THE CARAVAN

NEWSLETTER OF THE FRIENDS OF LOREN EISELEY

Vol. 4, No. 3 FALL 1990



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

FALL MEETING

Gale Christianson, author of Fox at the Wood's Edge; A Biography of Loren Eiseley, (see Dick Herman's review within) will be in Nebraska September 16th and 17th to talk with us about his book, to sign copies, and to appear on Book Talk on Nebraska Public Radio--so join us for:

RECEPTION, BOOKSIGNING, AND CONVERSATION
WITH GALE CHRISTIANSON
SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 16TH AT 4:00 P.M.
VISITOR'S LOUNGE, THIRD FLOOR, MORRILL HALL
UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA STATE MUSEUM
UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA LINCOLN CAMPUS

AND/OR

BOOKSIGNING
GEORGE KIESER'S BOOKSTORE
312 SOUTH 15TH STREET, OMAHA, NEBRASKA
12 NOON TO 1:00 P.M., MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 17TH

AND/OR

RECEPTION, BOOKSIGNING AND CONVERSATION
(CO-SPONSORED BY BISHOP CLARKSON COLLEGE)
OMAHA PUBLIC LIBRARY
215 SOUTH 15TH STREET, OMAHA, NEBRASKA
MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 17TH, 7:00-8:30 P.M.
THE PUBLIC IS CORDIALLY INVITED TO ALL OF THESE EVENTS.

PRESIDENT'S LETTER

At long last, Gale Christianson's definitive biography of Loren Eiseley is in the bookstores and the author will be in Nebraska in September to talk with us about it. Meetings are scheduled both in Lincoln and Omaha for greater convenience of people in both areas. We hope you will be able to attend one or both--this is a red letter event! Here, at the Newsletter, we will welcome your reactions to the book and will report on them in our next issue. Good reading!

Mary Liz Jameson of Lincoln, first winner of the Loren Eiseley Memorial Scholarship Essay award and most recently Outreach Educator for the University of Nebraska State Museum, Morrill Hall, will be leaving soon for the University of Kansas at Lawrence. She received her B.S. in biological science and Great Plains Studies in 1986 and her Masters in Entomology in 1988 from the University of Nebraska in Lincoln. She will be studying at the University where Eiseley had his first teaching job--an appropriate place for an Eiseley scholar. We will miss her as a Board Member.

Our regular Spring Meeting was held April 28 at Charles Gere Library in Lincoln. Morrie Tuttle, Treasurer, reported that there were 93 respondents to our first annual Dues Appeal in January and that we are solvent. Bob Boyce, Vice President, reported on the work being done in the Heritage Room at Bennett Martin Library in Lincoln, to catalogue the Eiseley material there.

Naomi Brill, Acting President, reported on the year's activities which included working with various organizations to promote knowledge and use of Eiseley's writing in teaching on various levels. These organizations included the Friends of Nebraska literature; the Nebraska Groundwater Festival and the Nebraska Center for the Book.

Contact was renewed with Bishop Clarkson College in Omaha whose annual Loren Eiseley Memorial Award was given to Dr. Jean Watson, Dean of the College of Nursing at the University of Colorado. Darlene Ritter, Friend's member, wrote an article on Eiseley for the Leaves From a Nebraska Notebook program which places articles about Nebraska writers in weekly newspapers around the state. Burt and Marian Schultz located a monolith on which Eiseley's bust will be placed in the Nebraska Hall of Fame in the State Capitol.

The program was given by Mary Liz Jamison, Outreach Educator at the University of Nebraska State Museum, and Vicki Wood, Coordinator of the Young People's Division at Bennett Martin Library, on their teaching Eiseley's essay, "Flow of the River", to 4th, 5th and 6th grade children at the Groundwater Festival.

It has been a busy and rewarding year but, still, we are troubled with a shortage of people interested in becoming active in the work of the organization. Please think about it and volunteer your help-we need you!

Naomi Brill, Acting President

Books

Indiana State professor u

A strange,

Fox at the Wood's Edge: A Blography of Loren Eiseley. By Gale E. Christianson. Henry Holt; 517 pages; \$29.95.

The vision of a coachman steering feverishly through a storm-grained night is a Loren Eiseley literary invention. It does not leave a reader's mind.

Across the sky, lightning cracks. The electrical flare suddenly illuminates the coachman's face. One side is smooth, normal, but the other is grotesque, horrible, enraged, almost subhuman.

If intended as a large metaphor for the duality of man, this serves. As a smaller insight into how the strange, gifted boy-man from Nebraska viewed his own damaged personality, it has a certain utility as well.

