

Creative Creatures

The ideas and the work of the American and European painters, songwriters, photographers, fiction and non-fiction authors, musicians, film makers, architects, designers, poets, and dreamers I met during my 20 years in America.



12 / William Least Heat-Moon, author, Columbia, Missouri

Three years ago I told William Least Heat-Moon in his face that he was the guy who had fucked up my life. He couldn't stop laughing and made me repeat it, this time on camera, for the 2010 documentary film 'Return to PrairyErth'. It was 25 years after he finished his extraordinary second book 'PrairyErth', the one he calls "a deep map" of Chase County, Kansas, this county smack in the center of the United States and the site of the last remaining tallgrass prairie. I had read it while I was still living in the Netherlands and the depth of his research and the style of his writing built up a curiosity that never diminished; so, in 1995, after Ans and I had immigrated, we went to visit the Flint Hills he had described so lovingly and eloquently. We spent many months there in the late 1990s and loved it, and we returned in 2009 to make Matfield Green our home.

I had first learned about William Least Heat-Moon in the 1980s when his first book was published to become a cult book not just in America but all over the world. 'Blue Highways' is its title—'Blauwe Wegen' in its Dutch translation, one of the many languages into which the book was immortalized. It describes Heat-Moon's journey as he circled America on the old highways, which in the times long past were colored blue on the road maps. During vacations in the American Southwest, I followed a few of Heat-Moon's trails to experience what he had experienced, only—no surprise—to make my own discoveries. He was the one who pushed me towards many intriguing destinations.

'Blue Highways' is a miracle of well-described observations and experiences. "Instead of insight, maybe all a man gets is strength to wander for a while. Maybe the only gift is a chance to inquire, to know nothing for certain. An inheritance of wonder and nothing more." I took Heat-Moon's advice and Ans and I travelled for four years without any strict itinerary and never regretted the decision. "What you've done becomes the judge of what you're going to do--especially in other people's minds. When you're traveling, you are what you are right there and then. People don't have your past to hold against you. No yesterdays on the road."

'PrairyErth' was indeed a life-changing book for me. Ans and I thoroughly investigated Heat-Moon's Chase County, found new friends there, worked on a ranch. We left and returned, left again and returned and left again. After twelve years in New Mexico, it was Chase County that became our final destination. Heat-Moon, having heard of our coming, knocked on our new home's door just after we rode into town. He appeared to be quite proud to be the one whose writing had enough force to make us Dutchies cross the ocean and live on the prairie. He proved to be as great a wine aficionado as a "topographical US travel writer"—a description which doesn't do him right, I think, because topography, although it leads him, is only one of the elements he explores, humanity being his main subject. We experienced a couple of enjoyable evenings together. "Chuck routine. Live the real jeopardy of circumstance. It is a question of dignity."

"With a nearly desperate sense of isolation and a growing suspicion that I lived in an alien land," said Heat-Moon, "I took to the road in search of places where change did not mean ruin and where time and men and deeds connected." And never did his curiosity get cured. "Some people sit around and wait for the world to poke them. Right here in this old curiosity shop of a world, they say, 'Poke me, world.' Well, you have to keep the challenges coming on. Make them up if necessary."

After 'Blue Highways' and 'PrairyErth' he wrote two more books about finding places untouched by food chains and interstate highways: 'River Horse' (about a journey across the American continent, from East Coast to West Coast, riding an old tug boat upstream on the Missouri as well as other rivers and canals); and 'Roads to Quoz', an American mosey from his home town in central Missouri to the Gulf Coast. I had trouble reading 'River Horse' possibly because it's about a water journey I have little affection with, although I heard a similar critique from a true sailor; 'Quoz' is much more lyrical and funny, by a writer who is obviously a happy man. His newest book is ready to be printed and may be "premiered" at Pioneer Bluffs, our gallery's homestead, in the spring of 2013. Another record of encounters in roadside cafés? Another search for something greater than himself? His "is a journey into the heart of a nation desperate for meaning beyond consumerism," wrote earlier critics. Heat-Moon's print is serendipity and joyous discord.

'PrairyErth' became "my bible." Now, as I am living in Chase County, it is still my book of books, although by now I have discovered many more writings about the Midwest which are (almost) as powerful and informative. Nonetheless, it is this book which is my preferred guide to the amazing world and culture of the 19th century settlers whose descendants I still meet daily in my new life.

Ton Haak, October 2012

Photo: A blue highway; photographer unknown