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### "He Wanted to Tell Stories": Geographers and the Biography of George R. Stewart

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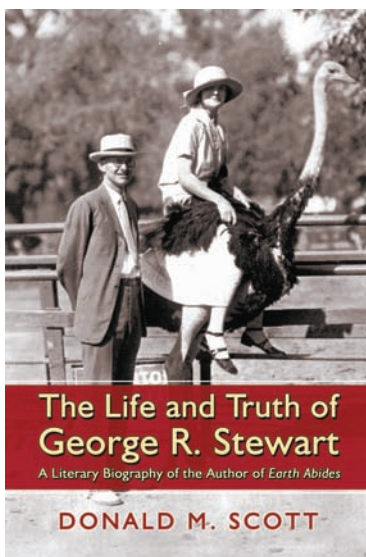
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REVIEW ESSAY

# “He Wanted to Tell Stories”: Geographers and the Biography of George R. Stewart

**The Life and Truth of George R. Stewart: A Literary Biography of the Author of *Earth Abides*.** Donald M. Scott. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012. 236 pp., acknowledgments, preface, figures, photographs, chief sources, notes, bibliography, index. \$55.00, paper (ISBN 978-0-7864-6799-0).

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biographer Donald M. Scott puts it, in an account that mentions a long handful of distinguished geographers starting with Daniel Coit Gilman (third president of the University of California), extending to the oft-consulted Carl O. Sauer, and including Thomas R. Vale, a Berkeley-trained geographer who became a fervent George Stewart advocate. Throughout his career, Stewart linked fields of scholarship—and geography most of all—to solid writing, well-braided interactions, a lilting conception of human ties to the land, and a vision of the results of the human presence, helpful and malfeasant, on Earth.

Split between home and my workplace are two shelf-feet of books by George R. Stewart. The school shelves hold *Storm*, *Sheep Rock*, *U.S. 40*, *Names on the Land*, and *Earth Abides* (of the last, there are actually three copies: a read-to-the-nub paperback, a nicer softcover, and a highly collectible hardback). At home are the two volumes of his North American highway study, *N.A. 1* (–North and –South), *Doctor’s Orals*, *American Names*, *Fire*, and that still-elegant mini-epic, *Ordeal by Hunger*, conveying in chillingly precise detail the gnarly Donner Party saga. When thinking about style and inspiration, I turn back to these often and happily, as all geographers should. For the attraction there is reason and precedent: George R. Stewart (1895–1980) was a phenomenon in his days as a professor of English at the University of California, Berkeley (UC Berkeley), and an outside influence as a consummate westerner. An inspiring literary mentor who savored field inquiry, he steered readers toward an appreciation of the larger truths of landscape. “[T]he first *ecological* novel—was *Storm*” (p. 6), is how Stewart’s

Talented authors are among the ranks of honorary geographers, fulfilling D. W. Meinig’s argument that writing for a broad audience is a first responsibility for those interested in humans and the physical earth. Stewart’s name should fit near the top of anyone’s list, likely alongside Bernard DeVoto and Wallace Stegner, Joan Didion, Jan Morris, John McPhee, J.B. Jackson, Gary Snyder, Ivan Doig, Dava Sobel, William Least-Heat Moon, and Rebecca Solnit. Form your own list, but it would be thin gruel were none of those names in evidence. Any practicing geographer worth the name ought to own books by writers good enough to merit a regular reread. Lamentably, as a group, geographers with scholarly aspirations might be said to write acceptably, but in the aggregate no better than that. There’s too much dross drowning our collective prose, and sometimes (as that self-appointed scourge, Richard Symanski, notes regularly) what appears in print is just bad. Part of the problem is that not enough geographers write (or read)

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books, preferring instead articles and short-form research with an attraction innate to wheatgrass or tar balls. They don't take the time to read and learn to write well. The fact is, as Peirce Lewis once pointed out, books last, and can be found and used, revisited and—if there's demand enough—revised and reprinted. In an age of iPads and Kindles, that might change, but I doubt it.

