

An Interview with Bob Sayre

KATHLEEN DAVIDSON

The scene: Late afternoon, Bob Sayre's sun-baked office, his coleus enjoying every bit of light, he and I overcooking a little as he prepares tea. Portraited nineteenth-century poets gaze over our heads, and the image of an Indian's face emerges from what appears to be an abstract print (fulfilling Seattle's prophecy, and D.H. Lawrence's echo). It's a familiar scene; for over a year now he and I have met to discuss my "Readings" in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century interactions between American Indians and whites, and the role of Indians in American literature and culture. But now I have a tape recorder, and I'm asking the questions, and we're both fidgeting a bit.

DAVIDSON: Your dedication to *Thoreau and the American Indians*, "To Hyemeyohsts, for the people,"¹ leads me to wonder what this kind of book means to "the people." Could you comment on how you came to write the book, on what it means to you?

SAYRE: Why is it dedicated to Hyemeyohsts? It was Storm who guided my interest in American Indians. He was my Joe Polis.² I would not have written the book without having first met him in 1969. Before that I had already made up my mind to go out to British Columbia, hoping that I would learn something from and about Indians. British Columbia looked like the frontier—it was as far as I cared to go, at least. I had no desire to go to Alaska. I also dedicated the book to Storm because I think that I want the book to be for the people, for the Tsistsistas, which is the Cheyenne tribal name meaning "the people."

During the peace marches and demonstrations of the late sixties, I can remember Allen Ginsberg here to give a reading. I happened to have supper with him. Ginsberg told a story about a big peace demonstration at the U.N. There had been a delegation of Sioux Indians, and the people in New York, according to Ginsberg, had no understanding of what those people were there for, who they were. The big crowd just regarded them as exotics, and it seemed to me that unless

the peace movement could relate to Native Americans, it was missing a part of its audience, admittedly a small part, but it was also losing out on a kind of moral authority that might stem from involvement with Native Americans—sympathy for them as victims of American aggression also. I was interested in knowing more. I really knew nothing about their literature. I asked some friends if they could tell me about American Indian autobiography, and Tony Ridington, Alex Kern's daughter, happened to mention *Black Elk Speaks*, and four or five other books that she knew of. So I read those books and I decided that I wanted to know more.

In the spring of 1969 I taught a course in the frontier in American literature. We were reading Henry Nash Smith and Edwin Fussell. Somehow—I forget how this happened—we just shifted our point of view and tried to imagine the frontier from an Indian perspective, looking from West to East rather than from East to West. The students asked me about Indian life, questions about alcohol and battles and things like that, and I really didn't know much. I suddenly felt naked, as if the blanket had slipped in the night and I was cold. It made me realize how our conventional American history is told from a white point of view. It's pretty well known now, but it was a real shock to me in 1969. We reorganized the seminar and went to work. DAVIDSON: What provoked your interest in Thoreau's relationship to the Indians? Did you see him as another man seeking what you yourself were after?

SAYRE: After my leave in '69-'70, I happened upon a book called *The Indian in American Literature* by Albert Keiser, done in the '30s. There was a long chapter on Thoreau, on his Indian notebooks, as Keiser called them. It mentioned his collection of arrowheads and artifacts, and it included some marvelous quotations from the journals. That was the first I really knew of Thoreau's research, and I wanted to know more. So I borrowed Sherman Paul's copies of the microfilms of the Indian books, and I fiddled around trying to read them—didn't get very far because it was awfully hard to read 3000 pages of handwriting with my head in a microfilm reader. I had a sequence of research assistants helping me—Lee Paradise, Carol Krob, and Bill Seaton—and we couldn't make very much of it. Then Herbert Cahoon at the Morgan Library told me about the Christy transcripts at Columbia, and that's when it became possible to read them. It's a book in which a lot of people helped me a great deal. It couldn't have been done without Mary Dobbie's making the transcripts available. She was Professor Arthur Christy's literary executor, and happened to be an old friend of Bob Irwin's. Most of the transcripts had been done as M.A. theses; two were unfinished, and I had to get these from Special

Collections at Columbia. She permitted the Xeroxing of all the transcripts, including those unfinished theses.