Gale E. Christianson, a talented Indiana State University history professor with a special affinity toward men of science, provides the latest, largest Eiseley biography. Thirteen years after the subject's death, it likely will be the definitive biography. It is a work for which those caught in Eiseley's magic word web patiently have been waiting.

They should not be disappointed. The biographer rounds the complicated, layered man, frequently timid and indrawn but just as often a compelling baritone performer in the classroom and on the lecture stage.

A few surprises

Even for many who consider they knew Eiseley or his background reasonably well, Christianson has unearthed a few surprises. All to the good, he does not shrink from necessary judgments along the journey. Some may discover, at the end, a tincture of disappointment in Loren Corey Eiseley. He could have been still greater; if not as an artist, or a scientist, then as a human being.

Out of his ingrained paranoia, his primal consciousness, out of a permanently scarred psyche, with "a chronic case of emotional hemophilia," the anthropologist-poet created a unique, autumnal prose style. He also made — I want to think — an enduring contribution to American letters.



A crip Loren mothe tery.

It goes popular

Closin Chris

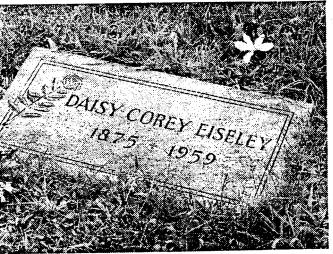
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rites definitive biography of Loren Eiseley

gifted boy-man from Nebraska



HARALD DREIMANIS/SUNDAY JOURNAL-STAR

ing home environment in his boyhood and youth left corey Eiseley with an unsoftenable hatred for his deaf **Daisy Corey Eiseley**, who is buried in Wyuka Ceme-

beyond being a transient er of science.

assessment

anson's closing assessment diseley's story can, in one laid out as that of "a shy, t backward Nebraska boy own] the path to literary he favorite image Eiseley get across publicly, "one he repeatedly in his writings, of a humble, self-deprecatar who wanted only to be own devices."

was a cover, though, the a fox. Reality differs, as the er documents.

nbering a lonely, alienating and youth in a crippling Neome environment — a pasleft him with unsoftenable r his deaf mother — Eiseley recognition and honors in prorary degrees). The word

and the scientific deed (which were negligible) were insufficient as personal satisfaction. The hunger was greater.

Late-arriving primate

This was an essayist whose writings underscore the slight footfalls of a late-arriving primate called man—and that animal's bent for arrogance and world eating—in the great cavalcade of evolutionary continuity. We are all as cosmic dust. Nevertheless, a kind of personal immortality is inferred as the artist's ambition. Perhaps as lasting as mineralized bones from the Ice Age, perhaps as evocative, but never as mute.

The chronology and architecture of Eiseley's life and career are well known among Nebraskans who unfailingly consumed his essays and poetry. The boyhood of the future Hall of Fame member was impoverished in several respects. Memories

of those days permanently etched into an uncommon sensitivity became material for subsequent retracing in prose.

Only one semester

There was only a semester at Lincoln High School, then a more congenial and rewarding University Teachers High experience. It was there that his writing talent quickly was spotted, with more encouragement and exposure during the eight broken years needed to graduate (in 1933) from the University of Nebraska (BA in anthropology and English).

Following acquisition of graduate degrees at the University of Pennsylvania, to which he later returned as a professor in 1947, never to leave, requisite faculty stops were made at the University of Kansas and Oberlin. And marriage in 1938 to the smart, stylish, confident — and, yes, noble — Mabel Langdon.

Blessedly, Christianson fleshes out Mabel's true role in this life drama. in several vital ways a supporting role that was simply pivotal. She made him famous, the biographer observes, that damaged soul who "could never get enough mothering." A friend called Mabel Loren's surrogate mother. Mabel is remembered by her own sister as being "very aggressive in getting him on with his work and into school . . . getting scholarships . . . getting people to notice his work." She believed in him, an enabler without peer. She was there at all the creations. "Mabel was his mother, sister, cousin, friend; she was his stay" is the testimony of a close companion.

Three generations

The centrality of Nebraska for Eiseley touches on three generations of men and women in the local university community, with C. Bertrand Schultz and wife Marian being the most lasting bond, through time and professional interests. There are no Eiseley loyalists today greater than Bert and Marian.