There are more nongeographers who, like Stewart, don the raiment of geographers than there are geographers who can claim any semblance of novelistic success, or even grapple for recognition beyond rank-and-file academia. In my admittedly partial list, it's no coincidence that all except McPhee have written fiction, and McPhee is himself the quintessential example of a now much-taught form of literary nonfiction. The need for narrative, with a plot satisfactorily delivering beginning, middle, and end, is something Scott treats respectfully in this biography. Life is the narrative; the plot is Stewart's legacy. Ties to geography are inescapable and place-rich: George Stewart hit his peak during a time when geography at Berkeley was vibrant, curious, and strongly field-oriented—in fact, that department had (and maybe has) no equal in seeding graduates to departments across the North American continent. In significant ways, Stewart's career is bound up with a high point for geography—and with a several-decade time span that welcomed innovation in fiction, lauded landscape as inspiration and source material, and recognized the connections of people to place. Think, if you will, “land and life.”

## Prolegomenon

George Stewart lit up a room with his storytelling. He consorted regularly with geographers, often colleagues at UC Berkeley, and he traveled widely to many a field site, for a dozen peak years, working a one-semester teaching schedule. By all accounts he enjoyed the company of knowledgeable companions, and at camps across the American West he would pick their brains for those details so dear to a writer. Stewart's sometime traveling cohorts were drawn from a near-legendary group: typically, his son, Jack, later a pivotal figure at the U.S. Geological Survey in Menlo Park; the famed paleontologist Charles Camp; geographer Carl Sauer; A. Starker Leopold, a professor of wildlife biology and the eldest son of Aldo Leopold; and geologist Parker Trask. For many of his ventures, Stewart had boon companions.

In Don Scott's account, Stewart's interests—as clear as mountain water—were environment and place, themes that a few decades later would be crystallized in the writing

of a subsequent generation of Berkeley-trained practitioners who reveled in the rich implications of sense of place as humanistic geography: Yi-Fu Tuan, David Lowenthal, Phil Wagner, Edmunds Bunkse, Anne MacPherson, Bret Wallach, and many others.

Stewart's life details make for an intriguing read readily absorbed, but a few facts can add here to the story. A fascination in Stewart's childhood was Robert Louis Stevenson and in particular maps in his books (p. 20). Stewart's father (George, Sr.) relocated the family from Pennsylvania to Southern California, aspiring (like many) to become an orange rancher, a cross-country journey that excited the interest of young George in place names, maps, and geography, “which would become a foundation of the books he later wrote” (pp. 32–33). Stewart's fellows in the Southland were at times notable: Howard Hawks, the future filmmaker, was at high school with Stewart in Pasadena, a city then at its peak of prestige and prominence. When Stewart went east to Princeton, F. Scott Fitzgerald was both a classmate and fellow athlete. A later cross-country hitchhiking trip was a formative influence, likewise a 3,836-mile bicycle trip north to south through Europe in the between-war years. A master's degree received at Berkeley (in part under historian Herbert Eugene Bolton) was rounded out with a PhD in English earned at Columbia during the years of World War I. In Stewart's search for a job, Ann Arbor answered first with an instructorship, and even as the most junior English Department faculty member. Stewart courted, and in 1924 would marry, Theodosia (Ted) Burton, daughter of Marion LeRoy Burton, then president of the University of Michigan. Recognizing that having a family required a more permanent post, Stewart went west to take a job at the University of California, Berkeley, weeks ahead of the fall semester in 1923, returning months later to marry Ted.

There is no mention in Scott's biography of whether, while at Michigan, the just-arrived Stewart came to know Carl Sauer, who that same summer of 1923 made his own migration to Berkeley after starting his career at the University of Michigan in 1915. Later, Stewart and Sauer would be colleagues and friends (the memoranda abound in Campus Archives), and their 1923 arrival came during quite the year: Stewart alighted at Berkeley just before the vast 1923 Berkeley Hills fire that burned 600 homes on the north side of the campus, leaving fully a quarter of the University's staff and faculty homeless.

It should be no surprise that Stewart blended well with the University of California in the 1920s. Rightly, Scott identifies Stewart as a significant figure in what he describes as

the “nature-centered” (p. 67) California Enlightenment, its roots in “the wilderness epiphanies of Joseph LeConte and John Muir and the other members of the 1870 Yosemite University Excursion Party” (p. 68). After the turn of the century, National Park Service founder Stephen Mather was added to that club, and with creation of the Park Service in 1916, he brought fellow Berkeley alumni George Melendez Wright and Horace Albright under his sway: “Mather believed that academia—specifically, the University of California, with its emphasis on the importance of wild places—should be one of the foundations of the [National Park] Service. So he built his staff in large part from UC professors, students, and graduates” (p. 68). As Scott sums up a decisive chapter that ends with Stewart’s departure in 1923 for Berkeley, “Stewart would fit in very well, and in the years to come he would add considerably to the California Enlightenment” (p. 68). That term, if a coinage original to biographer Scott, is a good one for the spirit of the time.

