

FAIRMONT STATE COLLEGE
OCCASIONAL PAPERS

Number One

CHANCE ENCOUNTERS: SCHOLAR MEETS SUBJECT

by

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1990

THE SERIES

Fairmont State College Occasional Papers publishes the texts of lectures and other writings of professional interest by faculty and staff members of Fairmont State College. It is distributed free of charge to friends of the college.

THE TEXT

The lecture text printed here was delivered at the Fall Convocation of Fairmont State College on September 21, 1989. The occasion marked inauguration of a Presidential Lecture Series initiated by Dr. Robert J. Dillman, the current president of the college.

CATALOGING IN PUBLICATION DATA

807.2

K57c

Kime, Wayne R., 1941-

Chance encounters : scholar meets subject / by Wayne R. Kime. --
[Fairmont, West Virginia] : Fairmont State College, 1989.

10 p. ; 23 cm. -- (Fairmont State College occasional papers ; no. 1)

1. Literature--Research. I. Title II. Series



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A native of California, Dr. Wayne R. Kime holds degrees in English from Stanford University (B.A., 1963) and the University of Delaware (M.A., 1965; Ph.D., 1968). His twenty-three years as a college professor include stints at the University of Delaware, the University of Toronto, and Fairmont State College, where he has taught since 1978. Among his academic honors are membership in Phi Beta Kappa, research grants and fellowships received from several sources, and recognition for his achievements by the Fairmont Arts and Humanities Council and other organizations. Dr. Kime has published widely in the field of his research interest, nineteenth century American literature and culture. His most recent book, a critical edition of Richard Irving Dodge's *The Plains of North America and Their Inhabitants* (1876), was issued in 1989 by the University of Delaware Press.

Chance Encounters: Scholar Meets Subject

by
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I propose to test with you today the accuracy of Ralph Waldo Emerson's pronouncement in "The American Scholar" that a speaker connects best with his audience when he utters freely his innermost thoughts. "The deeper he dives into his privatest, secretest presentiment," Emerson wrote, "to his wonder he finds this is most acceptable, most public, and universally true." But let me issue a disclaimer at once: I don't intend to inflict on you the results of some psychoanalytic depth probe, and I certainly don't pretend access to universal truth. I do hope that what I have to say about my life as an academic may strike a resonant chord in your own experience. Beyond that, I hope that in portraying myself as a representative professor I may succeed in conveying something of the satisfaction I have taken in my work. We college personnel perform our labors in several arenas, all of which offer their distinctive rewards. I limit myself here to a sketch of some professional activity I have carried on outside the classroom. In particular, I'm speaking as editor of a recently published book, a critical edition of Richard Irving Dodge's *The Plains of North America and Their Inhabitants* (1876).

Let me begin by setting up a modest thematic framework for the anecdotes I have to tell you. I suggest that two links of similarity connect your life and mine. First, I believe we all have noticed how on certain occasions as we look back on our earlier lives, what had once seemed muddled, or ambiguous, or inconsequential suddenly becomes more clear, more definite in its meaning, more telling. We discover connections, gain insight into facts that had been opaque before, recognize patterns that had been invisible before. Gradually our past selves come into focus, and we begin to see—for this is an ongoing process—how we got from there to here. The future remains hidden, of course, but at least we are tracing out a logic of personality and events that helps us to account for who we are in the present.

A second similarity between your experience and mine is, I think, that whatever our particular fields of interest or expertise, those fields go far toward defining us as individuals. As we work our way into a body of subject matter and gradually master it, it is meanwhile quietly taking possession of us. Our professional activity becomes deeply personal. Perhaps this is why when we describe our work we often use phrases such as we "are acquainted with" a certain theory or approach, or we "are familiar with" it. We say that we "have digested" a body of knowledge; indeed, we "have knowledge of" it. The intimate overtones of this language suggest that we are somehow bonded to what we know. It has become a part of us; to a degree it is us.

