

Stuart Rosebrook interview

Where did you grow up?

I was born in Youngstown, Ohio, and grew up in the nearby suburb of Poland.

Who influenced you most on your academic career and interest in Trans-Appalachian history and the Old Northwest?

I was a history major at Hiram College and my Ph.D. is in American Studies, so I've always had a love of history and I know how to do serious research. When I began teaching American literature at Kenyon College in 1967, however, I considered myself mainly a poet, and I have published some one-hundred poems over the years. In the 1980s I began writing novels, one of which, *Blacksnake's Path*, was about William Wells and was a History Book Club selection. At that time my agent said to me that since I have done so much research, why not write a straight history about Wells. The result is *William Wells and the Struggle for the Old Northwest*, where I tried to combine my writing skills as a poet and novelist with my training in history. My interest in the Old Northwest stems from growing up in Ohio and the fact that my parents and my sister took an interest in history and genealogy. I recall that we had Cap Heath's flintlock over our fireplace—he had come to Ohio in the 1820s as a surveyor—and my grandfather Heath had a basket full of arrowheads in his cellar which he picked up as he ploughed his farm in northwest Ohio. I even have a letter I wrote home from Washington DC when I was eight telling my "MoMey" that "I saw the Indians...I saw a tomahawk like this [I included my drawing]." And I saw "the Indians doing the snake dance." In sum, I'd always been curious about the frontier and the Indians and I finally decided to find out what actually happened on the Ohio Valley frontier by going back to the primary sources.

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Dear Momex, I went to the museum
 m. I saw the Indians I saw the Pue-
 Blo Indians. a MAN painting Ind-
 ians. We saw a little topee.
 We wish you will NOT. give patty
 the kitten ^{Right} I saw a tomahawk
 like this. ^{now till we get home}
 The Indians doing the snake
 dance. We saw tom-Toms and a Indian
 shield. We saw esquimaux, and
 totaempols. Now we go up stairs to
 the second floor. We saw a panda
 Bear. In all kinds of Bear, and
 a mountain goat. and
 other th

Who did you read growing up that inspired your interest in literature? history? poetry?

I've always been a keen reader and book collector. To list the many books that have impressed me would be a very long tale indeed. A few of the poets that strongly influenced me when I was starting out were William Carlos Williams, Paul Blackburn, and James Wright. I've always admired the classic American novelists—Hawthorne, Melville, Twain, Faulkner—and in the sixties Thomas Berger, John Hawkes, Robert Stone, were important to me. My recommended books on the Old Northwest suggest some of my favorite works of history. I've always admired Henry Adams's history of the early republic; even though the research is dated, the narrative sweep and his sound judgments still stand the test of time.

What did it mean to win two Spur Awards from WWA?

I must admit that I hoped *William Wells and the Struggle for the Old Northwest* would win an award. I put a lot of work and thought into the book and to have it recognized for its merit means a great deal to me. The fact that Paul Hutton, who wrote a ground-breaking essay on Wells, was one of the judges confirmed that my research and conclusions were valid. At a time when mass culture dominates American taste, it is, I think, more important than ever to try to recognize and honor works of excellence.

Tell me a little bit about your latest book on Robert Stone?

My next book is entitled *Conversations with Robert Stone*, which I am editing for the University of Mississippi Press. Stone, who died in January 2015, was a major American novelist, best known perhaps for *Dog Soldiers*, and this book is a selection of his best interviews. In my Introduction I provide a critical perspective on all of his novels.

How long have you lived in Frederick, Maryland?

My wife Roser Caminals-Heath is a Catalan novelist; she is a professor in the foreign language department at Hood College; and we have lived in Frederick since 1981.

What five books do you recommend on the Trans-Appalachian West?

The best overview of the period is still Richard White's *The Middle Ground* (Cambridge 1991); he traces how the French, English, and Americans interacted with Indians in the Great Lakes Region from 1650 to 1815, moving from mutual respect ("the middle ground") to mutual contempt over the years. For the Pennsylvania frontier I recommend James H. Merrell's *Into the American Woods* (Norton 1999); he pays particular attention to those men who were able

to negotiate between whites and Indians, albeit often with tragic results. John Sugden's *Tecumseh: A Life* (Henry Holt 1998) is impressively researched; among the host of books on Tecumseh his is usually the most reliable, although I differ with his evaluation of William Wells. The late Drew Cayton's best book is *Frontier Indiana* (Indiana University Press 1998); this book makes a conscientious effort to look at the period from multiple perspectives, whites and Indians, men and women, and its interpretations are always sensible. Colin Calloway's books on the Shawnees and related matters are important; his most recent work, *The Victory With No Name*, is a detailed account of St. Clair's Defeat of 1791, the biggest victory the Indians ever won against the U. S. Army, whose losses were about three times as great as Custer's Last Stand. The best captivity narrative of the period is James Smith's of 1799 *Scoouwa* (Ohio State University Press 1978); Larry L. Nelson's edition of *A History of Jonathan Alder* (University of Akron Press 2002) is also of value. The best historical fiction about the pioneers is perhaps Conrad Richter's *The Awakening Land* (Knopf 1966), but his treatment of the Indians is deeply flawed. Finally, for the period when the frontier was east of the Appalachians, I admire John Seelye's *Prophetic Waters* (Oxford 1977) and James Axtell's *The Invasion Within* (Oxford 1985), both books are written with flare and contain acute insights. West of the Mississippi my favorite novels are Thomas Berger's *Little Big Man* (Dial 1965), a stylistic tour de force, and Frank Bergon's *Jesse's Ghost* (Heyday 2011); I highly recommend all of his novels about the West.