

High Country News

FOR PEOPLE WHO CARE ABOUT THE WEST

Timothy Egan's Western odyssey

A talk with the author of five books about the West

John Moir | Sept. 11, 2009 | *From the print edition*

When he was a young man, Timothy Egan discovered two things: He loved to write -- and he was enthralled with the Western landscape. Egan combined these two passions into a journalism career that has spanned nearly three decades. After getting his start at the Seattle Post-Intelligencer, he went on to spend 18 years reporting on the West for the New York Times. In 2001, he shared a Pulitzer Prize as part of a team of New York Times reporters covering race in America.

*Egan is the author of five books about the West. In 2006, he won the National Book Award for nonfiction for *The Worst Hard Time: The Untold Story of Those Who Survived the Great American Dust Bowl*.*

High Country News correspondent John Moir spoke with Egan about his writing and the West. This interview has been condensed and edited for readability.

HIGH COUNTRY NEWS The dedication in your book *The Good Rain: Across Time and Terrain in the Pacific Northwest* reads: "To my mother who always said, Stay West, and then showed me why." What was it that your mother showed you?

TIMOTHY EGAN My mother loved the outdoors. When I was a kid, we'd go on walks where she would sing the praises of nature. She'd say: "Look at this mountain lake, look at this great view." She was the best proselytizer for the Northwest. Although she wanted me to travel and to see the world, she said, "You're going to go all over, but you'll see there is no better place than here."

HCN How did you turn your early love of writing into a journalism career?

EGAN I always worked at the high school paper and the college paper. I liked mixing it up with journalism; I liked being part of the public policy debate. I got my journalistic break with the worst oil spill in American history -- the grounding of the *Exxon Valdez*. I was then stringing for the *New York Times* when they asked me to rush to Alaska. I was there 10 days or so, writing for page one every day, staying in a fisherman's spare bedroom. In the midst of this flurry, I asked for a raise. They said they would do me one better and hired me.

HCN How do you approach writing about the West?

EGAN Writing for the *New York Times* forced me to look at this region through an outsider's eyes. I had always taken everything for granted, as most of us do. It made me pull back and ask: What interests the rest of the world? And then I realized that, my God, there are all these wonderful stories here.

HCN In telling these stories, you have written that in the West "the basic struggle is between the West of possibility and the West of possession." What are the origins of this conflict?

EGAN This battle goes back to Teddy Roosevelt and before: Who is going to own Western land? Roosevelt's idea -- and his cousin, Franklin Roosevelt, had the same idea -- was that the land belongs to the people. It defines us as Westerners to have all this public land. In opposition to this is the Western individualism myth where you let people get their piece and do what they will with it. If you look at Western history, you'll see this theme (of possibility versus possession) going through most of our stories.

HCN How do you see this dynamic playing out nowadays?

EGAN I think the battle for public sentiment on the value of national forests, national parks, clean water and wilderness -- areas that are largely left alone and unmuddled -- that battle has largely been won in favor of people who want to preserve open space and scenery. But here's the wild card: We are in the worst economic recession since the Great Depression, and a lot of things get thrown out the window. In the past, when pollsters asked, "Are you in favor of preserving the environment even if it comes at the risk of the economy?" that question was always answered by a majority putting environmental concerns over the economy. Now, for the first time since they've started asking this question, the economy has come out ahead.

HCN The theme of environmental calamity runs through many of your books. Do you see parallels between a story such as *The Worst Hard Time* and what is happening now in the West?

EGAN I was drawn to the Dust Bowl story because it was a perfect fable of the earth. It was an exact example of what happens when you push nature and nature pushes back. As long as the grass was there, it didn't matter how much the wind was blowing or how many droughts they had. But, in literally 10 years' time, farmers overturned a huge amount of ground. In the story, I quote a Native American looking out at the desolation; he turns to his son and points to where the grass was overturned and says, "Wrong side up." And that's the story of the Dust Bowl in its essence: wrong side up. There's a parable quality to it that I was really attracted to. It's funny, I didn't see it as a global warming precursor, but people who read the book, mostly young people, started to talk to me about that.

HCN Water is another all-important Western resource that pits powerful interests against one another. You -- and many others -- have said that "water flows uphill toward money."

EGAN It's true. You can't write about this land and not write about water being the destiny changer that it is. About 10 years ago, I was interviewing some Enron executives before that company went bankrupt. They were starting to buy up private water supplies. This is when they were at the height of their hubris and controlling the energy world and had all of these politicians in their pockets. They were actually buying some municipal water supplies and saying, "We'll privatize it." I remember interviewing this Enron exec and saying, "Water? What are you guys doing in water?" And he said to me, "Water is going to be to the 21st century what oil was to the last century."

HCN The West is not the only place to face conflicts over land and water usage. In 1997, you and your family spent most of a year living in Italy. What did your time in Italy teach you about the West?

EGAN We lived not far from the Apennine Mountains, and you could see pieces of land that were largely unchanged, where shepherd families had been running sheep for a thousand years. What I learned in Italy is that here's a country much older than ours with a much (denser) population and a much more chaotic political situation. But they understand the countryside has usefulness to them. For the most part, Italians have made peace with their land. If you live in the city, you go for your *passeggiata*, which is your walk, on Sunday in the country. You get your

food from the country. The Italians understand that they have a relationship to the land outside of the city. It's a practical relationship, one born of utilitarianism. I'm not saying Italians are perfect, but they've figured out a compact with their land. So seeing that made me realize that the population is not the problem in the West.

HCN Could you give us a preview of your new book, *The Big Burn: Teddy Roosevelt and the Fire that Saved America*, which will be published in October?

EGAN It's the story of the largest forest fire in American history. The fire itself was extraordinary. It created hurricane-force winds, and it burned 3 million acres in 36 hours. But what drew me to the story was the drama of the fire set against a larger story of conservation.

I never realized how much our public-lands legacy was threatened early on. My thesis is that this huge fire essentially saved public lands by making heroes of Roosevelt's young Forest Service. It was a radical idea, promoted by Roosevelt and his chief forester, Gifford Pinchot, to set aside more than 200 million acres of public land -- but it was opposed by Gilded Age forces and many Western politicians. After Roosevelt left office in 1909, support dwindled. Then came the fire, making martyrs and heroes of the 100 or so people who died in a blaze that burned an area the size of Connecticut. But, ironically, the Forest Service then took away the wrong lesson -- to try and snuff all wildfires, a tragic course, which led to much buildup in fuel and catastrophic burns, and a firefighting-industrial complex such as we have today that spends billions of dollars. So this fire is very much with us a century later -- in good ways and bad.

HCN You are a prolific writer, and *The Big Burn* is just the latest in your growing body of work on the West. How do you keep the words flowing?

EGAN I come from a blue-collar background. I've worked on a farm, bucking hay bales. I've worked at an aluminum factory. So when I finally started to make it as a writer, I didn't sit around and wait for the muse to strike. During my years working as a national correspondent for the *New York Times*, I traveled nearly 50,000 miles a year -- all over the West. My constant companion was Norman Maclean's book, *A River Runs Through It*. If I was on deadline and stuck, I'd just open it up and read a couple paragraphs. Things flowed easily from there.