Now let me tell you a bit about my professional and personal relationship with Richard Irving Dodge, a career officer in the United States Army who was born in 1827 and died in 1895. Even though for many years doing research into Dodge's life and writings was no more than a vague possibility in my mind, that I eventually did so seems inevitable now. And yet in fact, my involvement with him was the result of chance occurrences I simply could not have foreseen.

I first encountered Richard Irving Dodge twenty-three years ago when, as a graduate student, I came across his name in an unpublished journal compiled in 1859 by Pierre M. Irving, later the delegated biographer of his uncle Washington Irving. On September 28 of that year, I read, Dodge's wife and their newborn son paid a call at Sunnyside, Washington Irving's famous home beside the Hudson River. Like a good graduate student I ferreted out a few more details to provide an annotation for this insignificant journal entry. Richard Irving Dodge was Irving's grandnephew, I learned—hence his middle name. In 1859 he was posted at West Point, only a few miles up the Hudson from Irving's home, and was serving as an instructor of infantry tactics. I remember noticing that later in his career Dodge wrote books about the American West, but that fact didn't interest me at the time except as an odd coincidence. I was busy writing my Ph.D. dissertation on *Astoria* (1836), Washington Irving's major book about the West,¹ and I had no time for side excursions.

Dodge and I crossed paths again seven years after this first meeting, but by then he had pretty nearly dropped from my mind, and I almost failed to recognize him. One fall afternoon I was turning over some old books, semi-trash, in a used-book store I loved to frequent called the Book Barn. I picked up a stout volume that must have looked splendid when it was new, for it was bound in red cloth and its spine and front cover were lavishly decorated with designs in black ink and gold foil. I looked it over. It was entitled *Our Wild Indians*—had been published in 1882.² The author's name was given as "Colonel Richard Irving Dodge," and opposite the title-page was a steel engraving that showed a stalwart military gentleman standing erect in full dress, sword at his side.



Was this man Washington Irving's grandnephew? I wasn't sure, but I was then collecting books associated with Irving, and so on a hunch I purchased the old volume for a quarter. This was indeed the man, it turned out. I told myself that perhaps one day I would read *Our Wild Indians* and see what Colonel Dodge had had to say.

During the 1970s I was busy with other scholarly enterprises, but this old author continued to interest me enough that from time to time I dug up a few new facts about him. I came to regard him as something of a private acquaintance, especially since he seemed so utterly forgotten by everyone except me. I later learned, by the way, that his books had earned him considerable reputation during his lifetime, but that not a single article or book about him had appeared in print during this century. I bought by mail a facsimile copy of another of his books, one originally published in 1876, called *The Plains of the Great West and Their Inhabitants*.³ At the Library of Congress I found some interesting correspondence between him and General William T. Sherman, whom he served for a time as aide-de-camp. At the National Archives I secured a copy of his personnel file. In short, by 1981 I had gained a fair notion of what sort of man Dodge was, but even then I did not suspect that anything publishable would come of what I had learned.

That summer my wife Alicia and I passed a few days in the vicinity of Washington, D.C., and while there we decided to revisit Arlington National Cemetery. To our surprise, we were informed at the gate that access to all but a few places on the cemetery grounds was denied to visitors unless they could give a definite reason for wishing to see a particular section. I decided on the spot that we would visit Richard Irving Dodge's grave. I reeled off the necessary details—his state of birth, his regiment at the time of his retirement, and his year of death, and in a moment we were handed a ticket of admission. I can testify that finding a particular gravestone in that wilderness of monuments is not easy, even with the help of a map; but after an hour and a half I did locate an upright slab of dark gray granite with the appropriate information chiselled into it. Before returning to our car we lingered a few moments in the summer shade. Seeking out Colonel Dodge's grave had been an impromptu excuse to enter Arlington, certainly not a pilgrimage, and yet I remember now my determination to find him that afternoon and the real satisfaction I felt once I had done so. Without really having planned to, we had paid him a visit.

