CutBank

Volume 1
Issue 24 *CutBank 24*

Article 55

Spring 1985

on Max Crawford

Annick Smith

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank

Part of the Creative Writing Commons

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation
Smith, Annick (1985) "on Max Crawford," *CutBank*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 24 , Article 55.
Available at: https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss24/55

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in CutBank by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.

Often in a Kittredge story one has the impression that he is seeing history itself moving, influencing the present directly. Not a mean achievement for this form.

Extreme restrictions of space prevent detailing Mr. Kittredge's work here but writing students should study him exhaustively. He points to a clear alternative to the abandonment by the modern short story writer, of realism, that tradition which has been central to the flowering of this great form from Joyce, Mansfield, Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Flannery O'Connor, and many others up to the present.

—Leonard Wallace Robinson

Max Crawford
Lords of the Plain
Atheneum
New York, New York
1985

The *llano estacado,* or staked plains of the west Texas panhandle is a high, wide escarpment, flat and unembellished, with water scarce as trees, weather the only force. Max Crawford grew up here, and the landscape he gives us, intertwined with history and myth, is locked in stone like a memory of childhood.

> Men from other places cannot imagine the staked plains. . . . Here there were not bounds, no rupture, no undulation, no break or ornament or movement or change of any sort to relieve the line of the horizon. There was not a tree or bush or shrub or weed that grew above the ground. No formation of any sort, no work of man or nature. . . . There was the wind . . . But when the day was calm and the sky overcast, when one had left sight of the last lake and there were none to be seen ahead, then there was nothing.

This is the territory of war. A story of many battles, most of them fought in 1984-85 during one of the last and most senseless of the genocidal Indian wars — the Second Cavalry's pursuit and capture of the renegade Comanche band called the Wanderers, and their half-white leader, Tehana Storm.

The *llano estacao* had seen white men as early as 1541, when Coronado and his conquistadors wandered lost across it, planting stakes to prevent them from going in circles. By the mid-1800s ranchers, farmers, buffalo hunters, mule skinners, adventuresses, and aristocrats had also claimed a stake on the plains. The stories of these indigenous characters — hidden in canyons and dug-outs and fresh-water oases — give the novel a gritty subtexture that sets it apart from the typical western romance.

The plot unfolds like an old-fashioned diary, in the mold of Kenneth Roberts' classic adventure, *Northwest Passage.* The voice belongs to Captain Philip Chapman, a sensitive, educated veteran of the Civil War with a passion for history, a horror of bloodshed, and a keen eye for detail. His meticulous notebooks coolly describe the larger-than-life landscape and the men who wander over it destroying every creature that stands in the way of profit or glory. The villain is Colonel John MacSwain, crippled in mind and body, a frustrated left-over from the Civil War, a disciple of General Sherman and his policy of "contain and punish," with 'punish' being the operative concept.

MacSwain's ultimate moment of power comes when, after a series of skirmishes and a full-blown massacre, he drives the defeated Comanche captives on a forced march to Fort Sill. In a scene that aspires to the bloody despair of Picasso's *Guernica,* MacSwain orders his reluctant troops to slaughter fifteen hundred Comanche horses. The ponies are trapped and encircled in a dry playa lakebed and methodically shot while the Indians look on, sure that they are viewing their own fate.

Although spared for the moment, this vision is true. The Comanche will be trapped on reservations, and their culture killed off until, like the buffalo whose bones are piled in shining ricks across the *llano estacado,* they will exist only as ghosts on the American landscape, unwilling participants in Tehana Storm's suicidal last stand. Later, when the Comanches are safely jailed behind the wire fence of what can only be called a concentration camp, Chapman rides out to tour one of the 'civilized' villages that serve as models for enlightened Indian policy — "a collection of neatly painted frame houses scattered over several thousand acres of tilled lands." Chapman's Indian interpreter is not sure about the moral value of this enterprise.

"I often wonder in my work, Captain, what it means to be civilized and what it means to be free. Can they mingle?"

"Neither are free, perhaps," replies Chapman, "but at least the Indians we have just seen are civilized."

After a moment, the interpreter asks, "Then civilization is what we have when freedom dies?" It is a good question, which the book wisely does not attempt to answer.

Crawford does, however, try to answer other large questions about work and power and ownership of the means of production. Marxist questions whose answers do not lie in war between whites and Indians (Texas rednecks vs. Comanches), but in the victimization of both by the rich capitalists who live in cities like New York or London and direct the conquest of land and native peoples alike. The author does not sentimentalize these 'victims'. They are given to us with all their warts. The Comanche are shown to be as cruel and violent in defense of their homeland as any Texas lynch mob.

In a long scene near the end of the novel, when Tehana Storm and his warriors are being tried for the torture and murder of a wagon-train of Texas teamsters, the white attorney for the defense attempts to convince a jury of poor farmers, ranch-hands, and small-town drifters that they are in the same boat as the 'savages' they are judging. They, too, are exiles, Scotch-Irish driven from yeoman farms in the British isles to America, where they became the frontline of American pioneers only to be disinherited again and again as wealth moved westward, until they reached the end of the trail in this barren Texas desert.