

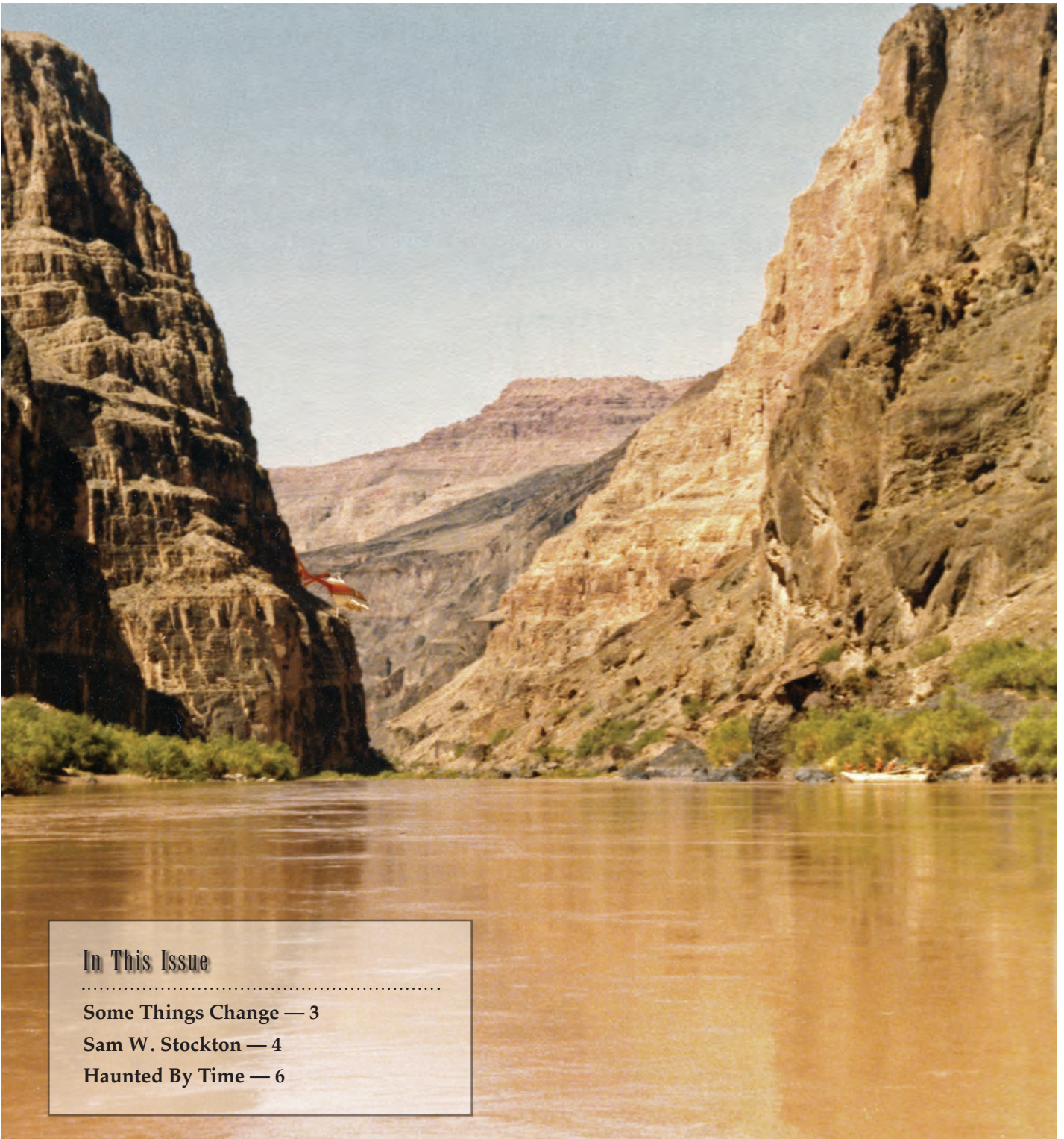
The Ol' Pioneer

The Magazine of the Grand Canyon Historical Society

Volume 25 : Number 2

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Spring 2014



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President's Letter

Anyone involved with a historical society such as ours will from time to time, deal with the passing of certain individuals who contributed something to that history, or perhaps to our personal attachment to a place like Grand Canyon. Death is an inevitable part of life and all of us will travel that rarely anticipated road one day. But when it happens to a cherished friend or colleague with whom you shared many adventures, it can seem especially painful or ill timed.

So it is for the Grand Canyon community when we learned of the passing of Mike Verkamp in late February. Mike of course, was a member of one of the most famous pioneer families at Grand Canyon and Karen Grieg has contributed something about Mike in the March / April edition of the GCHS Bulletin. In December, I learned that former NPS Inner Canyon mule packer Stan Stockton suffered a heart attack and passed away at this home in Hotchkiss, Colorado on November 17, 2013. Stan was 72 years old and had a personality that seemed invincible. He served as a mentor to me in my backcountry ranger days in the mid 1970s. More important, he loved the Grand Canyon as much as anyone I have ever known. His passing came as a shock to everyone who knew him, as his life was so energy charged and forthright. I have tried to honor the memory of Stan Stockton in writing an obituary to him. I wanted to write much more about Stan's life but he left us too soon, taking much of his personal history with him to the great "mule corral" in the sky.

With these recent passings, it makes it all the more evident how critical it is for each of us to do what we can to help preserve the history of Grand Canyon, especially the personal stories of connection to it. Each of us who calls this place "home" has a unique bond to the canyon, which may be similar in the very broad outline but unique in the details. I felt that I knew Stan but as I sat down and attempted to tell his story, I realized just how much of his basic narrative was missing. No one seems to recall when he arrived or when he left, and those details may now be lost to time and the winds. How sad that someone who was so deeply touched by and involved with the canyon will not have their story recorded and held sacred by all who follow.

These thoughts should give all of us a stronger desire to see the society's new Oral History Project up and running. It is a venture that I know will equal or exceed the importance of our famous History Symposium. We simply must be at the forefront of preserving the stories that connect people to the Grand Canyon. Our Secretary, Tom Martin, has been most instrumental in getting this project off the ground and has already conducted interviews with some true Grand Canyon All-Stars. As we have recently said goodbye to some cherished friends, let us recommit ourselves to preserving and telling the story of those whose lives have been captured and touched by the Grand Canyon of the Colorado River.

Wayne Ranney
GCHS President



The Ol' Pioneer submission deadlines are roughly the first of January, April, July, and October.

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Cover: Looking downstream from just above Lava Falls Rapid.
Photo by Charles Luttrell, circa 1978.

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The Historical Society was established in July 1984 as a non-profit corporation to develop and promote appreciation, understanding and education of the earlier history of the inhabitants and important events of the Grand Canyon.

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Editor: Mary Williams

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Some Things Change

by Jean Luttrell

Last week while cleaning my office and sorting through files I found a story written by my son and me in 1978. Actually this story was a cooperative endeavor written by both of us based on his account of a hike into the Grand Canyon. This was the first time we wrote as a team, but not the last time. In 1999 we wrote a boating safety book, *Heavy Weather Emergencies*, together and for many years Chuck has been my illustrator and my inspiration. Most recently Chuck wrote—*The Making of a Ranger*—about his first assignment as a ranger at Shivwits on the north rim of the Grand Canyon and his experiences in two other National Parks.