Having glanced at a few of my casual encounters with Dodge to 1981, I would like now to mention some of the interests that engaged my more serious attention during that period. My graduate adviser had given me wise counsel years before when he cautioned me to select a dissertation topic that I could live with long after I had completed the actual project. "Because you *will* live with it," he told me. "It will give a turn to your mind for a long time to come." As I have mentioned, I chose to do a critical study of Washington Irving's *Astoria*, a work once much admired but more recently all but ignored. *Astoria* is a wideranging history of John Jacob Astor's effort between 1809 and 1813 to carve out a fur-trading empire in the Pacific Northwest, with a depot for shipping at the mouth of the Columbia River.

My work on the dissertation confirmed in me a taste for the early literature and history of the American West, and naturally too it led me to learn a good deal about Washington Irving, our first professional man of letters. Study of *Astoria* also stimulated my interest in prose writings outside the genres that preoccupy modern literary critics, namely the novel and the short story. I focused on, for example, historical writing, the familiar essay, travel literature. And I developed a liking for topics that no one else seemed to care much about. Of course, one pays a price for devoting himself to these unfashionable authors and books. You may be able to find a publisher for your statement on that unheralded subject, but once you are in print few persons are likely to pay much more attention to your cherished topic than they did before. Even so, the opportunity to work through a project in one's own way and on one's own schedule seems to me a great benefit. And happily there are always interested readers who are grateful for what you bring to light.

Prior to the 1960s the United States, unlike nations such as Germany, France, Spain, and Great Britain, lacked standard scholarly editions of most of its classic authors. Eventually with federal assistance this deplorable situation began to be remedied, as various university presses committed themselves to issuing collected editions of major writers like Hawthorne, Poe, Melville, Emerson, Cooper, Irving, Howells, and others. These new editions were produced by teams of scholars who sought to meet the most rigorous standards of modern textual editing. In 1973 I was invited to help prepare an edition of Washington Irving's works; and even though at the time I knew next to nothing about textual editing, I accepted. I have remained active as a textual editor ever since. And because my work with Richard Irving Dodge has involved textual editing, I need to tell you just a bit about the aims and methods that characterize this discipline.

In general, a textual editor seeks to make available to readers the text of a book or other writing that embodies as fully as possible the author's own final intentions for that work in its original form. The author's wishes may have conflicted with those of his early editor, who had the final say, or they may have been misinterpreted by the printers. Or perhaps at the last moment the author wished to make changes which could not be incorporated in his book—say, for example, the work had already been set in type. In order to produce what is called a critical edition of a particular text, the textual editor searches out every shred of evidence that can help him determine the genesis of that work and his author's final intention for it. He attempts to locate the latest manuscript draft. He collates printed copies to isolate changes in successive impressions that may have been introduced by the author. Early drafts, correspondence, proofsheets, interviews—he amasses all the evidence he can, and then he sifts carefully through it. The process can be lengthy and laborious, but for all the drudgery involved it yields its rewards. One is performing a service for an author whose work he admires.

By the time I was granted a sabbatical leave from Fairmont State College for the academic year 1984-1985 I was conversant with the craft of textual editing and enjoyed my practice of it. But to be truthful, I had grown a little tired of Washington Irving, about whom I had thought and written for quite a few years, and I was ready

to make a change. That summer, in fact, I finished a book on a nineteenth-century American writer other than Irving—an unjustly neglected master, I need hardly add.⁴ I was pleased to have struck out again into new territory. But with that book finished, what next? I wasn't sure.

