



## H. L. Davis

**H**AROLD LENOIR DAVIS'S career as a writer is marked by a series of dichotomies, both as an artist and as an interpreter of the West. He was a maverick who stayed well clear of the literary cliques and trends of his time, yet he was deeply conscious of, and drew heavily upon, the literary tradition. He was very aware of his heritage in the West, and drew heavily upon it, yet he insisted that the history of the West was not separate or special but part of human history and tied closely to what had happened at other places in other times. Throughout his fiction his subject is the comedy and underlying pathos of the human condition, and humanity's astonishing capacity for foolishness and evil, as well as its courage, steadfastness, and love; and yet his most vividly lyrical writing is reserved for the western landscape. Finally, although both his poetry and his prose received high critical praise, including Poetry magazine's Levinson Prize, the Harper Novel Prize, and the Pulitzer Prize, his work was neglected by scholars and critics until only recently.

Davis was born at Rone's Mill, Oregon, in 1894, although he later gave a variety of dates for his birth, and even claimed a variety of other birthplaces around Roseburg, Oregon.<sup>1</sup> His father was a schoolteacher who also trained horses and was known for his marksmanship, despite the handicap of having lost a leg in childhood. Harold was interested in horses throughout his life, owning his own whenever possible, and his knowledge of the firearms used in the American West was encyclopedic.

Davis's grandparents on both sides had emigrated to Oregon from Tennessee in the 1850s and 60s, and he had an abiding interest in and detailed knowledge of that period in the history of the West, writing about it both in his poetry and his fiction. His best work, however, grew out of his own childhood and adolescent memories of Oregon.

Davis's career as a writer began with poetry. While he was still serving a three-month stint in the army, in the fall of 1918, Davis sent eleven poems, collectively called "Primapara," to Harriet' Monroe, who published them with enthusiasm in the April 1919 issue of *Poetry*. For the next decade Davis published only poetry, attracting favorable notice from Carl Sandburg, Robinson Jeffers, and other poets and critics associated with *Poetry*.<sup>2</sup> Yet despite this promising beginning, Davis never fully found his voice as a poet. His presentation of the western landscape was vivid, often lyrically beautiful, but he peopled that landscape with figures that were vague, indirect,

as if they spoke always with averted faces. Robinson Jeffers called it reticence, but could not explain it.<sup>3</sup>

By 1928 Davis was beginning to experiment with new poetic forms, but he was also beginning, with encouragement from H. L. Mencken, to experiment with short prose pieces. He also married Marion Lay and made the decision to become a full-time writer. The shift to prose was made quickly and successfully, and Davis published no more poetry after 1933, with the exception of a volume of selected poems, *Proud Riders*, in 1942. All but a very few of the poems in this volume had been published in the 1920s, and so the collection did not represent a significant addition to Davis's poetic works. In 1978, Ahsahta Press published a selection of Davis's poems, including some found among his papers and never before printed. A few of these, notably "Last Spring" and "Clearing Old Stones," show a directness and mastery of tone not often achieved in the earlier work, suggesting that had he continued to write poetry in his later years, Davis might have become a major poet of the American West. Lacking that later emphasis, however, his work as a western poet can be more objectively assessed as significant but not a major achievement.

Aside from a few reviews, critical essays, and short occasional pieces in the *Rocky Mountain Herald*, Davis's short prose writings divide fairly easily into sketches, short stories, and regional essays. The first short story published under Davis's name was "Old Man Isbell's Wife," which appeared in the February 1929 *American Mercury*. There is some evidence, however, that two stories published in *Adventure* in 1928 under James Stevens's name may have been written by Davis.<sup>4</sup>

While the sketches may contain fictionalized elements, they do not have fully developed story lines, or well-rounded characterization. Generally they deal with an individual character, a place or a region, or a particular community, with a strong element of history or nostalgia.

