Whistlepunks & Geoducks: Oral Histories from the Pacific Northwest by Ron Strickland (review)

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Eckstein's lack of sufficient revision shows especially in his notes and bibliography. Except in his brief Foreword and one note, he relies mostly on outdated secondary sources. Obviously, *The Marginal Man as Novelist* should have been more thoroughly revised. As it now stands, it is a good book. With more thorough revision and careful editing, it could have been much better.

RICHARD TUERK *East Texas State University*

Whistlepunks & Geoducks: Oral Histories from the Pacific Northwest. By Ron Strickland. (New York: Paragon House, 1990. 358 pages, $24.95.)

Strickland has been the author of several previous books, this being his second devoted to the Pacific Northwest using the technique of oral interviews. His earlier book was entitled *River Pigs and Cayuses.*

Whether this book is history or literature will be left for the reader to decide. The author has used the time-tested technique of travelling throughout various parts of the region with a tape recorder at his side, taking down the reminiscences and recollections of a wide variety of Pacific Northwesterners from tough oldtimers to contemporary New Agers, including cowboys and wheat farmers, fishermen and loggers, Indians and city folk, saloonkeepers and prohibition agents, and naturally, whistlepunks and geoduck hunters. And what are whistlepunks and geoducks? Well, the former are logging crewmen who, with a jerkline, signal the steam donkey engineer to indicate how the machine's cables should be deployed, and a "gooeyduck" is a large bivalve (*Hiatellidae*) averaging two or three pounds and sometimes going as high as sixteen pounds, the meat of which is much prized for chowders along the Northwest coast.

The arrangement of this book is straightforward. Each oral interview is assigned a chapter in the text, resulting in a total of fifty chapters. With a few paragraphs of explanation by the author, and an occasional interspersed paragraph, for the most part, each chapter is a literal transcription of the oral interview, taken directly from the tape. But what about the oral history technique? Oscar Handlin, the Harvard Professor of History, in his book *Truth in History*, calls oral history "the unverified ramblings of an eighty-year-old sharecropper, edited and arranged by unspecified standards." While the author's collection is not all eighty-year-old sharecroppers, many of his transcriptions are certainly rambling, and for the most part, unedited.

But this is tending to critique the book as history. What of it as literature? One certainly cannot say that it is great writing, or classic prose, or singing poetry. Bluntly speaking, it was not intended as any of these. The author has assembled the most interesting stories in a broad and exciting collection of Washington folklife that captures the independent and idiosyncratic spirit of

the people of the great Northwest, telling the tales of an America that is rapidly vanishing. These are stories of actual experiences that should be read for the pure pleasure they transmit, each in its own earthy, honest way.

The creative writer can find much background material in a book of this kind. Each chapter tells of an unique character, with numerous details to show the background and the environment that shaped that particular character. And for the non-writer, the stories are a good read for a rainy evening by the fire, or, for that matter, during that long wait in one of today's numerous traffic jams.

GEORGE H. TWENEY *Seattle, Washington*

The Stars, The Snow, The Fire. By John Haines (Saint Paul: Graywolf Press, 1989. 182 pages, $17.95.)

This dreamy memoir recollects 25 years of homesteading in the Alaskan wilderness. It also imagines and attempts to recover a primordial way of life, an "intenser being." This lost origin haunts Haines's years in Alaska, and makes wilderness life a waking dream of a primal time. Solitude is Haines's trail to this dreamtime, and it is his solitude that both limits and enables the vision of this book.

The other people in this memoir are often nameless, and they appear in stories which are themselves only half-known and which advance in conjectures. These others also rarely speak. Although a very few men with names appear repeatedly, and speak relatively often, they are essentially types of the past: old trappers, storytellers, survivors. Haines calls them "useful ghosts." The solitude of this wilderness is also, as Haines says, "a solitude without women." Haines's "young wife" arrives on page 13; on page 14, "wilderness and marriage . . . come to their parting." A second wife appears a few pages later. She does not speak in the book.

The real presences are the seasons, the water, and especially the animals. If the people are bloodless ghosts, the animals run with blood. Haines makes a living by trapping, and we witness or hear of the killing of ermine, lynx, marten, moose, beaver, coyote, rabbit, bear. We learn, unforgettably, how it feels to break the neck of a fox found alive in a trap, and how wire does its fatal work.

Haines's world is a book of wingprints, stripped bark, snowmark, tracks, of voices in the shadowy dusk. It is this silent world of lost languages that Haines retrieves from the Alaskan wilderness. Storytelling itself is understood as a renewal of "a world abundant with things that walked and flew and swam and seemed possessed of understanding . . . "

The absence of all but ghosts and animals from this solitude constricts the