
THE RIVER MADE NO SUCH CLAIM

*A Narrative History of the Maumee Valley — and
Everyone Certain It Was Theirs*

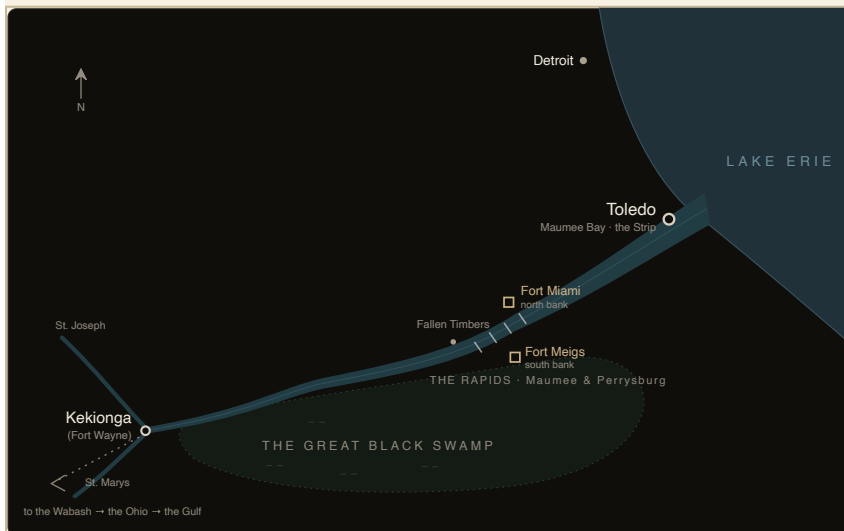


SCOTT FLACK

PRINTED UPON THE MAUMEE

· MMXXVI ·

First the animals, then the people, then the French, then the British, then the Americans — each in its turn certain the valley belonged to it. The river made no such claim. It only kept running, and outlasted them all.



The disputed ground — the Maumee running from its head at Kekionga, through the rapids and the two facing forts, down to Toledo and the lake, with the portage southwest to the Wabash and the drowned country of the Great Black Swamp.

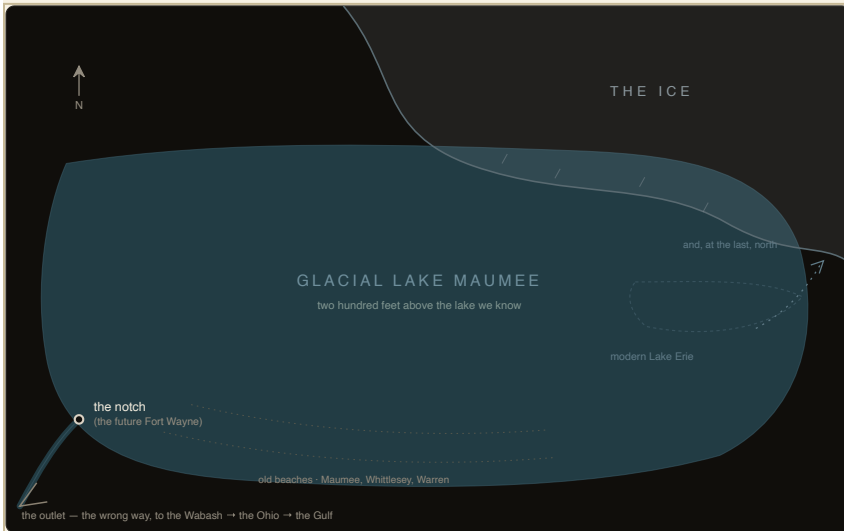
I

PROLOGUE — THE WATER AND THE LAND

What the Ice Left

*The hills / Rock-ribbed and ancient as the sun, — the vales /
Stretching in pensive quietness between; / The venerable woods —
rivers that move / In majesty, and the complaining brooks / That
make the meadows green.*

— WILLIAM CULLEN BRYANT, *THANATOPSIS*



Glacial Lake Maumee — the ice-dammed sea that drowned the future valley two hundred feet deep and, sealed off to the north and east by the glacier, spilled the wrong way: southwest through the notch at the future Fort Wayne, down the Wabash to the Ohio and the Gulf, until the ice let go at last and the water turned north to the lake we know.

THE LAND WAS MADE BY WATER, AND IT HAS BEEN TRYING TO BE-
come water again ever since.

To begin at the beginning is to begin under a sea. Long before there was a valley, before there was ice or a river or a name for either, before the first blade of anything green, the ground that this whole story stands on lay drowned at the bottom of a warm and shallow ocean, somewhere south of the equator, in a world that would not have known itself. Nothing that walks the valley now was there to see it, and no eye of any kind looked up through that clear tropical water at the sun crossing overhead; but the sea was busy all the same, in the patient, mindless way of seas, laying down on its own floor the bodies of the small lime-shelled things that lived and died in it by the uncountable billion, season upon season, an inch in an age, until their gathered remains were pressed into a floor of pale limestone and dolomite hundreds of feet deep. That floor is still there. It is the bedrock of the whole country, the hard pale bone under the black skin of the fields, and where the river has since worn down to it — at the rapids, where the water breaks white over shelving ledges, and at the great flat-topped rock that stands in the stream above them — a man may lay his hand on the bottom of that vanished ocean and not know he is touching the oldest thing in the valley. The land came up out of the water once already, ages before the ice, and hardened, and waited. It has never entirely forgotten the sea it was, and everything that follows is in some sense the account of its long unfinished effort to lie down under water again.

The sea left more than a floor. Deep in that old stone, deeper than any plow would ever bite or any grave be dug, it had sealed away the last of itself — the oil and the gas pressed out of the same numberless small dyings that had made the rock, and held there in the dark pores of it for four hundred million years, like a breath the drowned world had drawn and never let go. No one would suspect it was there through the whole of the human story that follows. The nations would walk over it, and the

French paddle over it, and the armies march and bleed over it, and not one of them dream that the richest thing in all the valley was neither the beaver on the water nor the black loam on the fields but a pocket of ancient captured sunlight locked in the bones of a vanished ocean a half-mile down. It would keep. The land is patient with its buried things, as it is patient with its buried dead. And when the last of the people in this book at last had need of it, near the very end, it would come roaring up out of the ground in a column of flame a hundred feet high and remake the whole country a second time — but that is the final chapter, and this is the first, and between them lie four hundred million years and every soul the valley ever carried down to the water. The sea laid the stone, and salted the stone with fire, and lay still, and waited to be needed.

What raised it and shaped it into the country the peoples would know was not the sea but the ice, and the ice came late and came more than once. Down out of the north, in the last and greatest of its comings, ground a wall of ice a mile high and a continent wide — not a drift or a winter's freeze but a moving mountain of it, slow as grief and heavier than mountains, that scraped the high places flat and filled the low ones and dragged the very hills along under its belly, carrying boulders a hundred miles from the ledges they were broken off of and setting them down, when at last it melted, in fields where no such stone belonged, so that the later farmers who cursed and levered them out of the plow's way were handling freight the glacier had carried and forgotten. For tens of thousands of years the ice held the whole of this country in a grip that left nothing as it found it. And then the world tilted back toward warmth, and the ice began, along its southern edge, to fail.

It did not fail all at once, and it did not fail cleanly. It failed the way a great thing dies, in fits and long reprieves, giving back a mile of ground and taking half of it again, weeping out its meltwater faster than any river could carry it away — and there, in the drowned ground at the foot of the dying glacier, is where the valley was truly born. For the melt had

nowhere to go. To the south and the west lay the land the ice had already quit, tilted gently up and away; to the north and the east stood the ice itself, a wall as good as any range of mountains, damming the water back against its own cold face. So the meltwater ponded in the great shallow basin between the high ground and the ice, and stood, and rose, and became a lake — a cold gray inland sea with no name, because there was as yet no mouth to speak one and no throat that could have spoken it.

It was a greater lake than the one that would inherit its bed. It stood, at its height, two hundred feet and more above the level of the lake we know, drowning under its flat gray water everything the fields now cover, and it stood not for a year or a lifetime but for thousands of years, long enough to do the deliberate work of a sea. And at first — this is the strange thing, the thing the whole later history turns on without knowing it — the great lake drained the wrong way. With the north and the east sealed by ice, the rising water could find no outlet toward the ocean it belonged to. It backed up and up until it brimmed over at the one low place along its far southwestern rim, a shallow notch in the tilted land, and poured out there, away from the future and toward the past — southwest, into the valley of the Wabash, and down the Wabash to the Ohio, and down the Ohio to the great river, and down the great river at last to the warm gulf at the bottom of the continent. For an age the water that would one day run north to the cold Atlantic ran south instead to the tropics, over a lip of the land no wider than a village, and wore that lip down as it ran.

Then, slowly, over centuries no one counted, the ice let go of the north. And as it drew back off the low country it unstopped, one after another, the lower and lower doors that had been dammed shut behind it — and each time a door opened, the great lake dropped to find it, and paused at the new lower level long enough to cut itself a new shoreline, and dropped again. The men who came thousands of years too late to see any of it would find those old shorelines still ringing the flat country, one

inside another like the marks a falling tide leaves in sand, and would give the vanished lakes at each level their several names — Maumee first and highest, then Whittlesey, then Warren, and on down through lesser stands to the modest lake that stands there yet — and would name the whole first and greatest of them for the river that would inherit what it left. Glacial Lake Maumee: a sea named after a stream, the parent christened for the child, because the child was the only one of them left alive to ask.

And at the last the ice uncovered the northeast, and the water turned. The drainage that had run southwest to the gulf for an age reversed itself in a geological instant, swung round toward the newly opened low country in the northeast, and ran off that way instead, down toward the basin of the modern lake and out at length to the Atlantic — abandoning the old southwest outlet, draining the great cold sea down to a river and a marsh, and leaving behind, where all that water had lain, the flattest and blackest and richest ground on the face of the continent: a bed of heavy blue clay laid down under still water, floored over with a skin of fine dark loam, and so unspeakably level — the settled bottom of a lake, graded smooth by ten thousand years of standing water — that the streams it still had to shed could hardly decide which way to go, and mostly did not decide at all, but spread and stood and soaked and waited, as the lake had waited, for the sea to come back.

It is hard to say, to anyone who has not stood on it, how flat the bottom of that lake was left. It is not the flatness of a plain, which rolls; it is the flatness of water, which does not. A man may look across it to a tree-line ten miles off and find nothing at all risen in between — no hill, no swell, no shoulder of ground — only the long level line of the fields running out to meet the long level line of the sky, as though the lake had drained the evening before and the mud had not yet dreamed of a slope. The whole fall of the country is measured not in feet to the mile but in inches; a ditch cut straight for ten miles may drop the height of a man

over the entire length of it, and the water in such a ditch can hardly be said to run so much as to lean. And the floor that the water left behind it was black — the black of drowned leaves and still cold water and ten thousand years of settling, a loam so deep and so dark and so fat that when at last it was broken open to the light it would raise corn as high as a man on horseback, and would be counted, acre for acre, among the most fertile ground on the face of the earth. But under the black lay the blue: a heavy, dead, water-packed clay that the standing lake had pressed down hard and airless, and that held the wet up on the surface and would not let it drain away. Rich soil laid over sour clay; a garden set down in the bottom of a saucer. That was the double gift the lake left, the fertility and the flood together, in the one act, of the one substance, so that for two hundred years no man could have the one without fighting the other.

The old shorelines the falling lake had left did not wash away. They stayed — long, low, all but invisible ridges of sand and gravel, the heaped beaches of the vanished seas, running for tens of miles in gentle curves across the dead-flat country, a few feet higher than the drowned land on either side of them and, for that reason, dry. In a country that was otherwise a swamp those few dry feet were everything. The animals found the ridges and walked them; the first people found the animals' paths and walked them too; the nations after them wore those same paths into trails, and the trader after the nations and the soldier after the trader followed the trails, and in the fullness of time the settlers graded the trails into roads and the roads into highways, and paved them, and drove them at speed, and never knew — most of them never know it yet — that the dry line their whole journey follows across the flatland is the beach of a sea that dried up before there was a wheel in the world to leave a track. The oldest roads in the valley are the shores of a lake that is not there. The archaeologists who came long after to map the buried camps and villages of the first people would find them strung, sure enough, along ex-

actly these old beaches and rises — the prehistoric hunters keeping, like the animals before them and the highways long after, to the few dry feet the vanished lakes had left them. Here already, at the very bottom of the story, is the shape the whole of it will take: the water lays down the land, and the land it lays down decides, ages later, where the people may go.

For that one low southwestern notch — the lip the dying lake had first spilled over — would matter more, in the end, than anything else the ice left behind. When the great lake was gone and the country had drained and dried, that notch remained the one shallow saddle in the whole tilted land where the waters of the north and the waters of the south very nearly met: the one place on the continent where a man in a canoe could come up out of the cold lakes on one river, lift his boat and his load across a mile or two of level ground, set them down on a stream flowing the other way, and float on, without ever truly leaving the water, all the way to the gulf. It was the seam between two halves of a continent, the single stitch that held the north to the south, and every power that walks through this book — the nation, the empire, the young republic — would come to want it, and to bleed for it. A people would raise their great town on the crossing. After the town a fort would stand there, and after the fort a war would be fought for it, and after the war another. The road that made this whole valley worth the killing was nothing grander, at bottom, than the channel a drowning glacier had gouged to let its own meltwater out. The oldest map of this country is the one the ice drew, blind, going away.

And the water never entirely left. What the vanished lake could not drain off its own too-level floor it left as swamp — the Great Black Swamp, the drowned unfinished forest that ran, at its full wet reach, from the marshes of Sandusky Bay in the east clear across to the Indiana line, and from the Maumee down south to the country about Findlay: a million acres and more of it, three million by one modern reckoning, standing in its own shallow flood the year around. It was a forest grown

up out of a lake and never quite persuaded it was not one still — an elm-and-ash swamp forest, in the main, with islands of beech and oak and maple riding the few low rises above the water. Its trees rose a hundred feet and better out of the black water, their crowns laced so close overhead that the noon sun came down to the wet floor already going green and dim, as though filtered through fathoms; and a traveler coming at it across the drier prairie to the west saw the whole vast wood stand up on the horizon like a single unbroken thing, a wall the color of a storm, and wrote that it looked from off like a blue wall drawn across the world. Into that blue wall the sun went and did not much come out. Mosquitoes rose off the standing water in clouds that could sicken a man in a night and did. Wolves ran the deer through it. Fever lived in it. For the greater part of the year no man could cross it at all, and for the rest of the year he crossed it a mile a day if he was lucky, sinking and swearing, and remembered the crossing all his life as the worst passage he had ever made — while the swamp, which had drowned a whole forest without effort and would drown the roads and the armies of everyone who came, took no notice of him whatever, being occupied, as it had been since the ice, with the one slow work of holding the water on the land.

The swamp kept its own calendar, and it was never the settler's. In the deep of the winter it froze, and for a few hard weeks a man might cross it on the ice, and did, hurrying, before the thaw could catch him out on it. In the spring it drowned — brimmed full, a shallow sea returned for a season — and could not be crossed at all. In the wet of the early summer the fever rose off it along with the mosquitoes, the ague that took a strong man and shook him in his bed until his teeth knocked in his head, and the whole low country lay for weeks under the sick haze of it, and the people learned to call the shaking, without much humor, the country's way of agreeing to be settled. Only in the driest weeks of the late summer and the fall did the ground firm enough underfoot to be fought for, and then only slowly, a mile in a day of pure misery, the wag-

ons sunk to the axle and the oxen to the belly and the men to the knee, hauling and swearing and making camp at dark on whatever low rise stood a hand's breadth up out of the water. For the better part of two centuries after the first white man laid eyes on it, the Great Black Swamp turned back very nearly everyone who tried it, and asked nothing of them in return, and was not changed by any of them in the least. It had drowned a forest a hundred feet tall without trying. It would go on to drown roads, and drown armies, and drown the patience of three separate empires, and it would take a war waged against the land itself — fifty years of that war, and a hundred thousand miles of clay pipe buried in the dark — before any people bent it to their will, and even that, in the end, only for a little while. But the bending comes at the far end of the story. At the near end there was only the water lying on the land, and the land lying under the water, and the two of them settling their long slow argument at the patient pace of stone.

And down the middle of all this, through the swamp and the flat and the old drowned lakebed, gathering the water that no one else could shed and carrying it, at the last, back to the lake, ran the river.

That river is the constant in everything that follows.

And here is the paradox to carry the whole way through it: the river claimed nothing — not the land it had made, nor the nations it fed, nor the empires it would set at each other's throats — and it ruled the whole of them regardless. On a ground where every comer in his turn would say *mine*, and be carried off for the saying, the one thing that never once said the word was the water, and the water was the thing that governed. It decided where a man could walk and where he must stop, where a town could stand and where an army would drown, which peoples rose at the crossing and which were swept past it. It laid down the country and then, without lifting a hand or pressing a claim, it laid down the terms of every life the country would carry. The river dominated this valley precisely as it possessed it — which is to say, completely, and not at all.

It rose then where it rises still, at the very notch itself, at the head of the country, where two lesser streams come together out of the tilted farmland to the south and the west and join to make one — and from that joining it fell away to the northeast, a hundred miles and a little more, to a wide and shallow bay at the corner of the lake. It was not a large river as the continent measures rivers, but it was a working one, and it did in miniature what the glacier had done in the grand: it moved the water off the land — and it moved the land itself besides, carrying the ground down grain by grain to lay at the mouth, building there in silt what it stripped from the fields above, the one slow work it had done since the ice and would still be doing when the last of this story was told. For most of its length it ran broad and unhurried through the flat, so gentle a fall that a loaded canoe could work up it against the current; but near its middle, where it crossed the old buried floor of limestone the tropical sea had laid, it quickened and shoaled and broke into rapids — eighteen feet to the mile through seven miles of white and shelving water, tumbling over the bared bone of that first ocean, the one loud stretch in a hundred quiet ones. Those rapids were the river's whole character and the valley's whole geography in little: the fast water where the boats must stop and the loads come out and go round by land, the one place the traffic of a continent had to gather and touch the shore. Wherever a river forces men to stop, men build; and everything this book is about would be built, in the end, within sight and sound of that broken water.

The peoples who came to it would give the river a dozen names, in a dozen tongues, and would quarrel over the naming as they quarreled over everything else, and would spell each other's guesses wrong, and hand the wrong spellings down. The river did not need any of them. It had been running before there was a mouth on the whole earth to name it and a mind behind the mouth to care; it had run south to the gulf when the ice said south and turned and run north to the lake when the ice said north; and it would go on running, indifferent and unhurried and exact, over

the same rapids and the same limestone and the same buried sea, long after the last of the namers had been carried off to the west or laid down to rest in its banks.

This is the story of that ground, and of the long procession of those who believed, each of them in turn and each of them only for a little while, that they had come at last to own it.

First came the animals.



II

THE ANIMALS

The Light Hand

*The air was literally filled with Pigeons; the light of noon-day was
obscured as by an eclipse.*

— JOHN JAMES AUDUBON, *ORNITHOLOGICAL BIOGRAPHY*



*The passenger pigeon — the male below, feeding the female above — in John James Audubon's plate from *The Birds of America* (engraved by Robert Havell, 1827–38). The bird that crossed the valley in rivers three days long was gone within a lifetime; the last of its kind died in an Ohio cage in 1914.*

BEFORE THE FIRST CANOE, THE VALLEY BELONGED TO THE THINGS that walked and swam and flew, and they held it on the only terms the land has ever really honored: they took what they needed and left the ground to close behind them.

The oldest of them were monsters, and the first people knew them. When the ice was still near, this was a cold spruce country ranging animals the valley would never see again — caribou and lemming down from the north, and giants: the mastodon and the mammoth, the stag moose, the short-faced bear, the flat-headed peccary in its herds, and a beaver the size of a black bear. Their bones still come up out of the bogs, tusks the length of a canoe surfacing in the black muck where the great animals mired and died; the later peoples who found them made them into grandfathers.

And the first men were already here to hunt them. Thirty feet down, under what is now a flat sea of corn and soybeans, in a sinkhole a little east of the river, lie their spear points of bone and chipped stone, and a snapping turtle's neck bone with the chopping marks still on it, and the skeleton of one of those vanished peccaries with a hunter's bone point among its ribs — some of the oldest trace of human beings anywhere in the eastern half of the continent, laid down twelve or thirteen thousand years ago, when the mammoth was not yet a memory but a meal. So the neat order of this book is a convenience and a small lie. The animals came first, but the people came in among them while the giants still walked — hunters moving with the herds, owning nothing, taking what they needed and letting the ground close behind them, exactly as the animals did. There was no line, at the beginning, between the animals and the people. There was only the hunting, and the cold, and the ice drawing slowly back off the land.

When the giants died — and they died, all of them, as the ice went and the world warmed — the valley settled into the country the later peoples would know: elk moving in herds through the oak openings, black

bear in the beech mast, deer past counting, wild turkey so thick a hunter could feed a town. It was, by every account that survives, one of the richest hunting grounds on the face of the continent, and it was rich because the drowned land no one could farm was a paradise no one had spoiled.

Of all that abundance the passenger pigeon was the sign and the wonder, and no one who saw it in its multitudes ever afterward found words for it that did not sound, in the retelling, a little like a lie. They came over in the spring and the fall in flocks that were not flocks but rivers of birds, a moving roof drawn clear across the width of the sky; and they came not for an hour but for a day, and another day behind that one, so that a man in his field looked up at noon into a false and beating dusk and heard, under the rush of a million wings, a sound like a rising storm, or like some great machine not yet invented for him to name it after. Where they came down to roost they broke the forest under them. They settled onto the old beeches and oaks in such dead weight that limbs as thick through as a man's waist cracked and came down in the dark, and green trees split to the root and fell, and the dung lay a hand deep on the ground and killed the brush for years, and beneath a roosting-ground the earth was carpeted with the young shaken living out of the nests, until the hogs and the wolves and at last the men came in among them by torchlight with clubs and sacks and carried them off by the wagonload. It seemed past the power of any people on earth to make an end of such a creature — and it must be set down here, plainly and at the beginning, that the people made an end of it. They netted the pigeons and shot them and shipped them to the cities by the railroad car through the middle of the next century, until the flocks that had taken three days to pass thinned to a scatter, and then to a rumor, and then to nothing; and the very last passenger pigeon alive anywhere in the world, a hen they had named Martha, died in a cage in the Cincinnati zoo on the first of September, 1914, within the lifetime of men whose own grandfathers had knocked her kind out of the branches for the pot. The bird that had

darkened the whole Ohio sky at noon went out of the world, at the end, in an Ohio cage, alone, under a keeper's eye. But that is the far end of the story. In the beginning the sky went dark at noon with the weight of them, and there was no man under it who could have dreamed that it might ever go light, and stay light.

