

What was the genesis for this book?

As I say in the introduction, South Dakota has been in my thoughts, on and off, ever since I first set foot in the state in 1992, and I am always conspiring to find ways to return. During my many visits to the state over the years I always regretted that I didn't make the opportunity to drive through Harrison, the small town in Douglas County that was my namesake. I had no expectations of the place other than satisfying an egotistical whim arising from the coincidence of our names. As far as I knew, no relatives of mine lived there, or, for that matter, anywhere else in the US.

In 2010, after an absence from the US of more than six years, my longest stretch, I was casting my eye over the map of South Dakota in a nostalgic mood, fearing that without realizing it I had made my last trip, when I was suddenly reminded of my itch to visit Harrison. I looked up the town's census statistics and noticed that the majority of Harrison's handful of citizens—51 in 2000—were over sixty-five. No doubt many small Midwest towns with dwindling populations were in the same position, but this unremarkable fact suddenly made Harrison look irresistible to me. Here, I thought, was a sort of laboratory of old age, where elderly people were dealing with their longevity in a small, more or less isolated community, with nothing to rely on but their own resources, material and spiritual. I had just reached the age of sixty-five myself, and old age, or at least preparing for it, had become a subject of great, if melancholy interest to me.

I decided there and then that I would find a way of making another trip to South Dakota, which would give me the chance to write about certain classic topics—Mount Rushmore, the Badlands, Deadwood and so on—but would also enable me to explore Harrison at last.

What is it about South Dakota that so interests you?

It may well be unjust, but the fact is that when I mention my interest in South Dakota to both Brits and Americans alike they are puzzled. Many of them, including Americans, are hard pressed to place it on the map, and few of them can name a single feature of the state. Before 1992 I was no less ignorant, but the moment I crossed the Missouri river at Chamberlain, I knew that I was in a familiar and magical landscape: the topography of my childhood.

Though no atlas of the period showed it, the suburban back yards of most British houses in the 1950s were an annex of the American Wild West. Herds of numberless buffalo roamed across our lawns and our herbaceous borders bristled with Indians, while we kids, authentically costumed in cowboy hats and sheriff's badges, cheerfully massacred each other with our six guns, only to rise from our spectacular deaths at tea time and gallop away to watch the Long Ranger on our newfangled black and white televisions.

Americans probably do not realize how deeply the imaginations of British children of my generation were colored by the mythology of the Wild West. I was no exception. When I drove across the Great Plains for the first time I was returned to the adventures of my childhood, but at the same time I felt I had found a literary subject, for which I was unexpectedly well prepared. I became interested in, and for a while positively obsessed with the history of South Dakota during the second half of the 19th century—the wars with the Sioux, the gold rush of 1876, the westward march of immigrant pioneers (such as the “Hollanders” who founded Harrison); in other words, I acquired an adult version of my childhood legends. I was drawn back again and again to write about the heritage bequeathed by this heroic era, a heritage that was not

always honorably exploited by the tourist industry. And this too became a topic of great interest to me.

Nowadays my interest in South Dakota is self-generating: the more I know about it the more I want to discover. And, despite its epic capacity for boring the driver, I never tire of the landscape; the interminable roads that march across the empty plains continue to draw me towards the infinite West.

How would you describe your book?

I would describe my book as an irreverent homage to South Dakota, if such a thing can exist. I have been visiting the state two decades, and during that time the place has roused mixed feelings in me, but my desire to return has never waned.

Perhaps perversely, I would also describe it as a travel book from which, as far as possible, the travel has been taken out. Traveling round the state was necessarily a matter of driving, mostly on blacktop roads that did not yield much in the way of adventure. However, travel in itself was not the purpose of my journey; I embarked on an itinerary that took me to certain places that had become essential to my understanding of South Dakota, and they became the subjects of the essays that now make up the contents of the book.

Of these six subjects, four are places that attract tourists, among whom I am content to number myself: the Badlands, Mount Rushmore, Deadwood and the site of the Wounded Knee massacre.

In the case of the Badlands, I was partly concerned to meet what I regarded as an impossible challenge: to describe in words what was so extraordinary as to be essentially indescribable. It seemed to me that the camera, not the pen, was the natural instrument for describing landscape like deserts and icecaps, landscapes on which human activity had left next to no mark, but, alas, I was not equipped in any sense as a photographer. I had to do my best with what skills I possessed. It is for readers to judge the results, but I don't regret persevering with my challenge.

