a time it seemed that the Federal Theatre Project would sponsor its production. After the sixth draft and at least as many rejections, Manfred carted the manuscript up to Paul Hillestad at Webb Publishing Company in Minnesota. Manfred recounts the final contract signing with Webb thus. I quote here from the book I wrote with Rod Mulder on Manfred's publishing career, in this section from a narrative interview with Manfred (Fredrick Manfred: A Bibliography and Publishing History, Sioux Falls, SD: The Center For Western Studies, 1981, p. 122).

Two impressions of The Golden Bowl, as the book came to be called, were run in 1944 for a total run of 5,500 copies. Grosset and Dunlap picked the edition up in 1946 and ran 10,000 copies. These figures were not bad, actually, for a first book by a self-proclaimed regional author.

That regionalism is emphasized in Manfred's third book, This Is the Year, which is among his finest. I include it here in the early stage of his career because the novel was written intermittently with The Golden Bowl. After the first rejection of The Golden Bowl in 1937, Manfred started This is the Year. Tired or discouraged of one he would work on the other. He claims that at one point of discouragement he burned most of the manuscript of This is the Year. It was the first of his books consciously about his people, those Dutchmen who settled in Northwest Iowa. It is the story of their struggle with the good earth and the bad weather, a remarkable and powerful story, full of the richness of human experience. It is a carefully crafted work, and was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize. It has been translated into Frisian. The larger significance of This is the Year, however, is that it was published by Doubleday which began Manfred's tempestuous relationship with eastern publishers. Two impressions of the book were run in 1947 in a total printing of 14,500 copies. Again, fairly respectable given the era. The relative success of This is the year forced Manfred's hand. He needed material, and for that he turned to himself in his World's Wanderer Trilogy. The first book, The Primitive, about his--as he tells it--stormy career at Calvin College is a flawed but exciting book; flawed both in its historical accuracy and in its style. In the latter two books of the Trilogy the flaws predominate. Manfred claims the publishers rushed him. Nonetheless, we have the first evidence of a negative quality that has marred his career at different points, the inability to cut back, to sort out, to discard in his own writing. In The Primitive Mr. Witsingberg advises Thurs Wraldson:

> Look, I want you to do something. The very next time you feel moved by something, find tears in your eyes, feel sad, feel elated, I want you to quick get that feeling down on paper. Even if it's only one paragraph. Even if it's but a sentence. Just let it fly out, no matter how it sounds. Then, after, well. . . then apply some of those silly grammatical rules you are trying to learn.

We move then to the second or middle phase. The short-lived romance with eastern publishers broke down completely with the critical bomb of the World's Wanderer Trilogy. Doubleday was happy to get rid of their rebellious giant and he was thoroughly disillusioned by the critical reception the works received.

Thus by 1952 Manfred was in personal and professional difficulty. Would his personal brand of regionalism work? Could he sell it? Would he survive as a writer? His name change in 1952 from Frederick Feikema to Frederick Manfred was a signal that he intended to make it. Lord Grizzly was to be his public statement that he had in fact made it. Let me read a page describing the background (Frederick Manfred, p. 35).

Manfred has made it in a smashing way. The subsequent four Buckskin Man tales vary in both quality and popular appeal. The best of the lot, perhaps the best of his 25 books, and surely one of the best westerns ever written, is Conquering Horse.

That brings me to the late period, and here I turn to Green Earth which I rank as one of his best. The book followed Milk of Wolves, a fascinating and important but slighted work which was rejected by nearly 30 publishers and was finally printed in 1976 in only 2,000 copies. In Milk of Wolves, one might say, Manfred elucidated his novelistic vision. In Green Earth he wrote it.

Green Earth, however, signaled a return to earlier themes; a fond recollection of his people, the clear, evocative regionalism, all recounted with sensitivity, grace, and good will. Perhaps this is not surprising since his first notes for the novel were scribbled in a notebook during college (Frederick Manfred, p. 72).

Let me make a concluding assessment. I have pointed out earlier that Manfred has the skills to be a successful, and perhaps wealthy, C/B western writer. He has chosen not to. I have great respect for his dedication to his personal vision, for a dogged determination to recount the stories of his people and his land, and finally, for his sheer energy. His output has been tremendous. He has an immense talent, sometimes uncontrolled. His artistic exuberance, what Wallace Stegner called the energy of a Frisian bull, has led to both stylistic and aesthetic faults. Nonetheless, Manfred has crafted four first rate books, This is the Year, Lord Grizzly, Conquering Horse, and Green Earth, and he remains, I believe, one of our ethnic treasures.