Nor was it the pigeons only. The drowned country that no plow could touch was, to everything with a wing or a fin, about the nearest thing to a paradise the middle of the continent had to offer. The marshes at the mouth of the river and the wet prairies out in the swamp lay square across the road of the great flyway, and twice in the year the waterfowl came down onto them in their seasons by the hundred thousand — swan and goose and every make of duck, the tall cranes standing gray and stilted in the shallows, the whole marsh gone clamorous at dusk and clamorous again at first light — feeding up on the wild rice and the wild celery, and rising off the water when a canoe pushed in among them in a thunder a man felt in the chest more than heard. And in the spring the fish came up the other way, up out of the lake and hard against the current to spawn, and packed the rapids so thick in their running that the old accounts cannot help but boast of it: that a man could not have missed with a spear if he tried, could have taken them out with his bare hands, could very near have crossed the river dry on the backs of them. The sturgeon and the pickerel and the great walleyed runs returned to that broken water every spring as faithfully as the pigeons returned to the beeches — for the rapids that would one day halt the boats of three empires were, first, and for ten thousand years longer, a ladder the whole lake climbed to breed.

But the animal that mattered — the animal that would, in the end, decide who came to the valley and why, more surely than any treaty or any army — was the smallest worth naming. The beaver.

Its own giant ancestor had gone into the ground with the mammoth and the short-faced bear, but the beaver that remained — forty pounds,

patient, no monster at all — was already at work on the river when the first people found it, doing to the water in miniature what the glacier had done in the grand: damming, ponding, drowning the low ground, making wet country wetter. Its fur was dense and fine and, in the cold, worth more per pound than almost anything else the interior of North America could produce. A hat could be made of it that would not lose its shape in the rain, and across an ocean the men who wore such hats did not know and did not care where the valley was. They knew only that they wanted the fur, and that want reached across the water like a current and pulled the whole of the world that follows into this one small river.

Why a swamp animal in the Ohio country was worth an ocean crossing is the question the whole of this book hangs on, and the answer is a hat. Beaver fur is not like other fur. Beneath the long guard hairs lies a layer of dense soft underfur, and each tiny filament of that underfur is barbed, microscopically, like a burr; and those barbs are the secret of the whole trade, because they mean that beaver underfur, once it is shaved from the skin and worked with heat and moisture and pressure, mats and locks upon itself into the finest felt a hatter can make — dense, smooth, all but waterproof, and able to be blocked into a shape and to hold that shape through weather and years. For the better part of two centuries, from the age of the plumed cavalier down to the age of the tall black stovepipe, a hat of beaver felt was simply the thing a European man of any standing wore upon his head to tell the world who he was. Every officer's cocked hat, every merchant's high crown, was beaver if its owner could afford it and cheap imitation if he could not. And Europe, by the time this hunger was at its peak, had trapped its own beaver very nearly off the face of the continent. So the want that could no longer be fed at home reached out across the ocean — a plain want for a fashionable hat, felt in the drawing rooms and on the parade grounds of France and England by men who had never in their lives seen a wild river — and it was that narrow, specific, faintly ridiculous want, utterly indifferent to

the country it was about to bleed, that came feeling its way up the St. Lawrence and along the lakes and into this valley, and set every other thing in this book in motion. The nations trapped the beaver; the French came and bought it; the empires fought over the ground the beaver lived on; the people were carried off it at the last. And at the far end of that whole long chain of wanting, a continent and an ocean away, was nothing more than a gentleman in Paris, adjusting his hat in a glass, who would have been astonished and unmoved in equal measure to learn what his reflection was costing a marsh he could not have found on a map.

There is more to the beaver's part than the price of its skin, for the beaver shaped the valley with its teeth nearly as surely as the ice had shaped it with its weight. A single pair, given a stream, will build until they have made a pond, and the pond drowns the low wood and kills the standing trees and silts up slowly behind the dam, year upon year, until the beaver at last abandons it and moves on up the water — and what they leave behind them, when the dam breaks and the pond lets down, is a flat of deep black silt lying open to the sun: a wet meadow in the heart of a closed forest, thick with grass and browse, the richest small ground in the whole country. The deer came into the beaver-meadows to feed, and the elk came, and behind them came the hunter; and behind the hunter, in the long run of time, came the settler, who mowed the beaver's abandoned meadows for the first hay his cattle ever ate in the valley, and cursed the wet, and never once thanked the animal that had cleared and drained and manured that field for him ten thousand years before he was born to stand in it. The beaver made the openings that the whole living world of the valley gathered into. It was, in its small and patient way, the under-engineer of the entire country — and it was, just then, about to be hunted for the felt of a hat worn in cities it would never see, very nearly off the face of the earth.

Everything that came — the French for the pelt, the wars between the nations for the hunting grounds, the forts, the treaties, the armies — turned on the back of an animal that weighed forty pounds and asked nothing of anyone but a stream to dam. The beaver did not know it was the hinge of an empire. It went on cutting willow and raising water, and the water it raised drowned the same ground the glacier's lake had drowned, and the ground did not mind. The ground had been under water before.

They held the country lightly, all of them — the pigeon and the beaver, the elk and the wolf — in the one way the valley has ever let anything hold it for long: they took what the season put in front of them and let the rest close over behind, and made no deed, and drew no line, and carried nothing off that the ground could not put back the following year. They were not gentle. The wolf was no kinder to the deer than it had to be, nor the pike in the rapids to anything smaller than itself, nor the pigeon to the mast it stripped. But they were, in the long slow arithmetic of the ground, sustainable — which is only our own colder word for the very thing that the whole rest of this book is the losing of: they belonged to the land, and not the land to them, and the balance kept itself for ten thousand years with no single creature in it ever meaning that it should. And then there came into the country a new kind of animal, one that could hunt beside the others and yet think past the turning of the season — that could stand on the bank and look at a river of pigeons and a river of fur and a river of water going by, and begin, very slowly, to reckon what the three of them together might be made to be worth. It was the first entry in a long account, and the account, once opened on this river, would never afterward be closed.

Then came the people.



III

THE FIRST NATIONS

The Oldest Title

Who is there to mourn for Logan? Not one.

— LOGAN, A MINGO CHIEF, 1774, AS SET DOWN IN JEFFERSON'S *NOTES
ON THE STATE OF VIRGINIA*



*Roche de Bœuf — the “buffalo rock” standing in the rapids of the Maumee, where the nations
held their councils under a spreading elm. From Gunckel’s Early History of the Maumee
Valley, 1902.*

THEY WERE NOT ONE TRIBE, THEY HAD NOT COME FROM HERE, and they were here “first” all the same — and that last fact is the ground the whole rest of this book stands on, no matter how hard everything that follows tries to forget it. The valley was theirs before it was anyone’s, by the oldest title there is: the title of having lived on a country and buried your dead in it and known its every rapids and marsh and oak opening for more generations than anyone kept count of. They held it a thousand years and better. Near the end of this book they will be given a single summer to leave it forever. It is right to set them down here, at the beginning, in their own light and their own names, before the long procession of those who would take the valley from them gets fully under way. Everything after them is, in the longest view, trespass — and the trespass ought at least to know whose ground it crossed.

How they had come was itself a story about the beaver, which is to say about want reaching across great distances to rearrange the world. A hundred years before the French ever paused to count them, the Five Nations of the Iroquois, far to the east, had trapped their own country bare of beaver, and — needing fur to trade to the Dutch and the English for the guns that had by then become the price of survival on the frontier of two empires — turned on their neighbors for fresh hunting grounds, in a long and grinding war that the later histories would name, without any apparent sense of the irony, the Beaver Wars. Armed first and armed best, the Iroquois fell on nation after nation and broke them. Huronia they destroyed in a single terrible year — a thousand warriors coming out of the winter dark at dawn, “mostly with firearms,” a priest recorded, “which they obtain from the Dutch, their allies”: the guns of one European empire, sold on the Hudson, breaking nations on lakes no Dutchman would ever see. The Erie they wiped from the earth so wholly that the lake is the only monument the people have left: the great water along the valley’s entire northern edge still carries their name — *Erie*, the Cat Nation of the earliest French accounts, called so, one black robe

wrote, for the prodigious number of wildcats in their country — and nothing else of them remains at all. The Neutral and the Wenro and the rest they scattered like chaff before a wind, and drove the survivors west, and west again, ahead of the muskets, until the drowned and unfarmable and game-rich country at the western end of Lake Erie — the one country in all the interior that nobody with a plow would ever trouble to want — became the ground where the broken peoples fetched up at last and made themselves new homes. And for a generation in between, the diggers and the historians agree, the whole of the future Ohio stood empty of settled towns altogether — hunting parties crossing it, no one keeping it — a swept and waiting country — and remember that emptiness, because everyone in this book will shortly be certain the land was always, anciently, theirs. So the valley filled, and it filled not with one people but with many: a country of refugees, nearly every town of it settled by a nation that had been driven out of somewhere else, each keeping its own tongue and its own council and its own dead, on a land wide enough and wet enough and rich enough to hold them all in something near to peace.

And the Erie were not even the first to go; the wars only finished a scattering that had begun before any European was near enough to watch. The ethnologists would later assemble the case from the pieces the survivors carried: far out on the plains today there are two nations whose very names are the memory of a flight down this country's southern river — the Omaha, "the people who went against the current," and the Quapaw, "the people who went with it," one people once, by their own tradition, who came down the Ohio ahead of the troubles and parted forever at the Mississippi, the name of each nation ever after a record of which way its canoes turned; and the Omaha kept a name for the Ohio itself that translates simply *the river down which they came*. A French priest on the Mississippi in 1700 set down that the Illinois and the Miami called the Ohio the river of the Akansea, "because the Akansea formerly dwelt on it" — the Miami keeping a departed nation's name on

the water exactly as the lake keeps the Erie's. And on a French map of 1684, over the country south of the future Ohio towns, there stands a legend of five words that is the whole story of a people: *Mosapelea* — *eight villages, destroyed*. The remnant of that nation fled the length of the Mississippi and ended on the Yazoo, in the far south, where two centuries later a linguist proved their tongue was Siouan, kin to nations in Virginia — one people torn in half and thrown a thousand miles apart, with the Ohio country in the middle of the tear. The last speaker of that language, an old woman named Rosa Pierrette, died in Louisiana about 1915 — within a year of the last passenger pigeon, the record losing a tongue and the sky losing a bird in the same season, and hardly anyone noticing either.

Stop on that a moment, here at the outset, because it is the same wheel that will come round again at the very end of this book. These nations — whom the Americans would one day round up and drive west as an obstacle in the way of a plow — were themselves already the children of an uprooting, the survivors of an earlier dispossession run by the very same engine: the reach of a distant market for fur, turning whole peoples out of their countries and pushing them before it across the face of the continent like weather. The valley was a refuge the fur trade had made. It would be emptied, in the end, by the same trade's long-delayed second act, when the men who came for the last of the fur were followed by the men who came for the land under it. And it would not stop even there: in a time none of these peoples would live to see, the men who came for the land would raise a great city on the emptied ground and be turned out of it in their own turn, by the very same cold reckoning — the grief of this chapter come round, at the last, to the children of the ones who caused it. The people of this chapter knew none of that. They knew only that they had found, after the breaking, a good country, and had made it a home, and meant to keep it. Name them; they earned it.

There were the **Wyandot**, whom the French called Huron — the remnant of the very nation the Iroquois had shattered first, returned as if from the dead, drifting down at last to the western lake to hold the head of the water by right of longest possession, keepers, as they reckoned it, of the western door of the whole country.

There were the **Myaamia**, the Miami, whose own word for themselves the river still carries, worn smooth down the centuries into *Maumee*. Their great town stood where the two streams meet at the head of the river — Kekionga, the crossroads of the interior, where the trails of half a continent came together and a canoe could slip from the northern lakes across to the Mississippi. It was the Miami capital and the market of the west, and every power that walks through this book would spend blood to hold it, because whoever held Kekionga held the door. And the Miami gave the valley more than its name. They gave it the finest mind it ever produced. His name was **Mihšihkinaahkwa** — Little Turtle — and by the reckoning of the very men he beat he was the ablest soldier the frontier brought forth on either side. Twice, when the young United States sent armies to take this country, he met them in the forest and destroyed them, the second time so completely that it remains the worst defeat an American army ever suffered at native hands. But he was more than a war-leader. He was a statesman clear-eyed enough to see, when the tide had turned for good, that it had turned — and brave enough to say so to his own people, and to counsel the peace he knew they would never forgive him for, and honest enough to keep it, once made, to the day he died. He dined with Presidents in Philadelphia; he had also stood in the trees and watched two armies come apart in front of him. No one ever saw the valley more whole.

A word more on that town at the head of the river, because the whole book bends toward it. Kekionga was not a village but a capital, and not a capital only but a market — the great interior crossroads where the head of the Maumee all but touched the head of the Wabash, and a man might

stand, as it were, with one foot in the watershed of the cold northern lakes and the other in the watershed of the warm southern gulf. A canoe, it was said, could set out from Buffalo on the far eastern lake and come down to the Gulf of Mexico without once leaving the water, but for a single short portage over that one low divide — and the portage was here, which made the town the one lock on the whole continental passage. The trails of half a continent ran together there. Down them, and up the two rivers, came furs and corn and wampum and captives and news; and the goods of the French, and later of the British — the kettle and the blanket, the powder and the knife — flowed the other way, so that the Miami sat at the tollgate of the whole west and grew, by the measure of that country, rich upon it. Around the town lay cornfields that could feed thousands, and orchards of apple and peach that French traders had set out generations before and that bore their fruit still; so that when at last an American army fought its way to the place it found not a raw camp of the imagination but a settled and provisioned country, an old and rooted town, and put the standing corn to the torch by the hundred acres, and marveled even as it burned at the plenty it was destroying — the American general himself writing that he had never before beheld such immense fields of corn in any part of America, from Canada to Florida. Whoever held Kekionga held the door between the two halves of the continent. That is the reason every power in this book would march for it; and it is the reason the Miami, who had held it the longest and knew the best what it was worth, would fight the hardest and the ablest of anyone alive to keep it.

There were the **Shawnee**, the restless people, who had ranged from the Savannah to the Susquehanna and come to rest along this river with their fighting spirit undimmed. They kept, alone among the peoples of the valley, a tradition that they had not come up out of the earth like the rest but across the sea — that their forefathers, led by a chief of the Turtle band, had walked down to the shore of the ocean and seen the wa-

ters open before them, and had crossed over dry along the floor of the deep to reach this land. It is a strange thing to find remembered in the Ohio woods. But a people that remembers crossing a sea to arrive is a people that has always known itself to have come from somewhere else, and the Shawnee wandered the whole length of their history like men in search of a country they had somewhere mislaid. From them had already come Cornstalk, the sachem who fought the Virginians to a standstill at Point Pleasant in 1774 and then, the battle done, was the first among his chiefs to argue for peace — and was murdered under a flag of truce for his pains, a great and good man by the reckoning even of his enemies, who had seen the doom of his people coming and could not turn them from it. And from the Shawnee, in the fullness of the story, would rise the man whose vision closes the Indian age of this valley — Tecumseh, the Shooting Star — though his hour is not yet.

There were the **Odawa**, the Ottawa, whose very name means *trader*, the longest keepers of the river's mouth and the merchants of the whole lake country; and from them came Pontiac, who would raise the first great rising against the newcomers when the newcomers thought the country already won.

There were the **Potawatomi** and the **Ojibwe**, who with the Odawa formed the Three Fires of the lakes — three nations that, by their own memory, had once been a single people and had parted far to the north at the straits, and stayed kin in blood and tongue ever after. There were the **Lenape**, the Delaware, pushed the whole width of their history from the Atlantic shore to this western water. There were the **Seneca** on the Sandusky. And there was the nation already gone before most of the others came — the **Erie**, destroyed in the Iroquois wars, who left behind nothing at all but their name, which every soul in this book would sail and fight and drown upon: the lake itself their only monument.

They held the valley the way the animals had held it, and the way the French would half understand and the Americans never would at all:

lightly. They did not fence it or deed it or break it to the plow. They took the deer and the turkey and the fish of the rapids in their seasons and let the forest close behind them. They set their towns on the high commanding points above the water and buried their dead there, so that the loveliest ground in the valley became its long memorial. They came together in councils so various that a single fire might need three interpreters to carry one speech across the tongues gathered round it. They played, too, in their seasons, on ground that was wholly their own. When the first Europeans troubled to count, in 1680, they tallied villages of nineteen peoples at the western end of the lake, some nine thousand souls, sharing a single companionable country.

The men who led them in those years were not the flat woodcut “chiefs” of the later schoolbooks but persons, particular and unrepeatable, and a few of them lived long enough to hold nearly the whole arc of this story in a single memory. There was **Black Hoof** of the Shawnee — Catahecassa — a small, cheerful man, not five feet nine by the one description that survives, with a quick and sprightly tongue in council; who by his people’s own reckoning had been born far to the south, in Florida, in the years before the Shawnee were driven north, and remembered as a small boy bathing in the salt sea; who fought as a young warrior on the day Braddock’s army was cut to pieces in the forest near the Ohio in 1755; and who lived on, and on, through every war this book contains, until he died at the last on the reservation at Wapakoneta — reputedly a hundred and ten years old, his health and his eyesight said to be unfailing to the end — having outlasted the power of the French and the power of the British both, and seen his people go down at the end before the Americans — one life drawn taut across a hundred years and the entire length of the tragedy. And there was **Buckongahelas** of the Delaware, the great war-leader of that nation in its western exile, at whose town on the Auglaize a traveling American judge was entertained, about the year 1797, with the ball game the old accounts remember best of all: a hun-

dred players to the side, the men against the women, the men permitted only to kick the ball along and the women to catch it up and carry and throw it, and the women winning it by the sheer strength of one among them who seized the ball and could not, by any man there, be pulled down. It is a small thing to have come through the centuries, that one afternoon of laughter on the Auglaize. But it came through — one of the very few glimpses the record allows of these people simply alive on their own ground — not fighting, not treating, not dying, but playing a game in the sun beside a river that was still, that year, entirely and unquestionably their own.

And they held one belief above all the others — the belief that is the moral center of this entire book, and the one the newcomers could never be brought to understand, because their whole civilization was built against it. They believed that the land had been given to all the peoples in common, for their use, by the Great Spirit; and that it was not any nation's to sell, no more than a man could sell the river, or the air, or the light that fell on the water. A chief might let another people hunt his country. He could not sign it away, because it was not his to sign, and no living generation held the right to sell the ground out from under the generations not yet born. It is the simplest idea in the book, and everything else in the book breaks against it. Tecumseh would die for it. The whole long tragedy of the valley is the tragedy of a people who believed the land could not be owned, meeting a people who believed in almost nothing else.

And it was not a loose sentiment but a settled philosophy, reasoned and handed down, and the nations had a working model of it older than any European government on the continent. Away to the east, generations before, the five warring nations of the Iroquois had been brought under a single law by a peacemaker their tradition remembers as Deganawidah, and had buried their weapons, by the telling, beneath a great white pine — the Tree of Peace — and bound themselves into one

Longhouse of many fires, each nation keeping its own council but all joined against the shedding of one another's blood. It was among the oldest living constitutions in the world, and the western nations knew it, and something of its spirit had come west with the refugees. When they gathered — and they gathered without end, for the whole business of such a country was done face to face, in councils where a single speech might travel by three interpreters around the fire — they practiced an oratory that the Americans who heard it never afterward forgot: plain and grave and figured, reasoning from the rivers and the trees and the graves of the fathers to conclusions a philosopher would not have been ashamed of. It is no accident that what survives of these people at all survives, so largely, as speeches. Logan's lament for his murdered family; Little Turtle's cold warnings to warriors who would not hear them; Tecumseh's terrible eloquence across the table from a governor — the record kept the speeches because the speeches were the very thing, the way a people who wrote nothing down bound themselves, and remembered, and decided. And the idea they returned to, in council after council, year upon year, was the one idea their visitors were constitutionally unable to receive: that the land was the floor of the Longhouse, held in common by all who lived upon it, and no more any one nation's to parcel out and sell than the floor of a house is the guest's to sell from under his host.

It is easy, at this distance, to hear that belief as a lovely piece of innocence — a people too unspoiled to have grasped the idea of property — and to hear it so is to miss the whole tragedy, and to condescend to men who understood their own world exactly. The nations were not ignorant of ownership. They owned canoes and kettles and horses and the corn standing in their own fields; they knew to the bone what it was to possess a thing and to trade it. What they held was not a failure to imagine property but a different and fully reasoned judgment about what kind of thing land *was*. Land, to them, was not a thing at all. It was the ground of

every other thing — the source of the game and the corn and the water, the floor of the common house, the resting place of the fathers — and it stood to the people as the air stood, or the daylight, or the turn of the seasons: something you lived inside of and depended on and belonged to, not something you could pick up and carry off and hand to another man for money. A chief might as easily have sold the wind, or the language his people spoke in, or the graves of his own mother and father. And set against that, coming up the rivers, was the entire weight of another civilization built — from its Roman law to its parish maps to its plainest daily instinct — on the exact opposite conviction: that land was precisely a thing, the first and firmest of all possessions, to be surveyed and bounded and deeded and bought and sold and left to one's children, and that a man who cleared a patch of it and mixed his labor with it had made it his by a right no one could question. Here is the center of the whole matter, and the reason the long collision was a tragedy and not merely a crime: these were not a wise people and a wicked one, but two peoples each certain, each reasoning soundly from its own first principles, and the principles could not both be true of the same ground at the same time. Every treaty ever signed in this valley was, underneath, a translation between two languages that owned no common word for the thing they were both pointing at. One side believed it was buying the country. The other could not conceive of selling it, and believed, setting its mark to the paper, that it was agreeing only to share. The paper said *sold*. The people said *shared*. And the paper won in the end, because the paper was backed by the muskets — but it never once, in all the long years of it, said the same thing to both the hands that signed it.

