

# PRELIMS

## An Interview with Brian Booth

Brian Booth is the man behind OSU Press' recent *Wildmen, Wobblies & Whistle Punks*, in addition to being a founder and former co-chair of the Oregon Institute of Literary Arts, Oregon's premier literary organization. We spoke in his office high above Pioneer Place on January 25, 1993.

**Plant's:** What prompted you to edit a book on Stewart Holbrook?

**Brian Booth:** *In 1986 I decided to start an organization I called the Oregon Institute of Literary Arts (OILA), to provide grants to Oregon writers and to put on the annual Oregon Book Awards ceremony to honor the best works of the year in various categories. I felt that literature was an important part of the arts in Oregon that was being ignored by cultural funding sources. I am also a book collector and am interested in Oregon literature, so I wanted to link the Oregon writers of the past with the writers of the present and have a historical aspect to OILA. I decided to name the non-fiction award for Stewart Holbrook, who I had read and admired for many years. So I tried to find out if a family member was living, and I was surprised when I looked in the phone book and to find a Mrs. Stewart Holbrook. I talked to her and got permission to use the Stewart Holbrook name. The first book awards were held in 1987, and, as I recall, Mrs. Holbrook and her daughter came to that event and we became acquainted. Also in 1987 I had a three month sabbatical from my law firm--after twenty-five years of practice--and decided that one project I wanted to undertake was to do a book on Oregon writers of the past. I felt that there were some fine writers whose works were out-of-print or not sufficiently well-known. To make a long story short, I zeroed in on Holbrook. With Holbrook I could make a pretty good case to publishers because none of his major works were in print in a hardcover edition or even widely-circulated paper editions. He had once been one of the best-selling authors in the United States, and was probably the best-selling Northwest author in history--up to Jean Auel, at least. Most importantly, I liked Holbrook's writing and found him a fascinating character. His stories were timeless, he was a great storyteller, and he had a marvelous sense of humor. Another thing that interested me was that he wrote about the lost men and women of American history, people who have been forgotten...*

The way he has been...

*Right. He fit into that very category he wrote about...and that was sort of the hook I needed.*

Did you have an idea of some particular pieces that were interesting to you that you knew you were going to include from the beginning?

*Yes. There's a book of Holbrook's that's been ignored for decades called *Murder Out Yonder: An Informal Study of Certain Classic Crimes in Backcountry America*. It was a collection of articles about murders in rural areas and small towns and included three wonderful Northwest stories, especially the one I used as the first one in the book...*

"Death of a Prophet"

*...Right. "Death and Times of a Prophet." I'd been around Oregon all my life and had read a lot of Oregon history, but I'd never heard of Prophet Joshua the Second.*

I grew up in *Corvallis* and *I'd* never heard of him...

*We're not alone. If people had remembered Joshua in the 1980s, the Bhagwan Rajneesh wouldn't have been such a surprise. Anyway, I got the idea of calling the book Holbrook Out Yonder for a working title because I wanted to limit the book to his Northwest writings due to the fact that I didn't think a national publisher would be interested.*

How did you find all the twenty-six pieces you used?

*Well, I went through all the books of Holbrook I could find. I had quite a few, I found others in libraries, and some in used bookstores. I went to the Holbrook family and looked through their material. I learned that Holbrook's papers and most of his library had been sold to the University of Washington, so I communicated with them and got a list of his files. There are some sixty boxes of materials. So off and on over several years I'd go to Seattle and go through dusty old boxes in the Manuscripts Section of the University of Washington library, sifting through correspondence, scrapbooks, and old magazines ranging from the American Mercury to The Century to True Detective. I found lots of good material. I also found that Holbrook often plagiarized or borrowed from himself. He would find a subject, do his research, then write an Oregonian column about it, then submit it to a detective magazine under a different name, then revise it and send it on to a more prestigious publication, and then later work it into a book.*

I noticed there were several references to the same "ladies of the evening" in this book.

*Right...I couldn't totally avoid some duplication and still use all the articles I wanted.*

One thing this reminded me of--particularly with the tales of "deaths out yonder"-- was Calvin Trillin's *Killings*.

*Several people have mentioned that. I am a fan of Trillin, but I don't think I have read Killings. Both Trillin and Holbrook have a similar light touch in writing about their subjects. Whether Trillin knew Holbrook's work, I just don't know.[Trillin has written about Oregon subjects in the past, and a recent *New Yorker* contains his article on "The First Family of Astoria".]*

Maybe there's just some sort of *gestalt* that's out there for people who are interested in these kinds of works. Why "Lowbrow" history or [Stewart Holbrook's] *Lowbrow Northwest*? What caused you to pick that particular subtitle for this?

