

Excerpted from

Rethinking Home

A Case for Writing Local History



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The Concept and the Practitioners of Local History

This book is neither a manual nor a guide to writing local history; nor is it a theoretical treatise on the nature of local history.¹ Instead, it is intended as a book that evokes fresh themes for and alternative ways of writing about home. In an era when national and international forces hold sway everywhere, I try to foster a passion for the local, for reviving those particular people, places, and events past that don't demand but nevertheless need our careful attention.

I have drawn this material from two decades of teaching at Southwest State University in Marshall, Minnesota, and from my writing and other works on southwestern Minnesota published by the Society for the Study of Local and Regional History and my own Crossings Press. While at times I write of the rural world at large, I more often focus specifically on the northern prairie, which lies between the Midwest and the Great Plains.

A theme for this book is the transformation of the countryside. Through industrial, commercial, and democratic forces, contemporary civilization has metamorphosed the landscapes and peoples it has touched. Its settlement of the prairie occurred at the end of the Civil War with the coming of the railroad. Settlement meant the digging of wells, the draining of wetlands, the building of bridges and dams, and later the construction of water and sewage systems. Additionally, settlement brought churches, schools, newspapers, police, and multitudes of peoples with aspirations to have what "every civilized person and place should have."

Each chapter of this book forms a reflection on civilization's mounting control of waters and minds. My initial chapters explore civilization's shaping of natural and human environments. Then I explore in succession the promise of new histories of the senses, emotions, the clandestine, and the irrational. I conclude with an examination of literature and ideologies as conscious creations of the countryside. I draw my examples primarily from the region of southwestern Minnesota, which spares the reader a constant change of referent while allowing me the advantage of drawing on my own writing and knowledge of a particular place.

At points I do refer to other regions in order to suggest the applicability of this book to other places, especially rural places, which, I argue, have in the past half-century lost what political and cultural autonomy they may have achieved to national or commercial agencies and ideologies. Because I have taken rural environments and life to be distinctive, I have ignored local history in the cities, despite similarities between urban ethnic neighborhoods and rural ethnic communities, and despite local history's origin in the civic and political histories of the late medieval and Renaissance Italian city-states, with the writing of such Florentine humanists as Lorenzo Valla and Niccolò Machiavelli.

I wrote this book assuming that local history requires a corresponding mutation to match the mounting metamorphosis of the contemporary landscape. Everywhere, place is being superseded and reshaped. Home, locale, community, and region—and the landscape they collectively form—have entered a stage of transformation. People everywhere live in an increasingly disembodied world, their landscapes and minds increasingly falling under the persuasion and control of abstract agencies and virtual images. Like the ecologies they modified and supplanted, human places—homes, farms, villages, and towns—have increasingly lost autonomy. Space and time, which once isolated places and assured continuity to experience and intensity to face-to-face interaction, have been penetrated, segmented, and diminished by surrounding forces and words. The coordinates of community, place, and time no longer define identities and experience or contour desires and expectations. Even walking, the most literal measure of grounded experience, has vanished from everyday life in town and on the farm.

As more and more people embrace multiple localities, the big and innovative explodes the small and the traditional. Technologies, markets, laws, and expectations disrupt, alter, and transform rural life. They have done so at accelerating rates since the middle of the twentieth century.²

Against this background of change, turbulence, transformation, and metamorphosis, I propose rethinking home and the rewriting of local and regional history.

THE CONCEPT

People of every place and time deserve a history. Only local and regional history satisfies the need to remember the most intimate matters, the things of childhood. Local history carries with it the potential to reconstruct our ancestors' everyday lives: the goods, machines, and tools with which they worked, and the groups in which they were raised, in which they matured, celebrated, had ambitions, retired, and resigned themselves to their fates. It recaptures how they experienced the world through their senses: what they thought; how they felt; what they got angry, fought, and cursed about; what they prayed for; what drove them insane; and finally, how they died and were buried.