DAVIDSON: We've touched on some of the personal and political implications of your topic. Did this ever become confusing for you?

SAYRE: I wrote an introduction to the book which the early readers found too personal and polemical. It was too outspoken, and they didn't think it was appropriate to a scholarly book. I had a big argument with myself whether to go along with them and drop it, or to get on the high horse of integrity and defend it. I think I was right in doing what they suggested. That might have been the appropriate introduction in 1972, but it no longer seems to fit. I don't feel that my story is that important. It's an interesting yarn and it'll serve here, but the book will succeed or fail depending on what it says about Thoreau and savagism and white attitudes in the nineteenth century. It's futile today to castigate my white ancestors about those bad ideas and mistakes. It's unchangeable.

DAVIDSON: What exactly did you say in the suppressed introduction?

SAYRE: It was this personal story of the book, with some references to Vietnam, "the last Indian war," and attacks on the ethnocentrism of most scholarship.

I am always interested, though, in the question of how much a scholar, in our case a historian and critic of literature, should be moved by personal feeling and involvement in the subject. In the 1960s there were a number of us who tried to make scholarship more personal and more relevant to immediate issues. There were a lot of others who were frightened that this might represent a disavowal of scholarly objectivity. I think that that question has sort of dropped out of discourse now. People are more interested in doing the kind of work that's going to get them a job, for obvious reasons, or in fulfilling what they see as immediate social and educational needs, which comes down to training themselves to do something for which there is employment. I don't think there are any ultimate answers to these questions, but I certainly am glad that some people in the 1960s asked them. They taught us that there is no "value-free scholarship," and that what calls itself "value-free" is either valueless or just silently serves the State and those who pay for it. But I'm pontificating.

DAVIDSON: You'd like to go back to 1969?

SAYRE: Would I want to go back? Well, it wasn't fun, but I think there'd be a lot more debate about people's intentions and purposes, and there'd be more challenge to what people were doing and why they were doing the kind of work they had chosen. That I think I'd like to see.

DAVIDSON: So you're asking for relevance to immediate issues in the

work of your students. I've never considered you a presentist. What kind of relevance would you like to see?

SAYRE: Studies of the relationship between literature and fossil fuel? No, I don't quite see that. There's a lot that goes on in the university that is indeed the wasting of energy, though!

DAVIDSON: Well, let's use your recent book as an example. You're correcting, or modifying, a widely-held image of Thoreau. I'm very glad to see how carefully you show Thoreau limited by, as well as pushing past, the ethnocentrism of his time. I just can't agree with Fussell that Thoreau was free of prejudice, rhetoric, and melodrama when it came to the Indians, and yet I do think he'd have written a much different history—he did write a very different “history”—than, say, Parkman did.

SAYRE: The tendency has been—if people are going to pay any attention at all to Thoreau's relationship to the Indians—to praise him as a “friend of the Indian.” That phrase “friend of the Indian” was applied to scoundrels like Jackson, as well as to Schoolcraft³ and a lot of others. I come out wondering if there were any real white friends of the Indians. Maybe John Dunn Hunter.⁴ Savagism was too pervasive.

DAVIDSON: Define savagism for us.

SAYRE: The content of savagism, briefly, is that Indians were simple hunters, children of nature, whose noble (or ignoble) way of life was doomed. It was myth; it was an ideology. It was extremely pervasive. It's the basis of Cooper. It's the basis of nineteenth-century policy. It was a science; at least scientific studies grew out of it, measuring bones and crania and collecting thousands of things. It was held by both Europeans and Americans.

DAVIDSON: And yet didn't Thoreau think that his age would be remembered for its “copper tints?” Didn't he see many of his contemporaries as learning from the Indians, as rediscovering a past, as finding a background for their own growth?

SAYRE: It's true that they were fascinated with Indians. The first half of the nineteenth century had many writers, usually from the East, who tried to record the condition of Indians, doing so from a feeling that in another generation all the Indians would be gone.

DAVIDSON: Do you think Thoreau felt that?

SAYRE: Yes, I think he did.

DAVIDSON: But do you think that his work was based on such a conception in the way that, say, Irving's was?