The quality of Davis's short stories and sketches is uneven. Some are well-crafted works that deserve to survive and undoubtedly will; others are obviously formula potboilers written for sale to the relatively high-paying slick magazines such as *Collier's* and *Saturday Evening Post*. Of those that deserve to be remembered and read, perhaps the best stories are "Old Man Isbell's Wife," "Shiloh's Waters," "Open Winter," "The Homestead Orchard," and "Stubborn Spearmen," all collected in *Team Bells Woke Me and Other Stories*. The best of Davis's sketches, including "A Town in Eastern Oregon," also appear in that volume.

In the short stories and sketches Davis began the development of the themes and techniques that he was to use in the novels that constitute his most important literary production. "Old Man Isbell's Wife" is a remarkably polished "first" short story, with a complex use of point of view techniques

in which the story of a senile old man is seen, sympathetically, through the eyes of a boy. This pairing of a boy and an old man occurs again in "Open Winter," and to an extent in "Homestead Orchard," both initiation stories, and years later was developed most fully in Davis's next to last novel, *Winds of Morning*.

Perhaps more important to the development of Davis's work, in the short stories and sketches he evolved the colorful, ironic, sometimes savage humor, very much in the straight-faced western tradition, that made it possible for him to set sharply drawn, clearly developed characters against the lyrical descriptions of the western landscape. With this wry, often boisterous humor as a mode of presenting his characters, Davis went beyond the reticent indirection that weakened his poetry.

Davis's first novel, *Honey in the Horn* (1935), is a lively picaresque journey through the Oregon of the turn of the century, but it is also an initiation story about the progress of an adolescent boy becoming a man as he moves from isolated alienation to a capacity not only for the love of a woman, but also for the acceptance of the human condition, with all its guilt as well as its virtues.

The humorous irreverence for Oregon society and culture already displayed in such short prose works as "A Town in Eastern Oregon" and "Back to the Land—Oregon, 1907" had already earned him considerable local resentment in his home state, and when *Honey in the Horn* again displayed debunking of the more romantic western myths, the outcry in Oregon was loud. As emotions subsided, and the novel was read more perceptively, the essential human sympathy and the universality of the theme were more fully appreciated.

*Harp of a Thousand Strings* (1947) was the second of Davis's novels to be published, although an early manuscript version of *Beulah Land* predated *Harp*. The twelve-year hiatus between publication of *Honey in the Horn*, with the acclaim accompanying the Harper Novel Prize and the Pulitzer Prize, and the publication of *Harp*, was the result of a dispute between Davis and his publisher, Harper, not the result of any diminution of creative activity on Davis's part. Once contractual questions were settled and Davis shifted to William Morrow as his publisher, four novels and two volumes of collected short prose appeared in the next twelve years, and Davis was at work on another novel when he died in 1960.

*Harp* is quite different structurally from *Honey in the Horn*. Rather than the picaresque series of adventures found in *Honey*, *Beulah Land*, and *Winds of Morning*, *Harp* presents a carefully—even self-consciously—structured series of triads based on the lives and adventures of a French revolutionary, a French noblewoman, and three Americans. To maintain the symmetry of the triads of love, vengeance, and ambition presented in the Frenchman's

story, and in the stories of the three Americans (drawn from Aristotle's triad of vice, imperfect self-control, and brutishness, and from Dante's similar three of incontinence, malice, and brutishness), Davis has to rely very heavily on dramatic coincidence. As a result, what purports to be an historical novel finally has to be read as an elaborate fable.

In beginning his story in France and ending it on the prairie frontier in Oklahoma, however, Davis is making an important point about literature of the American West. He is showing that what has happened and is happening in the West is an integral part of the whole history of humanity. The western experience is a part of the total human experience, a unity that Davis felt had not always been presented by writers of the West: "It is becoming clear . . . that the early writers [of the West] . . . must have missed something about it, since they failed to establish any unity between it and the world out of which they wrote."<sup>5</sup> What Davis felt they missed he expressed in a review of Robinson Jeffers's *The Women at Point Sur*: "Stories have actually neither beginning nor end. Every story is like a river; it began flowing with the beginning of the world, and it will not cease till the world comes to an end."<sup>6</sup> The stories in *Harp*, then, become stories in the American West, but they remain connected with the rest of the world, illustrating Davis's point that the West is a region neither isolated nor mythical, but rather a part of the whole of human history.