During my sabbatical year four decisive encounters occurred between me and Richard Irving Dodge, and as I look back they all partake of the eerily coincidental, verging onto the miraculous. The first was in the summer of 1984. My family and I were driving our old sedan across the country, and late one afternoon we reached Bryce Canyon National Park just in time to rent a rustic cabin for the night. This cabin had a massive stone fireplace, and the air inside the room was heavy with the perfume of cedar, but otherwise our accommodation was modest at best. I borrowed a blanket and slept on the floor in front of the empty fireplace. During the night I had one of those strange experiences so vivid that one cannot tell as they occur whether he is dreaming or semi-conscious. Someone or something kept pushing what felt like a sharp snout into the blanket I had pulled over my neck and face. I shifted position, but the thing was persistent—it wanted to get at me. I remember scratchings at my neck, as of claws. I was not frightened, but you will understand that I definitely was taking notice of all this. At last I turned over and gave one vigorous thrust of dismissal at whatever it was, and that was that; the troublemaker did not return. The next morning I told Alicia, our son Evan, and Grandma what had happened, and we concluded that some enterprising forager like a squirrel or skunk must have come down the chimney and addressed himself to me as a possible midnight snack. We partially confirmed our theory with a park ranger, who told us that the varmints around the cabin area practically owned the place.

That day I had opportunity to do some vacation reading, and so I opened my copy of *The Plains of the Great West*, having never yet read it through. Taking up where I had left off, I happened to begin with Dodge's description of the rabid skunks that infested the plains in his time. He told of a soldier who was bitten while lying asleep, and I quote his story in part:

He and another man were sleeping on opposite sides of a common or 'A' tent. He dreamed that he was being eaten up by some animal, but a sort of nightmare prevented his moving. After some time, however, the pain and horror together woke him up to find a skunk eating his hand. With a cry and sudden effort he threw the animal from him. It struck the other side of the tent, and fell upon the other man, who waked up, and, recognising the intruder, rushed out of the tent. The bitten man, who had heard of the surely fatal result of skunk-bite, was so paralysed with fear and horror that he made no effort to get up, and, seeing the skunk come towards him again, buried himself in the blankets. The skunk walked all over him, apparently seeking for an opening, and, finding none, began to scratch the blankets as if trying to dig out his victim. The mental position of this poor fellow can be better imagined than described.⁵

Perhaps I am superstitious, but the coincidence between this anecdote and my experience the night before seemed to me uncanny. "I'd better read more," I thought to myself, and I did. By the time we reached California I had finished the book, and with great relish. Dodge was a skillful storyteller, and his first-hand account based on a quarter-century of life on the frontier was full of curious material.

My second encounter with Colonel Dodge occurred about two weeks after the skunk incident. Alicia and Evan had flown home, and I left my mother at her home near Los Angeles and began driving east, planning to look into a few libraries along the way. Several years before I had found out almost by accident that material relating to *The Plains of the Great West* was located in Santa Fe, at the History Library of the Museum of New Mexico. Now I was eager to see what they had. When I arrived there the research librarian, a brisk little man named Orlando Romero, welcomed me like a long-lost brother. He knew all about the rash of thefts from certain research institutions that had necessitated their recently imposing stern security measures, but he seemed to trust me at once. And when he began to bring out boxes from the manuscript collections in his care I saw that he was offering for my inspection a kind of scholarly King Solomon's Mines. Correspondence about *The Plains of the Great West* between Dodge and his English editor, William Blackmore; more correspondence with the publishers of both the English and the American editions; a complete 700-page manuscript; corrected proofsheets; newspaper clippings containing reviews—the range and depth of information about this obscure work were remarkable. I was eye-to-eye with Richard Irving Dodge now, and I saw how I would spend the remainder of my sabbatical. Here was the basis for a project of research and writing that was meant for me. I would prepare a critical edition of this old soldier-author's book.

Let me describe to you one more scene from that seminal week in Santa Fe. I was beginning to hint around to Orlando Romero about the impossibility of my staying there many days and the great desirability, whatever the cost, of his permitting me to xerox even a little of this material. "Xerox as much as you like!" he broke in breezily. "Our machine is broken, but I'll take you around the corner and let you work at my friend's copy shop." So I selected an armload, about as much as I thought I could photocopy in one nonstop week, and off we went. The next five days I passed in another dreamlike state, standing in a stuffy, chemical-smelling little room as I fed a Xerox machine and attempted to keep track of the documents it tossed out. Every once in a while Orlando would look in to see how I was getting on, but essentially he left me on my own. Orlando Romero is a conscientious professional librarian, and his willingness to let me work independently in this way baffles me still—but so it was. I have never been treated with such liberality by a curator of manuscripts, and I have met some very kind ones.

