

Articles

Category: [Vol. 5, 2013](#)

Minding the Realm: William Least Heat-Moon and the Blue Highways of Public Memory

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Hits: 2349

The South Shore Journal, Vol. 5, 2013, pp. 203-209.

William Least Heat-Moon, whose ancestors included Englishmen, Irish, and Osage tribesmen, went on a vision quest in 1978. He traveled the back roads of America, so called the “blue highways” because they were marked in blue rather than black or red on the roadmaps of the 1970s. Traveling when gas cost \$.65 a gallon, his journey took him on a nearly 14,000-mile loop around the United States. Having lost his teaching position at Stephens College in Missouri, and on the brink of losing his marriage, Least Heat-Moon believed he had reached the nadir of his professional and personal life. With Walt Whitman and Black Elk as his literary, intellectual, and spiritual companions, Least Heat-Moon sojourned forth from Columbia, Missouri. His journey, which took him in and out of the lives of hundreds of his countrymen and women, culminated in the 1982 publication, *Blue Highways: A Journey into America*.^[1]

While it was not his intention when he set out on his journey into America, Least Heat-Moon left a record of his thoughts on history and representations of the past—sometimes called public memory. At one point, while reflecting on the nature of time, he became excited by the prospect of connecting with the past. That which was thought irrevocably lost became less so. One evening, when the stars “shone with a clarity beyond anything I could remember” he felt that he was “looking into—actually seeing—the past.” Looking to the light emanating from Betelgeuse of the Orion Constellation, which was hundreds of light-years away, he mused that it showed the “star that existed when Christopher Columbus was a boy”; the same star that “burned when Northmen were crossing the Atlantic.” As for the light from the Betelgeuse of the late 1970s, a future person “will have to do the looking.”^[2]

In many respects this is the reality of public memory in a historical sense, especially as it applies to monuments. As Pierre Nora reminds us, monuments serve as a “boundary stone of another age.”^[3] Monuments and their artistic representations of events and people of the past reflect the society or the particular social group that erects the monument, and thereby mark the time in which it was designed, funded, and erected. According to Least Heat-Moon, it is an attempt to “entomb history.”^[4] When a monument is erected, it commemorates a historical event or person. That is, it looks to the past. Yet,

the society or social group that erected the monument desired that whatever they were commemorating would be remembered by future generations. The amount of time, money, and energy that is needed to bring to fruition such a thing necessarily requires motivation, and this motivation stems from the seriousness of purpose. “Sculpture is a difficult and expensive craft,” writes the famed Chicago Sculptor, Lorado Taft, and monuments “are not erected by a community without good and sufficient reason.”^[5]

So, monuments are erected to commemorate an event or person of the past, by a present society or social group that hopes to have future denizens of a community or nation remember the said event or person. As philosopher Edward Casey argues, public monuments “embody this Janusian trait” suggesting that the monuments’ “very massiveness and solidity almost literally enforce this futurity, while inscription and certain identifiable features . . . pull the same physical object toward the past it honors.” In other words, the present that erects the monument, “strives to preserve its memory in times to come—at the limit, times beyond measure.”^[6] So, as Least Heat-Moon star-gazed he concluded that the “past is for the present, the present for the future.”^[7] His observation on that clear night in Oregon inadvertently provides us with an avenue for understanding public memory.

Yet, not all was as bright as the ancient, dying Betelgeuse that still radiated through light-years of space. While at a local tavern, Least Heat-Moon conversed with a patron about the changes then underway on the once gritty, seedy, and sailor-laced Thames Street in Newport, Rhode Island. When Least Heat-Moon asked the man about the loss of history that came with development he remarked simply and flatly and cynically, “American History is parking lots.”^[8] It does not take much of the imagination to see Least Heat-Moon, who had once walked Thames Street and frequented its taverns as a sailor while serving in the United States Navy, nodding his head in agreement.

As towns and cities shed their rural and idyllic character of an earlier America, or erase their seedier side, the history, and hence the memory, of events and lives past becomes threatened. Even in such a prominent place like Bunker Hill in Massachusetts, where an early standoff between the New England rebels and the British regulars took place in June 1775, with the Declaration of Independence still over a year away, the past remained elusive for Least Heat-Moon. “To see Bunker Hill (in fact Breed’s Hill) today rising unimposingly from the workers’ houses is to put historical imagination to the test, because Bunker Hill now belongs more to a notion of the past than to actuality.”^[9]