When I read his story written 36 years ago I noticed that a number of things have changed over the years. A few of these changes:

- No longer can a couple of youngsters, or anyone for that matter, hike into the canyon without a permit.
- Helicopters are not permitted to fly into the canyon and shuttle rafters back to civilization after five days on the river.
- The friendly ranger, John Riffey, who advised Chuck, is gone.
- And today Chuck certainly could not hike down to the river and back to the rim in one day.

Here is our story as written in July 1978.

* * * * *

GRAND CANYON'S LAVA FALLS "TRAIL" *Text and photo by Charles Luttrell*

Lava Falls is located at Toroweap Overlook in Grand Canyon National Park and the hike down to the river here is not a Sunday stroll. In blistering heat, which often reaches 120 degrees in the summer, my brother and I slipped and slid over the volcanic rocks that centuries ago spewed from Vulcan's Throne on the canyon's rim.

The name Lava Falls refers to the fact that thousands of years ago molten rock rolled like a waterfall into the Grand Canyon. The first lava flow was a little more than a million years ago and some of the more recent ones were only about 35,000 years ago.

Major John Wesley Powell (the first man to boat through the Grand Canyon) commented when he saw this formation. "What a conflict of water and fire there must have been here: Just imagine a river of molten rock running down into a river of molten snow. What a seething and boiling of the waters; what clouds of steam rolled into the heavens."

Geological evidence shows that over a period of hundreds of thousands of years there were three main flows of lava which filled the Grand Canyon at this point to a depth of about 600 feet.

But the mighty Colorado River was not to be conquered by those eruptions. It only paused, gathered its forces and then plunged on toward the ocean. Slowly, but persistently the river eroded the volcanic barrier until all that remains are the lava rocks cascading down one wall of the canyon and the jumble of boulders at the bottom, which make up the dangerous Lava Falls Rapids.

If you are in top physical condition and are looking for solitude, pristine beauty and a real challenge, then I recommend the hike down the Lava Falls to the Colorado River. To reach the jumping off place, you travel highway 89 to Fredonia, Arizona, then turn onto highway 389. About 9 miles from Fredonia you turn left onto a narrow dirt road, number 59. Some 60 miles later you are at Toroweap Overlook and the beginning of the Lava Falls.

The best time for this hike is either early spring or late fall. It is important to check with the Park Ranger before starting down and be sure to carry plenty of water. There is no water until you reach the river at the bottom.

My brother David and I drove to the edge of the canyon where the Lava Falls "Trail" begins. I place the word trail in quotations because there really is no trail. In fact, everyone who has made this trip seems to have had his own idea about where the trail should be and have built rock cairns to mark their version of the correct route.

Threading our way between rocks, cactus and flower-covered ocotillo we hiked over the ledges of rim rock to the main lava flow. Then we went straight down the lava flow, heading for two tall rock mounds called the Pinnacles.

Following directions given us by Ranger John Riffey, we kept to the left of the Pinnacles and entered the Chute. This part of the trail is a steep gully about ten feet wide with sides from 10 to 30 feet high. It is carved in white rock and the bottom of the Chute is covered with loose cinders and rocks washed down from above. Going down, your feet have a tendency to slip out from under you. Because of this, I began to wonder if perhaps the name was spelled, "Shoot."

Suddenly, as we made our way downward, we began to hear wild cries of boaters going through the Lava Falls Rapids. The voices of the river runners echoed up and down the canyon and even though we could not see them, we shared their joy and excitement. In fact, at that moment a dream was born. A dream that we would someday conquer the Lava Falls Rapids.

Coming out of the Chute, we saw before us boulders, a narrow sandy beach, chocolate-colored water and on the far bank (looking completely out of place) a group of tourists. These people, drinking beer and resting on lounge chairs watched as we clambered down to the water's edge. This tour group of about 50 men and women had just made a five day boat trip down the river and were waiting for helicopters to lift them 3,000 feet

to the canyon's rim.

One man called to us, asking where we were from. He was probably wondering from what insane asylum we had escaped. When he was satisfied that we weren't lost or in trouble, our friend in that other world returned to his easy chair.

The current here is too treacherous for swimming, but David and I waded out into the water to cool off. It was cold and felt good.

Near the beach were three large boulders leaning together to form a small cave. In this shelter we ate sandwiches and watched as the helicopters took people, who had never really left it, "back to civilization."

And we planned our trip down the Colorado River. No commercial river boat party for us. Rather David and I visualized ourselves floating along on rubber rafts and backpacking along the water's edge. However, before making this dream trip it will be necessary to get a permit from the National Park Service, and only a few of these permits are issued to private individuals.

Finally the last tourist, lounge chair and beer can was loaded into the helicopter and the solitude and beauty of the canyon were ours to enjoy. Remembering the excited cries of the river runners going through Lava Falls Rapids, we hiked downstream

to see the churning water. If only we had been there that morning! Roaring water! Bucking rafts! What a sight that must have been!

Next we faced the arduous climb back to the canyon rim. What had taken less than two hours going down, turned into more than six hours hiking back up.

On the canyon rim, before starting home I paused for one last look—down, down to the river. I now appreciated the view more than ever.

* * * * *

Some things change—but some things don't,

Stan W. Stockton — NPS Packer

Stanley Walter Stockton, former NPS Inner Canyon mule packer, passed away at this home in Hotchkiss, CO on November 17, 2013. Stan was 72 years old and is survived by his loving wife of 25 years, Margaret Ann Stockton (McGinnis); two daughters, Leslie Bazzi of Corvallis, Oregon, and Shannon Stockton of Fernley, Nevada; one sister, Marji Smith of Ferndale, Calif.; four grandchildren; and two nieces.

Stan was born on March 5, 1941 in Eureka, Calif., where he graduated from high school and later served his country in the U.S. Navy. Stan loved the Grand Canyon and spent his eight-plus years here extolling its many qualities in his sometimes gruff but always alert and alive manner. He loved turning young people, who came into his orbit, into passionate advocates for the protec-



tion of Grand Canyon National Park. He would often take it as a matter of personal responsibility to insure that newly hired Inner Canyon rangers were well-versed in the art of properly engaging the traveling public, who sometimes would illegally bring dogs into the inner canyon, establish camp fires, or evade the newly-established

camping permit system. Stan would seek out these new hires, take them under his wing, and inform them that when they encountered any illegal activity, that they should not call attention to any violation without first inquiring how their hike was going or how they liked the Grand Canyon. He personally told me that this conversation

should go on for 15 minutes or more. Stan encouraged us to downplay the enforcement role in such situations and attempt to engage

and inform such visitors as to the purpose and need for such regulations. Foremost, he told us, make friends for Grand Canyon National Park. His approach yielded huge and surprising dividends in my many encounters during three seasons as a backcountry ranger.

Stan also was involved with the removal of feral burros in Grand Canyon in the late 1970s and a picture of him, apparently giving mouth-to-mouth resuscitation to a tranquilized burro, was published in the July, 1978 article on Grand Canyon in National Geographic Magazine. Stan was a lifelong conservationist and felt strongly that the burros were a nuisance in the Park and worked tirelessly to have them removed. His skills as a hunter were invaluable in this regard and although most of the burros were eventually removed by non-lethal means, Stan's goal of seeing them gone from the inner canyon was eventually realized.