Every community has stories worthy of telling but few devoted historians worthy of telling them. On every front, local historians encounter dramatic change in environments, materials, technologies, institutions, and bureaucracies. In such a light, local historians cannot resist asking whether their subjects constitute a brand new order of society and culture in contrast to the one that existed until about a half century ago—one characterized, as French thinker Paul Valéry has noted, by “*interchangeability, interdependence, and uniformity* in customs, manners, and even in dreams.”³ In the course of its last 150 years, civilization has been measured by multiplying desires, by consumption and production, by new laws and government agencies. The past has been displaced at dizzying rates. Traditions and mentalities have been superseded, manners and crafts extinguished. Places and locales have been overrun as suburbs, subdivisions, and malls have expanded to satisfy and satiate an ever more powerful and demanding commercial civilization. Peasants and villages—the dominant class and the crucible of human life since the agricultural revolution of ten thousand years ago—have been commercialized and nationalized, diminished and destroyed. Ways of life that were unimagined in the countryside mere decades ago are now taken as the norm.

Local history focuses on the laboratory of change. It provides facts, comparisons, and contexts—the very pilings and piers of certain human knowledge—for the abstract reaches of contemporary social sciences and

history. In the United States, historian Constance McLaughlin Green points out that “for any true understanding of American cultural development, the writing and study of American local history is of primary importance. There lie the grassroots of American civilization. . . . [There one finds] our varied population stocks and their sharply differentiated cultural inheritances, the widely differing environments and the rapidity of changes in our economic life.”⁴

Local history satisfies an innate human desire to be connected to a place. It feeds our hunger to experience life directly and on intimate terms. It serves nostalgia, which (especially when one concedes nostalgia’s political and literary cultivation and exploitation) is arguably as compelling a cultural force as the quest for progress.⁵ Fostering loyalty to a unique climate of feelings and thoughts, it honors a kind of primal attraction one has to one’s own youth—which is unique in the irreversible succession of life. In the words of early-twentieth-century French Catholic poet and essayist Charles Péguy: “One never makes friends except of the same age and time.” Our only friends are contemporaries “of the same fellowship, of the same formation, of the same society, of the same world. . . . Friends of an only time are only friends.” This singular friendship, mortal and fleeting, is a good without equivalent. It is “a cradle, a family, a people, a time, a date, an entire temporal order, of unique and irreplaceable importance.”⁶

Local history serves more than personal desire and individual nostalgia, however. It meets groups’ collective yearning to bring back to life departed people, places, and times, tempting nostalgia and commerce equally to exploit themes of inheritance and heritage with pageants, theme parks, and even real estate ventures. As Lewis Mumford pointed out, “Every old part of the country is filled with memorials of our past; tombstones and cottages and churches, names and legends, old roads and trails and abandoned mines, as well as the things we built and used yesterday. All these memorials bring us closer to the past, and, so doing, bring us closer to the present; for we are living history as well as recording it; and our memories are as necessary as our anticipations.”⁷ Local history—as I, along with my original colleagues in the history department, have discovered in a decade of teaching mandatory rural and regional courses at Southwest State University—provides the natural link between immediate experience and general history. It confirms the idea that one’s own home is worthy of study and, again in the words of Mumford, promotes “a decent self-respect,” and it is that “form of self-knowledge which is the beginning of sound knowledge about anyone else.”⁸

THE PRACTITIONERS

Local history's topics are innumerable in their combinations. They arise from the desire to know, to explain, to preserve, to understand, and to commemorate. They flow out of interest in and curiosity about one's own place of worship, business, and civic and social organizations. Like the impulses that underpin journalism, local history takes form around the wish to document single episodes, which often teem with worlds of meaning, and is imbued with a sense of proprietorship in those episodes. A violent strike, a political massacre, a wildfire, or a sunken ship—all potentially win local historians' fidelity.

Local historians are driven to piece together a cherished and intimate past. They cannot quit themselves of their curiosity. This quest supersedes any desire to write critical history and often separates that desire from the professional historian's commitment either to a structured narrative of events or to a theory of development. In fact, local historians' concern for the unique person, singular place, or particular episode challenges them to satisfy the demands of both narrative and explanation.

Local historians' interests in traditions, legends, and rituals—the physical and mental landscapes of a place—resemble those of folklore or anthropology. Yet local historians commonly eschew theory. Their fidelity is not to ideology or methodology, to complex hypotheses, subtle generalizations, or protracted debates about sources, but to details, anecdotes, and particularities. Their concern for the particular can make them parochial. They risk mistaking what is common to an entire epoch and a whole nation as singular to their own place and time. Often, local historians' love of the past leads them to discount the present. Change, if they acknowledge it at all, is judged as decline from a pristine past, from a time when the world was whole. They discard the present, which is the spur to rethink the past, and, thus, escape a reconsideration of the present. And what is history without revision?

