THE LIMBERLOST REVIEW

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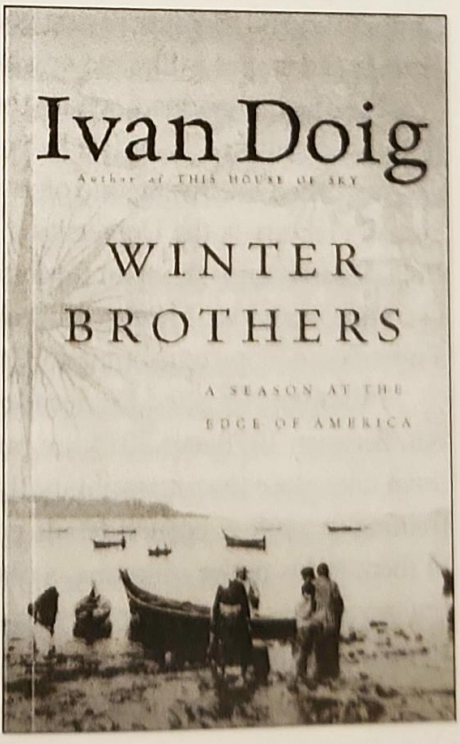
ADAM M. SOWARDS

Gossamer Possibilities: Re-reading Ivan Doig's Winter Brothers *in a New Season*

I won't pretend I come to this assignment dispassionately: Ivan Doig is my favorite writer. I own all his books. I've read them all, except for his final one, *Last Bus to Wisdom* (2015), because I have not been able to bring myself to do so, knowing that I will never again have the chance to read a Doig book fresh.

Yet re-reading *Winter Brothers: A Season at the Edge of America* (1980) tells me I can still experience Doig with open eyes. I last read it more than twenty years ago, the baby I had then when I was a freshly minted Ph.D. now is a doctoral student herself. Perspectives change as calendars pile up year upon year.

Winter Brothers is few fans' favorite Doig book, I'm sure. It was only his second. His trade became novelist, and *Winter Brothers* was nonfiction, one of only three nonfiction efforts and the only one not fully a memoir. What's more, *Winter Brothers* is an odd book, which is not to say it is a bad book or a confusing one, just unusual.



It is Doig's account of a winter reading James G. Swan's diaries, spanning 1859 to 1900. In *Winter Brothers*, Doig braided biography of Swan with excerpts of the diaries and memoir of his own seasonal quest. "A journal of a journal," he called it. This makes my re-reading of it a journal of a journal of a journal, I suppose.

Revisiting *Winter Brothers* resonates for me now, because I'm living through a season of change myself. Doig had gone to graduate school in history and decided the

classroom wasn't for him; he would write instead. I, too, went to graduate school in history, and I, too, decided to write — although I spent 25 years in classrooms first. I'm drifting out of those spaces now, blinking at the brightness, a couple years into this new season. Also like Doig, I moved from two decades in the dry interior West to the seawater coast of the Salish Sea. Sinking into *Winter Brothers* again is something of a homecoming in geography, an inspiration in subject, and an aspiration in style. Here was a historian-writer bouncing between present and past, words the medium of time travel on this western edge. While rereading and remembering, I stayed alert to capture something tangible in the fleeting whirlpool of time and prose that I might learn from.

Encountering Ivan Doig

In the autumn of my junior year of college, I spent some time in the bookstore. On a shelf I found Ivan Doig's *This House of Sky: Landscapes of a Western Mind* (1978). So many intriguing words shaped that title I found it irresistible. In the time since, I gathered his books, most in hardcover because I could not wait for paperback editions. More than one bear his signature. I'm sad when each book comes to an end, because saying goodbye to Doig's characters and settings and stories is like moving away from home.

I learned in graduate school that Doig had earned a Ph.D. in history. I discovered an article he wrote in a scholarly journal I have also published in. During one of my own dissertation research trips to Suzzallo Library at the University of Washington, I tracked down that Doig dissertation—about an important man in Northwest history, just like mine would be. I slid that bound dissertation off a low shelf for just a moment to help connect me to Doig, the closest I ever expected to be.