Richard Ach, editor of the former Grand Canyon Sama (the visitor newspaper) called him, "Stan Stockton National Monument." Rocky Harrison, a former park biologist, relates another

story of how Stan tested new hires at the Park. She was hired for the burro removal project and was scheduled to ride a horse into the canyon with a “ranger.” Stan put her on a mount called Chuckles, so named because the animal rode so rough that it would make any wrangler chuckle at the discomfort of their dude. Rocky was an experienced rider and loved riding Chuckles, and so had the last laugh on Stan. They became lasting friends and she ultimately hired him to work for her Alaskan hunting business.

The personal letter of support I received from Stan upon my ultimate termination from the NPS remains one of the most important letters I have ever received from anyone in my life. Were it not for Stan’s undying devotion to the Grand Canyon and his unwavering support to all who came under its spell, I might today reside somewhere else with only a hazy memory of my “short” time here. The Grand Canyon lost a true friend when Stan Stockton passed away but his affection and love for this place lives on in all of us who were fortunate to have met this amazing man—Stan Stockton National Monument.



Above: Stan leading another pack train in the canyon. Below: Working with feral burros during their removal in the late 1970s.



Haunted By Time: British Writers Discover the Grand Canyon

by Don Lago

When the Grand Canyon was opened to mass tourism in 1901, Americans did their best to turn the canyon into a national icon. But the canyon itself was oblivious to patriotic pride, and it offered itself to any human who was ready to find beauty and meaning in it. The canyon was soon world-famous and began drawing international visitors. Many of them were British, and this included some of Britain's leading writers. These writers proved Carl Sandburg's observation that each person sees themselves in the Grand Canyon, for the writers' reactions to the canyon were quite personal and varied. But the writers were seeking in the canyon something universal, an ultimate revelation of nature, a source of meaning for human lives.

At the start of the twentieth century most American writers still looked up to British literature as being more sophisticated than American literature, but this was probably not true when it came to perceptions of the Grand Canyon. For three centuries the American encounter with wilderness had been one of the central elements of the national experience. While many American novelists tried to imitate British novels of high-society manners, it was the novels that encountered the forces of nature—*Huckleberry Finn*, *Moby Dick*—that endured. It was Thoreau's personal encounters with living nature that eclipsed Emerson's sermons on abstract Nature. Britain had long ago been tamed and urbanized; British novelists were preoccupied with British society; and an elite British education placed a fog of abstract ideas and cultural self-references between a writer and nature. But British culture did include the rich traditions of Romanticism, with its reverence for nature, and much of this tradition had

been created by the British. With this mixture of intellectual tradition and a lack of personal experience with a powerful wilderness, British writers tried to figure out the Grand Canyon. They saw it as a source of order, beauty, peace, and perhaps divinity.

For three British writers, John Galsworthy, J. B. Priestley, and Vita Sackville-West, the Grand Canyon was especially meaningful.

John Galsworthy won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1932, only the third British author to win it. He won mainly on the strength of his series of novels called *The Forsyte Saga*, which began with *The Man of Property* in 1906; they portrayed the sordid realities behind the public face of a proper, upper-class British family. While many British novels dealt with class issues, they were usually written by authors, like Dickens, who were on the outside and looking in. John Galsworthy was an upper-class insider who pulled back the curtain on his own world for all to see in rich, scandalous detail. In 1967 the BBC turned *The Forsyte Saga* into a 26-part television series, and the audience response was so positive that the BBC created *Masterpiece Theater* to continue this idea of TV literature.

John Galsworthy wrote *The Forsyte Saga* not out of sociological sympathies for the poor, but from strong personal anger at the rich. As a young, single man Galsworthy fell in love with a woman, Ada Cooper, who would become the center of his life. But Ada was already married to John's cousin. It was an empty marriage to a nasty man, but she was trapped by British propriety. John was tortured to see Ada abused and humiliated by her husband, who wore the public mask of upper-class respectability and righteousness. As John and Ada conducted a years-long, semi-secret relationship, John too was subjected

to the hypocrisies and meanness of upper-class society.

John was pursuing a career as a novelist, against his father's wishes that he go into a respectable business or legal career. John's father sent him on an around-the-world sea voyage, hoping to encourage John to take an interest in maritime law, but by chance John met a young Polish seaman named Joseph Conrad, who was also aspiring to be a novelist, and the two encouraged each other and became lifelong friends. Ada too encouraged John's writing, another source of his loyalty to her. John's first novels were flat, full of unreal characters and stereotyped plots. But when John began writing the story of Ada and her husband and himself and their social world, the writing was full of passion and strong characters and events. Eventually Ada got a divorce and she and John married. By 1912, the year John and Ada visited the Grand Canyon, Ada had been the center of his world for nearly two decades. But now their marriage was threatening to fall apart. The fate of their marriage would be decided at the Grand Canyon.

The Man of Property made John Galsworthy famous—and made him interesting to other women. At age forty-four, a typical age for a male midlife crisis, John fell for a beautiful, nineteen-year-old actress and dancer, Margaret Morris, and she fell for him. Morris, who learned dance from the brother of Isadora Duncan, would go on to a major career as a dancer and dance teacher. Margaret Morris had a vitality Ada Galsworthy had never had. The attraction between John and Margaret was chaste but intense enough that he was almost ready to abandon Ada. Ada was very hurt, and her already-frail health imploded. John was very conflicted. All he could decide, quite abruptly, was to take Ada abroad and place some distance

between himself and Margaret. From France he wrote to Margaret that seeing Ada tortured was torture to him, and that he and Margaret must give each other up. But he was still in love with Margaret, and still conflicted, and his frequent letters to Margaret left her hoping. Then he booked passage to New York City, where one of his plays was being produced, and from there he and Ada would catch a train to the West and the Grand Canyon. The desert might be good for Ada's health.

At the canyon John Galsworthy wrote in his diary: "Morning and afternoon, walking and gazing at that marvelous, mysterious, beautiful, rhythmic piece of shifting form and colour." And the next day: "Rode with A. down into the Canyon on mules. Seven hours' steep riding. Interesting, but better to stay on the top. Sublimity is lost as you go down."¹ Sublimity could also be lost as you go down from looks into a love affair.

In a letter from El Tovar John wrote to Margaret:

This Grand Canyon of Arizona is the greatest sight in the world. It is one of those few wonders of Nature that are real masterpieces of art—as if every line, hollow, dome, shadow, and hue had been designed in subordination to a tremendous theme. It has the emotionalizing rhythm of great art...The first effect is almost crushing so that you feel your life—man's life—of no importance whatever. The second feeling, and that which stays with you, is that of exaltation, for you perceive that this stupendous thing before you is the result of the same forces at work in yourself and cause you to live your life and do your work in the way you must and do do it. In other words that you are a midget representation of this inspiring marvel before you and you get a sense of cosmic rhythm and Deity which one is always looking for and so seldom catches.

I've seen a few other sights in my time that give me something of the same sense of Unity...But none of them can touch this for

sheer grandeur of form and colour. I will give the rest of America for this sight.²

In comparing himself with the canyon and looking for a greater power there, John seemed to be seeking an ideal, a moral compass, something larger and truer than his own limitations and desires. It was now, John later told his nephew Rudolf Sauter, that he made up his mind about Ada and Margaret. Galsworthy's biographer Catherine Dupré interpreted the psychology of this decision:

It was also here, according to Rudolf Sauter, as he stood at the edge of the Grand Canyon, that John finally resolved to be faithful to Ada. Until this moment the issue was, in his own mind at least, not quite decided; to have Margaret as well as Ada was now obviously impossible; to take Margaret with all her youth and vitality for his own—could he inflict this final devastating wound on Ada? For his happiness, even for his fulfillment as a writer, it was perhaps the obvious course; Margaret could give him the freedom he needed to develop his talent and explore the depths within himself. To live with Ada must be to accept the essential superficiality and limitations of her character... Now, as he viewed the marvelous landscape of the Grand Canyon... he was struck perhaps by his own insignificance, by the comparative unimportance of his own suffering; one is 'a midget representation of this inspiring marvel before you and you get a sense of cosmic rhythm and Deity which one is always looking for and so seldom catches.'³

John cut off his relationship with Margaret and remained with Ada for life, though they would never again be as close as before. Margaret would never stop loving John.