Stewart swiftly established his stamp on Berkeley scholarship, proof positive of a wise comment made later by poet and farmer Wendell Berry that “separation of art and science is impossible” (p. 74). An early article by Stewart on “Color in Science and Poetry” was published in *Scientific Monthly* (1930), marking a novel venture for an English professor into an august scientific journal. There Stewart noted an utter impoverishment, in terms of a vocabulary for color description, in Old and Middle English. Not until the seventeenth century did science begin producing new words for color; before that, poets “apparently didn’t understand the difference between colors like blue and violet” (p. 75). Soon after arrival, he published several scholarly books little remembered now, although he was a teacher of recognized talent, and in 1930 he took his growing family on a first sabbatical to France and England. The Berkeley English Department was providing an acceptable home, until a change of leadership brought ominous reversals.

Stewart found consideration of his promotion case at Berkeley delayed during the Depression years by an intolerant chair of the English Department, which led him to decide that, “If he couldn’t expect a decent income from his professorship, he would make money from writing. He would write fiction that would interest the general public, books that would sell” (p. 80). His first fictional effort, *East of the Giants* (1939), written from a woman’s point of view, sold well and won the Commonwealth Club’s Gold Medal, no mean feat then or in any day. *Ordeal By Hunger* in 1936 had earned a Silver Medal in the Club’s category for “scholarship” as opposed to fiction, although “*Ordeal* is

based in . . . Stewart’s realization that it was ignorance of place that brought on disaster” (p. 82). Those early works were only a start for the writer-teacher, finally promoted in 1937, but clearly hitting full stride in terms of productivity and in his taste for public acclaim.

## Fiction

In short order, *Storm* (1941), *Fire* (1948), *Earth Abides* (1948), and *Sheep Rock* (1951) would be bestsellers (as would the 1945 *Names on the Land*). Scott suggests that each of the novels adds something truly distinctive about the American scene. In *Storm*, the protagonist is a catastrophic storm, named “Maria,” by a junior weatherman in the San Francisco Weather Bureau office. History—and, indeed, The Weather Channel—owe Stewart a sizable debt for popularizing the naming of major storms (p. 95). Certainly *Storm* offered drama, including the recurring figure of the junior meteorologist who carefully enters barometric pressures delivered to the Weather Bureau office by telegraph and radio, telephone, and teletype, while he awaits arrival of the chief meteorologist who will study the numbers, query a few anomalies, and then free-hand sketch in the isobars, yet another example of Stewart’s taste for geographical suspense and intricate plotting. (He claimed the hardest part of writing the book was creating the sequence of weather maps.) Although Monmonier (1999) is entirely right in pointing out in *Air Apparent* that television meteorology deserves credit for putting maps inescapably in front of the U.S. public, Stewart and his publisher were decades ahead of the curve: The endpapers at the start of *Storm* were two double-page spreads: “First Day” is a weather map showing a developing but distant low; the back endpapers are an isobaric map of the Seventh Day, as Maria reaches the peak of its (her) destructive power in a massive polar outbreak gracefully elongated from Sitka to San Diego. The novelist and utopian Callenbach (2003, vii) writes in his Foreword to a reprint edition of *Storm*, “When it first appeared in 1941, *Storm* gave readers a frisson similar to what we much later felt on seeing the first photo of Earth from space: a breathless realization that the planet was a working, living whole. *Storm*’s stunning effect came from its being a synoptic novel, synoptic as a weather map is, displaying what is happening all over the world at once.” And the book was a hit: A Book of the Month Club selection, abridged for the Boy Scouts of America, *Storm* was republished under the Modern Library imprint, selling altogether over a million copies by the 1970s.

A geographer by inclination if not a diplomate, Stewart can be added to the generations of voyagers and voyeurs

from Antoine de Saint-Exupéry to Denis Cosgrove who prized an aerial view of below from above. The prose descriptions of happenings on Earth in what David Blumentstock once called “The Ocean of Air” that make up *Storm*’s beginning and concluding pages remain riveting today. Other writing by Stewart was no less detailed and adept. His famed colleague, Josephine Miles, the first woman ever named University Professor at Berkeley, and also the university’s first woman tenured in English, wrote in a review that “*Fire* is a new sort of novel, as I mull it over, because far more than *Storm*, it materializes *dramatis personae* out of the powers of nature” (pp. 116–17).