SAYRE: No, not at all like Irving. But in the same way as George Catlin.⁵ Catlin's one reason for painting the Indians as fast as he could was the impending extinction that he foresaw. This was the impulse

behind Schoolcraft's collection, too. Thoreau was not out to make those death masks, but his desire to go to Maine, his going to Maine, came from the desire to see what was left of the Indians there. Another form of this in the nineteenth century was the desire to tell the story of white-Indian relations as Parkman did, or to write it up in fiction, as Cooper did. It's maddening to go back to Parkman and Cooper today, as you know, because they were so heavily influenced by savagist prejudice.

Thoreau was an exception. His own kind of savagism was an exception to his time. He was never drawn to hunting, or he identified it with his childhood. But he certainly had his savagist prejudices about Indian solitude and self-reliance, and he had beautiful and sometimes erroneous attitudes about Indian purity and tranquility and peaceful relations with nature.

DAVIDSON: How did Thoreau use Indian materials—say, the kinds of things he had in his “Indian books”—differently from his contemporaries? And how did he use these things differently from Indian writers themselves?

SAYRE: One of the interesting little sidelights in this are some letters from Irving to Schoolcraft, asking if he might have the Ojibwa stories that Schoolcraft had collected. Irving apparently wanted to make a collection of Indian tales similar to his *Tales of a Traveler*, etc. But Schoolcraft wouldn't give them up, wanting to use them himself. As it turned out, the person who used them most famously was Longfellow in *Hiawatha*. It's fun to think what might have happened if Irving had had those tales to doctor up in his style. Could he have made them as familiar as “Rip Van Winkle” and so made Indian stories a real part of white American consciousness? White writers have by and large not been able to use Indian materials. There are very few collections, except as children's stories. In one respect I suppose that's very good, because all these things are there for Indian writers to use in a deeper, more moving, and intelligent way. They might have been more sentimentalized if Irving had had his hands on them a hundred years ago. Now it's fresh material when Momaday goes over it in *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, or when Leslie Silko incorporates Laguna stories in *Ceremony*.

DAVIDSON: How do you feel about the way some of the earlier American Indian writers—like Charles Eastman—used these materials? I'm thinking now of how Eastman in *Indian Boyhood* calls the Indian myths fairy tales.

SAYRE: There the materials are made sentimental too, or infantile. Eastman was writing for the Boy Scouts, but because he thought they would subvert America. And he may have been right. He produced Gary Snyder.

DAVIDSON: Let's talk a little more about how Thoreau himself used these materials.

SAYRE: The amazing thing is that he doesn't use the historical stuff. Out of the 3000 pages of the Indian books, I don't think there are more than ten or twelve items that actually show up in his writing. He collected factbooks and then went over to try to verify these observations in his own walks and collections. There's a long section in *Cape Cod* where he's going over early explorations of America, and the writers recorded in the Indian books are referred to. But he's writing there about white discovery, not Indian history. That's another reason why the Indian books will be kind of hard for people to understand and assimilate.

DAVIDSON: Well, what about Hannah Dustan? This instance of white discovery is certainly important to Thoreau's *Week*. We were talking before about Indian perspective—what might an Indian perspective on Hannah Dustan be?

SAYRE: It's interesting—what that Wampanoag who captured Hannah Dustan thought when he suddenly saw her standing over him with a hatchet ready to fall, if he woke up—a crazy white woman, I suppose.

But one of the best reasons for studying savagism is this influence on the American character. The assumption that Indians were hunters, to the exclusion of all else, comes to mind in the fall when everyone goes out hunting. The fascination that some people find with bow-and-arrow hunting as opposed to using guns is a good example of this. A man I know just shot his first buck with a bow and arrow. Plus all that rough stuff, that machismo, that side of the American character is drawn from the prejudices that were held about Indians. We usually select Hemingway as the enemy of all sensitive women because of his machismo, but where does he get it from? This was the sense of what the Native American was, as it had been refracted through Leatherstocking, etc.

DAVIDSON: So you think that "regeneration through violence" is an important part of what you call American character?

SAYRE: By all means. Richard Slotkin's book is a good example of the kind of '60s committed scholarship we were talking about. Though Wayne Franklin, Lynn Angstadt, and I all disagree with some of his readings.