Although I lingered for decades among such shelves, Doig ventured out. Between 1978 and 2015, he published 16 books. Only a couple of them take place in contemporary times, meaning he put his historical training to work to ensure details pointed true north. He set nearly all of them in his native Montana, a place he moved away from in 1957 but never truly left. *Winter Brothers*—nonfiction and set in Washington—stands apart, almost insular.

Swan and Doig (and Me)

The main subject of *Winter Brothers* is Swan, a nineteenth-century man who spent most of his long, unusual life on Washington's Olympic Peninsula, trying to understand local tribes, hoping to attract the railroad, performing various government jobs—"white grooves of routine" in Doig's apt phrasing—and writing all the time: books, letters, articles, and, most of all, diaries. Those diaries, some two and a half million words, a substantial "wake of ink" as Doig put it, constituted a record of daily life in Washington Territory from the 1850s until Swan's death in 1900.

As the book's title notes, Doig felt a kinship, much of that rooted in a westering quest both author and subject embodied. Intangible factors also matched them. This means that on many occasions when Doig characterized Swan, he also characterized himself, such as when he said Swan was "as steadily curious as a question mark" with a "fetish for fact," qualities any scribbler must possess, cultivate, and guard.

Doig had discovered Swan earlier, likely in graduate school. Instinctively, Doig knew he wanted to spend more time with this man Swan, "oyster entrepreneur, schoolteacher, railroad speculator, amateur ethnologist, lawyer, judge, homesteader, linguist, ship's outfitter, explorer, customs collector, author, small-town bureaucrat, artist, clerk." Perhaps Swan's character made him inherently interesting and attractive to Doig's curiosity. Perhaps Doig knew a good story lurked in those diaries. Perhaps the siren song of the Northwest Coast proved too captivating.

But a greater awakening worked in Doig. He had become "more aware that I dwell in a community of time as well as of people" and wanted to know more about this "mysterious citizenship, how far it goes, where it touches." Swan would be his navigator and guide.

If time connected Doig to Swan, the West served as the medium. "More and more it seems to me that the *westernness* of my existence in this land is some consequence having to do with that community of time, one of the terms of my particular citizenship in it," he wrote in *Winter Brothers'* opening pages. Had Swan resided those same years in Chicago or Chattanooga, Doig would have sailed past him like a captain who realizes the bay is too shallow for a good anchorage.

"Markings, streaks and whorls of the West and the past are left in some of us," Doig wrote. The words resonate because the western past has been my territory, too. When I first read *Winter Brothers*, I was a graduate student studying the West and recognizing, like Doig, that the West was distinctive, that I was a "westerner" tied deeply to those who had come before me. *Winter Brothers* tracks Doig's own preoccupation with the West, or Wests, a constant hum in the background.

The Place of the West(s)

Born in Massachusetts, Swan left for California in 1850, wandered north to Shoalwater (now Willapa) Bay in Washington Territory, before nosing even further north where he bounced between the northwest and northeast tips of the Olympic Peninsula starting in 1859. There, even when canoeing from one end to the other across the top of the peninsula, Swan found a home. "Finding the place to invest his life meant, as it has to me, finding a West," wrote Doig, speaking for all three of us. He continued, noting that he recognized from Swan's writing and his own "that there are and always have been many Wests, personal as well as geographical." Differences abound in the West and within the West, establishing distinct subregions, subcultures, and experiences: "Perhaps that is what the many Wests are, common in their stubborn separatenesses: each West a kind of cabin, insistent that it is no other sort of dwelling whatsoever."

Western historians coming of age in the wake of *Winter Brothers* in the 1980s and 1990s spilled much ink on whether the West was a place or a process, a region or a frontier. In other words, did the West's natural extremes or federal presence or distinct racial composition make it unique? Or, was the process of confrontation, conflict, and colonization something that replicated itself across a continent?

Then, I was a partisan of place, a believer in distinctiveness. And if I'm honest, I favored the West as best, an adherence I shared with Doig, who quoted from his own journals: "The west of America draws some of us not because it is the newest region of the country but because it is the oldest, in the sense that the landscape here—the fundament, nature's shape of things—more resembles the original continent than does the city-nation of the Eastern Seaboard or the agricultural factory of the Midwest." I might have said the same.