Enamored with the static past, local museums and historical societies can become mere attics for peoples and things of bygone times. Members, though not necessarily averse to today's inventions and progress, pledge themselves to collecting, storing, and reminiscing, to duplicating and reinforcing a frozen image of the past. Endless sheets of music, hats sufficient for a dozen Easter parades, uniforms and guns from all services, band instruments, and old Coke signs can cumulatively reiterate a single redundant point: mass-produced goods, along with national signs and slogans, had a profound effect everywhere.

In all likelihood, the present condition of local history will persist as long as local historians remain oblivious to the mutation, metamorphosis, and even obliteration of the contemporary countryside. Aside from sharing with most historians a disinterest in the changing present, they lack a stimulus, a minimal theoretical apparatus, and a guiding model. The field of local history by its nature is profoundly fragmented. Think of Thomas Jefferson's hold over the Charlottesville region of Virginia. Here, local history is dominated by the biography of a single individual. Think of Petersburg, Virginia. There, place is commanded by a single battle in the Civil War. In yet other places (I think of alternating stretches along the mid-Atlantic coast), local history is subsumed by concern for a changing ecology, the rise and fall of the fishing industry, or the dominance of an emerging beach-resort industry. Conversely, in Cape May, New Jersey, all efforts, historians' included, are dedicated to preserving the town's golden age of leisure for the sake of present tourism and community.

Many places in the Midwest likewise know and express themselves in relationship to stereotypic, often idealized and sentimentalized portraits of the past. One place focuses on its early settlement days; another commemorates the coming or rule of the railroad, or thriving times prior to the First World War. Such preoccupations can distort the entire history of a place. The commemorated past can spell disregard for the present, leaving great contemporary changes unperceived and undocumented. Traces of the changing world in the village vanish daily—and local historians do not take measure of them. And, like generations before us, we fail to grasp in detail what the world makes of us.

If local history is to be renovated, it will depend on the commitment of talented amateurs seeking to understand what has and truly is happening to home. These individuals will most likely be solitary and eclectic. They may be community college teachers, people from the ranks of the burgeoning retired, or stray and odd individuals intent on grasping the place where destiny has delivered them. Certainly they will arise unpredictably. Their passion will be to fathom the singular place that has imprinted their mind with indispensable memories and a willingness to rethink home.

Proving the old saw that historiographers rarely write good history and theorists seldom conduct good practice, a new and vibrant local history will not spring from those in popular or academic quarters who appropriate locales for their sweeping views of humanity. It will not come from those who harness their stories to myths of the early settlers' tri-

umphant ordeal. Nor will it come from revisionists who turn the settlement narrative upside down by making it a hideous tale of destruction and exploitation. As practitioners of local history know, the history of one place is never quite that of another place. What they cherish is not theory and generalization, but difference and differentiation.

Yet there is a rub to repudiating theory. If local history is to be renewed, historians must first question the premises of their history. They cannot be isolated from the present and its changes. If the changing times prove worthy of their consideration at all, they must doubt the reasoning that locks place and nation in a single and progressive history. They must draw fresh inspiration from professional history, especially from the emerging field of environmental history.⁹ Also, as I hope this work will testify, fresh work in cultural history, particularly in modern and contemporary European histories, can offer novel themes and angles for local historical composition.¹⁰ Ever in need of invigorated concepts and broadened perspectives—not moral rage and metaphysical stammering—in order to provoke and excite, local historians must make sparks without appearing to grind an ax.

