A Backward Glance at Montana

O speak of Montana as a state without a history, merely because her written story is very brief, is scarcely to appreciate her past. So shrouded is this past, that nothing has been recorded of it earlier than a century ago. Even such knowledge as was then gained, can scarcely be called history, but it is enough to give us a foundation for our conjectures. We know that one hundred years ago red men and wild animals held undisputed sovereignty; aided by the traditions which have come down to us from among these wild tribes, we can in our imaginations, picture the battles which they fought, the dwelling places they established, the hunts in which they engaged; we can see the vast herds of buffalo roaming at large over the level lands; we can see the antelope, the bear, and cougars which inhabited the mountain districts in great numbers; but of recorded history we have absolutely nothing.

We know also that into this wilderness white men began gradually to penetrate. First came trappers and hunters, driven farther and farther westward by the advance of civilization; close after them followed the adventurer in search of excitement; of the renegade fleeing from the grasp of law, and at the same time came the missionary intent upon Christianizing these wild people of the forests.

Slowly, at first, they came, establishing a trading station here, erecting a mission there, and even beginning to till the soil, until in eighteen hundred and fifty-four the presence of the first white woman of which there is any record, gives evidence of the near approach of civilization.
As late, however, as eighteen hundred sixty, nothing that could properly be called a settlement had yet been established.

But in the next year, large deposits of gold, of which small quantities had previously been discovered, were brought to light, and ensured a rapid growth of population and the beginning of a town—Deer Lodge. Two years later the discovery of yet greater treasure in Alder Guleh brought a fresh influx of people and gave birth to Virginia City.

So rapid was this increase, that a government became necessary, and on the twenty-sixth day of May, eighteen hundred sixty-four, the act of Congress creating the Territory of Montana, was signed by President Lincoln. In the same year, there sprang into being, the city of Helena, which was destined, eleven years later to become the capital.

The advance was now extremely rapid. Counties were formed, cities incorporated, schools and churches instituted and men of every profession began their work. Where lawlessness and disorder had so long ruled, law and order soon gained control; where rude Indian villages had stood, beautiful buildings were erected; railways took the place of the pack horse and freighting wagon.

Today, where forty years ago settlements were unknown, all modern appliances and conveniences are enjoyed, and where the Indian war-dance was performed and heathen rites administered, advanced institutions of learning are to be seen.

Thus rapidly has Montana's history developed; thus quickly has a wilderness been transformed into a place of culture and learning, and yet although all change points to progress and an upward, onward march, there is something of pathos in Montana's story. Where now are the grand old forests, the pathless woods and wild, uninhabited plains? All are irrevocably gone, and only here and there among the rockiest of the Rocky Mountains, do we find a glorious wildness and naturalness, which tell of the splendor of the state before it was marred by the hand of civilized man.
"Noiseless creeping, while we’re sleeping,
Frost, his task-work plies;
Soon, his icy bridges heaping,
Shall our log-piles rise.

When with sounds of muffled thunder,
On some night of rain,
Lake and river break asunder
Winter’s weakened chain,
Down the wild March flood shall bear them
To the saw-mill’s wheel,
Or where Steam, the slave, shall tear them
With his teeth of steel."

—Whittier.
"And some mountain, the last to withstand her, that held, (he alone,
While the vale laughed in freedom and flowers) on a broad bust
of stone
A year's snow bound about for a breast plate,—leaves grasp of the
sheet;
Fold on fold all at once it crowds thunderously down to his feet,
And there fronts you, stark, black, but alive yet your mountain of
old,
With his rents, the successive bequeathings of ages untold—
Yea, each harm got in fighting your battles, each furrow and scar
Of his head thrust 'twixt you and the tempest—all hail, there they
are!"

—Robert Browning.
For the leaves soon fell, and the branches soon
By the heavy axe of the blast were hewn;
The sap shrank to the root through every pore
As blood to the heart that will beat no more.

For winter came; the wind was his whip;
One choppy finger was on his lip;
He had torn the cataracts from the hills
And they clanked at his girdle like manacles;

His breath was a chain which without a sound
The earth, and the air, and the water bound;
He came, fiercely driven, in his chariot throne,
By the tenfold blasts of Arctic zone.

—Shelly.
"Calm and still, the mingled current
Glided to the waiting sea;
On its breast serenely pictured
Floating cloud and skirting tree."

—Elizabeth H. Whittier.
"O, might I here—
In solitude live savage, in some glade,
Obscured, where highest woods, impenetrable
To star or sunlight, spread their umbrage broad
And brown as evening."

—Milton.
“Nature I'll court in her sequester'd haunts,
By mountain, meadow, streamlet, grove, or cell;
Where the pois'd lark, his evening ditty chants,
And health, and peace, and contemplation dwell.”
—Smollett.
"Ye clouds that are the ornaments of heaven,
Who gave to it its gayest shadowings
And its most awful glories, ye who roll
In the dark tempest, or at dewy evening
Bow low in tenderest beauty:—ye are to us
   A volume full of wisdom."

—Percival.
"Thou alone know'st the splendor of winter,
Mid thy snow-silvered, hushed precipices,
Hearing crags of green ice groan and splinter,
And then plunge down the muffled abysses
    In the quiet of midnight.

"Thou alone know'st the glory of summer
Gazing down on the broad seas of forest,
On thy subjects that send a proud murmur
Up to thee, their sachem who towerest
    From thy bleak throne to heaven."

―Lowell.
THE RIVER.

An army of waters in noisy parade,
As it flows in review, with its fanfaranade
Incessantly, rapidly beating the ear,
Of the music it carries from mountain to meer.

Age after age, in times that are past,
These waters have traveled thus, noisy and fast
From the cold, snowy peaks and the glacier lakes,
Down to the ocean their offering makes.

Mutations, vicissitudes, varied and strange,
These waters have witnessed through secular change.
What hill-tops they’ve wasted, what valleys cut deep!
What forests, what ledges, they’ve torn from the steep!

Endless column of waters, in endless career,
Ages pass over thee, yet thou art here;
Yea, cycles and eons shall come and shall go—
Still thy turbulent billows, triumphant will flow.

R. L. H.
REST.

Lone weeps the wailing wind,
Harbinger of grief,
   Messenger of sadness.
It cometh to keep company,
And lend its doleful mourning
To the heart that can not rest.

Drear, laden, leaden wind,
   Melancholy dirge,
Burdened with a sorrow,
No solace for the weary one?
This day hath had its measure,
And the spirit longs for rest.

Give me thy message, wind.
   Grief, it brings, and yet,
Token that a comrade
From out the realm of Nature wild,
Requites the human longing,—
And the soul hath found its rest.

Ralph L. Harmon.