

# THE CARAVAN

NEWSLETTER OF THE FRIENDS OF LOREN EISELEY

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Christmas 1993



**Loren Corey Eiseley**  
September 3, 1907 - July 9, 1977

*"We have joined the caravan, you might say, at a certain point; we will travel as far as we can, but we cannot in one lifetime see all that we would like to see or learn all that we hunger to know."*

*-- The Immense Journey*

## AN EISELEY CHRISTMAS ESSAY

This is a special issue of your newsletter. We have never before printed a Christmas issue and this may be the only time it will ever happen, but we have a particular reason for doing so. All year we have been looking forward to the idea of reprinting an Eiseley Christmas essay which has never been collected into one of his books and to give this to you during the season when it originally appeared twenty five years ago.

Dr. Eiseley did not ordinarily write on such themes. Perhaps the only other Christmas story, "The Christmas of the Talking Cat," did appear in House and Garden for December, 1972, and it was later collected in a much revised form into All the Strange Hours under the title "The Talking Cat." If you have enjoyed this as it appeared in the book, we would urge you to go to your library and read the larger version from the magazine.

But the essay we are now reprinting is much different and stands alone among Eiseley's essays. There is simply nothing else like it. In December, 1968, Redbook magazine presented a set of essays collected by Edith Efron under the heading of "Season of Hope: The Spiritual Testament of a Wise Woman and Four Wise Men." The editorial introduction to this feature tells us:

. . . In these difficult times especially, when so many Americans feel uneasy and at odds with one another, many of us long for new sources of hope. To help fill this longing we asked author Edith Efron to interview five distinguished citizens to ask them what Christmas means to them, beyond the tinsel and the bells. All five are brilliantly gifted figures who have won their places in history: poet Mark Van Doren; singer Marian Anderson; naturalist Loren Eiseley; physicist

John R. Pierce "father" of the communications satellite Telstar; and Jesuit philosopher Father W. Norris Clarke. Each has made a separate statement. Each statement is a spiritual testament. And each statement is rich in provocative thought and texture. . .

Certainly Eiseley was in good company. Most public libraries will have bound back issues of Redbook and if you have enjoyed this, you may want to look at the others which appeared with it. And you will also like the drawings that illustrated the feature.

We thought this essay was one you would enjoy having at this season. It is one of the few things appearing in popular magazines that did not, in one form or another, find its way into one of his books. So it is like having something new from him making a nice addition to our collection of his writing. We are grateful for permission to bring it to you.

### I Too Would Go to the Manger

By Loren Eiseley

I am not formally religious. But I am deeply aware that life has a spiritual dimension that is not ultimately reducible to physical terms. In our civilization Christ is the symbol of this spiritual dimension of Man -- the being with the impulse to choose, to choose well, to love.

Man has the capacity to love, not just his own species, but life in all its shapes and forms. This empathy with all the interknit web of life is the highest spiritual expression I know. There is a simple Christmas poem by Thomas Hardy -- it's called "The Oxen" -- that intimately expresses my own feeling:

Christmas Eve, and twelve of the clock  
"Now they are all on their knees,"  
An elder said, as we sat in a flock  
By the embers in hearthside ease.

We pictured the meek mild creatures where,  
They dwelt in the strawy pen,  
Nor did it occur to one of us there  
To doubt they were kneeling then.

So fair a fancy few would weave  
In those years! Yet, I feel  
If someone said on Christmas Eve,  
"Come, see the oxen kneel,"

"In the lovely barton by yonder coomb,  
Our childhood used to know,"  
I should go with him in the gloom,  
Hoping it might be so.

Like Hardy, I too would go out to the lovely manger, "hoping it might be so" -- hoping to see the oxen kneeling at Christmas. This is a figurative way of expressing the hopes, the yearnings, of the human spirit for something beyond the world that surrounds us. It is also nostalgia for the innocent acceptance of childhood, the acceptance and trust of the child toward this ideal world he's been given a glimpse of when as yet, he has not experienced the world's evil.

Or, rather, I should say Man's evil, for Man is the only being capable of calculated evil. By the virtue of his advanced brain, Man is the only being who is free to choose, free to select the path he will tread. Because of this freedom of choice he has power both for incredible good and incredible evil. The struggle between these two powers is represented by the tremendous drama of the Christian mythology -- the fall, the redemption. All too often I am aware of "the fall," of the unlovely, the cruel, the dark-cave aspect of men's nature, and I feel the despair described by Tennyson:

I found Him in the shining of the stars,  
I mark'd Him in the flowering of His field,  
But in His ways with men, I find Him not.