If John needed any further symbolism of the smallness of human

lives against nature's power, he soon heard about the sinking of the *Titanic*. John and Ada had been booked to return to England on the second voyage of *Titanic*.

Later that year John wrote an essay, "Meditation on Finality," that was framed by his Grand Canyon visit. On the surface the essay is a rather abstract musing on art and literature, but when we know of John's personal turmoil at the canyon, the essay's discussion of the human dislike of uncertainty suggests more personal meanings:

In the Grand Canyon of Arizona...Nature has so focused her efforts, that the result is a framed and final work of Art... Having seen this culmination, I realize why many people either recoil before it, and take the first train home, or speak of it as a "remarkable formation." For, though mankind at large craves finality, it does not crave the sort that bends the knee to Mystery. In Nature, in Religion, in Art, in Life, the common cry is: "Tell me precisely where I am, what doing, and where going! Let me be free of this fearful untidiness of not knowing all about it!"⁴

Later in the essay Galsworthy describes a scene of romantic tie and trial:

Traveling away, I remember, from that Grand Canyon of Arizona were a young man and a young woman, evidently in love. He was sitting very close to her, and reading aloud for pleasure, from a paper-covered novel, heroically oblivious of us all: "'Sir Robert', she murmured, lifting her beauteous eyes, 'I may not tempt you, for you are too dear to me!' Sir Robert held her lovely face between his two strong hands. 'Farewell!' he said, and went out into the night. But something told them both that, when he had fulfilled his duty, Sir Robert would return..." He had not returned before we reached the Junction, but there was finality about that

baronet, and we well knew that he ultimately would.⁵

Ada's health did benefit from the desert climate, and she and John returned to Arizona or California for several more winters, staying at guest ranches. In 1926 John and Ada were touring America with his nephew Rudolf Sauter and his wife Violet. Rudolf recalled:

...in later life, my uncle became more and more allergic to sight-seeing, avoiding all but the most cursory visits to the subjects that appear in travel-brochures. But there was one place which he and Ada had visited before and which they said must on no account be missed; this was the Grand Canyon of Arizona.⁶

Rudolf, an artist, was thrilled by the canyon, and the Galsworthys and Sauters stayed at El Tovar for three weeks so that Rudolf could paint the canyon. During their stay John Galsworthy and Violet Sauter arranged to go horse riding on the canyon rim. Rudolf recalled:

'Out-West', all English folk had a reputation for being superb horsemen...So, when word got about that John Galsworthy himself was visiting the Canyon, stables prepared in advance their best animal, feeding him oats for a week, to ensure that the V.I.P. should have a first-class ride. It was known, too, that he preferred an English saddle and one was specially furbished up.

When the horses were brought round for him and Vi, she naturally climbed into the Western saddle to which she had become accustomed...by some mischance the saddles had been switched.

Off they went together without any feeling of unease. But it was not long before Vi's horse, delighted (as it would seem) to be relieved of my uncle's prospective weight, proceeded to run away with her along the rim of the canyon, weaving in and out among the trees at full gallop,

with a drop of several thousand feet below—a very white-faced but helpless uncle following as hard as he could on what was so evidently was the staid animal. Much to his relief, the rarefied air at 6,000 feet eventually brought the horses to rest before disaster occurred; and they were able to make their way back in more sober fashion—to the hotel, already in an uproar of anxiety (for the mistake had become known). Vi's 'stock' as a horsewoman soared sky-high, so that in future she was always given their trick mule for rides down canyon trails...⁷

Rudolf also recalled:

The awe with which my uncle regarded the canyon was never too great to prevent him from looking at it with an air of detached speculation. I can see him now, sitting on the terrace drinking coffee after lunch, in front of what is one of the world's most amazing phenomena, and proceeding to calculate how long it would take a golfer, teeing up on the terrace and driving out over space, to fill the canyon with golf balls—somehow managing to invest the absurd problem with a kind of cosmic significance.⁸

After John and Ada Galsworthy had benefited from their winters in Arizona, John recommended Arizona to his friend J. B. Priestley. In the 1930s Priestley was becoming one of Britain's leading novelists and playwrights. But Priestley's wife Jane was not thriving in London's cold, damp winters, and her doctor told her to find a warmer and drier refuge. Priestley's first wife had died of cancer when he was twenty-nine years old, leaving him with two children, so he was ready to go the distance for the sake of his second wife's health. The Priestleys spent the winters of 1934-35 and 1935-36 in Wickenburg, Arizona, famous for its rustic guest ranches. The next year they tried Egypt, but J. B. Priestley discovered that he cared about nature more than human

artifacts: "No strange emotions, no magical memories of other existences, disturbed my mind as I stared at the Pyramids or the Sphinx...Nothing really happened inside my mind; there was no genuine *click*. I felt more in one minute when I first looked into the Grand Canyon than I felt during all those weeks in Egypt."⁹

The next winter, they returned to Arizona. Priestley had become fond of their Wickenburg guest ranch, whose owners had built a hut beside the Hassayampa River just for him to use as a writing studio. But mostly he loved the desert, and the Grand Canyon. Priestley had imagined that Wickenburg would be a good base from which to travel to Hollywood to do some film writing, but he found Hollywood even less genuine and magical than Egypt, and Hollywood made him appreciate the desert even more. Priestley wrote a memoir about his Arizona stay of 1935-36, *Midnight on the Desert*, and its concluding section on the Grand Canyon has become a favorite source of quotes for Grand Canyon books, calendars, and park-ranger programs.

In the first two pages of *Midnight on the Desert*, Priestley explains why he is there:

The New World! It seemed to me the oldest country I had ever seen, the real antique land, first cousin to the moon. Brown, bony, sapless, like an old man's hand. We called it new because it was not thick with history...Man had been here such a little time that his arrival had not yet been acknowledged. He was still some season's trifling accident, like a sudden abundance of coyotes or cottontails. The giant saguaro cactus, standing like a sentinel on every knoll, was not on the lookout for us, had not heard of us yet, still waited for trampling dinosaurs... The country is geology by day and astronomy by night. It offers a broad view of what is happening generally in the solar system, with no particular reference to Man.¹⁰

This image of timelessness was a

powerful image for J. B. Priestley. Priestley was a man haunted by time and tempted by the possibility of timelessness. His most famous plays and novels dealt with time-haunted people, the nature of time, and the possibility that the past was redeemable, or not really gone. Priestley's longing for timelessness was at the core of his fascination with the Grand Canyon.