They were here first. They named the river and the rock and the point and the rapids; they held the country a thousand years; they were, by every meaning the word has ever carried, its rightful people. The pages that follow will track, dutifully, the empires and the states that came and took the valley from them, because that is the history somebody wrote

down. But let it be said once, plainly, before any of them arrives: the valley was theirs, and it was taken, and no treaty ever signed made that anything other than true.

Out on the great water to the northeast, one autumn, a thing appeared that the valley had never seen — a hull under canvas, a ship, the first ever to sail the upper lakes. It vanished that same season with all its crew, taken by a storm, loaded with fur, never certainly found. The lakes took a ghost ship before they ever took a fort. But it was a herald all the same.

Behind it, wanting the beaver, came the French.



IV
THE FRENCH
The Corridor

Spanish civilization crushed the Indian; English civilization scorned and neglected him; French civilization embraced and cherished him.

— FRANCIS PARKMAN, *THE JESUITS IN NORTH AMERICA*



The valley as the imperial age drew it — the “Miami or Miammee R.” running into the west end of Lake Erie, with the fort at its head “usurped by the French 1750,” Sandoski “usurped by the French 1751,” and the portage southwest to the Wabash. Detail from John Mitchell’s Map of the British and French Dominions in North America, 1755 — the map later used to fix the boundaries of the United States at the Treaty of Paris.

THEY CAME WANTING EXACTLY WHAT THE BEAVER WAS, AND THEY never wanted much more than that.

This is the thing to understand about the French, and the thing that made them, of all the comers, the lightest on the ground: they did not want the valley. They wanted what could be carried out of it. A pelt weighs almost nothing; a canoe will hold a fortune in fur and still ride high; and a man who deals in furs needs not a farm but a road — a way in and a way out, and the good will of the people who do the trapping. So the French, when at last they followed the current of that want up the lakes and into the interior, did not come as settlers breaking ground. They came as traders keeping a corridor, and the valley let them keep it the way it let the beaver keep the river, which is to say without much noticing they were there.

The corridor was the whole point, and the river was the best stretch of it. A canoe could come down from Lake Erie, ascend the Maumee to its head, carry a few miles overland to the Wabash, and float on to the Ohio, the Mississippi, and the warm gulf at the bottom of the continent — so that whoever held this one river held the hinge between New France in the north and Louisiana in the south, the door between France's two Americas. The French strung that door with a light chain of posts, each a trading house with a few soldiers and a flag: one at the head of the river where the Miami kept their great town, another down on the Wabash, a third beyond at Vincennes. Not forts to hold a country. Waystations to move fur. The men who ran them were often not soldiers at all but the *coureurs de bois* — runners of the woods, unlicensed, half-wild by the lights of Quebec, paddling their loads down out of the interior and living, many of them, more like the nations they traded with than like the king they nominally served.

The anchor of that whole light chain was Detroit, which a Gascon soldier named Cadillac planted on its strait in 1701 to command the narrows between the upper lakes and the lower — the capital of the French west, the door through which everything, this valley included, reached the deep interior. From Detroit the posts ran inland like beads strung on

the rivers: the trading house at the head of the Maumee, among the Miami, burned and rebuilt more than once across the French century; Ouiatenon down on the Wabash, where the portage-goods changed hands and the traffic of the two watersheds met and mingled. But not one of these places was a fort in the sense the next century would give the word — a work thrown up to hold a country against an army. They were counting-houses with a flag over the door and a handful of soldiers to lend it dignity, and they held the whole interior precisely so long as the friendship of the nations allowed them to, and not one hour beyond.

Conjure, for a moment, the strange amphibious world those men made upon the water, for it is very nearly the whole of what France ever built in this country, and it left almost no ruin behind to prove it was here. Twice in the year the great canoes went up and came down — the *canot du maître* heavy as a loaded wagon and yet light enough for four men to shoulder, driven by crews who paddled from before the dawn to after the dark to the beat of their own songs, forty and fifty strokes to the minute, hour upon hour, and who ran their half-ton loads around every rapids at a trot, because a brigade that dawdled lost the season and the season was the whole of the year's fortune. They wintered among the nations. They took wives among them by the custom of the country, and fathered children who were neither one thing nor the other and were at home in both worlds at once. They came in to the great trade fairs at Detroit and at Michilimackinac in the spring painted and greased and feathered, and were scarcely to be told, by a newcomer, from the people they had paddled a thousand miles to buy from. Quebec disapproved of them heartily and could not have held the west a single season without them. They were the actual sinew of the whole enterprise, these runners of the woods, and they held the interior for France not by the fort or the farm or the plow but by kinship and credit and the yearly miracle of the canoe — a grip so light that when at last it slipped, it left behind it, for the digger to turn up two centuries later, hardly more than a scatter of

trade silver, a handful of gun-flints, and a wearing-down of names — very nearly all, as it would turn out, that the ground troubles to keep of anyone who ever believes he holds it.

And what the canoes carried up the river deserves a plain accounting, because the whole exchange rested on one article. The gun the trade ran on was not the soldier's musket but a thing built to the customer's specification — the period inventories of goods "proper for the savages" open with *short and light fusils*, light because the buyer was a hunter who carried his whole estate in a canoe — and it was, too often, cheap work: the nations complained in the traders' own hearing that their fusils were "continually bursting and laming them, after they have paid sufficient prices for them." And the prices were the quiet scandal of the empire. A French memorandum of 1689 set the comparison down in two honest columns: a gun cost an Indian *two* beavers at English Albany and *five* at Montreal; eight pounds of powder, one beaver against four; a blanket, one against two — the memo itself concluding that the English undersold the French by better than half. At Detroit the trading company's powder went out, by Cadillac's own admission, at four hundred per cent. Here is the fact to hold against everything this chapter has said about the French and the nations: the loyalty was real *because it could not have been bought at those prices*. The nations knew both price-books to the pelt, and could paddle to Albany any season they chose, and mostly did not — because the French had bound them with the one currency the English never stocked, which was kinship. And the gun itself was already doing its deeper work, whichever flag sold it: a band that shot its meat needed powder every winter after, forever, from somebody — the musket replaced skills and then held them hostage, and a trader on the lakes would later write down the plainest version of what that meant, from the mouths of hunters begging ammunition: *without it, their families must starve*. Keep that sentence; the rest of this book — the shut gate, the King's storehouses, a fleet on a lake — is a long working-out of it.

And where the trader went, the black robe went with him, and often enough ahead of him. The Jesuit missionaries were the other half of the French adventure, and by any honest weighing of the danger the braver half: unarmed men who walked alone into towns that had every reason under heaven to kill them, learned the hardest tongues on the continent well enough to argue the Trinity in them, and set down, in letters posted home to France year upon year, the fullest record any European kept of the nations of the interior before the flood came in over them — so that a great part of whatever can be known at all of these peoples in their own undiminished strength is known only because a priest who wanted their souls had first to trouble himself to understand their world. Some of them died for it, and died hard, and passed into the Society's own book as martyrs. Frontenac, who cared a good deal more for the beaver than for the souls of anyone, told the priests to their faces that they thought more of the selling of skins than of the saving of the heathen — which was a slander upon the priests and very nearly a confession about the Governor. But priest and trader and governor were, in the last accounting, the one thin French thread: a few thousand souls flung across half a continent, holding it by wit and friendship and the want of a hat in Paris, and holding it, for a remarkably long while, against every odd that was gathering, unnoticed and enormous, in the east.

They left the valley their tongue, and much of it is still on the land. The great limestone rock standing in the river above the rapids, where the nations held their councils under a spreading elm, they called *Roche de Bœuf* — buffalo rock. The wooded point on the bay, almost cut off by the water, was *Presqu'île* — almost an island. The river to the north, thick with wild grapes, was the *Rivière aux Raisins*, and the little settlement at its mouth was simply Frenchtown. Families like the Navarres of Detroit put down roots at the river's mouth that would outlast the flag by generations. But the deepest mark the French left in the valley's speech was not a rock or a settlement. It was the name of the river itself

— and the name of the river is the name of a people, worn nearly past knowing by three tongues in succession, which is a small history of the whole conquest folded into the name of a stream.

The people who kept the great town at the river's head called themselves *myaamia* — a word their own scholars today render, with some dispute among them, as something near to *the people of the downstream country*. It was their name for themselves long before it was anyone's name for anything, and because they were the nation the river ran down from, the river became, to everyone else, simply *theirs*: the Miamis' river, the water you ascended to reach the Miami. The French, when they came to set it on their charts, did what a writer always does with a word he has only heard and never read — he guessed. He wrote the sound as it struck a French ear and fitted it to a French pen: *rivière aux Miamis*. But the word would not hold still under the nib. *Myaamia* opens with a sound that French and English both lack a clean letter for and carries a nasal vowel that neither could quite trap, and so the old maps and the soldiers' journals became a graveyard of lunges at it — Oumami, Omaumeg, Miamis, Miammee, Aumee, Omee, Maumee — every hand grabbing at the one slippery word and missing it in a slightly different direction, and not one of them wrong, because there was as yet no right spelling for any of them to be wrong against.

You can catch the word in the very act of splitting in two. On the great map John Mitchell drew of this country in 1755 — the map at the head of this chapter, the same map whose lines would later be laid on the table at Paris to cut the boundaries of the new United States — the river is lettered, in one careful engraver's hand, *Miamis or Miammee R.* That small *or* is the whole matter caught in a single stroke: the mapmaker, staring at the word, could not choose between the two forms of it and so cut both into the copper, side by side, the older beside the newer, one name frozen in the middle of turning into another.

What at last drove the two spellings apart and pinned them where they sit was not scholarship but bookkeeping. There were two Miami rivers. The one that ran down through the south of Ohio to the Ohio itself was the Miami of the Ohio; this one, bending north and east to the lake, was the Miami of the Lake — both of them named, and named truly, for the one nation. But a land office and a canal and a county court cannot be run with two important rivers wearing a single name, and so, as the Americans surveyed and platted and finally governed the country, they let the split that was already under way harden into law: the northern river took the worn, spoken, phonetic form for its own — *Maumee* — for the river and the town and the bay at its mouth, while *Miami* stayed fastened to the nation itself, and to the southern rivers, and to the very county in Indiana into which the nation would shortly be driven. The same word, halved to keep two rivers straight, so that a man may live today on the Maumee and drive an afternoon south to the Miami and never once suspect that he has crossed from one spelling of a single name to the other.

And this is why the fort keeps the older word. Fort Miami stands on the north bank of the Maumee — the *Miami* upon the *Maumee*, the ancestor and the descendant of one word set on one bluff — because the fort was christened back when the whole river was still the Miami of the Lake, and a name, once cut into a fort, stops moving. The river went on wearing itself smooth toward Maumee; the fort's name froze at Miami and has not aged a day since. So on that single low rise above the rapids, where so much of this book's blood was still to be spilled, there stand together the two ages of one native word — the form the French guessed at and the form the Americans wore down — and neither the river nor the fort remembers any longer that both of them are only the Miami, saying, in a tongue nobody on that ground now speaks, *the people of the downstream country*. The land collects names the way its rivers collect silt, and

keeps them long after it has forgotten who dropped them, or that they were ever the names of a people at all.

Governor Frontenac, whom valley tradition would later credit with founding the first post here, almost certainly never saw the river; he ruled from Quebec, a man of such arbitrary temper that he once bullied his own intendant into barricading his house against him. But whether he came or not hardly mattered to the ground. A French flag flew over this river, in one form or another, for the better part of a century before an English one did — and in all that time the French barely marked it. They took the fur and left the forest standing. They married into the nations and were absorbed. They asked the land for passage, not possession, and the land, which had drowned a lake and would drown a swamp, scarcely registered so modest a request.

That lightness was also the whole of their weakness.

The French held the interior by alliance because they had no one else to hold it with. When the reckoning came, the arithmetic was merciless: at the outbreak of the last great war for the continent, the British colonies along the seaboard counted some two million people, and all of New France — every farm and post and mission from Louisbourg to the far Saskatchewan — counted perhaps sixty thousand. Thirty to one. No chain of trading posts on a portage could cover a gap like that. What covered it, for as long as anything did, was the friendship of the nations, and the nations were loyal to the French for the plainest of reasons: the French wanted their fur and not their country. A people that comes to trade is a different visitor than a people that comes to stay, and the nations of the valley knew the difference in their bones.

That difference settled everything, for it is the hinge the whole continent turned on. A fur trade is a business, and a business wants as few hands as it can manage — a thin scatter of traders and soldiers and priests, a few hundred where a few dozen would serve, because every man shipped across an ocean and fed in the wilderness is a cost set against the

profit of the pelts. Settlement is the opposite thing altogether. A people that comes to farm comes in families, and families breed, and every child born on the ground is one more body with a claim to it and, in time, a musket to hold it; so that a settling people does not merely arrive, it multiplies, doubling itself every twenty or twenty-five years by the plain arithmetic of a healthy frontier. France, wanting only the fur, sent men and kept them few, and stayed few. Britain, and the Americans after her, wanting the ground itself, sent families and grew, and grew, and grew. Set a business against a nation in a contest that is decided, in the end, by bodies standing on the ground, and the business will lose however brilliant its explorers and however faithful its allies — not because it is beaten in any one battle, but because it is simply and quietly outnumbered a little worse with every passing year. The very gentleness that made the French beloved of the nations, the fact that they wanted the trade and not the country, was the thing that doomed them to lose it. They were too light to keep what they had been clever enough to find. And the nations who had welcomed that light hand precisely because it was light would come to see, too late, that they had been sheltering all along beneath the one European power too few in number to defend them from the ones who were coming next.

Be exact about that gentleness, because the rest of the book will measure everything against it. It was real — the nations did not imagine the kindness, and the men who married in and wintered among them and learned the hard tongues were not playing a part. But it was not, at the root, a gift of the French character; it was the shape of what the French wanted. A people that comes for fur needs the trapper alive and friendly and in place, needs the forest standing and the villages full, and deals gently with them for the plainest reason a ledger ever gave — because gentleness, here, was the thing that turned a profit. The embrace Parkman praised was also, at the very same time, a transaction: the one long stretch of this whole story in which the cold arithmetic of a distant account-

book happened to come out, for a while, in the nations' favor. It would not stay that way. The same instrument that made the French kind because kindness paid would, in a heavier hand and a hungrier century, discover that emptying the country paid better. But that reckoning was still a lifetime off. For now the books balanced in tenderness, and the nations, who knew a generous visitor when one came among them, gave the French their loyalty and would spend it to the last.

They proved it at the worst possible moment for the British. In 1755, when a British army under Braddock pushed across the mountains to take the French fort at the head of the Ohio and was cut to pieces in the forest, nearly all the Indians of the west — reading, as one chronicler put it, the rising star — went over to the French, and for a season the power of France was supreme in the heart of the continent. The nations of this valley were among them. And they did not forget the choosing. The same peoples who stood with France against Braddock would stand against the Americans for another sixty years, long after the French flag was gone; the alliance outlived the empire that made it. That is the French legacy on this ground that mattered most — not the names on the rocks, but a loyalty that the land would still be paying out in blood two generations later.

But numbers tell in the end. The French era did not end on the Maumee. It ended far away, on a plateau above Quebec called the Plains of Abraham, in a battle the valley never heard, and by the peace that followed in 1763 the whole of the interior passed, on paper, from one European king to another. On the river nothing changed and everything changed. The same water ran over the same rapids; the same nations laid tobacco on the same rock. But the trading house at the head of the river now flew a different flag, and the people who had come to trade were being replaced by people who had come for something else, and the nations could feel it coming the way the land feels a season turn.

They did not wait to feel it fully. In the very year the peace was signed, before the ink of it was well dry, the nations of the lakes rose against the new masters in the most nearly successful war they would ever wage against a European power — and the man who lit it was an Ottawa war chief named Pontiac, whose people camped in this valley, and whose speeches would be repeated along this river for a generation. He had grasped a thing the British had not troubled to learn: that the tribes, for all their old divisions, could be made to strike as one. In the spring of 1763 he laid siege to Detroit itself, and up and down the frontier, on a coordinated signal, the western nations fell on the chain of little posts the British had just taken over from the French and swept most of them away in a matter of weeks — fort after fort surprised and carried and burned, from the Maumee country to the far end of Lake Michigan, until for one summer the whole interior seemed on the point of being wrenched back out of English hands altogether.

It failed in the end, as such risings did, for want of the one ally it had been built to count on. The French, whose cause it was half meant to serve, had made their peace and would not come; and no confederacy of the old kind could keep an army in the field forever without powder and bread. Detroit held. The tide turned. Pontiac's warriors drifted home to their hunting as the season closed, and the chief was brought at the last to submit. But the British had been handed a lesson they would spend the next fifty years failing to learn. The loyalty the French had earned by trading, the British would have to earn all over again, or do without — and they chose, in the main, to do without. And the idea Pontiac had reached for, the many nations striking as one, did not die with his rising. It went down into the ground of the valley like a seed, and it would come up again, taller, under Little Turtle, and taller still, and for the last time, under a Shawnee who was not yet born.

The land, for its part, kept no account of which king claimed it. It had held the mastodon and the beaver, the Huron and the Wyandot, and

now it had held the French for a hundred years and let them go with the same indifference it had shown when they came. A flag is a small thing to a lakebed. The whole hundred-year contest had been waged to hold a corridor the river had cut, a portage the river had left, a rapids the river had barred — the river had set every term the empires fought on, and taken no side, and flown no flag of its own; and it ran on.

Behind the new flag, wanting not the fur but the fort — and the ground the fort stood on — came the British.



V

THE CONFEDERACY

The Two Armies

Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered.

— THOMAS PAINE, *THE AMERICAN CRISIS*

THE FRENCH HAD WANTED THE FUR. THE BRITISH WANTED THE fort — and a fort is a claim on the ground it stands on, which is a different kind of wanting altogether, and the land felt the difference at once.

For thirty years after the flag changed, the change was mostly nominal. The British held the old French posts, took over the old French trade, and let the nations go on living as they had. But a war was coming down out of the east that would make this quiet river the hinge of a continent a second time, and it was the Americans' war. In 1783, when the American colonies won their independence, the peace that ended that war drew the new nation's border straight through the Great Lakes and handed everything south of them — this valley included — to the United States. The British posts on American soil were to be given up, the treaty said, with all convenient speed. They were not. From Detroit the British kept the trade, kept the alliances, and kept the nations armed and encouraged in a war of their own against the settlers already spilling over the mountains. For thirteen years the King's men held forts inside another nation's country, and the nations of the valley, who had chosen France against Braddock, now chose the British against the Americans,

for the same reason as before: the British, whatever else they wanted, did not want their farms.

And the nations fought their own war, which was the truest war the valley ever saw, because it was fought by the people of the valley for the valley itself.

They built the last great confederacy of the old kind — Miami and Shawnee and Delaware and Ottawa and Wyandot and the rest, gathered at Kekionga at the head of the river, bound together under leaders the American histories would spend a century learning to fear: Little Turtle of the Miami and Blue Jacket of the Shawnee foremost among them, and in the war-councils beside them Buckongahelas of the Delaware, Tarhe the Crane of the Wyandot, and old Egushawa of the Ottawa, the last great war-chief of Pontiac's nation. Little Turtle's gift was not new. Ten years before the Americans ever marched, in 1780, a French adventurer named La Balme had come up the Wabash with sixty men, surprised Kekionga, plundered its traders, and sat down to camp near the water as though the taking of the Miami capital were a settled thing — and it was Little Turtle, then a young war-chief, who gathered the warriors and fell on that camp in the dark and left not one of the raiders to carry the story home. He had been keeping the door of the west since before most of the men who would die trying to force it were grown.

Where such a man came from bears telling, since the whole confederacy leaned on him. Little Turtle — Mihšihkinaahkwa in his own tongue — had been born around 1747 in the Miami country near the head of the river, at or close by the great town of Kekionga that he would give his life to defending, the son of a Miami war-chief. He came up in a world already contracting around him: the French gone, the British careless of him, the American settlers a rumor on the far side of the mountains that grew a little louder with every passing year. What he wanted was the plainest thing a man can want and the hardest of all to keep — to hold his people's country, the door of the west, the crossroads his nation had

held for longer than anyone alive could reckon. For that he made himself a soldier the men who fought him rated above any of their own, and for a decade and more he succeeded past anything his enemies had thought possible, breaking the raiders first and then the armies, one after another. But the same clear eye that let him read a field of battle let him read, in time, the larger field, and see the thing the younger warriors could not bear to: that behind every army he destroyed there stood another, and behind that one another still, and behind all of them a nation breeding faster than his own could ever kill. The tragedy of Little Turtle is that he was too intelligent to be consoled by his own victories. He saw, sooner and more clearly than anyone around him, exactly where the whole thing was bound to end; and having given his youth to stopping it by war, he would give his last twenty years to softening it by peace, and be called a coward by his own people for the seeing. But that is the end of his story, and this is the middle of it, and in the middle he was still winning. Twice now, when the young United States sent its armies up to break the confederacy, they did to those armies what the forest and the swamp had always done to invaders, only faster. The land was the confederacy's ablest ally in those years — and the land takes no lasting side; it would let these nations go, when their hour came, exactly as it would let go of every comer who reached this valley certain it was his.

The first came in the autumn of 1790 — General Josiah Harmar, fourteen hundred men, sent to burn Kekionga and teach the confederacy its place. He reached the Miami capital and found it empty, the towns abandoned ahead of him, and he burned the bark houses and the standing corn and thought the thing done. But Little Turtle had only stepped back to gather himself, and as Harmar's detachments moved through the country the Miami war-chief cut them apart piece by piece, drawing them into the timber and the marsh and destroying them there, until Harmar counted his dead and turned for home having accomplished nothing but the announcing of his own weakness.

