

DEEP MAPPING THE LAND*

Wikipedia Definition: Deep map refers to an emerging practical method of intensive topographical exploration, popularized by author William Least Heat-Moon with his book *PrairyErth: A Deep Map*. (1991).

A deep map work most often takes the form of engaged documentary writing of literary quality; although it can equally well be done in long-form on radio. It does not preclude the combination of writing with photography and illustration.

Its subject is a particular place, usually quite small and limited, and usually rural. Some call the approach 'vertical travel writing', while others compare it to the eclectic approaches of 18th and early 19th century antiquarian topographers or to the psychogeographic excursions of the early Situationist International.

A deep map goes beyond simple landscape/history-based topographical writing – to include and interweave autobiography, archeology, stories, memories, folklore, traces, reportage, weather, interviews, natural history, science, and intuition.

In its best form, the resulting work arrives at a subtle, multi-layered and 'deep' map of a small area of the earth. In North America it is a method claimed by those interested in bioregionalism. The best known U.S. examples are Wallace Stegner's *Wolf Willow* (1962) and Heat-Moon's *PrairyErth* (1991, Flinthills, central Kansas).

An Example of Literary Deep Mapping

Excerpted from Page's memoir *In Search of Kinship: Modern Pioneering on the Western Landscape*

Long before Mark and I strolled through his great-grandfather's apple trees, the Ute Indians camped on a bluff near Wildcat Mountain. Long before the days of barbed wire, the Arapaho used the waters of Plum Creek to guard their hunting grounds from the fierce Ute. Long before we transplanted our roots into the sage-soils of Wyoming, the Cheyenne and Lakota kept sacred the Black Hills. To understand this land, the land the Delaware Indians called *Wyoming*—"upon the great plains"—would take more than a lifetime, more than one or two generations...

Inheriting the Deep Stories of the Land

Robert Lawlor has immersed himself in the Aboriginal culture of Australia, and has written extensively about it. In an interview with *Parabola*, he talks about their concept of land and story. "Aboriginal people travel constantly and rarely camp in the same spot; however, when a child is about to be born, the grandmother brings the mother to a particular place, she scoops out the earth, and the mother squats above this place and delivers the baby onto the earth.... [The child] inherits the stories of that place and the sacred responsibilities for the sites of importance in that area....He alone carries the songs concerning the Dreamtime origins of that place. In other words, his dignity, spiritual knowledge, sense of identity, and social responsibilities and rights are determined by this place....spun out from his birthplace into an extensive kinship system that spreads human relationships across vast distances."¹ ¹ *Parabola: Magazine of Myth and Tradition*, Summer, 1993, New York, NY, p.16, 17.

*For another example of Deep Mapping, or vertical time travel, read Page's April 2011 blog post: "Inside the DAM: Mud Woman and The Whisper of the Land"