But there are times when I feel differently.

If man, by virtue of his freedom, is infinitely corruptible, he is also perfectible. He is capable of magnificently courageous actions. In his most noble and outgoing moments he is capable of hurling his own life away, in the name of his very reverence for the dignity of life. There are moments when I have an exalted view of Man -- moments when, like Wordsworth, I see him as a being of reason and will, "instinct with godhead . . . a being first in

every capability of rapture." The capacity for rapture -- that is the aspect of Man that I love. Man exists both in the material world and the spiritual world, the world of thoughts and dreams. He endows everything about him with meanings, he surrounds every object with a spiritual glow, a rainbow of thoughts and feelings. He inhabits a world of revelation.

My own sense of this spiritual glow that surrounds the natural world is often captured in poetry. Mansfield, one Christmas Eve, saw what I have often seen: "The scarlet berries in the hedge stood out like revelations . . . unearthly meanings covering every tree."

Perhaps my vision of the world and my own testament of faith would correspond most closely to this passage by Whitman:

I believe a leaf of grass is no less  
than the journey-work of the stars,  
And the pismire is equally perfect,  
and a grain of sand, and the egg of the wren,  
And the tree-toad is a  
chef d'ouvre for the highest,  
And the running blackberry would adorn  
the parlors of heaven,  
And the narrowest hinge in my hand  
puts to scorn all machinery,  
And the cow crunching with depress'd head  
surpasses any statue,  
And a mouse is miracle enough  
to stagger sextillions of infidels.

It is difficult to tell why we are motivated, why we do as we do. The source of my own reverence for nature is only partly known to me. Often writers with highly impressionable, imaginative childhoods tend to remember that particular glow attached to their earliest surroundings. I was an unusually solitary child. I escaped early into a love of the natural world and animals. For me the fossil beds of western Nebraska, the eroded gulches and canyons of the high plains, the creatures of the fields, all of these have stayed with me and constantly appear in my writing.

Life, in all its forms is the texture of myself. My memories are of material things, yet the sum of my experience is spiritual, the end of

my road is a spiritual confrontation. Again, Whitman says it for me:

I have distanced what is behind  
me for good reasons,  
But call anything back again  
when I deserve it . . .  
Solitary at midnight in my back yard,  
my thoughts gone from me a long while,  
Walking the old hills of Judea  
With the beautiful, gentle God by my side.

We are each of us, alone in the end -- alone with our freedom. Over and above genetic and cultural influences we are true, unique creations, created by our own choices. And for each of us there is a final moment in life when the rest of the world fades away, when we come to face ourselves. And we ask: Did I choose well or ill? Did I make myself in the image of my ethical ideal? In the end, you see, we are back with our Christian heritage, our loveliness, with that haunting thing in the mind that happened in Bethlehem. And it does not matter whether it happened in reality or not. What is important is that it happened in the human mind. It is Man examining himself on the hills of Judea . . . walking through an open door into another dimension of existence.

## **FRIENDS OF LOREN EISELEY ENJOY OCTOBER PROGRAM**

The Annual Program of the Friends of Loren Eiseley was held on October 24th and it was a fine day. During the afternoon Darrel Berg gave us a conducted tour of the sites having associations with Loren Eiseley and that evening we had our dinner and program in Elephant Hall of the State Museum. Dr. Francis Haskins, Interim Co-Director of the Nebraska Academy of Science, presented their Eiseley Memorial Scholarship check to Sara Harney, winner of their Eiseley essay contest. The speaker for the evening was Dr. Thomas Bragg who has just given us the text of his presentation on "How Fire Makes the Prairie" and this will be featured in your next issue of the Caravan.

Our dinner tables were set in the newly restored Elephant Hall of the University of Nebraska State Museum which was rededicated just last January. And close to where we sat was the new exhibit featuring the skull of the Milford Mastodon and this has associations with the early days of Loren Eiseley.