The second came the next year, and it was the worst defeat the United States Army has ever suffered at the hands of this continent's first peoples. Arthur St. Clair, the governor of the whole Northwest Territory, marched north himself in the autumn of 1791 with the largest army yet — though "largest" flatters it. It was an army of raw levies scraped together cheap and late: men, in the disgusted words of Harmar himself, who had foreseen the whole catastrophe, "collected from the streets and prisons of the cities, hurried out into the enemy's country" under officers "totally unacquainted with the business in which they were engaged," underfed by crooked contractors, unpaid, sickening, and shedding deserters the whole slow way north. Harmar had said before it ever marched that such men, under such a command, could not but be beaten; and he was proved right past his own worst fearing. On the cold morning of the fourth of November, encamped carelessly on the upper Wabash with the women and children of the camp asleep among the tents, St. Clair was struck at dawn. The warriors came out of the trees on every side at once and went first for the officers and the guns; the militia broke and ran through the regulars behind them; the camp became a single churning slaughter that lasted three hours, and when it ended more than six hundred Americans were dead — near a quarter of the entire army of the United States killed in a single morning on ground the confederacy had chosen. It was Little Turtle's masterpiece, and the nation that would one day carry the valley off westward reeled from it as from a mortal wound. Twice now the United States had marched toward this river, and twice it had been broken short of it. And the nations, for one bright and narrow moment, held the whole of the country they had held for a thousand years.

The blow struck deeper into the young republic than a battle lost on a far river had any right to strike. More men of the United States Army died in that one November dawn than would fall in the whole of any single day of the war that had won the nation's independence; a full quarter

of the standing army was gone in a morning, on ground most of the Congress could not have found on a map. Philadelphia reeled. And out of the reeling came a thing that would outlast the grief: the House of Representatives, wanting to know how an army could be so utterly destroyed, appointed a committee to inquire into it — the first congressional investigation in the history of the United States — and when it called for the War Department's papers, Washington gathered his cabinet to weigh how much a President was bound to surrender to the legislature, and settled on a doctrine, that he might withhold what the public good required be withheld, which their distant heirs would one day call executive privilege. So it happened that two enduring machineries of the American state — the congressional investigation and the executive's power to resist it — were born together, in the same season, out of the wreck of an army on a creek in the Indian country, by the hand, though he never knew it, of a Miami war-chief at the head of the Maumee. The confederacy had shaped the conqueror's government before the conqueror ever took the ground.

A different nation, or a wiser one, might have read those two catastrophes as the plain verdict of the country and made what peace it could. This one could not, and the reasons go to the heart of it, because they are the reasons the ending was never truly in doubt however many armies the confederacy broke. In the first place, the government could no more call the settlers back than it could call back the tide: they were already spilling over the mountains by the tens of thousands, squatting on the nations' land ahead of any treaty, and a republic that could not protect its own people on ground it claimed as its own was a republic that might not survive to see the century turn. In the second place, the young United States was poor, and had paid its Revolutionary soldiers largely in promises — paper warrants for western land it did not yet actually hold — so that clearing the Indian country was not an ambition it could take or leave but very nearly a debt of honor and of solvency together: the nation

needed this ground to pay for the war that had created it. And in the third place there was plain shame, which moves nations as surely as it moves men. An army of the United States had been annihilated, a quarter of it left lying in the leaves, and no government that meant to be reckoned with in the world could let that stand as the last word on the matter. So the republic did the one thing that would, in the long run, make all the confederacy's dazzling victories beside the point: it refused to take them as final. It went home, and buried its dead, and raised another and a better army, and made ready to come again — and this, and not any weakness in the men who had beaten it, is why the beating did not save them.



VI

THE WHIRLWIND

The Shut Gate

They have sown the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind.

— HOSEA 8:7



General Anthony Wayne (1745–1796), the hero of Fallen Timbers — the reckless soldier of the Revolution who made himself, for one campaign, the most patient man alive. Engraving from Gunckel, 1902.

IT WAS INTO THAT MOMENT THAT THE BRITISH MADE THEIR GRAVEST promise and their gravest error. Believing the confederacy could keep

the valley, and wanting it kept as a barrier between the Americans and their own Canada, they came down from Detroit in the spring of 1794 — on the direct order of the governor of Upper Canada, John Graves Simcoe — and built a fort where they had never dared build one before, deep inside the ground the treaty of 1783 had signed away to the United States. And it was a real fort, not a trading-house with a flag: four bastions set to rake the walls between them, a battery laid to command the river, and a dry ditch twenty and twenty-five feet deep dug down into the clay, so that the thing bristled on the north bank at the foot of the rapids, on the very ground the French had quietly traded from a century before, and announced by its every angle that the age of the light hand on the valley was over. They called it Fort Miami, and it was a promise written in log and earth and iron: stand and fight, and the King will stand behind you.

The King did not.

The Americans had learned. After the two disasters they sent, at last, a general who would not be hurried — Anthony Wayne, whom his own men called Mad Anthony, though there was nothing mad in how he came.

This Wayne repays a closer look, because he is the American the whole valley turns on, and because he was nothing at all like the patient man who now came up its river. Anthony Wayne of Pennsylvania had made his name in the Revolution as the most headlong fighting general the American cause possessed — a tanner's grandson with a hot temper and a love of the bayonet, who at Stony Point in the summer of 1779 had stormed a British fortress in the dead of night with unloaded muskets and cold steel only, and who, asked beforehand whether he would undertake so desperate an assault, is supposed to have answered: issue the order, and I will storm Hell. The nickname grew out of that reputation, and it began as an insult — Mad Anthony, the jeer of enemies and of some on his own side who thought him too reckless by half to live long.

It was not even his first nickname: the army had called him Dandy Wayne before it called him mad, for the immaculate uniforms and the parade-ground exactness he demanded of everyone including himself — and the two names together are the whole man, the perfectionist and the gambler, waiting for the one campaign that would need both. And here is the turn that makes the man worth a chapter of his own. When the republic, twice broken and out of other ideas, at last handed this famously rash soldier the task of taking the country the confederacy had twice defended, he did the single thing no one who knew him would have wagered a dollar on. He became careful. The maddest general in the army made himself, for this one campaign, the most patient man alive. The nations would find their own name for the thing he was: Che-no-tin, they called him — the Whirlwind — and a warrior who had once stood in front of him said that in the fighting he was exactly like a hurricane, that drives and tears everything before it.

Where Harmar and St. Clair had blundered north in haste, Wayne spent two full years building an army he called the Legion and drilling it until it could not be surprised. He advanced by inches, throwing up a fort at every stage; and on the very ground where St. Clair's men had died he built one and named it Fort Recovery, a word with a message in it, and when the confederacy hurled itself against that fort in the summer of 1794 it was thrown back for the first time. Wayne guarded every camp by day and by night so completely that no ambush could find a seam in him. The man who found that sleepless army its paths through the forest was William Wells — a settler's son the Miami had carried off as a boy and raised as one of their own, red-haired by the tradition his Miami name is said to keep (Apekonit, the wild carrot), and married to Little Turtle's own daughter; he had fought the Americans at the chief's side for years, then rose one morning, told his father-in-law plainly that he meant now to fight for the other side, and walked across to scout for Wayne against the people who had raised him. And Little Turtle — who had beaten

two American armies and knew better than any man alive what he was looking at — watched this one come and drew the conclusion the younger warriors would not. This chief, he told his people, is a chief who never sleeps. He counseled them to take the peace that was offered while it was still offered. They would not hear it; they called it the counsel of a man whose nerve had failed; and Little Turtle, rather than lead men to a slaughter he had foreseen, stepped down from the command and let Blue Jacket take it — the Shawnee war leader who had risen beside him through all the victories, abler in the field than in the council, and readier than the older chief to believe that whatever had broken two American armies would break a third. A captive who saw Blue Jacket in his prime thought him the most noble-looking warrior of any he had met, and set down what he wore: a scarlet officer's coat laced with gold, epaulets on his shoulders, and a King's medal on his breast. The man who now commanded the confederacy went into its last battle dressed, in half his person, as a British colonel — the alliance worn as a uniform, the promise worn as a coat. Hold that picture for the length of one more page, until the men who sent the coat shut the gate on the man wearing it.

The end came quickly then, and on ground the land itself had prepared. A few miles above the British fort, a tornado had years before flattened a swath of forest into a vast tangle of fallen trunks, and there the warriors chose to make their stand — Blue Jacket in command now — certain no army could cross such a barrier under fire. But by the custom of the war they had fasted three days to make themselves ready for the battle they believed at hand; and when Wayne, who read them better than they knew, held his army back a day, and then another, many of the warriors, faint with the long fasting, slipped away downriver to the British fort for food. So that when he came at last, on the morning of the twentieth of August, 1794, straight into the fallen timber, he came against a line already thinned and light-headed and half unmanned by its own waiting. He split his infantry into two wings and sent them in with

the bayonet — two lines of blue-coated regulars, bearskin crests on their round hats and the long triangular blades fixed and level, two years of drill moving them forward as one animal — and they would not stop for the fallen timber or the muskets behind it; and while the foot soldiers drove the warriors out of the tangle at the point of the blade, his mounted men rode wide around the flanks and came down on them with sabers, and that charge finished what the bayonet had begun. In an hour it was over. The Legion had lost fewer than forty men. And the confederacy that had broken two American armies was itself broken and running, down the river, toward the fort where the King had promised to stand behind it. The battle took its name from the ground that was supposed to save the nations and did not: Fallen Timbers.

And the beaten warriors ran for the fort the British had built them, for the promise in the log and earth — and found the gates shut. The garrison watched its allies stream past under the walls and did not open, would not fire, unwilling to start a war with the United States over a battle already lost. It was the truest thing the British ever taught the nations of this valley: that the King would arm them and would not die for them. The gates that stayed shut at Fort Miami broke the confederacy's heart more surely than the bayonets had, and within the year the nations came to Greenville and signed away the country south and east of a line, keeping the lower Maumee among their reserves — for a while.

Those gates stayed shut for a reason that should be put plainly, because the same cold reckoning would betray these nations twice more before the story was done, and it was never, at bottom, a failure of any one garrison's nerve. It was a policy. To the men who governed in London and in Quebec, the nations of this valley were neither friends nor subjects but an instrument — a living barrier of armed tribes to be kept standing between the hungry American republic and the thinly held British provinces to the north, a buffer that cost Britain next to nothing to maintain: some trade goods, some muskets, some warm words at Detroit. So long

as the buffer cost no more than that, the King's men were glad to arm it and to urge it on. But a buffer, by its very definition, is a thing you are willing to spend and not a thing you are willing to die for; and the moment that holding it meant open war with the United States — the moment the price rose from muskets to British blood — the ledger returned the same answer every time, and the answer was to close the gate. The garrison at Fort Miami was not made of cowards. It was obedient to an arithmetic that had been worked out, long before and far away, in which the lives of the confederacy's warriors stood in the column of assets and the lives of the King's own soldiers stood in the column of costs, and no adding of those columns ever once came out in the nations' favor. They had believed they were fighting beside an ally for a shared cause. They learned, at the shut gate, that they had been all along a line in another empire's account book — valued exactly, and only, as long as they were cheap. That account-book was the first of its kind opened on this river, and it was neither the last nor the worst. The same cold instrument, in a later and a heavier hand, would one day write a whole homeland down as real estate; and the shut gate was the valley's first hard lesson in the difference between being a party to the books and being an entry in them.



The Treaty of Greenville, the summer of 1795 — Wayne and his officers receiving the confederacy's submission a year after Fallen Timbers, the treaty on the ground between them. The figures are traditionally identified as including Little Turtle, William Wells interpreting between the two families he belonged to, the young Harrison, and Tarbe the Crane. Oil by an unknown officer of Wayne's Legion; Chicago History Museum (public domain).

They came to Greenville in the summer of 1795 — the beaten nations, tribe by tribe, more than a thousand of them, Wyandot and Delaware and Shawnee and Miami and Ottawa and Potawatomi and the rest — and sat through the long weeks of council with the general who had at last defeated them, and signed. The line they drew that August gave away the whole southern and eastern two-thirds of the future Ohio, a boundary the nations were to keep to on their side and the Americans, the treaty swore, were never to cross; and within the ceded country the United States reserved to itself a scatter of small squares at the points that mattered — the portage at the head of the Maumee, the mouth of the

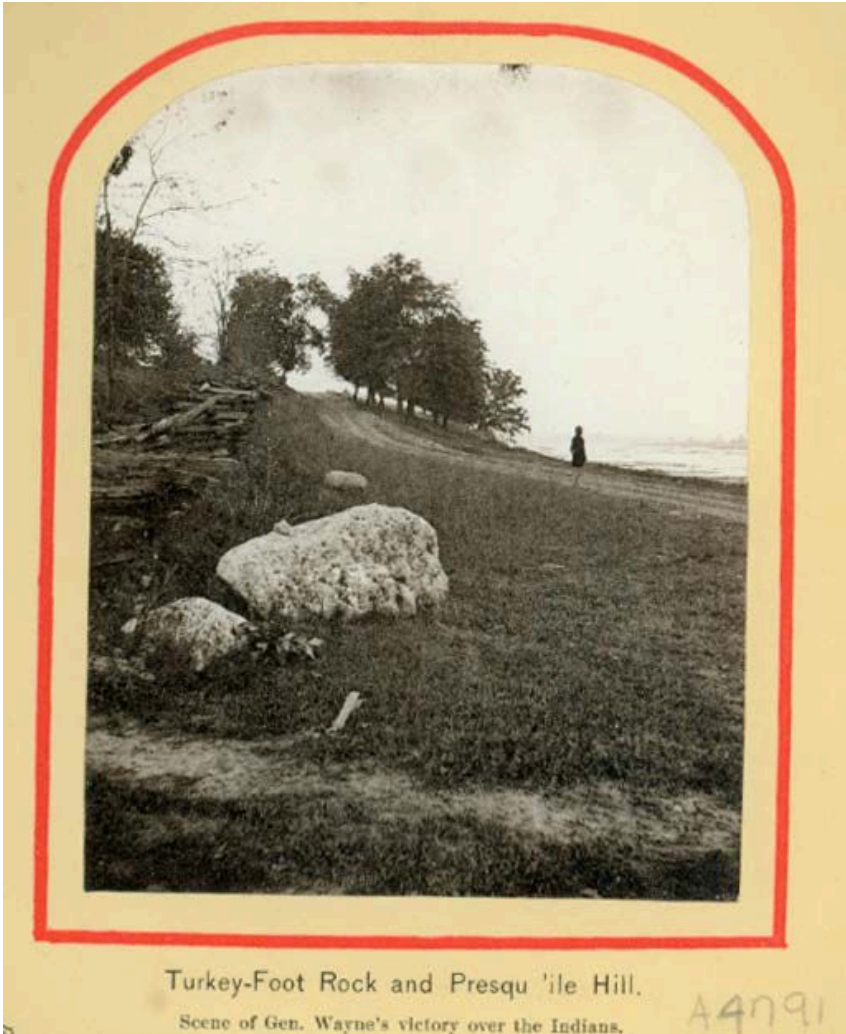
river, the old crossing places — the seeds, though no man at the council said so aloud, of every fort and town and courthouse to come. Little Turtle signed among the last of the war-chiefs, and, having signed, kept it. He had told his people the plain truth about the sleepless general and been called a coward for it; and he took the peace he had counseled as gravely as he had taken the war, and never again in his life lifted his hand against the Americans. He went east and dined with Presidents, sat still for his portrait, took from the Polish exile Kosciuszko — one revolutionary saluting another — a pair of pistols the giver is said to have pressed on him with the charge to fire them on the first man who came to rob his people of their rights, was pressed upon by Quaker philanthropists, asked of his own accord to be inoculated against the smallpox, and argued to any American who would listen against the whiskey that was doing to his people what no army ever had. He died at Fort Wayne in the summer of 1812, of the gout, in a house the government had built for him on the very ground of the capital he had spent his youth defending — a few weeks before the second war broke over the valley. The ablest mind the country ever raised did not live to see the last of what was coming for it. It may have been a mercy.

His son-in-law went the same summer, and went harder. William Wells — the captured boy raised Miami, married to Little Turtle's daughter, who had crossed over to scout for Wayne against the people who reared him — had spent the years after the peace as the American Indian agent at Fort Wayne, living out his strangely divided life on the very ground of both his families, wholly trusted by neither and wanted by both. When the second war came down in 1812 he rode west to the relief of Fort Dearborn, on the Chicago portage, to help bring off its small and stranded garrison — and he rode out of that doomed fort with his face blacked in the Miami manner, the sign of a man who expects to die, which is to say that he went to his last fight dressed in the customs of the people about to kill him; and there, in the massacre that caught them

outside the walls, the man who had belonged to two peoples and in the end to neither was killed by the side he had been born back among — and the warriors who cut him down, honoring the courage of an enemy they had known, are said to have eaten his heart, that they might take some of it into themselves. He and Little Turtle, bound by a daughter and divided by a war, went into the ground within a few weeks of one another, in the one summer, at the raising of the curtain on the last act: the two men who had understood both worlds more deeply than anyone alive, and who found, at the close, that there was no longer any room left in either for a man who understood them both.

The victor did not enjoy his conquest much longer, and the manner of his going says a thing the whole book has been trying to say. Anthony Wayne had done what no American before him could do: he had broken the confederacy in a single hour, thrown up a fort of his own on the very portage the Miami had held for a thousand years and named it, with no false modesty, Fort Wayne, and dictated at Greenville the peace that swung the country open. And then, scarcely a year past the summit of his life, on his way home from the west along the Lake Erie shore, he died — of the gout, of all the undramatic ends for the man who had offered to storm Hell — in a lonely lake blockhouse at Presque Isle, and was buried there beneath its flagstaff, at his own asking, far from anyone he loved. The man was gone at fifty-one, almost the instant he had won. But the name would not go. It fastened itself to the ground he had taken and it stayed: to the fort at the head of the river, and to the city that rose around the fort, and to the county — Toledo's first — that once carried it across the whole northwest, and to a broad road along the old rapids that bears it to this day. Anthony Wayne the man was in this valley for two years and never once came back to it. Anthony Wayne the name is on the green signs yet, and the maps, pointing still at a country he laid eyes on exactly once, in the smoke of an August morning, and left forever. He had conquered the ground as completely as any man in this book, and the

ground did with him precisely what it did with all the others: it let the man go, and kept the name, and grew its gardens over the place where he had stood.



Turkey Foot Rock on the Maumee bank below Presqu'ile Hill — the boulder where a war-chief the Americans knew as Turkey Foot fell in the last of the fighting, and where the passing warriors long after laid their tobacco. Photographed for Wabash Railway Views, 1879 — its own printed caption naming the ground only "the scene of Gen. Wayne's victory over the Indians."
Toledo Lucas County Public Library (public domain).

One boulder above the battlefield kept the memory the treaties would not. A war-chief the Americans knew as Turkey Foot had been shot dead

upon it in the last of the fighting, and for a generation after, the warriors who passed that way would lay a little tobacco on the stone and go by without a sound — in single file, one man who saw it wrote, without halting or uttering a word — until the summer the last of them was carried west, and there was no one left on the river who knew what the rock was for.



VII

TECUMSEH

The Common Ground

The hunter still the deer pursues, / The hunter and the deer — a shade!

— PHILIP FRENEAU, *THE INDIAN BURYING GROUND*

THE VALLEY THOUGHT THE THING WAS FINISHED. IT WAS NOT — because the one man who would never sign was still alive: a Shawnee of twenty-six who had fought at Fallen Timbers and lost a brother in it, who had stood close enough to watch the British gates stay shut on the running warriors, and who would refuse for the whole of the rest of his life to put his hand to the treaty that gave the country away. His name was Tecumseh, which his people understood to mean a shooting star, or a panther crouched and waiting, and he would spend the nineteen years left to him trying to undo, by the force of one will, what the shut gates and the signed line had done.

He had been born about 1768 on the Mad River, a few miles below where the town of Springfield in Ohio now stands, the fourth of seven children of a father killed in battle before the boy was grown; two of his brothers were the twins, one of whom would take the name Tenskwatawa and become the Prophet, and a third, Sauwaseekau, was the brother he lost in the fallen timber under Wayne.

He was not a large man — spare, and something under six feet — and by every account that survives he was commanding out of all proportion

to his size, with a quickness and a gravity in him that strangers marked before they had heard him say a word. The descriptions that survive agree with each other to a striking degree: black eyes, penetrating, under heavy arched brows; a full high forehead; a face set in an expression uniformly grave and severe — and an American officer who stopped his war canoes at a garrison in 1810, no friend to him, wrote home that the Shawnee at their head was simply one of the finest-looking men he had ever seen, straight, large-featured, “a daring, bold looking fellow.” No painting of him taken from life survives, and the familiar engraving in a British uniform is a later invention; the words are the only true portrait there is, and they were written mostly by his enemies, which is its own kind of testimony.

What they remembered longest, once he spoke, was the speaking; but there was more to him than the eloquence, and the more is the reason the story keeps him at its center. From boyhood he had set his face against the one practice that the frontier on both sides took for granted, the torture of prisoners, and he forbade it wherever his voice could reach; he kept himself clear of the whiskey that was unmaking his people; and he held to a plain code of mercy and word-keeping so steadily that even his enemies, who had every reason to blacken him, could find nothing in the private man to blacken.

Fix him in the mind so, here at the start, for everything he did afterward — the union he built, the massacre he rode into and stopped, the death he went knowingly to meet — was of a piece with the boy on the Mad River who would not watch a captive tortured.

For the better part of a decade he and his brother built a second confederacy, wider than the first — reaching south to the Creeks, north to the lakes, a nation of nations gathered at a town on the Wabash — on a single unbreakable principle: that the land belonged to all the peoples in common, and that no one chief and no one nation could sell what belonged to everyone, any more than they could sell the air or the river. It

was, though he would not have named it so, the old idea of the Longhouse, the Iroquois peace, raised again on new ground: many peoples, one fire.