Again in *Beulah Land* (1949) Davis gives us a western story that begins in the East, although still it is the universal human experience that is important rather than the setting. It is a story about love, what it can cost and what it can mean. The Beulah Land that the central characters, Ruhama and Askwani, are seeking is not a physical place so much as it is "a place somewhere in which people could love without being shamed or frightened or exterminated for it. There must be such a place; it must be ahead, somewhere beyond the river, beyond the settlements. . . ."<sup>7</sup>

Davis returns in *Beulah Land* to the journey motif that he used in *Honey in the Horn*, but like *Harp of a Thousand Strings*, *Beulah Land* is an "historical" novel covering most of the span of the nineteenth century and using major historical events as a framework for its plot: the removal of the Cherokees from Georgia, the Civil War as it was fought in the Indian Territory. This framework of time and place, however, remains only a concrete illustration of the common human condition in all times and places.

Davis's fourth novel, *Winds of Morning* (1952), was perhaps his most successful both artistically and commercially. In it he returns to his own time and place—Oregon in the 1920s—and to the journey motif. Developing upon a pattern he used successfully in one of his best short stories, "Open Winter," Davis presents the story of a late adolescent boy and an old man travelling through the back country of Oregon in early spring. It is a

picaresque adventure, a murder mystery, a love story, an initiation story, and a Christian fable of sacrifice and redemption, all rolled skillfully together. In a reversal Davis had experimented with in "Open Winter," the boy is the jaded, worldly wise, cynical one, and the old man is the Adamic innocent who, through a spiritual crucifixion, redeems the sin of a failure of love in his youth. It is a western story in that the old man was an original settler in the region and presents the consequences of the dreams and expectations of the pioneers who saw the West as a new Eden, only to learn that they had brought Satan there with them. The boy, in turn, represents the disillusioned later generations who saw the shattered dreams and unrealistic expectations of the early settlers as romantic mistakes that they would not repeat.

Each moves away from his own extreme position and learns from the other. The old settler accepts and learns to live with not only his own guilt but also the guilt of others. He acknowledges the imperfections of his Eden and finds a way to live with them. The boy, on the other hand, breaks out of his lonely cynicism in the discovery of the necessity for love and hope, even in a world that includes evil.

When *Honey in the Horn* was published, much of the comment of its reviewers focused on the novel's boisterous humor and colorful western vernacular. Some criticized these qualities and others praised them superciliously.<sup>8</sup> These characteristics were much less in evidence in *Harp of a Thousand Strings* and *Beulah Land*, although they did appear briefly from time to time. They reappear in full force in *Winds of Morning*, and this time the critics did not find them objectionable. Indeed, they add a special flavor and liveliness that Davis had previously achieved only in *Honey in the Horn* and some of his short prose. These ingredients—the boisterous but straight-faced humor in the western tradition, the colorful vernacular, and the vividly beautiful landscape of Oregon in the early twentieth century—all are present in Davis's most successful prose. It seems clear that he was at his best when he drew most directly on his own place and time. Away from those immediate roots he was a skilled writer; drawing directly upon them, he was a master of his art.

Davis's last published novel, *The Distant Music* (1957), again is set in Oregon, but it differs in almost every other way from his four previous novels. Rather than moving an individual consciousness through the experience of a journey, as he did in his earlier works, in this novel Davis takes a place, a single homestead in Oregon, as the center, and shows us how being tied to that place affects three generations of the family that owns it.