DAVIDSON: Yes, I do too. But I'm actually pretty suspicious of phrases like national character. What do you see as our national character?

SAYRE: National character is what's appealed to in Miller Beer advertisements.

DAVIDSON: Do you really think there is a national character?

SAYRE: Ok, not just a, but many, national characters. I'm thinking,

though, of that emphasis on the Cherokee Scout or the jeepster bouncing over the rocks somewhere in the Southwest, plunging into streams, with tires that can take all kinds of rough treatment. It's too specific to say that this is only some sort of manifestation of Indian memories and echoes, but then why is the damn truck called a *Cherokee Scout*? Sometimes I've made lists of what are considered to be civilized and savage traits, and invariably the popular notion of savagery connotes some sort of wildness, lack of discipline, ferocity, impulsive behavior, carelessness, and carefreeness. Yet, all the information I possess about Indian life conveys just the opposite. Indians were extremely disciplined, thoughtful, diplomatic, and self-restrained. They could fast, purify themselves, and make great gifts and sacrifices. In other words, Indian life meant control. It is civilization that was out of control, and still is.

DAVIDSON: So the whites couldn't see what they didn't know was there?

SAYRE: I guess they saw a kind of warfare that was very bold, lots of screaming and yelling and warcries and all of that. And they saw ceremonies which seemed strange and pagan and therefore wild. Chants and dances seemed wild to someone accustomed to quiet prayers and black clothes. War and religious ceremonies were the two principal kinds of "social" behavior seen. A third was the trading post, with Indians drunk, which is another complicated story. There were testimonies of Indians' hardiness and skills in stalking and ambush, but still the word "savage" continued to imply lack of restraint, even though "savage manners" were much more controlled than "civilized manners." Civilized manners may be restrained in a very narrow social sense—lectures and schools and that—but look what goes on in athletics, and in the unrestrained consumption of white America, where to surrender to your impulses, greed, and self-gratification is demanded of you hour by hour.

DAVIDSON: You make me think of Francis Parkman. He saw himself as becoming an Indian when he went on those buffalo hunts in *Oregon Trail*, but he ended by abandoning himself to completely unrestrained consumption—not even consumption, rather, slaughter—out there on the plains. And he was so genteel. That book upset me a great deal.

SAYRE: Yes. Another thing we have to think about is whether there's real profit in studying these mistakes, whether we have anything to gain by dwelling on them. It's necessary to go into those things in order to see what they were, in order to become conscious of our mistakes, in order to try not to make them again. But do we want to study error to the exclusion of other ideas which were more useful and cor-

rect? That's a question that I sometimes had as I was writing *Thoreau and the American Indians*, and that other people will have going into other kinds of chauvinist racial mythology.

But a great deal needs to be done in this area. Another important connection between concepts about Indians and the American character, for example, recently came up in my autobiography class. We were talking about the boys' books of the 1890s, how in Howells's autobiography he says that "the boy is a savage." I'm fascinated with that identification of Indians with children, and with what remains gentle in white women and pure and manly in white men. Savagism is going to be a lot harder to overthrow than racism about Blacks because so much of it is favorable and sympathetic.

DAVIDSON: Let's talk about autobiography for a while. In your recent *American Quarterly* article, you contrast the history we can get from reading autobiographies with the "bland soup" of orthodox history. What kind of unorthodox, heterodox history can we get from autobiographies?

SAYRE: You simply learn a lot of things that you would otherwise miss from reading conventional history. You learn about Steven Burroughs's counterfeiting and passing himself off as a minister, and you run into John Dunn Hunter. You run into James Fahey's story of World War II. You get these things just one step away from the actual personal encounters. It's just not as filtered through generalities and the pieties of patriotism and national self-respect.

DAVIDSON: So you believe it all? Or isn't that important?

SAYRE: I sometimes wonder whether the naive writer is more or less influenced by literary conventions or stereotypes about himself and his character and what he's doing. Is a naive writer seeing more freshly, or is his seeing more influenced by conventions and prejudices which, because he's naive, he's not so conscious of? That's one of the questions that occurs to me as I read autobiographies, and I think it has conflicting answers. Some naive writers who are very plain and outspoken and individualistic, are going to give a very distinct personal kind of account. But others who are very self-conscious about the importance of what they're doing are going to be very conventional in the worst sense.