And it was the last time it would ever be tried.

To see what he was attempting, and why it was very nearly impossible, a reader has to grasp the one thing that made the nations both free and fatally easy to divide: they had no kings. Power among them was scattered on purpose, down to the village and the band. A chief led by persuasion and by example and could bind no one who did not choose to follow him; a man who rose in council spoke for himself and his own people and never for the whole. That scattering of authority was the very root of their liberty — no nation of the valley had ever had to fear a tyrant risen from among itself — but it was also the exact seam the Americans had learned to pry apart.

For the whole art of American land-buying had become the art of finding, among the several tribes with a claim to a country, the one small faction that could be flattered or bribed or made drunk enough to make its mark, and then treating that mark as the sale of the entire ground. It was theft laundered into commerce with the stroke of a bribed pen — the paper doing quietly what no army in the field had ever managed, and doing it in a form a man could file away and forget he had ever done. Nation by nation, treaty by treaty, the country was going out from under all of them precisely because no one among them had the standing to refuse on behalf of everyone.

Tecumseh's whole insight, the single idea he gave the last years of his life to, was that there was one way and one way only to stop it: if the land were declared the common possession of all the nations together, then no lone faction could ever sell it, for the plain reason that no faction owned it to sell. In its cold logic the thing was unanswerable. It was also a demand that peoples who had never once in their history bowed to a common authority should suddenly bow to one now — and do it quickly, in-

side a few short years, against an enemy that grew stronger with every season, on nothing in the world but the persuasion of a single traveling man, who rode thousands of miles from the Creek towns of the deep south to the cold lakes of the north and back again, arguing, always arguing, that they must make themselves one thing or be swallowed one at a time.

He came astonishingly close.

That he came close at all was the wonder; that he could not quite cross the last of the distance, in the little time the Americans would leave him, is the tragedy the rest of this chapter has to tell.

The fire was first lit not by Tecumseh but by that brother. Once a failed and drunken man called Lalawethika, he fell into a trance in 1805, woke transformed, took the name Tenskwatawa — the Open Door — and began to preach a hard return: no whiskey, no white men's goods, no more selling of land, the old ways or ruin. Men are not easily moved by a preacher, but they are moved by a wonder, and the Prophet gave them one.

Having learned, somehow, that an eclipse was coming, he told a doubting crowd he would darken the sun on a day he named; and on the sixteenth of June, 1806, when the noon sky went to twilight and the stars came out at midday, he stood among them and pointed up. "Did I not prophesy truly?" he cried. "Behold, darkness has shrouded the sun!"

After that they came to him from as far as the upper lakes, and Prophetstown on the Wabash swelled to thousands.

But the confederacy took its mortal wound before the war it was building toward ever arrived. Twice, at Vincennes, Tecumseh had sat down across from the governor of the Indiana country — William Henry Harrison, the same Harrison — and told him to his face that the land sales were void, that no nation could sign away the common ground, that his own union of tribes was nothing but the mirror of the Americans' union of states. Men who sat in those councils never afterward forgot the

manner of him. He carried a familiar and exact knowledge of every treaty ever signed in the west, and took them up one after another and tore them, in the reasoning, to shreds; and the delivery matched the argument — the utterance rapid and vehement, the manner bold and commanding, the gestures quick and violent, and behind the whole of it a face that seemed always to be holding something back, “something more in his mind,” as one hearer set it down, “struggling for utterance, than he deemed it prudent to express.”

And once, walking the camp beside the governor the day after a hard council, he gave Harrison the truest image anyone ever found for what was being done to his people: the endless American buying of the land, he said, was a mighty water risen to overflow his country, and the union of the tribes that he was building was the dam raised to hold that water back. It was the whole tragedy in a single sentence — and it was, of all the figures he might have reached for, a figure of water, the Shawnee reaching, as this book keeps reaching, for the river to explain the world.

As for the President far off in his capital who kept on buying the ground, Tecumseh had only contempt: he is so far off, he said, that he will not be injured by the war; he may sit still in his town and drink his wine, while you and I will have to fight it out.

Then, in the autumn of 1811, while Tecumseh was far to the south trying to raise the Creeks, Harrison marched on Prophetstown; and the Prophet, against his brother’s strict order to risk no battle, gave him one — standing safe on a rise, singing a war-song, promising his warriors the American bullets would fall from them harmless. They did not fall harmless. The town burned, the spell broke, and a warrior turned on the Prophet with the plainest verdict a failed faith ever drew: you are a liar, for you told us the white men were dead or crazy, and they were all in their senses and fought like the devil.

When Tecumseh came home from the south, he came home to ashes, and to a confederacy that would never again be whole.

There is a story out of that southern journey that the nations told for long afterward, and it deserves the telling whether or not it fell out precisely as they said. Among the Creeks, who would not rise for him, Tecumseh is remembered to have lost his patience and left them a promise got up as a threat: that when he reached his own country again he would stamp his foot upon the ground, and the earth would shake, and their houses would come down about their ears, and then they would know he had told them the truth. And some weeks later, in the dead of that same winter, the ground did shake. The great earthquakes of New Madrid — the most violent ever known in the recorded history of the country east of the mountains — came rolling up the Mississippi valley, rang church bells a thousand miles off in the steeples of Carolina, threw down chimneys, and turned the great river itself, for one horrible hour, to run backward in its bed; and among the Creeks who felt their cabins fall there were those who remembered the Shawnee's words and were afraid.

But it came too late to be of any use. The sign, if it was a sign, arrived a month after the town on the Wabash had already burned to the ground, and a portent is poor powder.

The earth had spoken for Tecumseh at last, and spoken to no purpose whatever; and there is something in that — the very land seeming to rouse itself on his behalf, and the rousing altering nothing — that tells as much of the whole story as any battle in it.

The Prophet himself never recovered the authority that the darkened sun had won him. He had been nobody before it — Lalawethika, a one-eyed, drunken, boastful failure of a man that his own people had written off — and the vision made him, for a few short years, the most listened-to voice in the western country; and then a single lost battle he had been ordered not to fight took it all back and left him nobody again, discredited among his followers, overshadowed to the end by the brother whose one strict command he had disobeyed.

He lived on a long time in that shadow.

And in the bitterest turn the whole story has to offer, the man who had preached with the sun at his back that the nations must refuse everything the white man brought or be destroyed by it ended his own days doing the white man's work of destruction: a paid assistant, by the 1820s, to the very Governor Cass whose office was the removal of the tribes, helping to gather his people for the road west — and dying at the last in Kansas, in the exile his brother had spent his life and his death trying to prevent.

Of the two who lit the fire, the one who believed went into the ground a failure twice over, and the one who fought went into it a legend; and the ground made no more of the legend than of the failure.



VIII
THE WAR OF 1812

The Last Stand

Alas for them! their day is o'er, / Their fires are out from shore to shore.

— CHARLES SPRAGUE



Perry's victory on Lake Erie, 10 September 1813 — the commodore rowing his battle flag through the gunfire to a fresh ship after his own was shot to pieces beneath him. Command of the lake severed the British supply line and, within the month, doomed the confederacy at the Thames. William Henry Powell's Battle of Lake Erie (1873), the work of an Ohio artist, hangs today in the U.S. Capitol: the victory that killed the man this movement is named for, enshrined by the nation it made.

WHEN THE BRITISH CAME BACK — FOR THEY DID COME BACK, IN 1812, in a second war with the Americans — Tecumseh and his confederacy came with them.

That they went with the British at all, after the lesson of the shut gates, asks a hard question, and the answer is the bleakest kind of arithmetic. Tecumseh had no illusions left about the King; he had watched those gates stay shut with his own eyes, and before the end he would tell Proctor to his face exactly what he thought a British promise was worth. But a man fighting for the survival of his people does not get to choose his allies from among the faithful. He chooses from among those that exist. And in all the world there was exactly one power large enough to stand between the nations and the American flood, and it was Britain — calculating, faithless, glad to spend native lives and loath to spend its own, but there, and armed, and already at war with the same enemy. To refuse the British was to face the United States alone, which was to lose for a certainty. To take the British was to face the United States with a treacherous friend at one's back, which was to lose, most likely. Tecumseh, who could count as clearly as any man living, chose the most likely over the certain. It was not a hopeful choice and he did not make it in hope; he made it because it was the only course left that was not simple surrender, and he had sworn long before that whatever else he did, he would never surrender the common ground. A people with its back to the wall does not weigh the good against the bad. It weighs the bad against the worse, and takes the bad, and calls it — for want of a truer word — a chance.

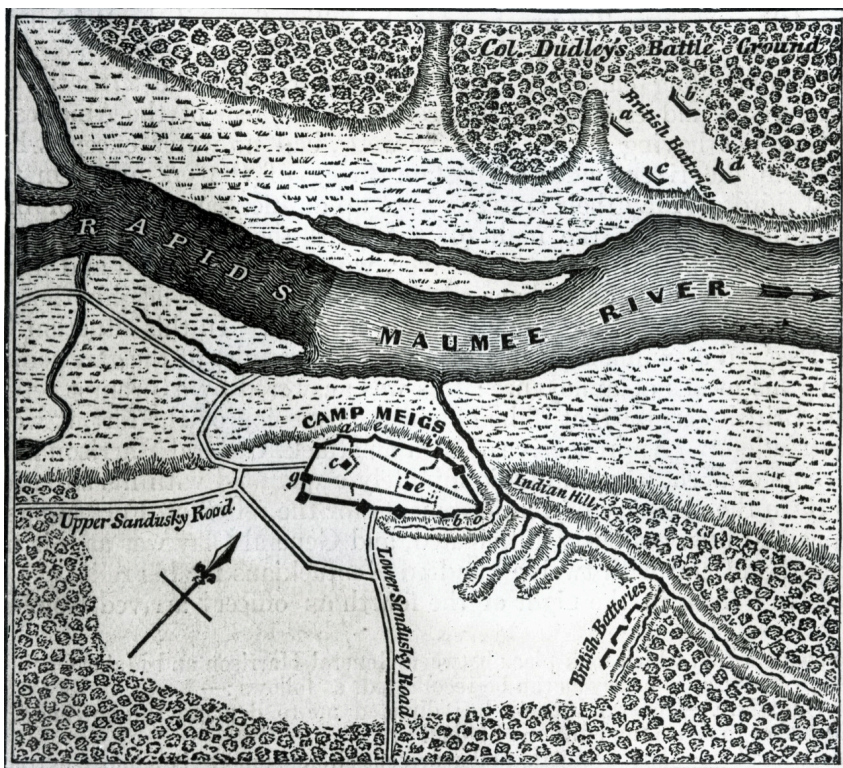
And for one more turning of the season the valley was again the theatre of a continental war. It went hard from the first, and for a season it went hard the other way.

In the first summer of that war the valley's own chief did the thing no council of nations had managed in twenty years of trying: he took a fort, and a whole American army with it, and never fired a serious shot to do

it. When the war opened, an aging general named Hull crossed from Detroit into Canada, lost his nerve, and drew back into his own works — and Tecumseh, with a few hundred warriors, and the young British general Brock, with a few hundred redcoats, set out between them to make Hull believe he was surrounded by thousands. Tecumseh marched his men out of the woods across a gap and back into the woods and around and out across the gap again, the same warriors passing the same opening three times over, until Hull's watchers counted an army where there was a war-party; Brock sent in under a flag a note hinting, with elaborate regret, that once the fighting began he might not be able to answer for what the Indians did; and Hull — an old man who had seen the massacres of the last war and now saw his own daughter and grandchildren inside the fort with him — ran up a white flag over Detroit and surrendered the place, twenty-five hundred men, and with them the whole American northwest, without a battle worth the name. The British general and the Shawnee chief had taken each other's measure in a glance and liked what they saw; the story goes that Brock unwound the sash from his own waist and gave it to Tecumseh, and that Tecumseh, honored by it, would not wear the thing over an older chief he judged more deserving, and passed it on — a plain grace between the two men that the powers standing behind each of them never once learned to extend to the other's people. It was the high-water mark of everything Tecumseh had built with his life. For a few weeks in the late summer of 1812 the confederacy and its red-coated allies held the entire frontier from the lakes to the Wabash, and it seemed, to men who did not know how thin on the ground the warriors truly were, as though the whole American flood might yet be turned back at the mountains after all. It was the last time it would ever seem so.

For the tide came back in, as tides do. In the deep cold of January the Americans pushed an army down to the River Raisin, to the old French town the traders had called Frenchtown, and there they were surprised at

dawn and broken; and the wounded who could not march were killed in the snow by the victors' allies while the British looked on, so that *Remember the Raisin* became the cry that carried the rest of the war like a wound that would not close. And there was a bitter accident in the name itself. The Raisin was the *Rivière aux Raisins*, the river of grapes — the French had named it, gently, for the wild vines that hung thick along its banks — so that the softest name they ever set on the valley's water became, in American mouths, the byword for its cruelest morning and the cry of a nation's revenge. Of all the pretty French words the newcomers took over and wore smooth, that was the one they wore into a scream.



The rapids and the two forts on one sheet: Fort Meigs ("Camp Meigs") on the high south bank, the British batteries thrown up across the river, and, upstream at the top, "Col. Dudley's Battle Ground" — the whole geography of the siege and the gauntlet. An early engraved map of the 1813 ground. Toledo Lucas County Public Library (public domain).

After the Raisin the fighting settled, as everything in this valley eventually settles, onto the rapids — and onto two forts that faced each other there across the water and across nineteen years. On the north bank stood the old one: Fort Miami, the fort the British had built in 1794 and shut the gates of, evacuated once and now, in 1813, reoccupied by the very army come back to try again. And on the high south bank, on a bluff seventy feet above the river, the Americans threw up the new one — a great stockade of fifteen-foot pickets and earthen traverses, nine acres of it, the largest wooden fort ever raised on the continent, and named it Fort

Meigs. The general who built it was William Henry Harrison, who as a boy of twenty-one had drawn the battle plan for Wayne at Fallen Timbers a mile upstream, and who had come back now to finish, against Tecumseh, the war he had helped begin against Tecumseh's teachers. The old British fort of the shut gates and the new American fort of the second war stood in plain sight of one another, a river between them, and the whole tragedy of one spring day in 1813 was played out in the space that separated them.

Late in April, Proctor and Tecumseh came up and laid Fort Meigs under siege, planting their batteries on the north bank by the old fort and throwing shot at the traverses for days. The garrison ran short of iron for its own guns and hit on a way to buy it back: it offered a gill of whiskey for every British ball brought in whole and "of a size to fit their guns," as the bounty order ran — for the two empires' artillery answered to the same calibers, so that the King's shot fit the republic's cannon as neatly as if the quarrel had been arranged by a single foundry — and soldiers hunted the mud outside the stockade by night, carried the balls to the keeper of the magazine, drank their gill, and fired the King's own metal back across the river at the men who had sent it. On the worst days the shot came in by the hundred, and one volunteer took it on himself to stand up on the embankment and call each round aloud as it came, so the men below could drop clear of its path — until a ball came straight down his own line of sight, and he stood a moment silent and perplexed, and was swept into eternity where he stood. And on the fifth of May the relief came down the river — Kentuckians, eight hundred of them under a Colonel Dudley, in flatboats — not regulars but volunteers in fringed hunting shirts of linsey and buckskin, their own long rifles across their knees, men bred to obey no officer a step farther than they agreed with him — with orders as narrow as they were plain: land on the north bank, take the British batteries, spike the guns, and come straight back. The first half went like a dream. Dudley's men swarmed the batteries and

drove off the gunners and hammered their spikes home into the touch-holes, and for one bright hour the thing was a triumph. Then the war-whoop went up in the woods behind them, and no order on earth could hold a Kentuckian who had heard it. Against every instruction they plunged into the forest after the warriors — and the forest closed around them, and the triumph became a trap. Cut off from the boats and the river, surrounded, they were taken, some six hundred of them, and marched down the bank to the old fort. To Fort Miami. To the same ground whose gates had stayed shut on the beaten warriors nineteen years before.

There the gates opened, and the horror began. The prisoners were stripped and made to run a gauntlet between two long lines of warriors armed with tomahawks and clubs and ramrods, and were beaten and shot and killed as they ran, near forty of them dead in the running of it before they even reached the gate; and inside the old fort the killing went on, methodically, under the eyes of the British officers who had promised the prisoners protection and now did nothing — the same silence, on the same ground, that the fort had shown its allies in 1794, only turned the other way. And then a horse came at a gallop.

It was Tecumseh. He had heard, miles off, what was being done in his name, and he rode in among the killers and threw two of them to the ground with his own hands and stood over the prisoners and dared the hundreds around him to strike another — *I conquer to save*, he is remembered to have said, *and you to murder* — and the killing stopped, because he had stopped it. Then he went looking for Proctor, and found him, and asked the British general to his face why he had not put an end to it; and when Proctor answered that his Indians could not be commanded, Tecumseh told him what he was. *Begone*, he said. *You are unfit to command. Go and put on petticoats*. The valley had watched the British shut the gates on their own allies in 1794. Now it watched a British general stand by while helpless prisoners were butchered under his flag — and watched a Shawnee chief ride in and do, alone, the plain human thing

that every officer of the King had failed to do. If there is a single hour in which the whole moral weight of this story stands clear, it is that one, on that ground, between those two forts.

Yet the ground does not bear his name. Walk the rapids today and the disaster is marked, in the books and on the plaques, as *Dudley's Defeat* — fixed forever to the Kentucky colonel who blundered his men into the woods and died there, and not to the Shawnee who rode in and stopped the killing over their bodies. That is no accident of the record; it is the record doing precisely what it was always going to do. The memory of this valley was written, in the end, by the people who took it, and a people writes its disasters in its own hand and files them under its own dead. The settlers remembered the gauntlet as a wound — a thing done to *them*, one more Raisin to be avenged — and named the ground for the man it was done to. The mercy they did not keep at all, because a mercy from the other side is a debt, and the ledger of this country, from the shut gate of 1794 to the last treaty still to come, never once entered a line in the nations' favor. So even here, at the single hour when a native hand did the plainly human thing that no officer of the King would do, the book closed the way it always closed: it set down the white loss, credited the native grace to no one, and handed us a battlefield named for the man who lost it and silent about the man who redeemed it. The gate that shut in 1794 and opened in 1813 was worked, both times, by the same cold arithmetic that could enter these people as a cost and never once as a credit — and the naming of the ground was its last and quietest turn.

And even as the gauntlet ran, the war was turning under them. Proctor's siege of Fort Meigs had already failed once; he came back in July and failed again, his warriors staging a sham battle in the woods to lure the garrison out to a rescue that never came, and the garrison, wiser than the Kentuckians had been, declining the bait; and when he gave up the rapids at last and threw his whole force downriver against a little stockade on the Sandusky called Fort Stephenson, a twenty-one-year-old

major named Croghan held it against him with a hundred and sixty men and a single old six-pounder the garrison had christened Betsy. Summoned to surrender or be massacred, Croghan sent back the word that if the British carried the place there would be nobody left inside it to surrender to them — and made the boast good, and broke the assault at the ditch with fearful slaughter. After Fort Stephenson the British and their allies never took another thing on this frontier. The high summer of Detroit was a year gone, and everything since had run the other way.

The lake was taken by a man of twenty-eight who had first to build the fleet that took it. Oliver Hazard Perry came of a Rhode Island naval family — his father a sea-captain before him, a younger brother the Matthew Perry who would one day sail a squadron into Tokyo Bay and pry open Japan — and he had gone to sea as a midshipman at thirteen. In the spring of 1813 the Navy sent him to a raw little harbor at Presque Isle, on the Pennsylvania shore, to make a fleet where there was none: to fell the standing timber of the lakeshore and build, out of the green forest itself, the ships that would decide who owned the inland seas. He built them, and worked them over the bar, and on the tenth of September stood out with them among a cluster of islands at the western end of the lake to find the British squadron that had ruled that water since the war began. What he did there was the plainest kind of courage. His flagship the *Lawrence* — named for the dead captain James Lawrence, whose last words, *Don't give up the ship*, Perry had stitched onto a blue battle flag and flown at the mast — was shot to wreckage under him, four-fifths of her people killed or hurt, until she could not answer with a single gun; and Perry, rather than haul down that flag, had himself rowed a half-mile through the whole weight of the British fire to the *Niagara*, the consort that had hung unaccountably back out of the worst of it, took command of her clean and unhurt, drove her straight through the enemy's line, and inside fifteen minutes had the entire British squadron — the first time in the history of the world that a whole British squadron struck its colors —

surrendered to a man of twenty-eight on a lake that two years before had held no navy at all. He wrote the word of it to Harrison on the back of an old letter, laid against his navy cap: *We have met the enemy, and they are ours.*

It was the height of his life, and he had little of it left to spend. The victory made him a hero of the whole republic at twenty-eight, and it curdled almost at once into a long and bitter quarrel with the captain of the *Niagara*, Jesse Elliott, whose hanging back Perry could neither forgive nor ever quite prove; the feud gnawed at what was left of his short life, and in the end the Navy, to be rid of the noise of it, packed him off south on a diplomatic errand to the new republics of South America. There the thing the valley itself knew best of all reached out and took him: the fever. Oliver Hazard Perry died of the yellow fever off Trinidad on the twenty-third of August, 1819 — his thirty-fourth birthday — not six years from the summit of his fame, and was put into the ground among strangers in the tropics before they ever brought him home. But the valley kept his name, the way it kept them all. The town that rose on the south bank at the foot of the rapids, under the walls of Fort Meigs, on the very ground where Dudley's men had run the gauntlet and the militia of Ohio would shortly pitch their bloodless camp, they called Perrysburg, for the young commodore who never once laid eyes on it — so that the man who won the lake and died at thirty-four, on his own birthday, in a fever off a foreign coast, rides the green signs of the valley to this day: one more name worn smooth over a life the ground itself never held for a single hour.

