

Placing John Haines. By James Perrin Warren. University of Alaska Press, 2017. Acknowledgements, bibliography, notes, index. xxii + 218 pages.

Reviewed by Ross Coen

At the time of his death at age eighty-six in 2011, John Haines had fielded requests from several writers around the country hoping for approval to pen his biography. Haines, a man of some vanity who was keenly aware of his status as the most important Alaska poet in decades, if not ever, encouraged them all. None, to my knowledge, have followed through, but James Perrin Warren has written a remarkable book of criticism, complete with biographical aspects, that will be the cornerstone of future Haines scholarship.

In one sense, *Placing John Haines* consists of conventional literary criticism. Warren begins with Haines's first book—*Winter News* (1966), which won him accolades and established him as a man of letters—and works his way through the poet's canon, focusing particularly on the next six books he published between 1971 and 1977. In his early poems Haines openly imitated masters including Whitman, Poe, Pound, and Eliot, but over time he found his own voice, to use a well-worn but in this case perfectly apt phrase. Other critics have noted the imagistic and dreamlike quality of Haines's poems, but Warren provides fresh insight with a line-by-line analysis of how his poetry evolved over decades when Haines was simultaneously isolated at his Alaska homestead and yet connected to the literary world via correspondence with William Carlos Williams, Robert Bly, Donald Hall, Wendell Berry, and others.

Indeed, Warren attributes much of the poet's maturation to the many years he and his second wife spent in Richardson, a small, nearly deserted town in Interior Alaska where he built a homestead in 1947. "I sensed here in the North, quite early, a place that could be mine as no other could be," Haines once wrote. "I don't mean exclusively mine, but mine in the sense of being a place of self-realization" (xiii). Haines is often called a poet of place, a reference to his subject and writing style, both as sparse as the backcountry cabin in which he lived and wrote. For Warren, critiquing the poems requires just as comprehensive an examination of the place where they were created—and so in this other sense his book functions as the very biography Haines always wished would be written about him.

Accordingly, Warren follows the poet as he sells the homestead in 1969, leaves Alaska, and, over the next four decades, wanders from one visiting professorship to another in Ohio, Montana, California, England, and posts in between. Even as Haines embarked on this most peripatetic life, however, his poetry remained grounded in those places he lived. For a poet who found his voice on a particular piece of land in rural Alaska, Haines adroitly transitioned into one whose work addressed cultural and political currents in the wider world. As Warren moves seamlessly between biography and literary criticism, especially in his analysis of Haines's challenging later works, he elucidates the mature vision of a major American writer.

When Haines turned to prose in *The Stars, the Snow, the Fire*, his 1989 memoir of the Alaska homestead years, he drew upon notes, outlines, and draft essays that he'd been working on for forty years. This "art of memory" so vividly displayed in the stories Haines tells about Richardson and its elderly inhabitants, neither of which was long for the earth when he encountered them as a young man new to Alaska, lends the work "a plangent, often tender style, evoking the shared mortality of all beings in a common journey" (xx). Even those readers already familiar with Haines's work will find new insights in the book.

The book's only real flaw is the inexplicable image that appears on the cover, that of the Trans-Alaska Pipeline against a snowy, mountainous backdrop. Haines detested the pipeline, not so much for the way its shiny, metallic, and phallic bulk intruded on the landscape, though such a sin was certainly enough for the curmudgeon of Richardson, but for the greed it represented and the social upheaval it brought to his once quiet home. Upon opening the book and putting the cover out of view, however, one finds a wealth of insight worthy of the poet's stature and legacy.

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