On the page with these words of Doig, I found my bookmark from my last reading of *Winter Brothers*. A simple index card, an artifact of my mind from two decades past. My jottings were brief, meant as discussion starters, not even ten points of emphasis. But offset in a place of prominence, I had written: WESTS of Book (Doig & Swan). We all were interrogating why the West placed a hold on us. Again and again, Doig wrestled with this West, these Wests, as he grasped toward understanding Swan, seeming to believe if he understood the place he could finally comprehend Swan, a man whose voluminous writings included abundant daily details and little introspection. Doig's search for Swan's anchor is his own struggle to explain himself. That I marked those "West" passages suggests I hungered for this grounding, too.

Reconsidering

When I read *Winter Brothers* first, as a nascent historian of the Pacific Northwest and an unabashed fan of Doig, I found it a volume that illustrated a region in the throes of transformation. *Winter Brothers* shone a light primarily on that past world, along with furnishing a happy dose of Doig prose. What stands out now are other qualities—and silences.

A couple generations of scholarship have cycled since 1980, and today, consequences of colonialism feel more important than the muted attention Doig gave them. He did deliver a Swan passage, channeling William Blake's "Proverbs of Hell," about what he witnessed among the Makah: "We have indeed caused the plowshare of civilization to pass over the graves of their ancestors and open to the light the remains of ancient lodge fires." A surprising metaphor from Swan, who tracked more often with matter-of-factness. But little analysis or commentary from him, or from Doig, spilled forth.

After two decades of reservation living, the Makah, in Doig's assessment, were "not quite citizens of either their ancestral world or the new white world, but of some shifting ground between." It is the sort of comment that I encountered frequently in graduate school in the 1990s during obsessions with so-called middle grounds but that today reads as simplistic. Given the growing sophistication of Indigenous Studies and the increasing political power of Tribes in the contemporary West, I find it hard to imagine Doig rewriting *Winter Brothers* today and not

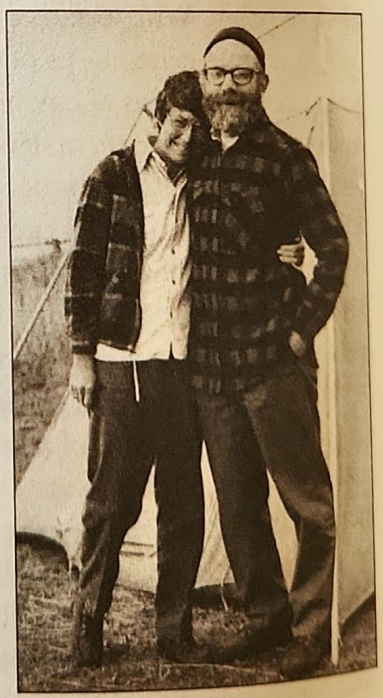
attending more to these sorts of themes. Swan's curiosity might be recast as surveillance, his collecting as theft.

Besides riding these waves of change in scholarship and politics since publication and my first reading, my sense of where *Winter Brothers* fits in Doig's body of work has also shifted. When I read it first, I knew Doig as the established author already of more than half a dozen books; I had published none and was steeped only in scholarly creations. Today, I see more clearly Doig as a writer starting out, a career and identity still forming; now, after unmooring myself from the academy, I am sensitive to the ways Doig may have been adrift and seeking both safe harbor and new ports. He may have been 39 during the winter sojourn that produced *Winter Brothers*, but Doig was still figuring out what he was doing, who he was, whether his writing success would last. It must have been exhilarating and exhausting.

Consider a very minor scene a third of the way through the book. Doig read Swan's diary entry of his 42nd birthday while visiting Cape Flattery, that far corner tip of the continental United States. Doig was triangulating the actual place, Swan's words, and himself. "Some men and women are never part of the time they were born into and walk the streets or highways of their generations as strangers."

These words, Doig mused, are ones he might have written about Swan. Instead, his wife Carol read them to him, "hunched in the phone booth at Clallam Bay." The words described Doig and appeared in the *New York Times Book Review* for *This House of Sky*. A poignant moment between the couple, sharing a triumph and recognition that any writer craves—especially at the start when the risks of a writing career weigh heaviest.