It could not last, and Tecumseh knew it could not. With the lake lost the British supply line was cut, and there was nothing left for Proctor to do but burn his stores and run for Canada; and Tecumseh, who had spent his life on the promise that the King would stand, went with them knowing exactly what it meant. Before the retreat he stood before Proctor and spoke for all the nations, in words the Americans would find

written out in the general's own captured papers: our father, he said, is like a fat dog, that carries its tail on its back, but when frightened drops it between its legs and runs off. We are determined to defend our lands, and if it be the Great Spirit's will, we wish to leave our bones upon them. He did leave them. At a place called the Thames, a little way into Canada, the confederacy made its last stand. He seems to have gone into it knowing he would not come out. On the morning of the battle he put off the red coat of a British officer that he had been given and dressed himself again in his own deerskin; he unbuckled his sword and pressed it upon a friend, telling him to keep it for his young son until the boy was grown enough to wield it; and he told the chiefs around him, without any drama about it, that he would be killed that day. Then he went into the fight anyway. Those who were there said his voice carried his warriors from the first fire, and that as long as they could hear it above the guns they held their ground — and that the instant it fell silent the fighting stopped, as though the whole battle had only ever been the sound of that one man's will. He was killed there on the fifth of October, 1813. Who fired the shot was argued over for fifty years, and a claim to it helped carry an American to the vice presidency, but it never mattered which hand did it. With Tecumseh died the last serious attempt, by anyone, to hold this country as a country of many nations held in common. The idea was what died. A white man named Stephen Ruddell, taken captive as a boy and raised in the Shawnee towns, who lived nearly twenty years among them and part of that time in Tecumseh's own family, left the truest word anyone said of him: that he was a very great as well as a very good man, who, had he been given the advantages of a liberal education, would have done honor to any age or any nation.

The man who beat him ran the opposite way to the opposite end, and the two lives set side by side are the whole argument of this book in little. William Henry Harrison had come into the country as nearly the reverse of Tecumseh in every particular: a Virginia aristocrat, son of a

signer of the Declaration of Independence, a young officer of good family and cold ambition who had first laid eyes on this valley at twenty-one as an aide to Mad Anthony Wayne, drawing the battle plan at Fallen Timbers a mile up these same rapids. What he wanted was what such men wanted — advancement, and land, and a name — and he had understood early that on this frontier all three came to the man who could take the nations' country and be seen to have done it. As governor of the Indiana territory he made himself the great engine of the land cessions, buying up the ground faction by faction in precisely the way that Tecumseh rose to stop; so that it was Harrison's treaties that in a sense created Tecumseh, and Harrison's army that burned Prophetstown, and Harrison's soldiers who at the Thames at last killed him. And then Harrison gathered the reward that Tecumseh's whole life had been denied. A generation on, an old man by then, he allowed the country to be told that the aristocrat had been born in a log cabin, ran for President on the name of the battle he had won against the Prophet — Tippecanoe — and was carried into the office on the strength of it; whereupon he delivered the longest inaugural address in the history of the republic, bareheaded in a cold March rain, took a chill, and was dead of it thirty-one days later, the shortest presidency there has ever been. Two men gave the whole of their lives to the fight for this one valley. One of them lies in an unmarked place off a Canadian river, his grave hidden on purpose by his own people so that it could never be found and defiled; the other lies in a marble tomb above the Ohio, having climbed to the very summit of his nation and held it for a month. And the ground kept exactly as much of the one as of the other — which is to say, their names — and let the men themselves go down into it without appearing to weigh the difference.

The British sailed away for good, their forts on the river emptied, their war lost, their allies dead or scattered. They had wanted the fort, and the ground the fort stood on, and in the end they kept neither. They

had held the valley for half a century and left it as they found it in only one respect: it was still not theirs.

But the ground was empty now in a way it had never been. The nations were broken; the confederacies were finished; the great chiefs were dead or bound for reservations in the setting sun. And into a valley emptied of everyone who had ever held it lightly came the one kind of claimant the land had not yet met — a people who did not want the fur, and did not want the fort, but wanted the ground itself, to break it and fence it and keep it and never, ever leave.

The Americans had come to stay.



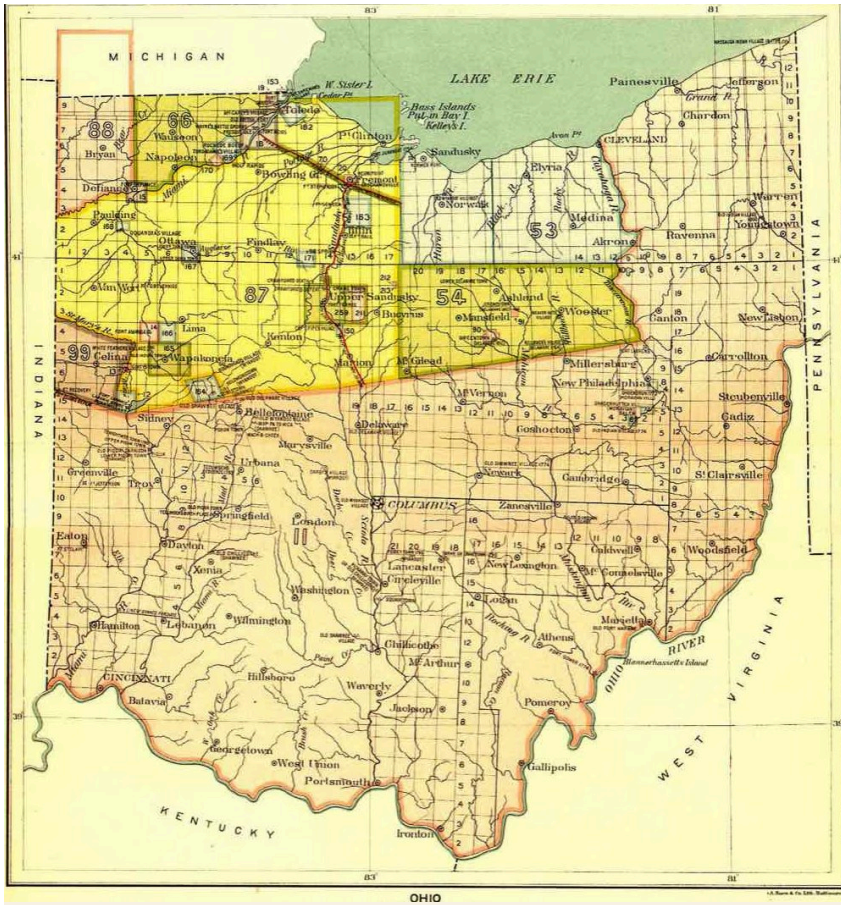
I X

THE AMERICANS

The Ledger

The wrong-doing of one generation lives into the successive ones.

— NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE, *THE HOUSE OF THE SEVEN GABLES*



The Indian land cessions of Ohio, numbered tract by tract — the ground signed away, treaty by treaty, until nothing was left. Royce, Eighteenth Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology, 1899.

THE OTHERS HAD ALL WANTED SOMETHING THE LAND COULD GIVE and keep giving — fur, passage, a fort on a bluff. The Americans wanted the land.

This was new, and the ground knew it was new. A trapper takes the beaver and the beaver comes back. A trader keeps a road and the forest closes over the road when he goes. Even a fort is only a scab the land will shed in a century or two. But a people that comes to break the sod and

fence the fields and file a deed at a courthouse has come to change the thing itself, permanently, into private squares of ownership — and such a people does not camp on the commanding points and move with the seasons. It stays.

The wagons came down out of Pennsylvania and over from the east by the thousand, and where the nations had taken the deer and let the ground close behind them, the Americans felled the forest and drained the water and laid the black earth open to the plow, and did not leave.

What the land meant to those people has to be reckoned with, because it was not simple greed, or not only that, and the not-only is the whole of the difference. Most of them were poor. They came out of a Europe and an eastern seaboard where the ground had long ago been all spoken for, where a man without land was a tenant or a hired hand or a servant the whole of his life and his children after him, and where the owning of land was the settled property of a class a poor man could not hope to enter. And they were pouring into a new nation that had just fought a revolution partly about this very thing — that had thrown off a king who, in one of the grievances that helped kindle the war, had presumed to forbid his colonists the country beyond the mountains — and that now held out, as the founding promise of its whole experiment, the one thing the old world had always kept back from the common man: a piece of ground that was his own, in fee simple, to clear and to fence and to hand down to his sons, and with it the standing of a free and independent citizen and not anybody's dependent. To Jefferson and the men who framed the republic, a nation of such small freeholders was the very definition of liberty. To the man in the wagon it was something plainer and more powerful still: it was the difference between being nobody and being somebody, and it was lying out here for the taking, black and level and richer than anything he had ever seen, at a dollar and a quarter the acre.

That is the force that came over the mountains — not a mood but a hunger with an entire philosophy behind it and an entire continent in front of it, and there was never the smallest chance that it would halt at the edge of another people's country, or recognize, when it arrived, that the ground was already spoken for in a language it had no intention of learning.

The dream of the settler and the doom of the nations were the same few acres seen from two sides. And the dream was the heavier of the two.

But first the ground had to be emptied of everyone who remembered holding it another way, and that was done not with armies now but with paper. Treaty by treaty the reserves were narrowed — the greatest of them signed in 1817 on the very ground of Fort Meigs, in a single afternoon. And then, band by band, the people themselves were gathered up and carried west. In the summer of 1838 the last of the valley's mixed nations were camped a few weeks on an island in the river within sight of the old fort, eight hundred souls of seven peoples, before their agent — a man who had grown up among them and spoken their languages since boyhood and called it the saddest duty of his life — took them across the plains toward a valley in Kansas none of them had seen.

A few old chiefs stayed behind to die on the ground. Ottokee, the peace chief who had owned the very land Toledo now stands on, went west with the rest.

How a people who had just built a republic on the sacredness of liberty and property brought themselves to do this to another people is a question worth sitting with, because they did not, on the whole, believe they were doing wrong — and the story they told themselves is one the reader ought to know, for it is a very human and a very durable kind of story. By the 1820s the taking had hardened from a scatter of local bargains into a deliberate national policy: removal, the wholesale transfer of every eastern tribe to the far side of the Mississippi, written at last into federal law under President Jackson in 1830. And the men who made

that policy wrapped it, most of them sincerely, in two comforting ideas. The first was that the Indian was a doomed race in any event — that he was fated by some law of nature or of Providence to melt away before the advance of civilization, so that removal was not his destruction but only the orderly managing of a disappearance already under way, and even a mercy, a means of setting the remnant somewhere safe and far from the whiskey and the swindlers of the frontier. The second idea was older and ran deeper: that a wilderness ranged by a few thousand hunters was ground going to waste, that the Creator had given the earth to man to be subdued and made to bear, and that a farmer who would raise corn and children on an acre held a better title before God than a hunter who merely passed across it. Set the two beside each other — they are vanishing anyway; the land is wasted on them; and we have need of it — and you have a machine for doing a great wrong with a clear conscience, which is the most dangerous machine there is.

Almost no one who turned its crank believed himself a villain, and that is the part to remember. The emptying of a continent was carried out, in the main, by ordinary and even kindly men who had talked themselves into the belief, on grounds that felt to them like justice and sometimes like charity, that the thing they wanted to do anyway was the right thing to do.

But to explain a wrong is not to excuse it, and it is worth stopping here, at the center of the book, to say the harder half of it out loud. That the men who emptied this valley did not think themselves criminals is a fact about them, not a mercy owed to them; the clear conscience was not the wrong's excuse but its engine — the very thing that let a theft be carried out in the open, at the scale of a country, by decent men, and entered afterward in the record as lawful business. And the decency was not evenly spread, and a book that will not rank these things has left its work half done. The poor family in the wagon, that wanted one acre of its own and never once saw whose grave it broke to the plow, is owed a gentler judg-

ment than the men who built the machine and knew exactly what it was — the governors who administered the emptying, the President who wrote it into the law of the nation, the buyers who had perfected the art of finding the one hungry or half-drunk signer in a nation and calling his mark the sale of a country. Those men were not swept along by a current they could not see. They cut the channel, and drew their wages from it, and died in their beds, honored.

If the reader has wondered why this book has been so slow to name a villain, this is the answer, and it is not the swamp, nor the settler, nor even the soldier: it is the ledger. It is the quiet conversion of a homeland into real estate, of a people into a line in a table, of a dispossession into a transaction — worked so smoothly that the hand that did it never had to feel the ground it took. That conversion was the whole genius of the thing and the whole crime of it at once, and it was done here, on this river, in an afternoon of signing, as thoroughly as it was ever done anywhere on the continent.

The paper did its work in stages, and the first great stage of it was signed, with a fittingness no one present can have failed to feel, on the ground of Fort Meigs itself. There, in September of 1817, on the same bluff where Harrison's men had stood and counted the incoming shells four years before, two American commissioners — Lewis Cass, the governor of Michigan Territory, and Duncan McArthur — sat the nations down and took from them, in a single treaty, four and a half million acres: something near a sixth of the whole state of Ohio, the largest cession of native land the state would ever see, gone in an afternoon's signing on the very ground the nations' own allies had died to defend. The fort that had been raised to hold the country by war had become the table on which the country was signed away by pen; and the one method having at last failed the newcomers, they turned to the other, which never failed them at all. Within the vast ceded tract the treaty penned the nations into a scatter of reserves — a few townships at Wapakoneta, at

Upper Sandusky, along the Sandusky and the Auglaize — islands of the old country left standing in a rising sea of American survey, and every man who made his mark that day understood, whether he let himself say it or not, that an island in a rising sea is a temporary arrangement.

The same treaties that took the land by the million acre left, here and there, a few small private squares of it in native hands — grants written out to particular men and particular families, many of them of mixed French and native blood, who had learned to hold ground in the newcomers' own way, by the deed: a section to Jean Baptiste Richardville, the Miami civil chief — a broad-shouldered, unsmiling man whose face carried his parentage openly, the Roman nose and pale blue eyes of his French trader father set in the countenance of a Miami chief, and who worked the seam between his two bloods in three languages, Miami and French and English, running the old portage at Kekionga as a tollgate business until he was reckoned the richest man in Indiana at his death; grants to the Godfroy and the Lafontaine and the Shane; a tract to Peter Minor at the Wolf Rapid on the Maumee itself. They were the stubborn little islands the tide left behind as it drew out, and a scattering of them are islands yet — the ground under a handful of Indiana farms held to this day by the descendants of families that simply would not be moved.

But they were the exceptions that took the measure of the rule, and the rule was that the nations went.

There is one image of that leaving that has to be set down, because it holds everything the newcomers never grasped about the ground. When the Shawnee were made to quit Wapakoneta, up the Auglaize, they went first to their burying places and took down the little fences from around their fathers' graves and laid the sod back over the mounds so smoothly that not a trace of them could be seen — hiding their dead in the earth a second time, so that no stranger coming after could find them or trouble them — and then they danced a war dance the night through, and in the morning rode west. They had buried their dead on the finest ground in

the country for a thousand years. On the way out of it they gave the graves back to the earth, and asked the earth to keep the secret.

And onto the emptied ground the towns rose, and the first and most telling of them rose exactly where the blood had been. At the foot of the rapids, on the north bank, on the very ground of old Fort Miami and the gauntlet Dudley's men had run, the Americans laid out a town in 1817 and called it Maumee — took the river's name, which was the Miami's name, for a town built on the place the Miami's allies had been slaughtered. It grew handsomely. They raised a Greek Revival courthouse on the massacre ground and held their county's law in it; they built white-columned houses along the river, one of them, the House of Four Pillars, going up in 1835 with a hidden room where, it was told, men fleeing slavery north to Canada were sheltered — so that the same soil held, in its layers, a fort, a massacre, a courthouse, and a station of the underground road. And in the finest of those mansions, a fourteen-room house on the riverbank a few steps from the old battlefield, there lived a woman named Mary Wolcott — daughter of that same William Wells who had scouted for Wayne at Fallen Timbers a mile upstream, and of Sweet Breeze, who was Little Turtle's own daughter.

The chief who had destroyed two American armies to keep this country had a granddaughter keeping a river mansion above the field where his confederacy had broken, married to an American merchant, presiding over the town that stood on the graves. The valley folded its conquerors and its conquered into the same few acres and grew its gardens over all of them, evenly, and gave no sign it knew the one from the other.

And as fast as the nations were emptied out of it, the newcomers poured in to fill the vacancy, for the land, drained and undrained alike, was going now at a dollar and a quarter the acre, and a dollar and a quarter was a price a poor man could let himself dream on. They came down the new canal and over the corduroy roads and in across the lake by steamer — Yankees off the worn-out hill farms of New England,

Pennsylvanians with German names, and behind them the first of the great wave then cresting out of Germany and Ireland: families who could not have found the Maumee on a map a year before, and who now meant to die on it and leave it to their children's children. They came into a hard country and it used them hard. The fever of the swamp took the newcomer exactly as it had taken everyone before him; whole settlements shook through their first summers with the ague, and a hopeful little canal town named Providence, up at the head of the rapids, was scoured off the face of the earth in two years by fire and the cholera together and never once rebuilt. Justice itself came to them by water and by barter: a circuit judge and his handful of lawyers paddled the sixty miles down from Findlay to Defiance in a dugout canoe they had christened, with frontier gravity, the good pirogue *Jurisprudence*; and one whole county away to the west, having not a dollar in its treasury the year it was organized, paid its entire assessment of state tax in certificates for wolf scalps. The very mud became an economy of its own: along the swamp roads the tavern-keepers kept spare yokes of oxen to drag the mired emigrant wagons out at a dollar the pull, and a man's claim to the nearest mud-hole was recognized among neighbors as a piece of real property — so that one departing landlord is said to have sold his cultivated mud-hole, as a going concern, to the man who would inherit the hauling.

It was a rough filling of an emptied land. But it was a permanent filling, which was the whole of the point, and the whole of the difference from every comer who had gone before. This time the wagons did not turn around.

If the settled valley had a single figure who tied the whole long story together in one man's life, it was Peter Navarre. He was of the old valley to the bone — born at Detroit in 1785 into one of the French-and-Indian trading families that the first chapters of this book left rooted at the river's mouth, at home in the woods and in the tongues of the nations as few white men ever were. In the second war with the British he

scouted for Harrison with a price of a thousand dollars on his head, and carried the general's dispatches on foot through the drowned country when no other road was open, swimming the flooded Sandusky twice in a single night to reach the little fort at its mouth. And then the war ended, and the nations he had grown up among were gathered up and carried west, and the swamp he had waded was cut into farms, and the frog-pond landing at the rapids swelled into a city — and Peter Navarre lived through the whole of it, an old French scout grown gray in a made American county, down to 1874, when the last surviving graybeards of Fort Meigs came together one final time at Perrysburg and he was among them: the living memory of a valley that by then existed nowhere on earth but inside the heads of a dwindling handful of very old men.

The last of the Ohio nations to go were the Wyandot, keepers of the western door, who held their reserve at Upper Sandusky a few years longer than the rest and gave it up only in 1843; and it happened that a famous stranger passed through the year before they went. Charles Dickens, touring America in 1842 and finding little enough in it to admire, came through Upper Sandusky and took his breakfast with the old Indian agent there, Colonel John Johnston, who had just concluded the treaty that would carry the Wyandot west. Dickens, who missed very little, set down how the nation had voted the question in a council house built for the purpose, and how, the decision once made, the large minority who had lost the vote gave way to the rest and withdrew all opposition without a word. It is a strange small immortality: the going of the last nation in Ohio caught in passing by the most famous novelist alive, on his way to somewhere he expected to find more interesting, and preserved in a paragraph set down between his complaints of the American roads.

And the people the river itself was named for were among the last to go, and went in the cruelest way the land could have devised. The Miami — myaamia, their own word for themselves, the word worn down the centuries into the name the whole valley wears — held on in Indiana an-

other eight years. Then, on an October day in 1846, the Army loaded them onto three canal boats and drew them west down the Wabash and Erie Canal toward Kansas. The people whose name the river carries were carried out of their own country on the canal — and there was a crueller thing folded into the route than into the bare fact of it. The canal did not run west at random. It climbed the Maumee to its head and crossed to the Wabash by the one low notch at Fort Wayne — the old portage at Kekionga, the continental carrying-place the Miami had held and taken their toll upon in the days of their strength, the one lock on the whole passage between the northern lakes and the southern gulf. The nation that had grown rich as the keeper of that gate was drawn out of its homeland as freight along the very ground of it, poled west on an artificial river dug straight down the line of the portage that had once made it a power.

They had been the lords of the passage. They left it as cargo. And the canal is the thing to remember, besides, because the canal is where the newcomers' story turns from tragedy into something closer to farce.



X

THE TOLEDO WAR

The Line on the Map

It could probably be shown by facts and figures that there is no distinctly native American criminal class except Congress.

— MARK TWAIN, *FOLLOWING THE EQUATOR*



The packet boat Legal Tender on the Miami & Erie Canal at Waterville, about 1890. Two states nearly came to blows over where this canal would meet the lake; the railroads made it worthless within a dozen years of its opening, and it lingered on in decline, as here, for a generation more. Toledo Lucas County Public Library (public domain).

FOR WHILE THE NATIONS WERE BEING EMPTIED OUT OF THE VALLEY by the deed and the treaty and the canal boat, the newcomers fell to fighting over the same ground — and they fought like people who had forgotten, or never known, what it had cost.

The quarrel was between two American states, and it was about ten miles of mud. A surveyor's error a century old had left the line between Ohio and the new territory of Michigan uncertain right at the mouth of the river, and both claimed the strip that held it — because the canal, that same canal, was going to end there, and everyone could see that whoever held the canal's mouth would hold the commerce of the whole interior.

The nations had wanted the valley as home; the states wanted it as real estate.

And so, in the winter of 1835, the two governments went to the edge of war over a boundary. Ohio's governor was Robert Lucas, sixty-three, stubborn, a man who as a young officer in the last war had been paddled across the great swamp by Indian guides — so that the man now claiming the country had once needed its oldest inhabitants to carry him over it. Michigan's was Stevens T. Mason, twenty-three years old, the Boy Governor, too young to be embarrassed and too proud to yield. Lucas pushed an act through his legislature seizing the strip and naming a county for himself; Mason answered with a Pains and Penalties Act that made it a crime punishable by hard labor for anyone to accept Ohio's authority on the disputed ground. Then both men called out their militias, six hundred on one side and a thousand on the other, and marched them into the mud to glower at each other across it.