One of the wonderful new features of the hall is a great mural painted by artist Mark Marcuson showing the life image of the largest elephant specimen in the museum out walking with his fellows in the Platte River country during Ice Age times. At the base of the mural a sand bar extends into the room and here two fine elephant skulls are displayed. One of these, the Milford Mastodon is identified as follows:

#### Milford Mastodon

Skull and jaws of an adult male mastodon with small lower tusks. Collected by C. B. Schultz and L. C. Eiseley in 1931 from Seward County.

The Milford Mastodon was discussed in Nebraska State Museum Bulletin 24 issued for December, 1931 which was entitled The Milford Mastodon, Mastodon Moodiei, Sp. Nov.: A Preliminary Report and which was written by Museum Director Erwin H. Barbour. It would be interesting to quote from that bulletin to let Dr. Barbour tell you something of this handsome fossil:

In developing the hydro-electric plant of the Iowa and Nebraska Light and Power Company, a number of dams were thrown across the Blue River and its branches. One of these, known as Dam No. 7, was built across the West Blue, about nine miles southwest of Milford, Seward county, Nebraska. This dam raised the water well above the ordinary river level, and flooded fifteen or twenty acres of valley land. The impounded water soaked into, and washed against, the base of a twenty-foot bank of cross-bedded sand, until some time during the winter of 1931, a portion of the bank near the base slipped, and slid down, carrying with it a well-preserved mastodon skull which hitherto had lain buried there. The skull was eased down on the sand at the

water's edge unbroken and came to rest on its crown.

In this position the skull was soon encased in ice, where it was quite discernible in the transparent matrix, and since it lay with the teeth upward, fully exposed, it was easily recognized by Messrs. Elmer Danekas, Walter Farrow, and N. F. Morris, who found it while hunting. The skull at that time was in fine condition. They undertook to dig it out after the first thaw, but quickly realized that without training and experience the undertaking would be futile. They promptly discontinued further attempts, and, on March 19th, Mr. Farrow called at the State Museum and gave notice of the discovery.

. . . On the twentieth and twenty-first of March, 1931, the weather being mild and suitable, one of the field parties of the State Museum, consisting of C. Bertrand Schultz and Loren Eiseley visited Dam No. 7 and secured certain skeletal parts and chunks of the skull . . . As soon as possible thereafter they made a second trip and found additional parts. Since the weather was propitious, extensive exploratory digging was planned, but had to be temporarily postponed because of flood conditions. After securing as much material as possible, work was suspended until the water could recede. On June fifteenth this spot was again visited and thoroughly explored by two combined field parties, namely, C. Bertrand Schultz, and assistant Frank Craybill, and E. L. Blue and assistant Eugene Vanderpool. They soon unearthed fragments of the skull along with the atlas, axis, two thoracic vertebrae, ribs and mandible with teeth. Three days later, after the quarry was well opened, the writer, accompanied by Mr. Henry Reider, visited the place.

Dr. Barbour continues with a detailed and technical description of the fossil and its condition. He reports that he has visited prosboscidian collections in other state museums and has not seen anything similar to the Milford Mastodon. Perhaps this fossil may be of a distinct species but he warns that "before foisting a new name upon an over-

crowded role," much more study will be necessary to consider all of the individual variations. He then concludes his article:

While the bones of this specimen lay bleaching on the surface, elephant herds, unmindful of the relics of their kind, must have trampled upon and scattered them. Both incisive sheaths and zygomatic arches were broken off and impelled several feet from the skull. The heavy mandible was broken into many pieces and scattered over the quarry floor. Creatures less ponderous could scarcely have crushed to flinders such heavy and resistant material. Fortunately the scattered splinters and chunks were buried, fossilized, and thus preserved. . .

The skull, mandible and certain skeletal parts lie on the sand tables in the laboratory undergoing necessary repair. Examination of the skull shows no essential parts missing or seriously damaged. Even the incisive sheaths, so commonly imperfect or wanting altogether, are essentially whole and but slightly injured. The mandible was set together temporarily with modeling clay in order that measurements and photographs might be made. When finished and mounted, this specimen will be figured and described at greater length. . . Following the collector's inviolable rule, every scrap of the skull, jaw and bones have been saved. The smaller bits will go together to make the larger ones, and finally, when the fragments are all properly assembled and cemented together, this promises to be the best mastodon skull and jaw secured as yet in this State.