This is a somber novel that presents the ownership of the land as a kind of bondage that can limit and finally destroy the lives of the settlers and their descendants. Once they have become fixed in a place and are no

longer moving westward, no longer aspiring to a new land, these people begin, as Walter Van Tilburg Clark observed in his review of the novel, to “entertain such homemade illusions as Progress, Betterment, and Civic Virtue.”<sup>9</sup> As Clark points out, this novel is the further, deeper development of the themes Davis first began to explore in 1930 in “A Town in Eastern Oregon,” an unflattering sketch of The Dalles.

During the 1950s Davis wrote a series of eleven regional essays published in *Holiday* magazine. Nine of those were soon collected, with a preface and the title fable, into a volume, *Kettle of Fire* (1959). The essays are a fine evocation of the land and rural people of the Pacific Northwest, particularly Oregon. In “Kettle of Fire,” the story for which the volume is named, Davis created, late in his career, an outright fable using archetypal patterns and Swiftian irony with little pretense of realism.

Davis’s first short story, “Old Man Isbell’s Wife,” published in 1929, was about a man who had become an absurd figure in his old age, but who deserved respect and credit for what he had been and done in the early days of western settlement. Davis’s last published short story, thirty years later, presents a similar theme. It offers strong Promethean and Oedipal overtones, and an openly symbolic journey through the foibles of humanity—all told to a young boy by a foolish old man who is remembering them from his youth. First and last, Davis’s fiction presented the western experience as a continuation of the human experience in all times, with all its foolishness, cowardice, and shortsightedness, and all its courage and selflessness and love. Throughout his career Davis found many effective ways to express his vision of the West, but his basic themes remained the same.

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## Notes

1. A somewhat fuller outline of the biographical facts of Davis's life, and the evidence upon which they were established, is presented in Paul T. Bryant, *H. L. Davis*, Twayne's United States Authors Series (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1978), pp. 13–27.
2. Harriet Monroe, *A Poet's Life: Seventy Years in a Changing World* (New York: Macmillan, 1938), p. 423; Warren L. Glare, "Poets, Parasites, and Pismires," *Status Rerum*, by James Stevens and H. L. Davis, *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 61 (1970): 22–23.
3. *The Selected Letters of Robinson Jeffers*, ed. Ann N. Ridgeway (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1968), p. 177.
4. This evidence is discussed briefly in Bryant, *H. L. Davis*, pp. 20, 163.
5. Davis, "Preface: A Look Around," *Kettle of Fire* (New York: William Morrow, 1959), p. 17.
6. *Poetry* 31 (1928):277.
7. *Beulah Land* (New York: William Morrow, 1949), p. 189.
8. See, as an excellent example of this, Mary McCarthy, "Tall Timber," *The Nation* 141 (1935): 248–9.
9. "The Call of the Far Country," *New York Times Book Review*, February 3, 1957, pp. 5, 29.

## Selected Bibliography

### Primary Sources

#### 1. Papers and manuscripts

By far the most significant collection of Davis's letters, journals, and manuscripts is in the Humanities Research Library at the University of Texas in Austin. Others are at the University of Oregon Library in Eugene, the Tennessee State Library Archives, the Joseph Regenstein Library at the University of Chicago, the Douglas County Museum in Roseburg, Oregon, and the Library of the University of Washington in Seattle.

#### 2. Novels

*Honey in the Horn*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1935.

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#### 3. Collections

*Proud Riders and Other Poems*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1942.

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———. *H. L. Davis*. Twayne's United States Authors Series. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1978. The only book-length treatment of Davis's work, including critical chapters on all novels and critical analysis of some poems and prose works; bibliography.

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Kohler, Dayton. "H. L. Davis: Writer in the West." *College English* 14 (December 1952): 133–40. First major critical article on Davis; not yet superseded.

Lauber, John. "A Western Classic: H. L. Davis's *Honey in the Horn*." *The Western Humanities Review* 16 (Winter 1962): 85–86. First to compare Clay Calvert with Huck Finn.