The cast of local characters themselves now memorialized include some still here, most others gone: Letta May Clark, Emery Blue, Mylan Stout, Preston Holder, Erwin Barbour, Lowry Wimberly, Bill Gaffney, Louise Pound, Rudolph Umland, Weldon Kees, John Campe, Kenneth Forward. Then there would be Clifford Hardin, Virginia Faulkner and Bruce Nicoll. And lastly Steve Sample, who unknowingly ripped opened a time-buried scab.

Nebraska novelist Wright Morris chummed with Eiseley in early Pennsylvania years. His recollections are of a writer with a sunnier, charming disposition. Morris' condolence letter to Mabel after Loren's death is itself a most affecting, memorable piece of writing. Read it slowly.

Psychological trap

For biographer Christianson, Eiseley could not escape a psychological trap: "The constant search for a father who could measure up to his every fictional ideal of a vanished Clyde, the craving of love and comfort from women who treated him as a vulnerable hero and child. The enclosed world of his Nebraska youth proved so crucial imaginatively that it set limits on the degree of his maturity, barring full entry into man's estate. The Odyssean status he so craved was an impossibility, given his failure to surrender to something larger and grander than himself."

But from such a matrix, literature was born and burnished and literature remains. Perhaps the keenest and most compressed assessment of Loren Eiseley came from his father. This was written in a letter: "Remember, the boy is a genius, but moody."

— Dick Herman

Loren Eiseley is generally recognized as one of the great nature writers. The following excerpt, reprinted in the Lincoln Journal, testifies to his position in this field of creative endeavor:

The following paragraphs were written by William Howarth, a Princeton professor of environmental literature and history. They opened an April 1 Washington Post Book World essay recalling the classics of 20th century nature writing.

In a Manhattan hotel a man awakens from troubled sleep. Alone at his 20th-floor window, he stares into the stony blackness of urban canyons, waiting for dawn. From far below a host of faint lights rises silently past him, toward the brightening sky. He is baffled, even frightened, till he grasps what he is witnessing: the first rays of the sun reflected from a thousand wings as the city's birds ascend in morning flight.

exultant, filled with unfamiliar Exalted. longings, he grips the windowsill and leans out, farther and farther, wanting only the courage to push off and follow. And then he pulls back. He finds his coat, the door and another way down, thinking as he goes "that I was, after all, only a man." This scene, a brief moment in Loren Eiseley's The Immense Journey, captures with haunting clarity the price of urban As we advance into lives spent evolution. entirely in the built environment, alienated by our ingenuity from the nurturing earth, the dream of waking and soaring in a natural world grows ever stronger.

And so does our need for the wings of nature's bards and prophets.

To some minds, "nature writers" may connote uncritical tree-worship. But the real subject of Nebraska-bred Eiseley and his literary kin is environment, the totality of human surroundings. Such writers share a deep attraction to place and the emotions it arouses. They also speak for wildness and its creatures: the rush of mountain water, the glint of light in a panther's eyes, the blueberry bush that vanishes into grizzly jaws.

The Program Notes of the Nebraska Chamber Orchestra for May 18, 1990 included the following:

PROGRAM NOTES

Black and Blues (1984) Randall Davidson Crane (b. 1953) Willy

Judgment of the Birds

"Black and Blues" takes its movement titles and its inspiration from two books by the essayist and anthropologist Loren Eiseley. Many of Dr. Eiseley's stories are set in his native Nebraska. The work was not written as program music, but the music was certainly written to evoke something meaningful. The first movement, "Crane Dancing", was inspired by Eiseley's story of a strange, accidental and comical love dance between a man and an African crane. "Willy" is an elegy for an old black man that Eiseley wrote about in his book "All The Strange Hours". Willy knew he was dying and spent hours gazing over a rickety fence at the light and movement across the way. "Judgment of the Birds" is about how a forest of small birds come to pass a judgment upon life. It is a judgment involving a black raven and the crystal note of a song sparrow.

The work was commissioned by Jeanyne and John Slettom for their two young daughters, Malena and Linnea and was premiered by the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra. There have been subsequent performance of the work in Sweden and throughout the United States. The St. Paul Chamber Orchestra has performed the work nearly two dozen times. This is the Nebraska Premiere of this work.

PLEASE NOTE . . .

We welcome comments, criticisms, material for inclusion in The Caravan, new members. If you have not yet paid your dues, send them along. \$5.00 will keep you on the mailing list for a year and include a subscription to the Newsletter.

You can become a <u>Contributing Member</u> for \$25.00; a <u>Supporting Member</u> for \$50.00; and a <u>Patron</u> for \$100.00.

Send checks to: Friends of Loren Eiseley

P.O. Box 80934

Lincoln, NE 68501-0934