Two novels are especially meaningful to geographers and the reading public: *Earth Abides*, published in 1949 when Stewart was fifty-three, and *Sheep Rock*, from a few years later. Each was distinctive; geographers tend to enjoy *Earth Abides*, not least because Ish, the protagonist who survives a massive epidemic that kills off all but a few bands of roving humans, dwells on the fugitive nature of knowledge: “Change the individuals, and the whole situation changes. Change even one individual! In the place of Em, if we had had—well, say, Dotty Lamour? Or, instead of George, one of those high-powered minds that he remembered from his University years—Professor Sauer, perhaps! Again, the situation would change” (*Earth Abides*, 153; discussed in Scott, p. 121). Pushing toward its seventh decade, *Earth Abides* has never gone out of print; writers from Kim Stanley Robinson to Cormac McCarthy were influenced by the dilemmas of apocalypse; the composer Philip Aaberg recorded a musical tribute that he titled *Earth Abides*, readily available for download; and Stephen King says his own book, *The Stand*, was inspired by Stewart. *Sheep Rock*, a novel of a Quest and published just two years after *Earth Abides*, takes on less disastrous themes, set in the Black Rock country of northwestern Nevada (about which, I will admit, Peter Goin and I co-authored a well-received book [Goin and Starrs 2005]). Stewart renamed a crucial location, Black Rock Point, to Sheep Rock, but details were so meticulously captured in his novel that photographs in our book, published more than 50 years later, include a number of sites described in Stewart’s evocative prose. And as Scott writes, “Sauer’s idea that time is geography’s fourth dimension would have deep influence on Stewart when he was writing *Sheep Rock*. Sauer’s belief that you needed to work across disciplines was shared by Starker [Leopold], Parker [Trask], and the others” (p. 134). *Earth Abides* is widely regarded as the progenitor of the after-the-fall novel, and there is an all-fingers-and-toes count (at least) of films, from *The Road* to *World War Z* to *Waterworld* to *Children of Men* to *Twelve Monkeys* to *The Road Warrior*

to *The Book of Eli* and *A Boy and His Dog* that owe a debt to *Earth Abides*. And certainly, in Margaret Atwood’s stunning trilogy *Oryx and Crake*, *The Year of the Flood*, and *MaddAddam*, at core are elements of *Earth Abides*.

## Nonfiction

Whereas Scott, as a biographer and a Stewart family friend, is much taken with Stewart’s fiction, geographers are often as impressed—or more—by his nonfiction, still mesmerizing. As Scott describes some of the place-names research, “George R. Stewart . . . had developed a style almost biblical in cadence and rhythm. It would help define his later novels” (p. 104). The opening page-plus of *Names on the Land* is so powerful that I’ll often read it, with full oratorical pomp, to an unwary introductory human geography class. Themes broached in those 400 words include diversity, race, history, barriers of terrain or cultural violence, folklore, and physical features: a primer in geography, whether old-time or modern-day. Experts in modern-day toponymy (or onomastics or place-name studies) are sometimes linguists, etymologists, folklorists, fans of nomenclature or forensic history, but Stewart’s interest was unmistakably stories behind the names. If some place names give offense, and need to be banished from use or even elided from maps (otherwise our living official testaments to place precision), Stewart asks that the history behind even noxious names be retained in memory, as “items in the national cultural landscape,” as Monmonier (2006, 6) has termed them. A founding member of the American Name Society (along with H. L. Mencken and Frederic Cassidy), Stewart was a contributor to the inaugural issue of the journal *Names*, a supporter of place-name studies throughout his career, and a firm believer that toponyms told worthy tales. He drew effectively on pioneering studies by often-anonymous contributors to WPA [Works Progress Administration] volumes, many of whose manuscripts survive only as carbon copies, cataloging local names and their origins. Certainly the profusion of place-name volumes since 1940, and work by anthropologists and ethnographers from Franz Boas to Keith Basso owe much to Stewart’s popularizing push. It is also significant, though, that place names offer a safe haven in the later chapters of scholarly life, where the collection of names and dialects and words can be controlled with organization and persistence, and it was with dutiful care that Stewart tended those place-name files to the end of his days.