Local historians now find their communities caught up in a great transmutation. In the last two decades, in particular, they have found themselves bearing witness to the making of an entirely new rural order—characterized by decline, turnover, turbulence, and transformation. Local historians must recount the story of the growing penetration and dominance of outside powers over local minds and landscapes. They must describe agencies and effects of change unequalled since settlement itself; at least, that is the argument John Radzilowski and I make for Marshall and southwest Minnesota in our recent book *Community of Strangers*.¹¹

Stories of local initiative and accomplishment have evaporated in the face of state-mandated programs, population decline, and the loss of the traditional business community. The nation and its rural communities no longer seem to walk hand-in-hand into the future. Their last shared triumph, to paraphrase historian Richard Davies, was over the Great Depression, with victory over the Axis and material achievement that placed a car in every garage and a flickering television in every living room.¹²

Local historians are seldom directly preoccupied with earth-shaking events or political maneuvering, although worldwide forces continually shape their homes and communities. Their subjects are usually far more modest: a family, a house of worship, a company, a bay of sailors, a valley of farms, the coming of a new technology, the passing of a venerated

institution. It is precisely the limited focus of local history that makes it such a powerful anodyne in a mass era characterized by gigantic proportions and crushing statistics.¹³

Local historians do not court high, mighty, or even large audiences. Generally they keep their distance from the methodological fashions that pervade universities. In contrast to the exalted terrain over which academics vie, local historians hug the less sublime ground of anecdote. They often deserve their reputation for being commonplace, ho-hum, and tedious, because they concentrate on ordinary things. Not unlike social historians of everyday life, local historians pursue invisible men and women living their common lives, going about their pedestrian labors, and pursuing their daily bread and popular pleasures.

Offering a humble solace in this imperial age, local historians shape their work around items we can touch, personalities and institutions we have directly experienced. Resembling genealogies on this count, their best studies rest on precise connections. For these historians, theory always gives way to facts. At a time when encompassing ideologies and global sensibilities abound, the practitioners of local history strive to tell single stories in a straightforward manner.

For local historians, their rewards are as tangible as their subjects. They know in detail what contributions they have made by collecting, studying, and writing. They know what territories they have opened and what gaps they have filled. They know the communities their work serves. They know that their work in almost all cases is a singular, irreplaceable contribution. They are consoled to know that their publications, which rarely ever gain national or even regional notice, may outlast standard academic tomes dependent on the vagaries of academic fashions. More grandiosely, local historians can argue that their publications are indispensable contributions to the science of the singular in this age of abstraction. There is pride and pleasure in giving birth to a book about a place, community, person, or small region when society at large is agog over great ideas, startling developments, or all-embracing trends. Local historians can take satisfaction in helping to sustain a specific locale. They do what Guy Thuillier, master of French local and regional history, considers so important: they define the tissue and the memory of endangered local communities.¹⁴

Such high praise as this seldom, if ever, is heard from professional academic historians, who commonly disregard local and micro-regional history. They venture into regional history mainly to contend against a prevailing theory. The microcosm serves merely as a reflector of their

macrocosm. If they bother even to notice local and regional historians, professional historians judge them to be narrowly focused fact gatherers and eccentric storytellers, or they are irritated by the disdain that amateur local historians show for the academy's No Trespassing signs. Lacking an effective and popular national association dedicated exclusively to local history, local historians go about their business as oblivious to professional historians and their canons as professional historians are indifferent to them. (State historians and their societies commonly find local histories too narrow and eccentric to merit their support. Additionally, local history might, by approach and subject, transcend state borders and prove indifferent to prevailing orthodoxies.)

Like any passion, writing local history can bring pain and disappointment. Aside from the lack of time, money, skills, and collaborators, local historians often find themselves writing for small, poor, and diminishing audiences. And even when supported by a rare university appointment, they may not find allies among administrators, students, or faculty members, who frequently have little historical understanding of or affection for the locale. The awareness of what is *not* being done to save the history they cherish keeps local historians constant companion. As in other fields of knowledge, accomplishment is often rewarded by an escalating sense of insufficiency.

Local historians must collect and preserve the primary and secondary documents of their locale. Over time, this can turn into a pressing obligation and even a matter of despair, as time sweeps things clean. Conscientious local historians sense that they must not only provide documents for their own works but also provision subsequent generations with abundant possible evidence. They grasp that those who come after may find the past inaccessible precisely on matters that we take for granted. Who, for instance, thinks of saving the records and catalogues of the local contractor, hardware store, or chamber of commerce? Who is undertaking the study of changing patterns of travel, use of psychological services, or turnover rates in diverse local industries? Duty simultaneously binds local historians to past, present, and future.