I also draw on firsthand information to read *into* Doig's state of mind when creating *Winter Brothers*.



Doig and wife Carol.

A job took me temporarily to Shoreline Community College where I eventually learned Ivan's wife Carol had taught for decades. In a hallway conversation, I revealed to a colleague my admiration of Doig's books. I've considered teaching *Winter Brothers*, I said. My colleague said he'd happily arrange an introduction. And that's how Ivan Doig walked into my classroom to discuss with my students his quirky book, *Winter Brothers*.

Doig met me at my classroom, no time to visit before or after. *I have to finish the damn book*, he told me on the phone. (That book turned out to be *Prairie Nocturne* [2003], one of his loveliest.) I sat off to the side, allowing students to have unmediated access. My admiration and excitement and joy charged the classroom atmosphere. I felt like a teenaged fan meeting a rockstar.

I asked Doig how he came to write *Winter Brothers*, to tell the story behind the book. *Winter Brothers*, Doig said to my class, *is not easy to describe, as you now know.* He reminisced about trying to sell the book. A memoir like *This House of Sky* is uncomplicated to characterize, and it had succeeded beyond any reasonable debut author's expectations, including a National Book Award nomination. But second books are hard, and what Doig had in mind with *Winter Brothers* took no clear course. Getting a publisher to understand the book's unique blend of biography-excerpts-journal with an unusual nineteenth-century character at the center was not easy.

Still distracted by his mere presence, I let his story's details float over me. Today, though, this moment looms larger, a hint of unsettledness rises to the surface. That effort to get a publisher to understand his vision must have filled his winter pairing with Swan with uncertainty. His career's success was by no means assured or even likely with one book under his belt, even a well-regarded one. His career worked out.

As did *Winter Brothers*. This time the *Times's* review assessed: "Sometimes the exercise is forced; sometimes it pushes Mr. Doig into overwriting. But the occasional patches of dullness or lushness should deter no one from devouring this gorgeous tribute to a man and a region unjustly neglected heretofore. The reader has the pleasure of encountering two contrasting styles and two angles of view, both infused

with the fresh air and spirit of the Northwest." It remains, too, a "gorgeous tribute" to the writer, who I never saw again.

The Elliptical Past

Winter Brothers exemplifies how history shades our world. Doig saw his surroundings as he did because of that "mysterious citizenship" he felt with the past, the one he nurtured through his winter communion with Swan. Once recognized, it is hard to avoid tacking between the depths of the past and surface of the present. Realizing that we dwell in time is perhaps the historian's special way of seeing the world, a way of navigating society's shoals.

Our world is in constant conversation between then and now. This can be difficult because the past is gapped in incompleteness. It is elliptical. Doig says this after one of Swan's diary entries drifts off in the middle of relating a Haida story, the teller having grown tired and left Swan without the denouement.

So it is with all history. We only have scraps, scraps we weave into stories, stories we believe to be coherent and true. But even those are incomplete, elliptical. "I've heard it offered that a period is simply the shorthand for the dots of an ellipsis," Doig wrote. "That a story never does end, only can pause." I take this to mean, partly, that time is not fully recoverable and that our efforts to make meaning of it will remain endless because of that. Writing about history, then, will continually evolve, reflecting the concerns of authors and their contexts. Just as the same reader can encounter the same words at different times and come to different conclusions given their shifting preoccupations. And just as a writer can encounter the same place and find endless curiosities to explore.

"So much of Swan I still do not know, even after studying him through the fifteen thousand days and two and a half million words of his diaries," Doig wrote on Day 88 of his 90 days of winter. He wondered about Swan's thoughts and why he wrote of some things and not others. "Or why, like me, he chose to invest his life at this edge of America over all other—although I think it has most to do in both our cases with a

preference for gossamer possibilities, such as words, rather than hard and fast obligations, such as terms of employment."

Closing *Winter Brothers* twenty-some years after teaching it, looking out at the one corner of Puget Sound I can glimpse from my home on almost the exact latitude of Cape Flattery, I see those gossamer possibilities more clearly than ever, and finally, I open *Last Bus to Wisdom*. ■