Perhaps J. B. Priestley's obsession with time and timelessness began with personal losses, the loss of his mother soon after his birth, reemphasized by the loss of his first wife. But it was World War One that left Priestley with a powerful consciousness of shattered time and lost futures. Priestley was twenty years old in 1914, the age when most young men feel themselves to be striding into a glorious future. Britain too was confident of its future, and the whole human race was confident of Progress of one sort or another. But 1914 brought the Great War, and after his years in the trenches, being wounded, and seeing his friends killed, Priestley returned to a Britain where the bright future had vanished. Priestley was too realistic to indulge in false nostalgia for some idyllic past, and with his working-class background and socialist sympathies Priestley wasn't longing for the lost glories of the British Empire, but like much of his generation he felt a powerful sense of being robbed of time and possibilities and hope. In his 1946 autobiographical novel *Bright Day* Priestley shows himself looking back from 1946 to 1914: "When all allowance has been made for my youth and innocence, I am certain these people lived in a world, in an atmosphere, that I have never discovered again since 1914, when the guns began to roar and the corpses piled up."¹¹ Priestley generalized this sense of loss and blamed Time itself: "I hate that beastly clock in the corner...I feel it's just ticking us away." Priestley used similar lines about life-robbing clocks in his plays and in *Midnight on the Desert* when he discussed the Grand Canyon. At Phantom Ranch Priestley went for a walk along Bright

Angel Creek, and he puzzled over why this was the most powerful memory of his Phantom Ranch stay:

All this and more came back to me now, yet the little walk I had up the creek that first evening remained the dominant memory and I found myself constantly returning to it. I remembered very little of what I must have seen...No, all that remained was the quality of that hour, the deep satisfaction, the peace. My memory clung to it as if every step I had taken along that path had been set to exquisite music. The time value was queer, perhaps significant. It lasted hardly any ordinary time at all, at most an hour, yet...it seems to have had more real time in it than some whole years of hurrying and scurrying I have had. Or you can say, with equal truth, that it had a timeless quality; there were no ticking clocks gnawing it away.¹²

Priestley's longing for timelessness attached itself to two metaphysical theories about time. In 1927 Priestley discovered the book *An Experiment with Time* by British aeronautical inventor J. W. Dunne. Dunne argued that time was not one-directional but that the past and future existed simultaneously and eternally. In dreams humans could occasionally break through the illusion of linear time and glimpse the future or past; immortality consisted of permanently merging with endless time. During his *Midnight on the Desert* winter in Arizona, Priestley discovered *A New Model of the Universe* by the Russian mystic P. D. Ouspensky, who agreed that linear time is an illusion and who offered his own theory that time is an eternal, six-dimensional spiral, on which humans could transcend their flaws and become perfect and eternal. Priestley was enthralled with these ideas, and they inspired several plays. Sailing from Los Angeles to Britain after his Arizona stay, he plunged into writing the play *I Have Been Here Before*, and right after that, *Time and the Conways*. As with his later and most

popular play, *An Inspector Calls*, these plays combined family or love stories, twilight-zone moments of strange time, and longings and recognitions of lost or future time. Priestley's enthralment with these metaphysical ideas about time soon entangled itself with the Grand Canyon. In his 1964 book *Man and Time*, a coffee-table book about how human cultures have related to time, Priestley said that his first visit to the Grand Canyon, during his 1934-35 stay, offered proof of the reality of precognitive dreams:

The...dream belongs to the middle 1920s. I found myself sitting in the front row of a balcony or gallery in some colossal vague theater that I never took in properly. On what I assumed to be the stage, equally vast and without any definite proscenium arch, was a brilliantly colored and fantastic spectacle, quite motionless, quite unlike anything I had ever seen before. It was an unusually impressive dream, which haunted me for weeks afterward.

Then in the earlier 1930s I paid my first visit to the Grand Canyon, arriving in the early morning when there was a thick mist and nothing to be seen. I sat for some time close to the railing on the South Rim, in front of the hotel there, waiting for the mist to thin out and lift. Suddenly it did, and then I saw, as if I were sitting in the front row of a balcony, that brilliantly colored and fantastic spectacle, quite motionless, that I had seen in my dream theater. My recognition of it was immediate and complete. My dream of years before had shown me a preview of my first sight of the Grand Canyon.¹³

Priestley was being too generous to his memory of this event, for in *Midnight on the Desert* he had described the same event much more tentatively:

After I had spent several hours, staring at it from various viewpoints, I had a growing feeling that I had seen it before...

it was only after I had spent some time looking at it that I began to ask myself why I should feel that somehow once before I had stared at this scene and more or less as I was doing it now, across and down from some high place. Then at last I remembered. Some years before I had had a dream...¹⁴

Yet for Priestley the Grand Canyon meant far more than just evidence for his metaphysical ideas about time. He was also ready to see geological time there, and he saw it more vividly than most writers:

This incredible pageantry of sunlight and chasm, I thought, is our nearest approach to fourth-dimensional scenery. The three dimensions are on such a scale that some of the fourth has been added. You do not see, hung before you, the seven million years that went to the making of these walls and their twisted strata, but you feel that some elements of Time have been conjured into these immensities of Space. Perhaps it is not size nor the huge witchery of changing shapes and shades that fill us with awe, but the obscure feeling that here we have an instantaneous vision of innumerable eons.¹⁵

Priestley even saw a connection between the canyon's Time and its silence:

There must be the profoundest of silences there because all the noises made throughout these years have no existence in this instantaneous vision of the ages, in which the longest time that any individual sound could take would be represented by the tiniest fraction of an inch on these mile-high walls.¹⁶

Priestley begins the Grand Canyon chapter of *Midnight on the Desert* with the same scene that frames much of the book, a scene of him burning unsatisfactory novel manuscripts and Hollywood scripts he'd worked on that winter. Priestley had devoted

most of the winter to a novel set in London, *They Walk in the City*, in which the Grand Canyon makes a brief appearance when a small-town person tries to describe London: "It's a wilderness. It's the Amazonian jungle. It's another Grand Canyon. Whole tribes live there, buried away; no one knows much about 'em."¹⁷ Priestley's burning of manuscripts suggests the futility of human efforts, and Priestley, talking to himself, admits to ennui: "You are still, my dimension-juggler, feeling a little lost, a little bewildered, vaguely unhappy." Then he recalls how happy he was during his Grand Canyon visit, with his vision that humans belong to a larger scheme of things.

Priestley recalls how his first, mist-curtained visit to the canyon had begun with ennui. He had arrived on the train at night, sleepless. By then Priestley had seen enough cheesy American tourist attractions that he was expecting the worst from the Grand Canyon:

The little station looked dreary. The young man waiting with the hotel bus...looked all wrong, for he wore a ten-gallon hat and an embroidered cowboy coat with English riding-breeches and long boots, like a cowboy in a musical comedy. The bus turned two corners and landed us at the front door of an hotel that was so tremendously Western that it might have been created by a German scene-designer who had never been farther west than Hamburg. I felt grumpy about all this. A lot of nonsense. The interior of the hotel took my breath away, not because it was very beautiful, but because it was overheated and seven thousand feet above sea-level. I continued to disapprove of everything...¹⁸

When Priestley walked the rim and the mist cleared, he felt that:

...a miracle had happened. At last, in all my travels, I had arrived and there had been no anticlimax, and my imagination, after weeks or months of expectant dreaming,

had not cried, "Is that all?" Reality, stung by my many jeers at its poverty, had gone to work to show me a thing or two...