DAVIDSON: *How* do we get this history from autobiography? You say you want us to bring as much historical knowledge and insight to an autobiography as possible. Do you have any more specific suggestions?

SAYRE: I think it's true that you can't read autobiographies in a historical vacuum, as some people would say that you can read novels and poetry.

DAVIDSON: But you wouldn't say that about novels or poetry either, would you?

SAYRE: No, that's not my position. I'm glad for all the assistance I can get. Whatever materials are relevant I'm happy to use. But with autobiography you can't be sure about how truthful a writer is being in the basic sense of the word, unless you can check him from time to time with outside materials—what Albert Stone calls “reality testing.” You're looking to check a writer's memory of something with other people's memories.

DAVIDSON: You also advocate in your *AQ* article that we push the limits of what has so far been considered autobiography. Of what kinds of forms are you thinking? Do you consider *Four Quartets* autobiography?

SAYRE: I've had a running correspondence with James Olney about this. I first said it was in *The Examined Self* in 1964, or at least I compared it to Cotton Mather's *Magnalia* and said that both were in ways autobiographical. I'm not so sure that I would say that now. Or let's just say I'm not as interested in *Four Quartets* as autobiography as much as I am in captivity narratives, say, or slave narratives which have more to offer that's unknown and undigested.

DAVIDSON: So what's next?

SAYRE: I'm editing my father's autobiography. In the last six or seven years of his life he started trying to dictate reminiscences, and then because he wasn't comfortable with tape recorders—any more than I am!—he started writing them out. He'd been an editor and he could write very well. Eventually he wrote about eighty “Random Recollections,” most of them very short—two to five pages—but very characteristic of him. It is fun to go back to these things. I also get some satisfaction from going back to replenish the well of literature, rather than just to draw from it. I like the challenge of working with materials which are in an almost publishable state, but not quite. The “Random Recollections” have the limitations and strengths of his own character, and I am simply trying to present enough of his character for people outside our immediate family to enjoy his autobiography.

DAVIDSON: Are you planning any writing in the area of American Indian literature?

SAYRE: I'm reviewing Leslie Silko's *Ceremony* for *ASSAIL*. I would like to do a study of the Deganawidah story, and compare it to the Judeo-Christian stories or classical stories of the origins of the law. I think Indian law is very different from white law on a lot of points, and very relevant to our needs today. The Indians' handling of offenders, the emphasis on retribution and reparation—Vine Deloria talks about this pretty well and suggests what might be done.

I once thought of trying to collect a group of essays written about Native American literature and simply calling it *Learning from the Indians*, because I think there is so much that was passed over by the frontier historians and the early writers. As Ed Folsom says, our history is like a palimpsest, and we can now scratch off the top layer and go down further and further, satisfying our need for more knowledge and awareness of these things.

DAVIDSON: Now you sound like Thoreau in the *Week*—where he praises the worm for digging down instead of jumping about like a grasshopper to make his history.

SAYRE: I guess so. Or the Biblical worm!

1 Hyemeyohsts Storm is the author of *Seven Arrows*. He taught here in 1970 and 1972.

2 Joe Polis was Thoreau's Indian guide in *The Maine Woods*.

3 Henry Rowe Schoolcraft's six-volume work attempted to synthesize all available expert information on Indians in the mid-nineteenth century.

4 John Dunn Hunter lived with Mississippi Valley Indians from infancy until young adulthood, and his memoirs, published in 1824, show a rare reconciliation of white and Indian perspectives. Many whites went to great lengths to prove him a fraud.

5 George Catlin left his law practice and family in 1832 to live among the Indians in the West for eight years.

Editor's note: Robert F. Sayre has taught at The University of Iowa since 1965. His book, *Thoreau and the American Indians* (Princeton, 1977), was begun while on a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1973-74. He is also the author of *The Examined Self: Benjamin Franklin, Henry Adams, Henry James* and various articles on American autobiography, including "Vision and Experience in *Black Elk Speaks*" (*College English*, 1971) and "The Proper Study: Autobiographies in American Studies" (*American Quarterly*, 1977).