The comedy is real, but the men who marched were not simply fools, because the thing they were fighting over looked, in 1835, like the key to a fortune, and the looking was not unreasonable. This was the age just before the railroad, when a heavy load could be moved cheaply only over water, and a canal was the most modern and most coveted thing a state could have — and the great canal then being dug to join the Ohio coun-

try to Lake Erie was going to empty at precisely this spot, at the mouth of the Maumee. Whoever's state held that mouth would hold the one place where the grain and goods of half the interior changed from canal boat to lake ship, and would gather the tolls and the trade and the swelling growth of it; the little fever-ridden town in the mud was widely and soberly expected to become a great city, a western rival to Buffalo or even to New York, and the men who were platting its streets across the marsh believed it with their whole hearts.

That the canal would be obsolete within fifteen years, killed by the very railroads not one man in 1835 quite saw bearing down on him, is the joke the future was preparing to play on all of them — but they could not see the future, and by the lights of their own moment they were contending over a real and glittering prize.

It takes hindsight to turn them into two mobs of armed men scowling across a ditch that was about to be worth nothing. At the time, that ditch was the future of the West, and they knew it.

How the line came to be in doubt at all is a small comedy in its own right, and a characteristic one, for it turned on the oldest of American mistakes: a confident map of a country nobody had yet seen. When the Congress of the Confederation laid out the Northwest in 1787, it drew the top of the future Ohio as a line run due east from the southernmost bend of Lake Michigan — a sensible rule, if only anyone had known where the southern bend of Lake Michigan actually lay. Nobody did. The best map in existence, an Englishman's chart of 1755 that the framers trusted, had set the bottom of the lake the better part of half a degree too far to the north; and when the surveyors at last went out and found the real lake sitting well south of where the map had sworn it would be, the line run east from it by the old rule struck Lake Erie not above the mouth of the Maumee but below it — throwing the river's mouth, the future canal terminus, the whole coveted strip, into Ohio, or

into Michigan, depending entirely on which map and which clause a man had made up his mind to believe.

Ohio ran one line, the Harris Line, by its own hopeful reading; Michigan ran another, the Fulton Line, by the letter of the Ordinance; and between the two lay a wedge of ground some five miles wide at the Indiana corner and eight at the lake, a sliver about the size of a small county, with the town of Toledo sitting squarely in the disputed middle of it.

Two states were preparing to shed blood over the difference between two lines that a dead Englishman's guess about a lake had set a half a degree apart.

Nobody died. That is the whole comedy of it.

The nearest thing to a battle came on a Sunday in April, when a Michigan posse rode up on an Ohio survey party resting for the Sabbath and fired a volley — over their heads, Michigan always swore; at them, Ohio's men reported — and carried nine prisoners off into the interior. And that, as near as the record tells, was the last volley any armed force ever fired in anger on the disputed ground: two centuries of the gun deciding this valley — the Dutch muskets that broke the nations onto it, the fusils that bought it, the King's muskets that armed its buffer and the bayonets that took it — ending in a single ragged discharge that the shooters themselves swore, ever after, had been aimed at nobody.

The only blood spilled in the entire war was drawn by a penknife: a Michigan deputy named Wood, come to arrest a Toledo partisan, took the blade of one Two Stickney in the thigh and lived.

The Stickneys are the note the whole war is played in — their father, an old man named Benjamin Stickney who had been the government's Indian agent in the valley in better days, had named his sons, with a straight face, One and Two. It was Two Stickney who did the stabbing, and Two Stickney who slipped across the line into Ohio where

Michigan's warrant could not follow, and so the one wound of the Toledo War went unavenged and its one combatant went free.

The war produced heroes, but of a distinctly reduced kind. When the federal government, alarmed, sent two commissioners — Richard Rush and Benjamin Howard — to broker a peace, they proposed the mildest terms imaginable: rerun the disputed line unmolested, and let the people of the strip obey whichever state they preferred until Congress could settle the thing. Old Governor Lucas of Ohio, having already gotten most of what he was after, graciously assented; the Boy Governor of Michigan, having gotten none of it, refused, and went on refusing, until President Jackson, out of all patience with a twenty-three-year-old who would not be governed, simply removed him from his office.

The rest of the war was fought in the same key. A drummer named Odle, sent to beat up recruits at Perrysburg and ordered by the sitting Ohio court to hold his noise, was clapped in jail for drumming; whereupon his captain threatened the judge with martial law and the arrest of the entire bench; whereupon the judge thought better of it and let the boy go; whereupon Odle, vindicated, took up his sticks and resumed his drumming more vigorously than ever. And across the line at Monroe, where Michigan men had raided old Major Stickney's garden in his absence and carried off his vegetables, the wits of the town raised their glasses to the only casualties either side could name with confidence: *Here's to Major Stickney's potatoes and onions — we drafted their tops, and their bottoms volunteered.*

The decisive engagement of the war was fought at three o'clock in the morning. Ohio's law required that a county court sit at Toledo on a certain September day in 1835 to fix its jurisdiction on the record; Mason's militia held the town to prevent it. So in the small hours, while the soldiers slept, three Ohio judges and a handful of men rode quietly into Toledo, let themselves into a schoolhouse, lit candles, opened court, appointed a clerk, transacted the least business the law would accept as a

court having sat, and — by the story the valley has always loved to tell — stuffed the records into the clerk's tall hat and galloped for the county line before the town woke.

Court had been held. The jurisdiction was on the record. The whole war had produced exactly one wound, no graves, and a lawsuit conducted at a gallop.

There is one detail of the affair that the land itself seems to have arranged, for the joke's sake. When Ohio at last put six hundred militia into the field and marched them down to the rapids to hold the strip by force, the ground they pitched their camp upon was the old earthwork of Fort Miami — the British fort of the shut gates, the fort of Dudley's gauntlet, the bloodiest few acres in the whole valley. It was the fourth army to occupy that one spot: after the French who had traded there, and the British who had built there, and Proctor's men who had let the prisoners be butchered there, now came the militia of the sovereign state of Ohio, to glare across a surveyor's line and shoot at nobody at all. The same ground that had swallowed the confederacy's heartbreak now played host to a farce, and did not appear to feel the descent.

And the whole small war went forward, besides, under a sky the rest of the country was watching for graver reasons: Halley's comet hung over the Maumee that autumn of 1835; and in the very months the boundary act was being drafted and passed, far away to the southwest the Alamo fell and was avenged at San Jacinto, and a real war, with real graves, settled the fate of a vastly larger piece of contested ground. The republic bled in Texas and postured in the Ohio mud in the same season, and got itself a new state out of each.

The absurdity ran all the way down. In the very months the two states were mustering militia over the strip, Michigan was busy chartering and building the first railroad west of the Alleghenies — the Erie and Kalamazoo — to run from the disputed town of Toledo out to Adrian in undisputed Michigan, as if to settle by commerce what the muskets

would not: a line of flat oak rails capped with thin strap iron, its cars drawn at first by horses, the loose ends of the strap curling up now and then under the wheels into what the passengers uneasily called “snake heads,” which could tear straight up through the floor of a coach. Michigan, in short, was laying track into Toledo with one hand while claiming to besiege it with the other.

And there survives, from the year before the war, a map — the only one anyone has ever found — that simply draws the line where Michigan wished it and prints the word *Toledo* squarely inside the territory of Michigan: a paper conquest of the ground that the paper, in the end, could not keep. The whole war was of that character throughout — loud, cheap, litigious, and faintly ridiculous, and carried on the entire time over a town that both sides were already racing each other to build.

Congress settled it in the end, and settled it as a joke settles. Ohio got the strip and its canal mouth. Michigan, as consolation for the ground it had lost, was handed a wild and frozen peninsula on Lake Superior that its own delegates cursed from the floor as a sterile waste, fit by soil and climate to remain a wilderness forever; and Michigan, sulking, refused the bargain until a hard winter and an empty treasury and the discovery that only a state could collect its share of a federal surplus drove a second, humiliated convention — the Frostbitten Convention, the histories name it — to swallow the terms. Within a decade that “sterile waste” of a peninsula was found to hold more copper and iron than all the rest of the old Northwest combined.

And the canal that two states had nearly gone to war to possess was already dying — obsolete within a dozen years of its opening, killed by the railroads, drained and derelict, and at the finish literally blown apart by the farmers it had flooded.

The prize was never the prize. It never had been, for anyone. The nations had bled for a homeland; the states had marched for a ditch that a dozen years made worthless, and traded away for it a wilderness that

turned out to be a fortune. And under the whole farce lay the plainest fact of it: the thing two governments had mustered armies to possess was the single spot where the river had chosen to meet the lake — a place the river had made, and set every man on that ground scrambling for, and would never once trouble to call its own. The land let them fight and kept its own counsel.



The Same Ground



Fort Miami — a lantern-slide plan of the earthwork on the north bank of the Maumee, its ditch and rampart enclosing some three acres above the river (the bluff hatched at left). The low rise nearly everything in this book happened on: the fort of the shut gate and of Dudley's gauntlet. Toledo Lucas County Public Library, Farmer Collection (public domain).

THERE IS A LOW RISE ON THE NORTH BANK AT THE FOOT OF THE rapids, a few acres of grass a little above the water, and very nearly everything this book is about happened on it.

The French traded there first, quietly, a counting-house with a flag, and left scarcely a mark on it. Then the British came and dug in — four bastions and a ditch twenty feet deep and more down into the clay — and

called it Fort Miami, and in the autumn of 1794 the beaten warriors of the confederacy ran to it for the shelter they had been promised and found the gates shut in their faces. That was the first thing the ground learned to do: to promise a people protection, and then to close.

Nineteen years later, in the very same place, it did the opposite to the other side. In the spring of 1813 six hundred Kentuckians were marched to that fort as prisoners and made to run a gauntlet between two lines of tomahawks, and were beaten and shot as they ran, under the eyes of British officers who had promised them protection and did nothing — the same silence, on the same rise, only turned around. And then a Shawnee came in at a gallop and threw the killers down with his own hands and stood over the prisoners and stopped it — I conquer to save — on the very ground where the King's men had once refused to lift a hand for anyone. The coldest betrayal in this whole book and the plainest mercy in it were done on the same forty yards, nineteen years apart, and the grass could not have told you which was which.

Then, in 1835, the militia of the sovereign state of Ohio pitched their tents on the old earthwork to fight the Toledo War, and glared across a surveyor's line, and shot at nobody at all, and went home. Four flags had stood on that one low rise — French, British, American, and the state of Ohio — and the last of them turned the bloodiest few acres in the valley into a campground for a war that killed no one.

The earthwork is still there. You can walk it today: a shallow green ditch under old trees in a park above the river, a plaque or two, and nobody much about. It kept none of them — not the trade, not the fort, not the massacre, not the mercy, not the farce. It kept the shape of a ditch and the flatness of a parade ground and a great deal of grass, and it grows that grass exactly as green over the spot where the gates stayed shut as over the spot where the chief rode in. That is the land's way, and the land is welcome to it. It is not ours. Stand on that rise long enough to feel its terrible evenness settle over you, and then walk back down remembering the one thing the

ground never will: that the man who rode in to stop the killing and the men who stood and watched it were not the same, and that the grass, for all its peace, is wrong.



XI

THE SWAMP AND THE GLASS CITY

The Draining and the Return

Ten thousand River Commissions ... cannot tame that lawless stream, cannot say to it, Go here, or Go there, and make it obey.

— MARK TWAIN, *LIFE ON THE MISSISSIPPI*



The city of Toledo in 1902 — the old frog-pond landing at the foot of the rapids grown to a quarter-million souls on the drained bed of the Great Black Swamp. From Gunckel, 1902.

THEN THE AMERICANS TURNED ON THE LAST THING IN THE VALLEY that had beaten everyone — the swamp — and this, at least, they conquered, though it took them fifty years and it cost them what it always costs. They dug ditches and passed drainage laws and, when ditches were not enough, they mined the swamp's own clay bottom, fired it into drainage tile, and buried a hundred thousand miles of it under the fields until the drowned forest that had turned back armies was simply gone — the beech and the ash felled for lumber, the black water run off to the river, the million acres of standing swamp become, by about 1920, the flattest and most productive farmland in Ohio. It was the most complete remaking of the ground that anyone had ever managed. And it had a joke buried in it, the way the valley's stories always do: the useless cursed bog, drained at last for corn, turned out to be floating on oil. The gushers came up out of the heart of the old swamp in the 1880s, and the cheap gas that came up with the oil pulled the glassworks west and made a Glass City of the old canal town at the river's mouth — the same mouth two states had fought for, now grown from a hundred frog-catching settlers into a quarter-million souls within one long human lifetime.

The draining was the one nearly clean victory anyone won in the whole of this book, and it was won not by an army but by a law and a machine and a very great deal of buried clay. The state passed its ditch laws — the first of them in 1859 — that let a county compel a man to drain his ground, and carry his neighbor's water off through it besides; and then the newcomers hit on the thing that beat the swamp at last, which was to turn the swamp against itself. The dead blue clay that lay under the black loam and held the water up, the very curse of the country, proved to be the finest stuff in the world for the making of drainage tile. So the settlers dug up the swamp's own cold bottom, fired it in kilns into hollow pipe by the millions of miles, and buried the pipe back down in the ground it had come from, in lines four feet deep and forty feet apart, until the water that had stood on the land since the glacier let go

drained off down the clay veins of the old lake into the ditches and away to the river. The tile works multiplied like a fever in the low country — five of them in the valley counties in 1870, better than fifty by 1880 — and a clanking steam machine called the Buckeye traction ditcher came crawling across the fields laying drain faster than a gang of men with spades could have dreamed of. By about 1920 the thing was done, and the price of it — though nobody then was keeping the account — was more than nine parts in ten of every wetland the state of Ohio had ever owned, run off in two generations and not missed until it was long past calling back.

It is hard, now, to feel about that the way the people who did it felt about it, and yet the distance must be crossed, because they were not vandals and did not think themselves anything but heroes — and by the lights of their own day they were right. To the family that had buried a child to the ague, to the farmer who had watched his first crop rot in standing water, to a whole generation that measured a country's worth by the corn it could raise and the mouths it could feed, the draining of the Great Black Swamp was not a wound dealt to the land but a victory won over it: the hardest and most honorable labor there was, the turning of a useless, sickly, death-dealing morass into some of the richest farm ground on the face of the earth, food for millions and homes for thousands and the very picture of what human work and human ingenuity were supposed to be for. They drained it with a clear conscience and an earned pride. It is only from here — a century on, with a different set of bills coming due — that the same act shows its other face: the vanished marsh, the lost web of living things, the water that now sheds off the bare tile too fast and too foul and blooms the lake green every August. Both of those are true at once, and a reader does the story no justice who keeps only one of them. The people who drained the swamp did a great thing and a grievous thing in the very same motion, as people generally do, and could no more see the second half of what they were doing than we can

see the full price of the things we ourselves are surest, this year, that we are right to do.

And no sooner was the swamp killed than the ground it had covered played its last and best joke, which was that the useless drowned bog had been floating, all the while, on a buried sea of fire. In the autumn of 1884 a well sunk after natural gas near Findlay, at the swamp's southern edge, came in with a roar out of the same old limestone the tropical ocean had laid down four hundred million years before anything in this book drew breath; and a year and more later the great Karg well blew in wild at twenty million cubic feet a day, its torch of burning gas standing a hundred feet into the air, heard five miles off and seen for fifty on a clouded night. Oil followed the gas, struck at Lima the next spring, and within a few years the old swamp counties were a black forest of derricks and the second oil field in the nation, and Mr. Rockefeller's Standard Oil had made a western capital of Lima. It was a boom in the fullest and most wasteful American manner: gas so cheap the towns burned it day and night in open flambeaux they never troubled to shut, whole wells flared off into the sky for the pure squandering light of it, fifty-dollar farms sold for hundreds while their owners reckoned themselves princes — and the whole of it, gas and oil together, drawn up and burned and all but exhausted inside of thirty years, the derricks pulled and the flambeaux gone dark again before the men who had lit them were old. The ancient captured sunlight that the first sea had sealed in the stone came up in a single human lifetime, flared, and was spent.

What the cheap gas built, in the short years before it failed, was the thing the city at the river's mouth would carry for its name forever after. In 1888 a New England glassmaker named Edward Libbey, hunting a place with cheap fire to melt his sand and clean sand to melt, moved his whole works west to Toledo, drawn by the gas of the dead swamp and the pale sand of the lake shore; and there a mechanic in his employ named Michael Owens, who had gone into a glasshouse to work at the age of

ten, built across the next fifteen years a machine that did the thing every glassblower alive had sworn no machine could do — it made a bottle, gathered and blew and shaped and finished it, entirely of its own iron accord, by the hundred and the thousand an hour, and put a craft as old as Egypt out of the world inside a decade. Out of Libbey's furnaces and Owens's machines came the great firms — Libbey-Owens-Ford, Owens-Illinois — that made the old frog-pond landing at the foot of the rapids the Glass City, and glazed the windows and filled the shelves of half a continent out of the muck of a drained swamp.

None of it would have made a city, though, without the thing the two states had gone to the edge of war to possess in the first place: the mouth, the harbor, the place where the water met the rail. For a long while the promise outran the fact. The boosters platted streets across the marsh and sold lots on paper, and one of them, a tireless prophet named Jesup Scott, spent his life declaring that this fever-ridden mudhole at the foot of the rapids was the destined "future great city of the world," the natural capital of a continent whose weight was sliding westward — and for decades the river's mouth stayed a shallow, silting bar where the lake boats grounded and the ague waited. But the promise was not wrong, only early. After the Civil War the government at last dredged the bay and cut a deep ship channel through it, until the heaviest freighters on the lakes could come to the wharves; and the railroads, which had already killed the canal, came threading into the town from every quarter until Toledo was one of the great rail crossings of the interior, where the ore and coal and grain of half a country changed from keel to rail and rail to keel. The farmers, for their part, finished the canal off with their own hands: when the state let a canal reservoir back up and drown their fields out west near Antwerp, two hundred masked men who called themselves the Dynamiters marched out in the night in 1887, blew the bulkhead and the locks, and burned the keeper's house, and the militia the governor sent up found nobody at all to fight, and the legislature took the

plain hint and gave the old ditch up for dead. The mouth that two states had mustered militia over turned out to be worth the trouble after all — not for the canal, which was obsolete before it was paid for, but for the deep-water harbor and the roundhouses that replaced it. Jesup Scott did not live to see the city he had foretold, but he came far nearer the mark than the men who had laughed at him, and he left the ground his money bought for the university that carries his name in it yet.

The nation's own great war brushed the valley only once, and strangely: on a low island in Sandusky Bay the Union penned some fifteen thousand captured Confederate officers, and a wild plot to free them by seizing a lake steamer came, in 1864, to nothing. It left behind only a scatter of gray graves on the island, which the Union veterans of the valley, when their own angers had cooled, took in time to decorating each spring beside their own.

The made city bred more than machines and mayors. It bred, early, a new kind of claim on the valley — and this one was unlike every claim that had come before it in this book. Each earlier comer had wanted the ground, and had taken it from someone. In the spring of 1869, in a hired hall on Summit Street, a company of Toledo women organized to want something else. They drew Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony to the city to speak, and then they stayed and made a society of their own — the Toledo Woman Suffrage Association, among the earliest anywhere in the country — set at its head Emma Ashley, wife of the Toledo congressman who had helped drive the Thirteenth Amendment through the House, and wrote into their constitution the plain declaration that equal rights were “the natural inheritance of all.” It had been slow in coming. “The nineteenth century had passed its meridian,” one of them wrote, “before any public agitation had taken place in the Maumee Valley relative to the equal rights of woman” — and the one who wrote it was the truest of them, Rosa Segur, a German girl carried into Toledo as a child in 1840, grown to keep a women's column in the

Blade, and moved at seventy to set the whole story down before it was lost. What these women asked for was the one thing no claimant in this book had ever asked. Not to own the valley, nor to take it from anyone, but only to be counted in the governing of the ground they already lived on. And they asked it, as it happened, in the very season the nation was resolving that the freedman should have the vote and the woman should keep waiting — so that their claim, like the nations' before them, was set down long before it would be honored. Half a century would pass before Ohio let a woman vote. But the asking had begun, on the drained lakebed, in a city a single generation risen out of the swamp, and it had begun here.

And in the made city, at the century's turn, there rose a new kind of man that the valley may claim for its own as fairly as anything it ever grew. Samuel Jones was a manufacturer of oil-well tools who ran his shop by a single rule posted on the wall — the Golden Rule, that a man should do by his workmen as he would be done by. He had come to it, by his own account, out of disgust at another factory's string of rules "a yard long, at the tail of every one of which was a threat of dismissal": *I am going to have a rule for our shop*, he told his wife; *I am going to have the Golden Rule printed on a piece of tin and nail it up as the rule that governs the place*. One rule of fair dealing set against a placard of threats — the whole of his politics was already in that tin sign. He paid his men a living wage, and gave them paid holidays and a park, and was so plain a crank by the standards of his day that when he was made mayor of Toledo the bosses of his own party would not put his name up again. He ran without them, as an independent, and the city returned him in a landslide, and returned him again, and kept him in the office until he died in it in 1904, mourned by the working people of the town as few rich men have ever been mourned. Golden Rule Jones, the valley called him, half in mockery and half in love, and the reform politics he practiced ran out from the little Glass City across the whole of the country in the years that

came after. The market at the foot of the rapids, that the beaver had first made worth something and the French had first come to trade at, had begun to export — along with its grain and its glass and its oil — ideas about how a people ought to live. The Americans had wanted the ground itself, and they had it, and they had made of it something none of the others who came before them could have imagined.

And still they were only the latest.