An irrevocable fidelity to a given place, time, landscape, and community—which as an ensemble might equal a childhood or adult home—makes capturing even the most everyday images and objects a matter of conscience. Local historians worry, often compulsively, that if they do not preserve a given past, it won't survive at all. At some point, they recognize themselves and their subjects as mutually precious, fragile, and temporal. Tedious, demanding, and exhausting, local history, like a consuming

hobby, demands more work than any human can muster. Effort cannot keep pace with the desire, imagination, and conscience born of passion. Passion forces local historians to confront their finitude and mortality.¹⁵

Even as local historians shoulder the weight of their responsibility to their successors, they feel mortality strike at them from other dark quarters. The information they painstakingly research, collect, and write down won't endure forever. The living lose interest in the dead. Local historians' documents end up in dusty archives—and in the end, both the historians and their subjects vanish. How could it be otherwise, when whole civilizations—Elam, Nineveh, Babylon—fell into oblivion and remain for us but dry stones and “beautiful vague names”?¹⁶

Neither life nor work, neither memory nor the subject can last. All turns to dust in the mills of the contemporary market, state, technology, and bureaucracy. In the highest mountains of Sicily, the deepest recesses of Brazilian jungles, on this prairie, under its immense sky, change prevails. No heart secures permanence, no action assures continuity; even hope wavers with different wishes. All peripheries register the rhythms of Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, Washington, London, Paris, Rome, Tokyo, and other world-shaping cities. The river of change always spills over its banks, inundates the land, and eventually erodes even the most enduring promontories.

However, temporality does not weaken local historians' fidelity, at least as I have idealized it. On the contrary, it intensifies it. Mortality does not divest their hearts from earthly matters but rather stimulates their wish to preserve particular objects and temporal connections. They know that they have a singular duty to a singular place. They know that their work is uniquely valuable. They know themselves to be blessed in a protean age and amorphous world to offer a testimony that must be given—and that they alone, or with the help of a few friends, can do it. On this count, local history is a mission that belongs to committed and passionate amateurs.

DEFINING REGION

Local historians must stand ready to connect their locales to both immediate and distant worlds. Above all else, they must come to terms with the accordionlike notion of *region*—and its subsets, zones, belts, sectors—in order to understand the natural endowments and human actions that distinguish a place. Without this capacity, local historians will

indeed be guilty of the parochialism for which they are often cited and will fail to extend the context of their work and thus give it the significance it deserves.

Local historians should not come to this task empty-handed. In all likelihood they are acquainted with how cotton determined the fate of the American South; how the milk cow made rural New England; how corn and pigs formed the Midwest and windmills and barbed wire allowed mastery of the Great Plains. With just a smattering of European history, local historians can grasp that the concept of region has been, for more than a thousand years, adjustable and omnipresent, for it was medieval Europe that witnessed the birth of regions. Regions took form in distinct environments: mountains, woods, plains, and lowlands. They were shaped by climate, vegetation, and oceans and rivers; they were defined by agriculture, forestry, and mining. Nature largely measured out subsistence and fertility, but culture, religion, economics, and politics also drew odd and capricious borders and created lasting affinities and aversions. Fiefdoms, duchies, principalities, islands, centralizing city-republics, and even empires defined regions in the maelstrom of European events. Nowhere as much as in the Balkans did cultural diversity, historical memory, and ideologies collide, as recent events have again brutally shown.

In early-modern European history, regions existed by virtue of participation in the Mediterranean or Atlantic economies and Catholic or Protestant faiths. The Atlantic community settled the New World. The people of northern France—especially Normandy and Brittany—settled the St. Lawrence Valley, traveled the rivers of the Midwest and northern prairie and explored my own local Minnesota River system. Names such as the Coteau des Prairies and Lac Qui Parle testify to the early presence of French explorers and traders in southwestern Minnesota.

Local historians must extend their reach to grasp the multiple and evolving definitions of the concept of *region*. They must grasp its relativity. They must make themselves at home with anthropologists' varied use of the term: both the traditionally employed definition that identifies the space of tribes and customs and, more recently, the constructed Marxist-inspired reference to staking out shared spatial and material realms of "peoples without history."¹⁷ Linguists, in turn, define regions by similarities and differences in language, while demographers characterize them by numbers and types of people. Geographers place spatial boundaries around natural physiography or a region's economic resources and development, whereas historians cast temporal grids over political borders and

cultural boundaries. Local historians must also grasp how politicians and chambers of commerce are master creators of regions. On occasion, both appear to conjure something out of nothing, or next to nothing; the former can excite armies to march, and the latter can fashion lake regions, cheese lands, and wine valleys out of landscape.