*Well, Holbrook himself used it. He was not a college graduate, he was a high-school dropout, in fact, and he started writing while he was in logging camps and his first subjects were the wild characters he worked with--like the legendary Jigger Jones--who were considered almost a distinct species compared to ordinary humans. He became famous with his book *Holy Old Mackinaw*, which was a history of logging from the viewpoint of the lumberjacks. Holbrook eventually said that his mission in life was to write about the figures in American history who had been ignored or badly treated. This led him to write about various lowlife and rough characters, Wobblies, saloon keepers, madams, and also various dreamers and visionaries. Needless to say, this was not a conventional approach to writing Western history at the time. Until recently traditional Western history has focused on the heroic and triumphal aspects of the Western movement.*

But what did the pioneers do once they got here?

*Well, almost fifty years ago Holbrook said that the early settlers of the Oregon Country were "adept at clearing, plowing and liquidating", shouting "Glory to God" all the while. This was not a particularly popular view of the pioneers at that time, and you may not have read that viewpoint in the Oregon Historical Society Quarterly, either. The so-called New Western historians today are looking into what happened to the Native Americans, what happened to the environment, what was the role of women in the West. Holbrook*

*seems to me to have anticipated their writings somewhat by dealing with what the pioneers and loggers did to the environment, looking at the West from the standpoint of the working person, and exploring parts of that life that usually get swept under the rug.*

By Holbrook's track record in the publishing industry, he was...

*...very popular. Very popular. History does not necessarily exist to be popular, obviously, but somehow people like Holbrook don't tend to show up all that often.*

With such a large audience, why do you think this area of history is generally ignored?

*I don't think that lowbrow history is ignored, but I think that many of the books written by academics that cover the same topics--there have been books on the Wobblies, there have been books on violence in the West, there have been books on logging--are aimed at a scholarly audience and are too forbidding to the general public. Other works are too superficial or boosterish. In neither case are they as interesting as Holbrook's work. Holbrook comes right down the middle. He's pretty good on his facts, he chooses interesting topics, he writes in a colorful manner, and he is non-judgmental. He's not pushing a particular economic or social theory, so he doesn't really go out of date.*

Isn't that what historians are supposed to do, be non-judgmental?

*Well, I don't know about that.*

"The Last of the Wobblies" is obviously a personal view about one particular man, Wobbly Boose, but in it he manages to give a lot of history about the Wobblies in general.

*Right.*

Obviously there's not as much detail as an entire book about the Wobblies, but do you think it gives a more conceptually accurate view of the Wobblies than a typical history does?

*I'm afraid I'm not an authority on books about the Wobblies...*

For the general reader...

*Well, a number of readers have told me they never heard about the Wobblies, or about most of Holbrook's characters, until reading the book, and they're well-educated people who've been around the Northwest for a long time.*

That's scary. What else contributes to his popularity?

*He's very readable. Perhaps one reason Holbrook gets across to readers is that he was a journalist/historian who had to sell everything he wrote to editors. They, obviously, wanted to satisfy their readers. This required an interesting style and interesting subjects. In some ways, Holbrook's best writings remind me of the so-called New Journalists, who came along in the 1960s, and some of the well-known New Yorker writers today who do in-depth stories and inject themselves into the stories to some extent.*

Not quite as far as, say, Hunter S. Thompson.

*No, but Holbrook would have loved to write about Thompson. I think his story, "Fire in the Bush," which was first published in 1926, is the type of first-person New Journalism that really only came into vogue forty or fifty years later.*

Are you thinking about collecting any more of these?

*I'm thinking about it. This wasn't an easy sell to get published. I submitted this to one publisher in about '89, and they sat on it for a couple of years. Then it got to Oregon State and it sort of clicked with them.*

They've done a nice job with it.

*It's already gone through two printings in a few months. OSU is going to do a third printing, and that's apparently very unusual for an academic press. So sure, I'm thinking about something, but I'm practicing law full-time and it might be another five or six years before I get anything ready.*

Holbrook managed to chronicle a bunch of small communities in pieces like "Anarchists at Home."

*An amazing piece for the conservative Northwest.*

One of my favorites was "The Aurora Communists." And the one about an Eastern Oregon city being shut down...

*Isn't that great? "The Affair at Copperfield."*

That's a wonderful piece. It almost makes you want to go back out and...

*Do a field trip.*

He talks about how they wanted to put on a stage show with Fern Hobbs, take her to England and everything. It almost made me want to pick up on that.

