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When Vardis Fisher died on July 9, 1968, the Idaho novelist left behind an extensive bibliography: more than two dozen novels, collections of short stories, essays, and poetry, as well as three books written for the Federal Writers' Project. But he also left behind multiple projects in mid-process. Obituaries and memorials noted that Fisher was at work on a book called *The American West: The World's Greatest Physical Wonderland*.¹ Biographers over the ensuing decades also mentioned this incomplete project but didn't elaborate further.²

The following essay, which appears in print for the first time, is a surviving remnant of that project he was working on at the time of his death. It is a finished, polished piece, and likely the last essay he completed in his life (excluding newspaper columns).

The manuscript lay dormant for half a century until I came across it earlier this year in Fisher's papers housed at Yale University. My interest in Fisher stems from my on-going research into Caxton Printers, a Caldwell print shop and publishing firm. Caxton published dozens of Fisher's books, including the well-regarded *Idaho: A Guide in Word and Picture* in 1937. Moreover, Caxton's founder, J. H. Gipson, was good friends with Fisher.

"The World's Greatest Physical Wonderland" started as a lecture that Fisher delivered at the College of Idaho six months before his death. For six weeks in the winter of 1968, Fisher served as writer-in-residence at the college, where he taught classes on creative writing and also gave three public talks. Delivered at 9:30 a.m. on January 12 in Jewett Auditorium, Fisher's first lecture focused on the physical beauty of the American West.³

That lecture was not the first time he referred to the West as a "physical wonderland." In 1966, while delivering a speech on "The Western Writer and the Eastern Establishment" at a meeting of the Western Literature Association, he described how "this Western part of our country is by far the most remarkable physical wonderland in the world."⁴

Fisher planned to turn his College of Idaho lecture into a full-length volume, similar to his final book, *Gold Rushes and Mining Camps of the Early American West* (Caxton, 1968). *Gold Rushes* was a large-format (9 x 11 inch), 466-page book, written with his wife, Opal, and filled with hundreds of photographs. In newspaper articles reviewing *Gold Rushes* in spring 1968, Fisher was already talking about his next project and how he and Opal planned to travel east to acquire photographs from libraries in New York and Washington.⁵ He envisioned a "large and very beautiful book" featuring "300 or 400 of the finest photos from all possible sources."⁶ There's no evidence that he produced any more material for the book than this lecture he gave.

In "The World's Greatest Physical Wonderland," Fisher acts as a booster for western geography, specifically the national parks, but also as a defender against what he called the "condescension and contempt of the Northeast for our Western land."⁷ Born and raised in Annis, Idaho, Fisher lived most of his life in Hagerman, Idaho. He nursed great disdain for easterners for much of his life, based on his experience teaching in New York City.⁸

The specific impetus for this essay was his reaction against a book published in 1966 calling most of the western United States a "desert." Fisher vehemently objected to that label; he believed that reducing the West to mere desert was to ignore its beauty and natural diversity.

He highlights Crater Lake, the Grand Canyon, Yellowstone, and Carlsbad parks, among others. Regarding Idaho, he spends several paragraphs describing Craters of the Moon, which he characterizes as the state's "greatest physical wonder." Drawing heavily from Freeman Tilden's *Our National Parks* (Knopf, 1951), Fisher describes why and how these natural areas are beautiful. Fisher also pulls extensively from John Muir, an early proponent of U.S. national parks, as well as several other early naturalists and environmentalists.

To be sure, Fisher engages in extreme jingoism: the West is better than the East in every way. And he leaves no room for discussion:

“We have such a wealth of splendors out here that I feel a little shame at holding a few of them up for the East to look at. In the entire expanse of it, from Caribou in the northern tip of Maine, to Flamingo in the southern tip of Florida the East has, besides its two outstanding features, Mammoth Cave and the Everglades, only the Acadia, Shenandoah, and Great Smoky parks, which, compared to our greatest, are really nothing at all.”

Fisher’s boosterism, though jingoistic, is not the fluff writing found in promotional brochures from state agencies or chambers of commerce. Instead, it’s brutally honest and critical, even of places in the west. Not every western national park deserved its status, Fisher thought. “Big Bend, the Rocky Mountain, and Glaciers are beautiful wilderness areas but should not be national parks.” Even the Sawtooth Mountains in Idaho weren’t beautiful enough for Fisher: “[The Sawtooth range] would make a nice wilderness area but it simply does not have national park status.” When describing Lassen Peak in northern California, he says it, too, is not worthy of being a national park, given its location in the West. However, “it would be [a national park] in the northeast, where they have so little that is unusual in natural features, but not in the West, where we have so much.”

Despite his tone, Fisher clearly has a “love affair” with the West to speak so longingly of its beauty.⁹ Had Fisher not died when he did, he likely would have turned this essay into a beautifully illustrated and produced book, perhaps published by Caxton Printers. But this extant remnant serves as a fitting final word from a writer who, above most everything else, cared about the American West.

Where possible, I’ve added endnotes identifying the sources of the quotations and references within the piece.

Many thanks to Vardis Fisher’s son, T. R. Fisher, for permission to publish this essay.

¹ Fisher had also begun to write his autobiography just eight days before his death and was also revising an unpublished novel.

² See, for example: Ronald W. Taber, “Vardis Fisher of Idaho, March 31, 1895-July 9, 1968,” *Idaho Yesterdays* 12, no. 3 (Fall 1968), 2-8; Wayne Chatterton, *Vardis Fisher: The Frontier and Regional Works* (Boise, ID: Boise State College, 1972); and Dorys Crow Grover, *Vardis Fisher: the Novelist as Poet* (New York: Revisionist Press, 1973).

³ The other two lectures were titled “What is the Evidence? The Author Comments on His ‘Testament of Man’ Series” and “Vignettes of a Few Prominent Authors.” “American West Is Topic for Noted Gem Novelist,” *Idaho Free Press*, January 10, 1968, 10.

⁴ Vardis Fisher, “The Western Writer and the Eastern Establishment,” *Western American Literature* 1, no. 4 (Winter 1967), 244-259.

⁵ Jan Arthur Sainsbury, “Will the Real Vardis Fisher Please Stand Up?,” *Twin Falls Times-News*, May 1968, from Folder 73, Box 14, Cage 48, Inez Puckett McEwen Papers, Manuscripts, Archives, and Special Collections, Washington State University Libraries; Betty Penson, “Vardis Fisher, Gem Writer, Dies,” *Idaho Statesman*, July 11, 1968, 3.

⁶ “American West Is Topic,” *Idaho Free Press*.

⁷ “Idaho Writer Will Address College of Idaho Students,” *Idaho Statesman*, January 12, 1968, 33.

⁸ See, in particular, the above-referenced essay, “The Western Writer and the Eastern Establishment.”

⁹ “American West Is Topic,” *Idaho Free Press*.