Dr. Barbour made a further report in the Nebraska State Museum Bulletin 29 issued for October 1932 entitled The Skull and Mandible of Mastodon Moodiei. He tells that all of the materials have been cleaned and assembled, that "no essential parts of the skull and mandible are wanting or seriously damaged." He provides a technical description of the specimen and its condition and notes:

The mandible of the animal under discussion is unique among mastodons. It is massive

and strong, and is noticeably wide across the condyles. The two stubby tusks and the recurved rostrum lends added interest. Ordinary examples of *Mastodon americanus* are without mandibular tusks, but scattered examples called the tetracaulodont type show tusks in the lower jaw as well as the upper. The occasional recurrence of lower tusks suggests origin from a four tusked ancestry.

Later he suggests that the mandibular tusks were worn off by the animal's rough, dangling trunk and says:

This is an interesting variation of the type known as the American mastodon which flourished from the beginning to the close of the Pleistocene time, and ranged all of the United States, probably all of British Columbia and the Yukon Territory.

## GALE CHRISTIANSON'S NEW BOOK IS PUBLISHED

Our readers are familiar with Gale Christianson's biography of Loren Eiseley, Fox at the Woods Edge. By the time you read this, his new book of essays, Writing Lives Is the Devil, will be published by Archon Books. Subtitled Essays of a Biographer at Work, this collection includes thirteen essays over half of which have material about the Eiseley biography. We talked with him about these when he was here years ago when the biography had just come out and so we have waited a long time to be able to have this book. We have now been able to read the Preface and are most excited to have it published so we can discover the essays. The following teaser is taken from the book jacket:

"How can one make a life out of six cardboard boxes full of tailor's bills, love letters and old picture postcards?" asked the novelist Virginia Woolf, who once tried her hand at literary biography. "Yes," she concurred, "writing Lives is the devil."

It is also the most widely read form of historical nonfiction. Here, Gale E.

Christianson, author of the standard biographies of Isaac Newton, Loren Eiseley, and the founders of modern astronomy, writes eloquently of the subject he knows so well in thirteen essays. Ranging in tone from humorous to melancholy, they trace the complex and fascinating process of creating a biography, from the point of selecting a subject to the book's publication and review.

Rather than offer a "how-to guide," or "art of biography," Christianson delves anecdotally into what does not get into the finished biography. He makes the reader a partner to the creative struggle, to the gathering of the mounds of information, to the sifting and the winnowing, to the writing and the rewriting, to the small triumphs and the nagging doubts when commitment fails to imitate art, as seems inevitable -- nothing more and nothing less than the personal reflections of a biographer at work.

## EDITORIAL EXCAVATIONS

Gale Christianson was in town over a recent weekend and we were glad to be able to visit with him. We speak of his new book elsewhere in this issue and he tells us that his work in progress on the astronomer Edwin Powell Hubbel is only a chapter from completion.

He came here to be interviewed and to otherwise consult on the Eiseley documentary being produced by the Nebraska Educational Television Network under the able direction of Christine Lesiak. Gale was full of good things to say about the work that is being done and so we really do have something to be looking forward to. Chris tells us that the work is coming along very well and we understand that production schedule calls for having the work done this spring with initial airings scheduled for this coming fall. We have long wanted to see a television production such as this and are very grateful for the care and devotion NETV and especially Chris have poured into this effort.

The November issue of The Mammoth, newsletter of the Friends of the Nebraska State Museum, features an interview with museum

staff member Robert Skolnick, Preparator, Vertebrate Paleontology. Telling about summer field work in western Nebraska, he says:

This past summer brought a unique experience to me - acting! NETV is filming a documentary on the life of the late Loren Eiseley. . . I was asked to portray him in a non-speaking (thank goodness!) role. Decked out in a khaki wool shirt, fedora, jodhpurs, and a snazzy pair of riding boots, I spent two days being filmed in the Wildcat Hills in the Panhandle of Nebraska. . .

And a handsome photograph shows Rob standing in that Banner County landscape looking very much like the young Loren.

Over the fall months there have been three brown bag luncheon discussion programs on the University of Nebraska at Omaha campus, each featuring Campus Pastor Darrel Berg discussing an Eiseley book with Dr. Bing Chen. The books discussed were The Invisible Pyramid, The Night Country, and Darwin's Century. This fine series was sponsored by United Campus Ministries and the UNO Library and it follows a successful Eiseley book discussion series which they presented in the previous school year. We are very proud of Darrel and Bing for their good work.