A term as variable as *region* requires dexterous use. Although commonly judged to be the most myopic of all historians, local historians must draw on the works of geologists, agronomists, hydrologists, and other students of the natural and constructed world. Using contemporary geography and demography, local historians can estimate and represent the shifting forces, changing institutions, and developing cultures of their locale. Finally, with the aid of other historians, local historians can establish contexts and narratives that link their subjects to other regions and the world at large.

Of course, local historians also need all sorts of maps, charts, and graphs to accustom themselves to the variety of perspectives defining a region. Natural features such as rainfall, vegetation, geologic structures, and water sources constitute elemental determinants of place. Maps and graphs of human activity—from those recording borders of tribal lands and nation-states to those charting early settlements, waterways, railways, and drainage systems—give different views of the human constructions of the landscape. Of course, no set of spatial coordinates and quantitative indicators can represent all aspects of a given place. They simply do not capture the dynamics of change that are so pertinent to all historical inquiry, especially for historians dedicated to understanding home and place at a time when accelerating change characterizes the entire world.

LOCAL HISTORY AND REGIONAL HISTORY

Local history calls for a clarification of the relationship between the local and the regional. I treat the region of southwest Minnesota (which has no singular definition) as if it were a locale itself. I see it as a micro-region composed of nineteen counties that share a common history by virtue of being in an agricultural zone within the state of Minnesota. I conceive it (as shown on the three maps in chapter 1) as belonging to and being encompassed by yet other and larger regions, such as the tall grass, or northern, prairie, or the Prairie Lake Region. I place it at the northwestern corner of the Midwest. A borderland between prairie and plain, wet and dry lands, I suggest it is a gateway to the Great Plains.

Yet, as a region comprising roughly ten thousand square miles, it is too large to count as a locale, insofar as a locale implies a place that one experiences and knows directly. Furthermore, southwest Minnesota's geography, ecology, towns, and ethnic settlements are diverse. Its economic, political, and cultural development provide it with a varied and changing historical definition, which I admittedly transform—or even create—by the very act of writing about it.

Sometimes I treat *local* and *regional* as synonyms, whereas at other times I underline their opposition. Operating under the truism that locales belong to regions and regions are composed of locales, readers are likely to assume that locales and regions, thus local and regional history, not only have much in common but are in many cases identical. This assumption, however, falls apart on close examination.

While definitions of a locale *can* prove problematic, definitions of regions invariably do. At the extreme, in fact, regional definitions are self-contradictory. On the one hand, a region can be conceived of as an entity sharing a common geographic, economic, political, or cultural center. On the other, a region can be understood as a macro-unit, embracing whole states, nations, and even vast and diverse geographic territories in which individual locales are unlikely to share a common geography, climate, culture, government, or historical experience. The very range of its diversity becomes a part of the region's definition.

Historians can disagree on definitions of locales. A given locale can be mapped differently when classified as a location, a site, or a place, for at issue is the definitional centrality of geography, economics, cultures, or community. The history of European names suggests that in the Middle Ages, particular and modest features of a landscape—a stream, a church on a stream, a marsh, or a single tree—were significant enough to provide villages and individuals with their names. In contrast, testifying to the tremendous transformative powers of contemporary civilization, whole regions have been temporarily identified by the nation that colonized them, like French West Africa, or the industry that has exploited them, like the coal region of northeastern Pennsylvania, which has been named the Anthracite Region. At the same time, national borders divide ecological zones, as shown by the division of the grassy plains by the United States and Canada and the arid plains of the Southwest by the United States and Mexico.

The physical geography and the history of a place are not identical. A place belongs similarly but never equally to the course of nature and human events. Topography, soils, and climate define conditions and set

limits to human settlements. For instance, according to essayist and naturalist Joseph Wood Krutch, the American West begins where vegetation competes for water rather than sunlight.¹⁸ Yet the West as a region cannot be understood independently from profound and ongoing economic and political efforts to shape and transform the land and its waters to suit its human wants and needs. The degree and manner to which nature and human work seem in harmony with each other, or stand defiantly at odds, form the histories of macro-regions.