I have heard rumors of visitors who were disappointed. The same people will be disappointed at the Day of Judgment. In fact, the Grand Canyon is a sort of landscape Day of Judgment. It is not a show place, a beauty spot, but a revelation...The Colorado River made it, but you feel when you are there that God gave the Colorado River its instructions. It is all Beethoven's nine symphonies in stone and magic light.¹⁹

In speaking of visitors who were unimpressed by the canyon, Priestley was probably thinking of George Bernard Shaw, Britain's most famous playwright, whom Priestley happened to meet on the rim during his second visit to the canyon in 1936. In *Midnight on the Desert* Priestley comments only on the implausibility of their meeting: "To meet the Grand Canyon and Bernard Shaw on the same morning—what an adventure!" But twenty-five years later in his memoir *Margin Released*, Priestley complained about Shaw's always-mocking attitude: "He was peevish. He refused to wonder and exclaim at the Grand Canyon, muttering something about Cheddar Gorge. The truth was, I am afraid, that he was determinedly resisting the spell of this marvel...the most ego-shrinking of all earth's spectacles."²⁰ In his 1957 essay "Shaw," Priestley suggested that Shaw couldn't face having his ego shrunk. Shaw was "...a very vain old super V.I.P. I remember once coming across him at the Grand Canyon, and found him peevish, refusing to admire it, or even look at it properly. He was jealous of it."²¹

Or perhaps Shaw was reluctant to admit there might be something admirable about the United States, which Shaw had always disliked, though he didn't visit it, and then only briefly, until 1933, at age seventy-seven. Shaw got most of his images of America from skeptical authors like

Mark Twain and from movies. Shaw regarded Americans as a childish and barbaric people, obsessed with money and social climbing, racist, puritanical, pompous, culturally shallow, persecutors of ideas and art and social reformers. In a 1920 newspaper article called "Why I Won't Go to America," Shaw explained:

It takes a foreigner to understand your institutions, simply because he has a perspective on them which you have not. Why, then, go to America and lose the perspective? To see skyscrapers? If I saw them tomorrow they'd hold no surprise for me. I've seen them ten thousand times painted, watercolored, impressionised, futurised, photographed, and cinematographed, from every point of view, including a bird's. The beauties of nature? I've seen Niagara Falls, Yellowstone Park, the Grand Canyon, Yosemite, and what not at the cinema.²²

Yet the Grand Canyon must have held some special interest for Shaw, for three years later, on his second and final American visit, Shaw took an overnight train from California just to see the canyon, spent twelve hours there, and then returned to California. A brief account of Shaw's visit appeared in *The New York Times* and gives Shaw more credit than Priestley did. Shaw even seems to have noticed that many canyon overlooks were named for Indian tribes:

A strangely solemn George Bernard Shaw saw the Grand Canyon today and said "It reminds me of religion."

"Science changes every twenty years, and we must change our views on many things," he said, "but the canyon and the truths of religion are always the same."

Attracted by the many beautiful birds, Mr. Shaw expressed regret that "the extent of my knowledge is to distinguish a parrot from a canary."

"If we decide to name one of the scenic points in the canyon formations for you, what name

would you suggest," a park official asked.

"Shawnee," he replied.²³

J. B. Priestley had another unlikely literary encounter at the El Tovar newsstand, which was selling Franz Kafka's novel *The Castle*, which Priestley had wanted to read. Priestley took *The Castle* down to Phantom Ranch, where the novel's surrealism seemed the perfect match for the canyon's surrealistic landscapes. His ride into the canyon on a white mule named Marble brought out Priestley's sense of humor; watching Marble stopping to eat anything he could grab, Priestley "decided that it was Marble who had eaten out most of the Grand Canyon."²⁴ The ride also enthralled Priestley with the canyon's changing and enlarging shapes and colors. When he arrived at the ranch, Priestley took the solitary walk up Bright Angel Creek that he found so peaceful and joyful. Priestley and his wife and children spent two nights at Phantom Ranch.

At Phantom Ranch Priestley observed the camp of the Civilian Conservation Corps:

...they had some decent work to do for the good of their own community, and they were being reasonably well sheltered and fed and paid in one of the most enchanting places on earth. And when I remembered that these brown, husky lads who waved at us were the new American equivalent of the unemployed English youths who stand outside our labor exchanges and at slushy street corners, just miserably kept alive by the dole, I could not see that we could teach the Americans much about social services.²⁵

Priestley was often critical of American society for the same reasons Shaw was, but Priestley also loved America's democratic spirit, the way the Wickenburg cowboys made no class distinctions and treated everyone the same: "To return to England, after a few months of this, is like dropping back into the feudal

system."²⁶ Priestley hoped American society could live up to the greatness of its land, its Grand Canyon:

Even to remember that it is still there lifts up the heart. If I were an American, I should make my remembrance of it the final test of men, art, and policies. I should ask myself: Is this good enough to exist in the same country as the Canyon? How would I feel about this man, this kind of art, these political measures, if I were near that Rim? Every member or officer of the Federal Government ought to remind himself, with triumphant pride, that he is on the staff of the Grand Canyon.²⁷

When Bruce Babbitt was inaugurated as Secretary of the Interior in 1993, he quoted these lines.

Vita Sackville-West wrote her novel *Grand Canyon* to use the Grand Canyon to challenge Americans to rise to their political destiny.

When Vita Sackville-West got the idea of a Grand Canyon novel in 1933, she was one of Britain's leading literary celebrities. Two years previously she had published *All Passion Spent*, her most enduring novel, which would be brought to life by BBC's *Masterpiece Theater* in 1986. In 1928 Sackville-West was the hardly-disguised central character in Virginia Woolf's novel *Orlando*, which has been called a long love letter from Woolf to Sackville-West, who were lesbian lovers even as both women were loyally married to prominent men. Woolf and Sackville-West were part of the Bloomsbury circle of artists, writers, and intellectuals who were encouraging new ideas in the arts, politics, psychology, spirituality, and human relationships. Woolf and Sackville-West became leading feminist voices, depicting the burdens of traditional female roles and restrictions. In literature it was a time of bold experiments, some of which, as with Virginia Woolf's novels, have become cultural landmarks. Vita Sackville-West's novel *Grand Canyon* was this kind of experiment, but it was not so successful. For two

decades Sackville-West's novels had been published by Hogarth Press, run by Virginia Woolf and her husband Leonard, but Hogarth Press would reject *Grand Canyon*.

In 1933 Sackville-West went on her only trip to America, with her devoted husband Harold Nicolson, a diplomat, biographer, and member of the House of Commons. Sackville-West made the rounds of American cities and colleges, where her lectures drew enthusiastic audiences. Vita and Harold disliked America's commercial values; to Virginia Woolf, Vita wrote: "Los Angeles is hell...The Americans have an unequalled genius for making everything hideous."²⁸ But Vita loved America's nature. Nature was a central element of Sackville-West's novels and poetry. In *Orlando* Virginia Woolf depicts Sackville-West as a nature lover who endlessly devotes herself to her epic poem "The Oak Tree." Sackville-West sought out Niagara Falls and was thrilled by it. After Los Angeles, Vita and Harold retreated to a cottage at a California-desert guest ranch, much like Galsworthy and Priestley. "Magnificent stars overhead," Vita wrote to Virginia Woolf, "and mountains all around. The desert itself is carpeted with rosy verbena...we are as happy as larks."²⁹ It was at this ranch that Vita conceived of her *Grand Canyon* novel, which like *All Passion Spent* would be about personal transformation and renewal. Harold wrote in his diary:

It is about a middle-aged woman who has had some deep sorrow in her life and becomes benevolent and neutral. It is divided into two halves. One half is in life and the other half in death. The life part is to take the form of the Grand Canyon...The death part is to take the shape of a wind-jammer from which, at stated intervals, people tumble overboard...It is the sort of thing which only she could carry off...³⁰

Vita conceived this idea before she had actually seen the Grand Canyon.