Back in Fairmont I set to work trying to make sense of all the information I had brought home. And one day that fall I wandered unaware into a third meeting with Colonel Dodge, this time deep in the stacks of the West Virginia University library. In order to trace the publishing history of Dodge's book I was looking

through the entries on him in the elephantine *National Union Catalog of Pre-1956 Imprints*, a bibliographic reference work that ordinarily lists only published material. But to my amazement I found on the page before me a series of entries indicating that the Newberry Library in Chicago owned a substantial body of Dodge's unpublished papers in one of its special collections. This was truly an unsolicited gift, but there was more. Within a few minutes I had discovered that the West Virginia University Library owned a printed catalogue of that very collection. I remember thinking that if the word *serendipity* had not already been coined I could have coined it then.

Not long afterward I spent a productive week in Chicago, but I pass over that busy time in order to recount a fourth meeting between me and Colonel Dodge, the most memorable of them all. You will recall that when I first visited Santa Fe I really didn't know very much about Dodge and his book. True, I photocopied a wealth of documents, but others remained that I did not have time to look at at all. Now that I was better informed and was committed to a serious project of scholarship I knew I had better take another, closer look at everything in the History Library that related to my work. No doubt I would find answers there to some of the questions that had arisen as I had studied the photocopies. Why, for example, was the book manuscript I had xeroxed not written in Dodge's easily recognizable hand? And why did the manuscript text include stuffy British turns of phrase that were not at all characteristic of the briskly colloquial prose he wrote?

Confident that a second visit to Santa Fe was warranted from a scholarly point of view, in April 1985 I returned to that beautiful part of the country. On my first morning back at the History Library I stood before a large old study desk and reviewed the shelf list of manuscript holdings. The William Blackmore Collection, the one in which I was interested, consists of items numbered sequentially from 001 up to 1450 or so, all carefully docketed; it is housed in storage boxes numbered 8 through 15 in the library's manuscript archive. My plan was to begin with item 001 and work my way steadily through the entire collection, so naturally I would begin with Box 8. But as I stood there that morning I suddenly wondered—why, I cannot tell you—about the contents of Box 7. On a whim I asked to see it first, and in a moment Orlando's assistant placed it on the desk before me. Still on my feet, I opened the box and looked in at its contents. Without even lifting them out, I knew what Box 7 contained. I experienced something like vertigo and had to sit down. Inside the box were three neatly tied piles of manuscript, corresponding to the three main sections of Colonel Dodge's book, and on the top sheet of each pile Dodge himself had written out the title of a section. Here was the manuscript that represented the closest I could possibly come to Dodge's final wishes for his book. The photocopied text I had been working with in recent months had been recopied from this one by a secretary in England, and I later established that it incorporated hundreds of word changes from what the author had written. I'll admit I was a little disappointed to have wasted several months laboring over the wrong manuscript, but taking the longer view I was delighted and grateful and humbled and immensely relieved. Box 7 contained the best textual evidence I could hope to find, and

I had almost passed it over. In fact, whoever had compiled the inventory of the Blackmore Collection *had* passed it over; the staff of the History Library were unaware even of its existence. Wherever my friend Colonel Dodge was on that day, he must have worn a smile; I know I did.



Richard Irving Dodge (1876)

Orlando Romero kindly permitted me to carry home as a souvenir part of the ribbon that had held together one of the three piles of manuscript. That little strip of century-old cloth has no value whatever to anyone else, but for me it conjures up the distant scene wherein Dodge and I had our closest encounter—at least so far.

With my new manuscript to work with, and surrounded by all the additional information I had gathered from one place or another, I found preparing the critical edition a thoroughly satisfying task. A university press accepted the completed work, and now, less than two years later, the book is in print. I am happy to report that it bears for the first time the title Dodge wished for it, *The Plains of North America and Their Inhabitants*.