From another perspective, the definition of a place—its borders, meaning, and use—is conferred by those who discover, conquer, and map it. Old World conceptions and ambitions defined New World realities and attractions. The fate of places depends on changing motives, developing interests, and even the skills of mapmakers.¹⁹

Historians do not escape these testing problems. To delineate a region is tantamount to determining which factors, natural or human, define it. In constructing regions—whether the Mediterranean or the Great Plains—historians fabricate unities and draw divisions between places. Situating a place in a region attributes to it an environment, a way of life, a fate, and can even predicate a distinct relationship between society and nature.

Regions also rise out of contested events. French Canada belongs to the history of French colonization, the British victory in North America, and above all else, the plight of a single Canadian province, Quebec. In Ukraine, recently born as an independent nation out of the ashes of the Soviet empire, local history thrives as fresh potentials are perceived and novel identities are required. All regions are subject to reinterpretation as events and politics mutate and elite groups foster fresh ideologies. All historians to a degree both record and invent pasts and presents for peoples, places, regions, and nations. They are makers of place and home.

In the hands of its definers, a region can be a micro- or a macrocosm. Environmentalists may equate a region with a distinct ecology or with one of its physical attributes, such as a chain of mountains, a body of water, or the specific mixture of them.²⁰ While some traditional practitioners identify regions with a combination of ecology and historical interaction, as in the cases of New England, the Southwest, the Midwest, and the Pacific Coast, other historians drape regions in timely ecological and environmental garb. They equip regions ethically and ethnically to fit their yearnings for yesteryear and their politics for tomorrow.

Historians of macro-regions like the West (such as Donald Worster, Richard White, and Patricia Limerick) create narratives to match vast

historical processes.²¹ They invent moral narratives and agents to express nation building, the expansion of democracy, and the establishment of new economic and industrial orders. The aim of their regional histories is to reflect critically the transformations of society and nature. Localities and micro-regions become forgotten stars in the movement of such immense heavens.

Local historians make a different use of the concept of region. They use it principally as a backdrop for their stories of places. Imprecise about where the surrounding region ends or begins, let alone how it fits into the nation, they articulate smaller, even minuscule, regions. They speak of micro-regions, such as a zone where two rivers join or one divides, where one or two crops controlled the economy for a century, or where a particular industry, such as iron mining, commanded life and settlement. The micro-region provides a kind of mediating identity between a collection of places and localities that have contact and share a common experience and yet are shaped (as all contemporary locales are) by an expanding metropolis, the history of the state, or the fate of a nation.

The need for a sense of place (as real and constructed) intensifies as impinging nations, economies, technologies, and ideologies get larger, more complex, and increasingly abstract.²² In the last three to four decades in Europe, regionalism, despite moves toward overall unification, has exploded. Micro-regionalism does more than criticize centralization and excess taxes. It ignites passions, warms souls, and peddles politics. It also sells wine, cheese, and a lot more. The tourism industry often adds a picturesque distant past to eclipse a failed present. It sells stories of yesteryear's bandits in the mountains of Sardinia and train trips across the North American plains. Frequently, local and regional historians, with the goading of the chamber of commerce, conspire to provide local color and culture to freshly created places. Historians have yet to deliberate on the possibilities of creating electronic regions out of interactive Web pages—nor have they begun a fully critical discussion of how much “tradition” and “place” are recent creations.²³

Wise local historians—I hope—will grasp all this. They will not sacrifice locale to region or region to locale. In fact, this conceptual complexity will lead them to a timely reformulation of home and place. It will enhance their sense as makers of places—as creators who must toggle between the immediate givens of place and experience and the profound influence of state, nation, and world. They will learn to use the notion of region—so important to contemporary environmental and

economic history—to write their histories of individual places. Although complex issues lie outside their doors, they will not allow methodical argument and moral disputation to devour home and its stories. Even when perplexing theory, contradictions, and ambiguity nip at their heels, they must pursue their own path among details and particularities. They persist in their duty of getting right the names, places, deeds, motives, associations, circumstances, and events of a chosen place. This is the labor and reward of rethinking home.