On April 1st Vita and Harold arrived at the Grand Canyon, where they

stayed at El Tovar Hotel, went for rim walks, watched the Hopis dancing, shopped for Indian jewelry, traveled to the Desert View Watchtower, and admired the Painted Desert in the distance. To Harold the canyon was like "twenty Matterhorns blazing with alpine glow and situated many thousands of feet below one."³¹ Harold was disappointed by the Hopi dances, but having just come from Hollywood and a meeting with Gary Cooper, he was probably expecting Hollywood Indians. But Vita was very interested in Native American spirituality, and she would begin her novel *Grand Canyon* by relating the Hopi belief that the spirits of the dead ventured into the canyon to find the entrance to the underworld. Harold reported: "Vita is very impressed by the Grand Canyon. So am I."³² At sunset they walked from El Tovar to Powell Memorial. Harold wrote:

It is approaching sunset and we get the best view of the Canyon we have seen. The shadows are slate-blue and the rocks a dominant *sang-de-boeuf* trailing off to pink in places and in places to orange. We walk back thinking out comparisons. I say it is like a wood-fire—looking into the glow of the logs. Vita says it is like nothing on earth. She adds that she feels 'increased'. I say that I do too. We dine hungrily, look out again by moonlight—but there is only half a moon and the Canyon opens a dim cold greenness...³³

From South Carolina, near the end of her American trip, Vita got out a piece of El Tovar stationary and wrote to Virginia Woolf:

Oh, the things we've seen and the people we've met! I don't think I wrote to you from the Grand Canyon which is the most astonishing thing in the world. We're going to come back to America in order to motor all through Texas, Arizona, California, and Mexico, taking tents with us in order to camp in the desert. You can't imagine, Virginia, what the Painted Desert is like. It is every color of the

rainbow, broken by great-pink cliffs...And the sun blazes every day...Why don't you and Leonard come with us? January, February, and March would be the time to go, and the first bit of April. Nor can you imagine the desert flowers...Doesn't it appeal to you?³⁴

This trip never happened, and Virginia Woolf never saw America. But Virginia Woolf was responsible for Vita writing *Grand Canyon*. It appears that Virginia had suggested to Vita that her American trip might supply her with the raw materials for a novel. Upon returning to England Vita made a brief attempt at a start, but, as she wrote to Virginia: "Didn't start it, so much as returned to a bit of vomit I spewed in America—the novel you said I was to write—all about deserts and hurricanes. I don't know if I can make anything of it."³⁵ Vita set the idea aside for seven years, and she returned to it only because of Virginia Woolf's encouragement. In 1940 Vita dug out a piece of El Tovar stationary, with its image of the Grand Canyon, and wrote to Virginia:

Thank you for letting me come to stay with you and for being so permanently loving towards me—

Your friendship means so much to me. In fact it is one of the major things in my life—...

Isn't this a nice piece of writing-paper I have found for you?

I am so grateful to you: you sent me home feeling that I really ought to go on with my novel—Before I came to you, I was in the dumps about it.

Then I told you something about it, which I would never have said to anybody else, and you said just the right thing.

So instead of despairing about it, I fished it out again this evening instead of trying to avoid it...

*Your Orlando.*³⁶

Vita would retain her idea about a story with a life half and a death half, but she would abandon the death

half's ocean setting and place that half in the Grand Canyon also. A larger change occurred because World War Two was now raging, and she turned the novel into a political allegory. Combining her original personal/metaphysical story with a political story resulted in a novel that Sackville-West scholar Michael Stevens called a "failure," and "this strange book."³⁷

With the outbreak of World War Two, Harold Nicolson became a war minister in Churchill's cabinet for a year, and one of his duties was writing a book, *Why Britain is at War*, to rally the world's sympathy for Britain, especially in neutral America. Harold was well-positioned to observe America's ambivalence about the war. Harold had written a biography of American diplomat Dwight Morrow, and in 1933 Harold and Vita had visited Dwight Morrow and gotten to know his daughter Ann and Ann's husband, Charles Lindbergh, who soon would become the most influential voice against America aiding Britain. Vita too had some expertise on American-British relations. Her grandfather had been Britain's ambassador to the United States in the 1880s, and her mother had become a star in Washington social circles. According to family legend, the widower President Chester Arthur became smitten with Vita's mother and proposed marriage, but she turned him down.

Harold's war book was rushed into publication and soon sold 100,000 copies. Harold also became Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Information, with the duty of promoting good relations with the United States.

Vita had considered herself a pacifist, but now she encouraged her two sons to be proud soldiers. In the darkest days of the war, when German planes filled the skies and a German invasion seemed imminent, Vita and Harold were so horrified at the possibility of defeat that they both carried a vial of poison. With Americans still resisting the war, before Pearl Harbor, Vita began writing *Grand Canyon* to arouse Americans about the German threat.

She labored on the "bloody book" through many midnights, since it was "The only form of happiness I can find."³⁸

In 1942 Vita sent the completed manuscript to Leonard Woolf at Hogarth Press; Virginia was no longer there, for she had committed suicide the year before. Hogarth Press had already given Vita a contract for *Grand Canyon* and advertised it as a forthcoming book. Vita was shocked when Leonard rejected the manuscript, on the grounds that its portrayal of British defeat and German world conquest was just too bleak and demoralizing. "This is," wrote Leonard, "one of the most unpleasant letters I have ever had to write, primarily because as an author you have always treated us so extraordinarily well that it seems almost unthinkable that the Hogarth Press should reject a book of yours."³⁹ He was referring to the fact that Vita had stayed with Hogarth Press even when the success of her novels meant she could have jumped to a larger and more lucrative publisher. Privately, to his business partner John Lehmann, Leonard expressed his doubts about the novel's literary merits: "It is not a good book, I'm afraid, and I doubt whether, were it not by Vita, one would consider it."⁴⁰ It was "in many ways absurd."⁴¹ Vita sent the manuscript to another major publisher, and they too turned it down. After some revisions, a third publisher took it. Hogarth Press had published fourteen of Vita's books, but she would never return to them. On the basis of Vita's reputation the novel drew 8,000 pre-publication orders, but then it drew what Vita called "some bloody reviews."⁴² At least her American publisher, Doubleday, stuck by her, but on their jacket blurb they promised readers a happy ending and made no mention of the novel's metaphysical element or of the United States being conquered by the Germans.