Looking ahead, then, should I be expecting a flood of talk-show invitations, an honorary degree or two, or perhaps a princely increase in salary? All doubtful, I am afraid, and yet I have no regrets. I've already collected my reward in the intellectual excitement that accompanied producing this edition.

So there you have a sampling of my private thoughts and experiences as a scholar. In 1984 and 1985 a conjunction occurred between my tastes and abilities, the material I came across, and something else—call it a run of luck. Looking back, everything seems to have fallen into place. It won't happen again this way, I know—this was once in a lifetime. But then, everything you and I do is once in a lifetime. New chance encounters, scholarly and otherwise, surely lie waiting out there for us all. Where, when, and under what circumstances we may live through those

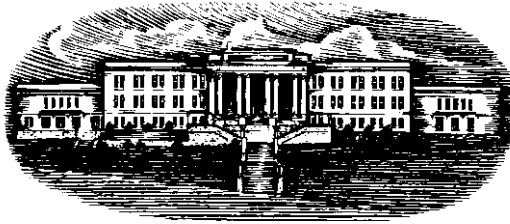
unexpected experiences—may be proffered those sly gifts—we cannot say, any more than we can describe a scene we have not yet visited or characterize an utter stranger. I think the trick is to remain assured of their existence and to stay on the lookout for them. Perhaps such a moment awaits us an hour from now, or a minute from now. Who knows what may happen? In *Song of Myself* our great poet Walt Whitman portrays himself as a would-be comrade to each of us, one willing to strike up that comradeship even after his own death. “I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,” he writes. “If you want me again look for me under your bootsoles.” And Whitman concludes his poem with these lines of friendly assurance:

*You will hardly know who I am or what I mean,
But I shall be good health to you nevertheless,
And filter and fibre your blood.*

*Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,
Missing me one place search another,
I stop somewhere waiting for you.*

NOTES

1. Washington Irving's major writings about the American West include *A Tour on the Prairies* (1835), *Astoria; or, Anecdotes of an Enterprise beyond the Rocky Mountains* (1836), and *The Adventures of Captain Bonneville, U.S.A.* (1837).
2. The full title of this work was *Our Wild Indians: Thirty-Three Years' Personal Experience among the Red Men of the Great West. A Popular Account of Their Social Life, Religion, Habits, Traits, Customs, Exploits, Etc. With Thrilling Adventures and Experiences on the Great Plains and in the Mountains of Our Wide Frontier* (Hartford: A. D. Worthington, 1882). *Our Wild Indians* was Dodge's most popular book; by 1890 over 36,000 copies were sold.
3. The English edition of this work, issued in November 1876, was entitled *The Hunting Grounds of the Great West* (London: Chatto & Windus); the American edition, offered for sale in January 1877 but with a publication date of 1876 on its title page, was entitled *The Plains of the Great West and Their Inhabitants* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons).
4. Wayne R. Kime, *Donald G. Mitchell* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1985). Mitchell (1822-1908), who is best remembered under the pseudonym "Ik Marvel," won wide popularity as the author of two works of sentimental fiction, *Reveries of a Bachelor* (1850) and *Dream Life* (1851).
5. *The Plains of the Great West and Their Inhabitants*, p. 96.



Fairmont State College, the largest institution in the West Virginia state college system, currently enrolls over 6,000 students. Incorporated in 1867 as a state-supported normal school, for over seven decades it helped train teachers for the public school system until, in 1943, it was authorized additionally to offer bachelor of arts and bachelor of science degrees. At present, following two decades of rapid growth, the college offers one-year certificates, two-year associate degrees, four-year bachelor's degrees, preprofessional study in several fields, and a range of continuing education classes.

Drawing a high proportion of its students from within its own region, Fairmont State College welcomes the support it receives from surrounding areas. In return it participates actively in community projects, shares its programs and facilities with the public, lends its resources to promoting economic development, and serves as an information center and cultural focus.

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