As for the other three destinations in this group, I had formed decided opinions about them over the years. In particular, I was interested to investigate how the tourist industry presents these sites to its visitors. For example, Mount Rushmore, lays claim to being the Shrine to Democracy, but what in fact is the memorial's idea of democracy and how is it conveyed to its millions of visitors, who very often seem more like pilgrims than tourists? Deadwood has turned itself into town-sized casino trading on the wild and woolly days of 1876, but how does it give its visitors a taste of lawlessness while yet staying strictly within the law in order to keep its gambling license? By contrast, although Wounded Knee attracts large numbers of visitors, both American and foreign, it is a site that remains more or less unexplained, a deficiency I have tried to remedy by offering an account of the massacre drawn from what can be seen today when visiting the site.

My other two essays concern Harrison, and the time Lewis and Clark spent in South Dakota during their great expedition.

In Harrison I spoke to several members of the community, who made me welcome and spoke with great dignity about the experience of living in a small farming town that history had gradually abandoned as their kind of small-scale, family agriculture became less and less viable.

Like many Americans, but unlike most British people, who have never heard of Lewis and Clark, I am a great admirer of the explorers themselves and a habitual reader of their journals. I have followed in their footsteps (shamefully, by car, not on foot or by pirogue) along several stretches of their odyssey, and I was pleased to catch

up with them at various points on the Missouri river in South Dakota: Yankton, Pierre, and Mobridge.

This is a travel book, but I have given the genre a twist. Traditionally, travel writers have journeyed to exotic, faraway places and then returned home to report on their adventures. But in my case, the position is reversed: I made my journey in an exotic, faraway place (to me), but now I'm reporting to the people who live there; I am an outsider addressing American readers on the subject of themselves and their country – not an automatic route to popularity.

Memory, aides memoirs, and methods

When traveling I am hag-ridden by the fear of forgetting what I have observed. To that end I equip myself with a battery of tools for recording my impressions: notebook, audio recorder, camera, computer for preserving notes and pictures, and finally a memory stick in case the computer suffers an electronic form of Alzheimer's and loses its memory—and mine in the process. In addition, I am a great collector of the tourist ephemera that every journey produces: handbills, brochures, menus, checks, cards, post cards, souvenir newspapers, to say nothing of books. However, by equipping myself so extravagantly with the means to ensure that I do not lose what I have set out to collect, I unleash another fear with which to torment myself: the fear of losing some, if not all, these pieces of kit and aides memoirs. Thus, I have to fight the ludicrous compulsion to spend more time checking that I have not lost my materiel than putting it to use.

In my experience the most distracting tool of memory support for the writer is the camera. There is something very seductive about the idea of the snap. Point the camera, click, and there you have a comprehensive “note” of the scene you have been looking at. Nothing is as effective as a photograph at capturing accurately large quantities of detail, including such subtleties as shades of color and details of decoration that would be laborious to describe with words. Yet the fact remains that the process of taking snaps is different from that of writing notes; it engages a different part of the imagination. For a writer, a written note made on the spot, however rudimentary, ultimately carries a value that a photograph cannot compete with, because it has been the product of what you might call literary work; it has called for a special kind of selection—selection of the detail to be recorded, selection of the word to use, selection of the order in which things are recorded, and all these selections are the beginning of writing itself.

It does not surprise me that very few writers have proved to be outstanding photographers; the English travel writer Bruce Chatwin was an exception. Photographers and writers possess different kinds of eyes.

What message do you hope readers will take from your book?

The notion of conveying a message makes me uneasy. However, it is true that my book contains more opinions about South Dakota than descriptions or traveler's tales, and I hope that readers will take some of these opinions from the book, if only to disagree with them. To have any value an opinion must be the end point of a train of thought, of evidence marshaled and put to use; otherwise, it is simply an assertion. By that definition, a properly evolved opinion is always up for argument; it cannot settle the question, though it may change the way the question is considered. As I see it, the chief duty of a book like mine is to entertain. An opinionated person soon grows tiresome, whereas someone with interesting opinions can prove entertaining. I hope I have properly understood the distinction.

What are you most looking forward to about the SD Festival of Books?

Nothing is more agreeable to a writer than the opportunity to talk about the book he's just written and hear other people talk about it—nothing, except perhaps the opportunity to sell it in large numbers. I look forward to both.