The first half of *Grand Canyon* is titled "The Hotel" and is set at El Tovar. The novel begins as a typical British novel of manners, observing the little society in the hotel. The main character, the

British Helen Temple, is basically Vita herself and voices many of Vita's opinions. Observing a couple with children, Helen says: "They are decent people—so decent that one wonders how they ever brought themselves to commit the grotesque act necessary to beget children."⁴³ Helen meets a British man, Lester Dale, a perpetual wanderer who comes to the Grand Canyon every year: "Like the Indians, he could believe that the canyon held the secrets of life and death."⁴⁴ Helen and Lester observe the doings of the Americans. Unlike J. B. Priestley, with his proletarian sympathies, Vita Sackville-West was an aristocrat and indulged in the long British habit of snobbery towards lesser peoples: "Americans never grow up at all—they remain permanently adolescent; that's their charm if they only knew it, though they don't like being told so."⁴⁵ At dinner time: "The dining room filled up with people and chatter as the hour for feeding approached. The animals must be fed, be fed. The animals in the Grand Canyon Zoo couldn't be allowed to go hungry."⁴⁶ Of the Indian dancers: "What's the good of having a canyon if you don't exploit it? The management exploited it for all it was worth."⁴⁷

Only well into the novel is there any mention that this is a time of war. The Nazis have conquered Britain and much of the world. The Americans are too innocent to grasp the reality and strength of Evil and to be prepared to fight it. The Grand Canyon is the hub of huge American military maneuvers, and the hotel is full of servicemen. We discover that the manager of the hotel is a Nazi secret agent, with the mission of setting the hotel afire at night to guide German bombers to a surprise attack on the American forces. When the bombers appear and an alarm sounds, Helen opens her jewelry case to get her vial of poison, and then she and many other guests flee toward the Bright Angel Trail. "The burning hotel was dramatic enough in its own way, but the magnificence of the canyon cheapened it into a mere little bonfire. The quick disaster of man showed up cheaply against the slow carving

of Nature.”⁴⁸ The bombs fall, and there’s a “big crash.” Only later do we discover that this blast has killed everyone.

In Part Two, “The Canyon,” Helen and Lester and the others descend the Bright Angel Trail to Phantom Ranch, where they catch radio reports of the massive German attack against the entire United States. In New York, the Statue of Liberty is destroyed. The author gives us hints that something remarkable has happened to her characters: a blind man can now see, a deaf man can now hear, a tubercular Harvey Girl is now well, and no one is bothered by the heat or by hunger.

The characters carry on implausible and didactic conversations that allow the author to voice her opinions. Human psychology may leave humans separated “as wide and deep as the Grand Canyon,” but they can build “a broad and substantial bridge connecting even the most completely incommensurable of psychological universes.”⁴⁹

At last we learn that the characters are actually spirits, but “They both felt so remarkably alive, more alive than they had ever felt in their ordinary lives before...There was indeed a great deal to be said for being dead...if being dead meant that one gained this new angle of proportion on life...So Mrs. Temple and Mr. Dale wandered among the immensities of the canyon...”⁵⁰ The canyon was now “their territory, their domain, in its inexhaustible beauty and surprise... It was necessary to spend...seasons, years, for its magnitude and beauty fully to enlarge and enrich the soul. This opportunity was theirs now.”⁵¹

In an implausibility that tops all the others in the novel, the German bombing of New York City triggers a fault line to rupture, toppling skyscrapers and leaving—right down Fifth Avenue—a canyon that “reminded him of a section of the Grand Canyon of the Colorado. He said that he seemed to look as deep into the earth and that the tumbled masonry of the buildings suggested the natural rock formations of that region.”⁵² Nature or God had

endorsed the self-destruction of humanity.

Humans may be hopelessly mad, but Helen and Lester are content in nature’s embrace: “We know that other mountains and other hills shall in time be washed into the sea, and coral reefs and shales and bones and disintegrated mountains shall be made into beds of rock, for a new land where new rivers shall flow. But in the meantime let us enjoy the strip of beauty that has been granted to us.”⁵³

The idea of finding peace in nature had always been important to Sackville-West, and now, as German bombers thundered over her home, she was probably wishing she had a Grand Canyon in which to hide. She had to settle for her garden. She became famous as a gardener.

With its hybrid origin, its implausibility, its didactic rhetoric, and its passing moment of history, *Grand Canyon* wouldn’t satisfy many readers or endure. Even Sackville-West scholars tend to ignore *Grand Canyon*. Yet Vita Sackville-West does deserve credit for at least attempting to make the Grand Canyon the setting for a meaningful, literary story. Almost all Grand Canyon fiction has used the canyon as a stage for melodrama—Wild West melodrama, romantic melodrama, river running melodrama. While poets readily saw the Grand Canyon as a realm of ultimate questions, and while nature writers saw it as one of nature’s ultimate expressions, few serious novelists have seen much use for the Grand Canyon. Novelists deal in human stories, and the canyon seems an inhuman realm, as inaccessible by novelist’s pen as it is by boot or boat. At least Vita Sackville-West tried to use it as a philosophical landscape.

There were two other British novelists who should have written about the Grand Canyon.

D. H. Lawrence spent nearly two years in New Mexico in the 1920s, trying to reinvent paganism for the modern world out of a mixture of nature romanticism, tribal spirituality, and sex. When Lawrence first traveled from San Francisco to New Mexico he

had a vague plan to visit Yosemite and the Grand Canyon, but he was feeling poorly, and he said, in the words of biographer David Ellis, “he would drop dead if any more stupendousness assailed him.”⁵⁴ In 1924 Lawrence journeyed to Arizona to see the Hopi snake dance, but this was as close as he got to the Grand Canyon.

The outbreak of World War Two stranded Aldous Huxley in America for six years. He lived in southern California, an easy train ride from the Grand Canyon that held a Huxley Terrace, named for Aldous’s grandfather Thomas Huxley, the public champion of Charles Darwin. Yet Aldous Huxley didn’t seem to feel much rapport with the canyon. Huxley had included the canyon on his first American visit in 1926; he spent a day there and took the bus tour of the South Rim. He had just come from Hollywood and a visit with Charlie Chaplin; Huxley wrote to a friend that he had now seen America’s “two most remarkable natural phenomena—the Grand Canyon and Charlie Chaplin. Both were splendid.”⁵⁵ But Huxley seemed more interested in Chaplin. To another friend Huxley wrote:

The Grand Canyon was quite up to specifications and only man was vile. (But then, poor devil, he can hardly fail to be when he is as closely concentrated as he necessarily must be round the point where the railway touches the canyon.) One trundles in motor buses along the brink of the chasm. Of if one has more time or, being a woman, likes the shape of one’s haunches in breeches, one mounts a mule and goes off with a movie cowboy down into the gulf. The breeches, I must say, added something to the charms of the scene.⁵⁶

The canyon’s main literary influence on Huxley was that it introduced him to Native American culture, in the form of the Hopi dancers at Hopi House. Five years later in *Brave New World* Huxley explored Puebloan life and ceremonies; he has two characters visit a New Mexico “Savage Reservation,” where the Indians are imprisoned by

an electric fence that gets its “current from the Grand Canyon hydroelectric station.”⁵⁷ In contrast with Lawrence’s Noble Savages, Huxley’s Indians are far from utopian. Like Lawrence and Priestley, Huxley was frustrated with science and searching for more spiritual realities, but Huxley couldn’t believe in Lawrence’s prescription of primitive life and preferred a purer form of mysticism. Aldous Huxley might have found more inspiration in Buddha Temple than in Huxley Terrace.

Huxley, Lawrence, and Shaw agreed with Galsworthy, Priestley, and Sackville-West in disliking American pomposity and social values, but when these three latter writers gave the Grand Canyon a chance, the canyon quickly broke through the sociological veil and spoke to them on its own greater terms. They found in the canyon an ultimate realm of beauty and order and peace, a peace that could reach through the turmoil of love and the turmoil of war and the turmoil of doubt and grant its timelessness to troubled human hearts.

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(Endnotes)

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First grade, Grand Canyon School, February 1953.

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2ND ROW: PEARL TALAKTE, ?, ?, ?, MABEL WESCOGAME

FRONT: VICKI MAJOR, ?, LINDA BOSLEY, ?, CAROL SHEPARD, JANICE SINYELLA

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