Although place-name studies were a favored theme, and Stewart claimed *Names on the Land* was the golden child among his books, his “road” writings have as deep

a following. The geographical polymath J. B. Jackson emphasized “the road” as a definitive force in U.S. culture—urban, rural, connective—and Jay Vance, at Berkeley, was a firm believer in transportation as a key influence on the U.S. urban and mercantile developmental model. Vale and Vale (1983) took Stewart’s *U.S. 40*, rephotographed illustrations, placing old and new alongside for ready comparison, and offered a follow-up study laced with observations new and time-tested. Later, much in the spirit of Stewart’s work, Vale and Vale (1990) published *Western Images, Western Landscapes: Travels Along U.S. 89*. There are others: *Blue Highways* by William Least-Heat Moon, Karl Raitz’s edited work on *The National Road*, and Arthur Krim’s prize-winning *Route 66: Iconography of the American Highway*, which each transmit the spirit of Stewart’s *U.S. 40*. Or equally, there is his literally weighty two-book study of North American Highway 1: *N.A. 1–North* and *N.A. 1–South*, which between them run from the Canadian border to the Arctic Circle in Alaska, and from the Mexican border to Panama. Not the least elegant part of these three “road” volumes are maps, crafted by Harvard’s Erwin Raisz in the mid- to late 1950s, at the peak of his cartographic vim. I’ll admit, as Scott notes others will at times confess, that the place-by-place exposition in these books lacks the flair of a novel. Likely part of the problem are varying talents, as for all his sense of possibility in singling out interesting sites, Stewart’s prose was more imaginative than his indifferent eye for photography.

Nonetheless, publishing at the pace of a new book every two years, with plenty of awards and good sales, Stewart’s writing brought him financial success, and he moved the family to a house they custom built adjoining Codornices Park less than a half-mile north of the Berkeley campus (p. 123). For years, at that location and earlier ones, Stewart and his wife Ted hosted a wealth of visitors: often English Department colleague James D. Hart (Director of The Bancroft Library from 1969–1990), the Stegner family (Wallace Stegner was a professor and author at Stanford University and their families and children fast friends), the poet Robert Frost, the historian Bruce Catton, poet Carl Sandburg, and novelist C. S. Forester.

If financial times in the 1950s were good, though, renewed unrest eddied through the campus as tension mounted over politics, much aided in the later 1950s, through the 1960s, and into the early 1970s by an FBI run amok under J. Edgar Hoover. As recently released documents reveal, attacks on the campus and its personnel were encouraged by none other than an education-hating FBI shill, one “Ronald R. Reagan” (Rosenfeld 2012). For nearly two decades the FBI sought out

Berkeley faculty, staff, and senior scientists who might under any conceivable pretense be labeled subversive. In the 1950s, red-baiting did not fit at all comfortably with Stewart’s broadly liberal politics, and certainly not those of his wife, Ted. Stewart published a gripping account of the loyalty oath controversy at Berkeley in the 1950s, and strongly objected to the dismissal of faculty (nearly all later rehired) for refusal to sign the “oath.” As Stewart aged into his seventies, though, he was dismayed by the collapse of campus civility and less than sanguine about the ferocity of protesters. Especially horrifying were attempts (more than one) to set afire the Reading Room at the campus library, incidents particularly troubling to many on the Berkeley faculty, including the geographer Clarence Glacken, who was thrown into a deep depression that effectively ended his career.

Scott’s biography is not limited to an account of what Stewart did when, with some speculation as to why and how. Instead it is a fully formed exploration of a life of writing and travel and field study that spooled from a supremely inquisitive mind and a supportive family (Stewart’s wife Ted, son Jack, and daughter Jill appear often). It was not a goal of Stewart’s to write labored academic prose; he wanted to tell stories, exploring names on the land and the people who placed them. Honoring that principle and the man himself, Scott gives us an effective, appropriately documented, and always enthusiastic biography of George R. Stewart, “the man who named the storms.” In a few places the book lags; no account is perfect, and this is Scott’s own labor of love, long in the emerging, and published now by McFarland, which did a suitable job with photographs and production, but asks a pretty penny for anyone who might want to purchase a copy. That is not the author’s fault, and since the book went into print in 2012, readers have responded with enthusiasm. In part, that is thanks to the labors of Scott in this fine book. What else it reflects is the devotion of those who knew, or know of, Stewart and what he represents, which should certainly include geographers who remember the person and a vaunted career. Surely, there should be more like him.

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