The Friends enjoyed participating in the Nebraska Literature Festival held in Lincoln in the Student Union on the 18th of September. We had a table in the Book Fair. There were many sessions featuring all sorts of interesting speakers. The day began with our program presenting Dr. Michael Voorhies who spoke on "Hunting Fossils in the Wildcat Hills: Loren Eiseley's Night Country." Naomi Brill conducted a workshop on nature writing. At the end of the day we offered a tour of Eiseley's Lincoln conducted by Darrel Berg and Kira Gale while Naomi Brill stood by our Eiseley bust in the Hall of Fame of the State Capitol to greet visitors and answer questions. You will want to be sure to get a map that shows how to get to Omaha and then save September 24th for the next edition of the Nebraska Literature Festival.

We have had a nice note from Gale Carrithers, author of the book Mumford, Tate, Eiseley, Watchers in the Night, which was published by the Louisiana State University Press in 1991. He tells us that he is working on a paper to be published in a special issue of the Arizona Quarterly which will commemorate the late American critic, Joseph Riddel, and says the topic will be "Eiseley and Selfhood." We are looking forward to this and thank him for letting us know about it.

And we've learned of another paper in progress. We went to a book signing party to honor Michael Hill's new book and he told us that night that he was about to start work on a paper on the subject of Loren Eiseley as a sociologist. Mike is in the University of Nebraska Lincoln Sociology Department and we have heard him deliver fine papers on several occasions.

At this time of year Nebraskans look forward to the combined January/February issue of the NEBRASKAland Magazine because it is always a spectacular production. This time it will be of particular interest, a special issue covering archeology and paleontology in Nebraska. We do not yet know much about the specific content, but expect them to include something about the collection in Morrill Hall and to feature the Ashfall Fossil Beds. We learned of this at a museum committee meeting on the very day this is written explaining why we are a bit short on information. However, while we don't yet know how to do it, we are planning to help our out of state readers obtain copies of this issue. More will be said in the next Caravan, but meanwhile anyone who is interested can write us addressed to the return address on this newsletter and we'll take care of things.

We recently enjoyed reading an article by Kenneth Brower which appeared in a 1979 issue of Omni. He tells that he and his father, David Brower, paid a visit to Dr. Eiseley in 1965 to try to talk him into going with them to the Galapagos to help with one of the studio photographic books for which David Brower is so well known. But they were unsuccessful and had to settle for an agreement that Eiseley would write an introduction for the book.

Brower indicates that they had been using Eiseley quotations in their books; "We've ransacked him more thoroughly than any writer except perhaps Thoreau."

Besides reporting on the visit, Brower presents his impressions of Eiseley using extensive quotations from Eiseley's his best known essays.

Brower provides a wonderful picture of the man and his office:

Dr. Eiseley's office was the spacious well-appointed suite of a professor whom the university very much wanted to keep. I remember bones and stones on the desks and shelves, as I had expected. I remember lots of books. But I recall Eiseley's appurtenances less well than his voice. It was deep and resonant, the delivery unbelievably slow. I have never met anyone who spoke with more deliberation. His facial expressions were minimal, slow to surface, slow to subside. It was as if the models for his behavior were not from society, or even from biology, but from geology.

A bit later Brower speaks of "His weighty sentences, bumping like tectonic plates . . ."

We were impressed with a couple of statements which, even when pulled from the context of Brower's article, seem to stand alone and give us quite a little to think about:

For his leaps into abstraction, Eiseley liked to push off from something small, hard and particular. He was an anthropo/archeo/bioliterary Aladdin, good at finding something in the sand, rubbing it and summoning forth its genie.

And this is the other one:

His gift was to see his own planet as if it were another. He was the perpetual alien on his natal sphere. He was able to see Earth's true miracles as truly miraculous. Some sort of earthly miracle is at the core of each of his essays.

Most libraries will have back issues of Omni in their collection and if you would like to read the whole article, you can find it on page 16 of the September 1979 issue.

## **DUES REMINDER**

**1994 dues are now being received and appreciated. Remember, if you paid after September 1, 1993 you are considered paid up for all of 1994.**

**The dues structure is as follows:**

**Individual member - \$10.00  
Contributing member - \$25.00  
Supporting member - \$50.00  
Patron - \$100.00**

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