*Holbrook spoke at the Oregon Historical Society in 1940, saying that Oregon had a wonderful opportunity to exploit and market its history, to the rest of the country, as well as to educate its citizens. He didn't just mean the Oregon Trail, the missionaries, and the usual suspects. He wanted to memorialize Fern Hobbs and Copperfield, Harry Tracy, King of the Western Outlaws, Bunco Kelly, King of the Crimps, etc... Well, we're finally getting around to memorializing the Oregon Trail, and maybe eventually the powers that be will recognize the wisdom in Holbrook's advice before Oregon's history and culture is forgotten and we turn into another Orange County.*

And it's a renewable resource.

*Sure. I think we have missed the boat by not following his advice. Oregon has a fascinating history.*

Well, "Cargoes of Maidens." Anyway, Seattle got a TV show out of that one.

*I didn't know that.*

"Here Come the Brides." It was years and years ago.

*Oh, yeah. Sure.*

Well, not *years* and years ago. It wasn't that far back, unfortunately. You have a quote from Holbrook here in the Introduction talking about why he thought that Wobblies and other radicals were more fun to write about "because they were more interesting than the other side." But of course he was working for the other side when he was writing for the *Lumber News*. Do you know if that ever caused friction for him? It didn't seem to stop him from being accepted into these groups of people and writing about them.

*That's a good point. One of his best friends he corresponded with regularly for twenty-five years or so was*

*an avid anarchist and yet Holbrook also had good friends who were lumber executives (although one of Weyerhaeuser's called him obscene) and other prominent business people. He knew his way around the Arlington Club as well as the Press Club and was at home on Madison Avenue as well as as on Burnside. I do think his reputation among scholars was adversely affected because of his close relationship with lumber companies--he wrote company histories and even advertising. But remember, he was writing to make a living. He didn't have a university professorship or grants from foundations. But it does seem to have tainted his reputation in some quarters that he wrote for a living and was willing to take on assignments from the business community.*

He moved in both worlds. Did he feel skeptical about both sides?

*I think he enjoyed both sides. He didn't offend either side as much as you would think because his views were so often stated so humorously. He admired mavericks and people of principle regardless of their ideology. He was very non-judgmental. He had a card made up to use when readers would write and complain about his portraits of various figures or issues. It said "Dear Sir or Madam: But I shall neither use guilt, nor whitewash, nor tar. You may be right at that."*

He talks in the book about the Tillamook Burn replanting, and how that would turn out to be a major part of the industry. But I remember that --even thirty years later in Eugene--some of those groups that were going out planting were sort of laughed at by people in the community because it seemed so silly. There were so many trees.

*Holbrook observed the devastation that early timber companies did with the "Big Clearing" across the country and he wanted to believe that the forest products companies had learned their lesson. He wasn't an environmentalist by our standards, but he was certainly a conservationist by the standards of his time. He was an early and leading advocate of reforestation and sustained yield forestry, and I think he died convinced that the lumber companies would use sustained yield practices, and that the Forest Service would insist on that with government timber.*

How about his own politics?

*As far as I can tell, he was not actively involved and he viewed most politicians with great skepticism. He supported the social reformer Upton Sinclair when he ran for Governor of California, and he generally voted for the socialist, Norman Thomas, for President. Then again, he supported Robert A. Taft, the conservative "Mr. Republican" of his time. I think it reflects his admiration for people of principle who stake out their own ground and stick to it.*

He admired their characters.

*He was a character. Another point about Holbrook to remember is that he helped put Oregon and the Northwest on the map with his writings about this "Far Corner". Oregon was a pretty isolated place in the '40s and '50s. Holbrook helped change that with his writings and his personality. He made the Northwest seem like a special kind of paradise--and he was a national figure himself. He was constantly being featured in the national media, and wrote on the Northwest for all the national magazines in those pre-TV days. The nation's leading writers would come out to Portland to see him; he would go to New York and be feted by Bennett Cerf and Alfred Knopf. Before TV this generated tremendous publicity. He was almost like one of the Portland Trailblazers of today, in being celebrated by the media. Imagine having a historian as the Grand Marshall of the Rose Parade! So I thought he had become one of the lost characters of our history who needed rediscovering, and that's why I devoted so much space to him in the Introduction.*

Do you think there's a chance for another Holbrook to spring up in today's world?

*I think they've probably broken the mold. Today, writers tend to be on the literary bus or off of it. But Holbrook went both ways, and achieved a unique popularity, both as a journalist and as a historian. It's also hard to see how a writer could ever get the public attention that Holbrook did in his prime. Television isn't very interested in books or history or the satirical art that made him famous. And, his tongue in cheek approach to everything from religion to the pioneers to modern art wouldn't go down so well in our politically correct climate. It's too bad, I think we could use him.*

### **-Darrel A. Plant**

[Sustained Resource](#) is a review of Brian Booth's *Wildmen, Wobblies & Whistlepunks: Stewart Holbrook's Lowbrow Northwest*



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