For the thing the Americans could not do, that none of them could do, was stay in the sense the land means by staying. The nations had held the valley a thousand years and were carried west in a summer. The French had held it a century and let it go for a battle they never heard. The British had held it fifty years and sailed away. The Americans drained the swamp and drilled the oil and built the city — and the swamp, it turns out, is coming back. The same drained ground that grew the corn now sends its buried water, thick with what the fields are fed, down the tile and the ditch to the river and out into the lake, where every summer it blooms green and foul. In the first days of August 2014 that bloom drew a lethal skin of poison across the very crib of the water intake off Toledo, and a city of half a million people woke to be told not to touch its own taps — not to drink the water, not to boil it, not to bathe a child in it — for three days, because the water the drained swamp had fouled was, for once, unfit to swallow. The marsh the tile was laid to kill had reached, a full century later, all the way into the kitchen sink. And to answer it, men have begun, in our own time, to pull the tile up again and let the low fields flood, to plant the beech and the ash back, to un-drain the drained land acre by acre and coax the Great Black Swamp to return. Two centuries after Wayne's soldiers cursed its mud, the swamp is the one party to this whole long story that is quietly, patiently, winning.

And the people the valley emptied did not vanish either. They endure — the Miami and the Ottawa, the Shawnee and the Wyandot and the Potawatomi and the rest — as living nations in the west it carried them

to; and the heirs of the Miami families who slipped the removal and stayed hidden in Indiana are, in this very decade, still petitioning a federal office to acknowledge that they exist. The story that opened with nations holding this valley by right of long possession has not closed. It only moved.



XII

THE RUST CITY

The Ledger Comes Home

*A bar of steel — it is only / Smoke at the heart of it, smoke and the
blood of a man.*

— CARL SANDBURG, *SMOKE AND STEEL*



Smoke and steel on the Maumee: blast furnaces on the west bank at Toledo, 1905, a wrecked hull rotting in the shallows below. The river the whole valley was built to use runs still in front of the works that used it — and would outlast them. Detroit Publishing Co. (Library of Congress; no known restrictions on publication).

THE SWAMP'S VICTORY IS A SLOW ONE, TOLD IN CENTURIES, AND the endurance of the nations is slower still. But there is a faster story on the same ground, and it is the last one this book has to follow — the story of the people who drained the swamp and believed they had won it, and of the single loud century in which they made the valley more thoroughly theirs than anyone ever had, and then stood and watched it be taken back out of their hands. And the strange thing, the thing that closes the long account, is who took it. It was not the water, and not the returning marsh, and not any army or any nation. It was the same cold hand that had taken the valley from everyone who held it be-

fore them — and this time it reached into the pockets of the takers themselves.

For the first half of the twentieth century the city at the foot of the rapids did the one thing the whole of this book had trained the valley to do: it took what the ground gave and carried it out. Only now the ground gave neither fur nor corn but the buried fire and the pale lake sand, and the thing carried out was no longer a raw material but a made object with a Toledo name upon it. The cheap gas that had pulled the glassworks west built, in two generations, an industry that put the city's glass in the windows and on the tables and behind the headlamps of half a continent — Libbey and Owens-Illinois and Libbey-Owens-Ford, and in 1938 a company that learned to spin the very sand of the old lakeshore into a wool and called it Owens-Corning, fiberglass, a Toledo invention that would go into the walls of a nation's houses.

And glass was the smaller half of it. The automobile came, and the crossroads that had gathered the traffic of canoes and then of canals and then of railroads gathered now the traffic of the car; the city filled with the makers of spark plugs and headlights and axles and transmissions; and a Toledo firm called Willys-Overland, which had been building automobiles on the Maumee since before the first great war, was handed in the second one a small, ugly, indestructible machine to build by the hundreds of thousands — the Jeep, the quarter-ton truck that went wherever an army had to go. So that the valley that had drowned the armies of three empires in its mud now built the machine that carried a fourth across the beaches and deserts of the world.

Toledo went to the second war an arsenal, and came home from it to its fattest years.

But the making of the object never did settle the old question the Glass City's crank of a mayor had raised and lost — the question of the share. Golden Rule Jones had nailed his tin sign to the wall and asked the men who owned the shops to do by their workmen as they would be

done by, and they had not, and he had died, and the shops had swelled into factories with thousands at the line and the Golden Rule nowhere on any wall in them. In the spring of 1934, in the pit of the Depression, at the Electric Auto-Lite works where the city made its spark plugs and its lamps, the men who had asked politely for a generation stopped asking. They struck; the company brought in replacements to break them; and the strikers, joined by the thousands the Depression had thrown out of every other factory in town, threw a picket line around the plant that no judge's injunction could dissolve.

For five days at the end of May the streets outside the Auto-Lite gave the valley the thing the Toledo War had promised a hundred years before and failed to deliver — a real battle, on the same ground, with real blood. The county deputies fought the crowd; the governor sent in the Ohio National Guard, better than a thousand of them, with bayonets and gas and loaded rifles; and on the twenty-fourth of May the guardsmen fired into the picketers and killed two men and wounded a great many more, on a Toledo street, over the price of a day's labor.

Recall that the Toledo War had marched the militias of two states into this valley over a line in the mud and shot exactly nobody. It took another century, and a different quarrel — no longer between two governments over a boundary but between capital and labor over the share — for the ground to collect the blood that the first war had only threatened.

And this time the people who fought the ledger did what no one in all this book had managed before them: they won. The Auto-Lite strikers forced the company to the table and to terms, and their fight, joined to two others in that same violent year in Minneapolis and San Francisco, cracked the door that the New Deal walked through the next year with the law that made the union legal at last. For the first time on this river the cold arithmetic met a thing it could not merely outnumber and outwait; it had to sit down and divide the take.

Jones's plea had become a picket line, and the picket line had become a contract, and the contract bought the valley the one stretch in the whole long story when the people who did the work drew a fair and a rising share of what the work was worth. On that bargain the city climbed to its height. It built the Jeeps for the war and the glass and the parts for the long boom after, and the wages the strikers had bled for raised whole wards of brick houses and filled the ball fields and the parish halls and sent the children to a new university on the bluff; and by 1970 the city at the rapids held more human beings than it ever had before or ever would again — near three hundred and eighty-four thousand of them, the fullest the valley had stood since the ice went off it. For about the span of one human life it looked like a settlement in the sense the land had never once permitted: a people not passing through but staying, and thriving, and meaning to hand the place down to its own.

It was as close as the valley ever came to belonging to the people who lived on it.

At the very crest of that confidence the city did a thing that reads now like its century's epitaph written a generation too early. In 1945, with the war just won and the plants roaring and the future looking like nothing but more of the same, the Toledo *Blade* hired Norman Bel Geddes — the showman-designer whose Futurama had been the marvel of the 1939 World's Fair — to build the city a scale model of its own tomorrow and set it up for the public to walk through; and they called it Toledo Tomorrow, and billed it, in the very words the old booster Jesup Scott had used seventy years before, as *the future great city of the world*. The crowds came by the tens of thousands and stood open-mouthed while toy helicopters settled onto a model civic center and a rebuilt Toledo of joined rail and road and air gleamed under the lights; and then the exhibit closed, and the people filed back out into the Toledo of that afternoon.

It was the second time in seventy years the city had been shown its own glorious future and had believed in it. Both times the belief was the same, and both times it was wrong in the same way — for even as the crowds moved past the gleaming model, the ledger was already at its quiet arithmetic, and the future it was drawing up for the valley was not a city of the tomorrow but a wage in some other place, and rust.

It did not last, because at the bottom of it the place was never theirs to keep — and the reason is the oldest one in this book. The factories were never owned by the hands that ran them. They were owned by the ledger, the same cold instrument that had priced the beaver in pelts and the homeland in acres and the drained swamp in bushels of corn, and the ledger had only ever kept the city for precisely as long as the city was the cheapest place to keep it. When the arithmetic turned — when the same wage bought more labor somewhere to the south, and then far more somewhere across an ocean — the ledger did to the work exactly what it had done to the fur and the fur trade and the nations and the canal before it: it carried it off. It shut the plants one at a time and moved the making elsewhere and left the buildings standing empty on the riverbank, the way the French had left their counting-houses and the British their forts — a scatter of brick shells going back to weeds and weather.

The parts men went, and the glass lines thinned, and the Jeep's owners changed their name and their country four times over; and the city that had spent three centuries watching everything be carried out of its valley — the pelts, the timber, the oil, the gas, the very sand melted into glass — learned at the last what it was to have the work itself carried out, and the working people with it.

By the census of our own decade the city had lost nearly a third of the people it held in 1970, better than a hundred thousand of them gone, the very neighborhoods the strike had built emptying house by boarded house.

There was a word for it by then, run the length of the whole belt of made cities from Buffalo to Milwaukee that the one ledger was hollowing at the one time, and the word was rust. The Glass City had become a Rust City, and it was in numerous company.

Glass and rust are opposite in their very natures, and the city wore each of the names in its turn. Glass is the pale sand of the old lakeshore made bright and all but immortal — the one manufactured thing that neither rots nor corrodes, that gleams in a wall a hundred years after the hand that shaped it has gone to dust. Rust is the reverse motion: iron surrendering back into the ground it was dug from, eating its own strength from within until the beam lets go and the roof falls in — the land taking the metal back exactly as the swamp, a few miles off, was taking the fields. The city was named first for the thing that lasts and then for the thing that consumes itself; and a pane of Toledo glass still throws the afternoon light from some far window while the mill that made it settles, red and flaking, into the weeds along the Maumee. The made thing outlives its makers on this river, the way it always has — the beaver's fur outlived the marsh it was stripped from, and the fort's name outlived the fort, and the glass has outlived the Glass City.

And a third slow thing works on the river besides, older than the glass and quieter than the rust, and it is only the Maumee doing what it has done since the ice: it carries the ground away and sets it down again. Every spring the flood comes brown and heavy with the country itself — the loosened fields, the caving banks, the whole tilted land handed grain by grain toward the lake — and where the current slackens at the wide shallow mouth, the mouth two states once mustered armies to hold, it lets the load fall, and the silt settles, and builds. It is the same patient arithmetic as the rust, only run the other way. The rust eats the iron from within and adds nothing; the silt takes nothing and lays the land down fold on fold — and the two come out at the one place, which is the river quietly having back what was raised upon it. The deep channel dredged

for the heavy lake freighters fills again from the bottom a little every year, so that the dredges must go out and out forever to hold the mouth open against the river's slow insistence on closing it.

The valley was silt before it was anything, and it is silting yet. Rust unmakes the mill from within and silt unmakes the harbor from below, and it is the one event — the river taking the whole work of the ledger back into the slow accumulation it makes everything out of, and always has, and will still be making long after the last of the red has flaked into the weeds.

There is a bitter symmetry in it that the whole of this book has been walking toward without saying. The ledger that emptied this valley of its first peoples — that wrote a living homeland down as real estate and a nation down as a line in a table and poled the Miami off west on a canal boat — was never, it turns out, a thing that happens only to other people, only to the ones who were here first. It is a machine, and a machine does not care whose hands it lifts the work from. It ran on this river for the fur, and then for the ground itself, and then for the cheap fire trapped under the swamp, and when it had spent those it ran a while on the labor of the settlers' own grandchildren, and when that labor too could be had cheaper somewhere else it moved along and left them — exactly as it had left the pelt-hunters and the treaty-signers before them — standing on a ground that had no further use for them at the price they came to. The dispossession this book opened with came home, at the close of it, to the children of the dispossessors.

The ledger keeps no permanent friends. It never had; it was the whole of the warning the shut gate first spelled out on this river two hundred years before, only now the entry written down as a cost and struck off the books was the mill town itself.

And there was, in the wreck of it, one irony sharp enough to draw blood. Among the things the city had made, and made well, was the honest scale: the Toledo Scale Company had set its balances on the counters

of the nation's groceries for half a century under a flat four-word promise — *No Springs, Honest Weight*. The ledger that closed the plants weighed honestly too, in its own cold fashion. It set the valley's labor in the one pan and cheaper labor in the other, and read off the true, pitiless difference between them, and moved the work to the lighter side of the beam. The city that had sold the world an honest weight was, at the last, weighed by a harder honesty than its own, and found too dear to keep.

One thing stayed, because the valley keeps one green thing growing out of every ruin it makes.

The Jeep stayed.

The little war-truck Willys-Overland was handed in 1941 outlived its maker and every owner to come after him — Kaiser, and American Motors, and Chrysler, and a French carmaker's money, and at the last an Italian-American combine with an invented name — and the plant at the city's edge went on turning it out, decade upon decade, model upon model, until half the country was driving to the grocery in the descendant of the thing that once crossed Normandy. And when the newest owner let it be known, now and again, that the machine might be built more cheaply somewhere else, the city and the state paid what was asked to keep it — for by then the Jeep was not merely the last great factory in the town but the last piece of the town's own picture of itself, the one thing still made here, on the river, with the valley's name understood to ride on it. A people that had watched every other thing be carried off held on with both hands to the one machine that would not go.

So that is the city on the Maumee now, in the third century of the American claim upon it: smaller than it was, and quieter, and marked — the glass companies' towers still on the skyline though the mass of the jobs beneath them is gone, the university and the great art museum that the glass money built still open on the bluff, the Jeeps still coming down the line, the old factory ground along the water turning slowly, like the swamp out beyond it, back toward green. The people are fewer, and they

are not going anywhere. They are the valley's latest, and they hold it as every latest has held it — certain, most of them, that it is theirs, and always was, and always will be.

And the river, which has heard that exact certainty from the beaver and the Miami and the French and the British and the treaty-men and the glassmen and the union men each in turn, and has outlasted every one of them, makes it no answer at all. It only keeps running, over the same broken limestone, past the empty mills and the humming Jeep plant and the green and shallow bay, down toward the same lake it has always sought, carrying the same water it has always carried — indifferent, and constant, and unhurried, and belonging, now exactly as at the beginning, to no one who ever stood upon its banks.



XIII

CODA — THE RIVER

And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves.

— WALT WHITMAN, *SONG OF MYSELF*

STAND TODAY ON THE BLUFF AT THE OLD FORT, WHERE HARRISON'S men once counted the incoming shells, and the valley lies out before you exactly as it lay for every one of them — the same wide water sliding over the same stone ledges, the same land falling away flat and black toward the same lake. The forts are outlines in the grass. The battlefields are marked with boulders and bronze. The great swamp is farmland turning slowly, in patches, back to marsh. The names on the map are French words the Americans made their own, spelled the way a clerk in Quebec once guessed at a Miami sound. And the dividing did not stop at the names; it went into the very sound of the place. Down at the mouth, in Toledo, the speech is the hard, flat Inland North of the Great Lakes country, where the short vowels ride up until a *cat* is nearly a *kee-at*. Follow the river the other way, up toward Defiance and the old Miami capital and the Indiana line, and those hard edges soften and go plain, into the milder Midland speech of the country to the south. The accent runs the length of the whole story: the contested lower river speaking one way, the head of the water another, and the seam between them lying just about where the river has always bent. The disputed ground is disputed even in the mouths of the people who live on it — a border you can hear.

Everyone who ever wanted this ground is gone from it, and the ground goes on as though it never knew a single one of them. The beaver

went first, trapped out for hats worn by men who never saw the river; the nations who came for the beaver's country were carried west; the French who came for the beaver's fur lost it on a plateau above Quebec; the British who came for the fort sailed away from the fort; the Americans who came for the ground itself drained it and drilled it and built upon it and could not, any more than the others, make it stay put. The land kept none of their claims and all of their names. It buried their dead in its banks without preference — British and American under one willow, blue and gray on one island, Kentuckian and Shawnee in the same dark soil — and it grew its harvests over the unmarked graves without knowing whose they were.

It kept a little of each of them, and forgot the rest, and could not be made to say which was which. The old shore of the vanished lake is under the highway. The buried tile of the men who drained the swamp is under the corn, and the water is quietly finding the cracks in it. There is a boulder above one field where a chief was shot and the passing warriors laid their tobacco, and a plain marker before a public library where six hundred Kentuckians ran a gauntlet, and a granddaughter of Little Turtle's is in the churchyard a walk from the fort her grandfather's confederacy broke against, and out on the marsh the herons have come back to stand in water the tile was laid to carry off. The valley wears all of it at once, lightly, the way it wears its several names — the deep time under the human time under the day's weather — and holds no grudge, and keeps no rank, and tells no one apart. Conqueror and conquered, namer and named, drainer and drowned: it took them all in, and grew its gardens over all of them, and did not seem to feel the difference between any of them and the leaves.

But the river's indifference is not a verdict, and it must never be borrowed for one. That the land cannot feel the difference between the conqueror and the conquered is the land's limitation and not its wisdom, and it is the one lesson in this whole book that must not be taken from

the water — for the differences were real. It was not the same thing to take the beaver as to erase the nation; not the same thing to trade for a country as to empty it by the treaty and the bayonet; not the same thing to drain a marsh for bread as to load eight hundred souls of seven peoples onto a boat and pole them off their own ground forever. The river carries all of it down to the same silt and keeps no account, because a river cannot. A person can, and must. And the refusal to keep that account — the clean conscience that files a stolen homeland as a purchase and a massacre as a turnover in the books — is not the river's serenity at all, but the very machinery the wrong was done with. To stand on this bluff and feel nothing but the peace of the passing water is to take, without meaning to, the side of every man who ever needed not to feel it. The land forgives by forgetting. We are not the land, and we are not allowed.

This is what a river teaches, if anything does. It was here before the first of them and it will be here after the last. It was running when the ice let go and it was running when the last canal boat went down it carrying the last of the Miami west, and it is running now, tonight, in the dark, over the same rapids, toward the same lake, indifferent and constant and unhurried, having outlasted three empires and two states and every soul who ever stood on its banks and called it his. It ruled the whole of them and claimed no part of it — outlasting them because it never contended with them, having its way with all of them because it never once wanted the thing they killed each other to hold. That was the river's dominion from the start, and it is the river's dominion still: it made no claim, and it governed everything. The land was made by water, and it has been trying to become water again ever since, and it has all the time in the world.

And you who read this are in the procession too, whether you have ever laid eyes on the Maumee or not — everyone always is. Whatever you are most certain the land is for, whether that is farming it or draining it or building on it or handing it back at last to the marsh, is as sure to you as the pelt was to the trader and the deed was to the settler, and it will look,

to whoever stands on this ground a hundred years from now, just as partial and just as passing. That is no reason to hold your certainties lightly; the people in this book held theirs to the death, and were not wrong to. It is only a reason to remember, on the bluff with the wide water sliding by below, that the river has heard the whole of it before — every soul of every nation sure the country was his — and made no answer, and makes none now, and will be making none still, over the same rapids, long after the reader and the writer and the whole of our own loud age have gone the way of the beaver and the mastodon and the French.

First came the animals. Then the people, then the French, then the British, then the Americans. And under all of them, before all of them, after all of them, the river.

It is still going. It was never theirs. It was only ever passing through them, the way they passed through it — except that the river is the one that stayed.



APPENDIX

The People

An index to the ones the story names — real figures, briefly drawn, in the order the land met them. The fuller record lives in the research store behind the site.

THE FIRST NATIONS

Little Turtle — Miami war chief at the head of the Maumee. He broke Harmar's expedition in 1790 and destroyed St. Clair's army in 1791 — still the worst defeat the United States Army has ever suffered against a Native force. He counseled peace before Fallen Timbers, and was overruled.

Blue Jacket — Shawnee war leader who took the field when Little Turtle stepped back, and commanded the confederacy at Fallen Timbers.

Tecumseh — Shawnee, born into the war years on this ground. He spent his life trying to rebuild across the whole frontier the confederacy the treaties had broken apart, and fell at the Thames in 1813 — and the northern alliance fell with him.

Tenskwatawa, the Prophet — Tecumseh's brother, whose religious revival gathered the nations at Prophetstown, and whose defeat at Tippecanoe — fought while Tecumseh was away — undid much of the work in a single morning.

Stephen Ruddell — a white boy taken captive as a child and raised Shawnee, Tecumseh's boyhood companion; one of the few who left a close account of the man from the inside.

THE FRENCH

Augustin de La Balme — led a march toward Detroit in 1780 to break the British hold on the western posts. Little Turtle's warriors cut him down on the Eel River — a first rehearsal, in the French tongue, of everything the valley would do to the armies that came after.

THE BRITISH

Major-General Henry Proctor — British commander at the two sieges of Fort Meigs and at the Thames. His caution and his retreat up the Thames left Tecumseh to make the last stand alone.

THE AMERICANS

Josiah Harmar and **Arthur St. Clair** — the first two American generals sent against the confederacy, and the first two beaten by it, in 1790 and 1791.

Anthony Wayne — called Mad Anthony. He drilled the Legion of the United States for two years before he moved, then won at Fallen Timbers in 1794 and dictated the Treaty of Greenville. The road his army cut through the country still carries his name.

William Henry Harrison — held Fort Meigs through two sieges in 1813, broke the northern confederacy at the Thames, and rode the valley's wars all the way to a presidency that lasted a single month.

Oliver Hazard Perry — the twenty-eight-year-old commodore who built a fleet from the standing timber at Erie and, on September 10, 1813, took the whole British squadron on Lake Erie — cutting the supply line that doomed Tecumseh a month later. Dead of yellow fever at thirty-four, on his own birthday; the town of Perrysburg, beside Fort Meigs, keeps his name.

Colonel William Dudley — led the Kentucky charge that overran the British batteries across the river from Fort Meigs, then was cut off and destroyed in the woods behind them. The ground still carries the name of the disaster: Dudley's Defeat.

Peter Navarre — French-descended scout of the lower Maumee who carried Harrison's dispatches through the Black Swamp; one of the valley's own, in the American ranks.

Robert Lucas and **Stevens T. Mason** — the governors of Ohio and of Michigan Territory who marched militias to the Maumee in 1835, over a strip of ground and a line on a map, in a war that in the end killed no one.

Rosa L. Segur — carried from Germany to Toledo as a child in 1840, a Toledo Blade columnist who from 1869 helped found and lead the Toledo Woman Suffrage Association — among the earliest in the country — and at seventy wrote its history. Hers is the one claim in this book laid not on the valley's ground but on a voice in the governing of it.



Here ends *The River Made No Such Claim*, drawn from the verified research store that stands behind it. The narrative is a living draft; the procession continues, and the river with it.

SET IN EB GARAMOND · THE MAUMEE VALLEY · MMXXVI

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