Of course this begs the question, when does the past become historical or, as Least Heat-Moon pondered, “Just when is history anyway?” At one point he wondered, when will the past become history? While eating lunch on a beach in Delaware, he notes that at “my back rose two silo-like concrete observation towers, relics from the Second World War. At the top of each were narrow openings like sinister eyes.” No longer needed, the people they were meant to protect, as well as their descendents, neglected the structures and the birds took over, flying “in and out of the slits” with “the shrill bird cries resonating weirdly in the hollow stacks.” The towers were now “historical curiosities”

standing as “monuments to man’s worse war, one that never reached this beach.” Yet, thirty-two years after the war had ended, they remained unidentified, unmarked. “To the young,” Least Heat-Moon mused, “they could be only mysteries.” He suggests that for society, history happens when it is no longer a threat, no longer a real force, no longer a disrupter to the lives of the living. “Had [the towers] come from the more remote and safer history of the Revolutionary or Civil wars, they would have been commemorated.”^[10] The “silos” would finally have their history acknowledged in 2005 with the book, *Delaware’s Ghost Towers*.^[11]

Does it take a book to transform the past into history? Does it take a monument to turn history into public memory? According to Edward Casey, it is a matter of mass production. “The crucial tie-line between past and future that is at the heart of public memory can be effected on the slenderest of reeds—so long as these reeds are at once easily reproducible and widely accessible.”^[12] In this case, a popular book, document, or photographic image can become public memory. While it is likely that Least Heat-Moon would accept this definition, he saw public memory as being entombed in a monument, identified by a marker. Consider the following passage regarding the present entering the future as history. While Least Heat-Moon visited a Civil War battlefield—a site of memory—three “children raced from under the oaks out over the grass to reenact the battle with guttural gunshots from their boyish throats.” He continued:

They argued briefly about who would be who: one chose the Americans, one the Germans, one the Irish. The small cries of the boys, and the bugs chirring out the last of spring, and the warmth of the evening sun almost turned Bloody Angle [part of the Spotsylvania battlefield] to an idyllic meadow. But its history was the difference. Even though Titans and Tridents and MX’s have not made the ‘red business,’ as Whitman called it, a thing of the past, they have eliminated future battlefield parks where boys can play war—unless scientists find means to hang monuments in the sky.^[13]

What will history be without sites of memory? What will come of the imagined, collective, and public past while we wait for scientists to discover a way to monumentalize the sky? What Least Heat-Moon did not foresee was the development in American culture of the near ubiquity of memorials and monuments. According to Erika Doss, Americans have developed “an obsession with issues of memory and history and an urgent desire to express and claim those issues in visibly public contexts.”^[14]

While William Least Heat-Moon did not set out to write about the nature of the past, he realized later, after interacting with people ranging from the town of Nameless, Tennessee, to the lonely outposts of the American West, and then back east again to Smith Island in the Chesapeake Bay, that the “book is

very much about time, and about the continuance of the past, and how it shapes not only human values, but the will to go on.”^[15] But also, that history, as Alice Middleton informed Least Heat-Moon while he visited Smith Island, “isn’t a thing of the past.”^[16]

William Least Heat-Moon’s vision quest along the Blue Highways of America was a journey of discovery. As he told interviewer Hank Nuwer, the “Blue Highways is one man’s assimilation and transformation of things that had existed before him.” He recounted that as he sensed his trip was winding down, he began to “realize ever so faintly that what I was looking for in this angle of vision were the connections that hold a human being to a context greater than himself—connections that hold the present to the past and suggest that the present and past will be part of the future.”^[17] His quest became a journey into the realm of public memory, a place where we are inextricably connected to those who came before and to those who will come afterward, as is so perfectly illustrated in Lorado Taft’s sculpture, *The Fountain of Time*.



Lorado Taft’s *Fountain of Time* (1922). DN-0085346, Chicago Daily News negative collection, Chicago History Museum. Chicago, 1928.

[1] William Least Heat Moon [William Trogon], *Blue Highways: A Journey into America* (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1982); William Least Heat Moon: Interview with Hank Nuwer; “The Road to Serendipity,” [http://www.hanknuwer.com/William%20Least%20Heat%20Moon%20\(Trogon\).html](http://www.hanknuwer.com/William%20Least%20Heat%20Moon%20(Trogon).html)

(accessed December 26, 2012). Here after, “Interview with Hank Nuwer”.

[2] Least Heat-Moon, 249.

[3] Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire, Representations* 26 (Spring 1989), 12.

[4] Least Heat-Moon, 329.

[5] Lorado Taft, “The Monuments of Chicago,” *Art and Archaeology* 12 (1921): 120.

[6] Edward S. Casey, “Public Memory in Place and Time” in Kendall R. Phillips, ed., *Framing Public Memory* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004), 17-18.

[7] Least Heat-Moon, 249.

[8] *Ibid.*, 373.

[9] *Ibid.*, 329.

[10] *Ibid.*, 397.

[11] William Grayson, *Delaware’s Ghost Towers: The Coast Artillery’s Forgotten Last Stand During the Darkest Days of World War II* (Bloomington, Ind.: AuthorHouse, 2005)

[12] Casey, 18.

[13] Least Heat-Moon, 419.

[14] Erika Doss, *Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 2.

[15] “Interview with Hank Nuwer”.

[16] Least Heat-Moon, 403.

[17] “Interview with Hank Nuwer”.