

CLAY JENKINSON

The Language of Cottonwoods

FOREWORD

lay Jenkinson is a public intellectual. He thinks deeply about issues and shares his conclusions widely. In this book he turns his attention-not for the first timeto North Dakota, the state that nurtured him and to which he returned after study at distinguished universities, including Oxford, and teaching, writing and creative work in other places. The enormous emptiness of North Dakota drew him home, and he began to explore anew the state's grasp on its people, all of its people—lovers of its wilderness, tillers of its soil, drillers for its oil, newcomers, descendants of homesteaders, indigenous people. He turned, too, to the eccentricities of its politics. Nor did he overlook the extremes of the state's climate, the panorama of its landscape, the voice of its cottonwood trees—the species that surely should be the state's arboreal emblem, but which North Dakotans overlooked in favor of a more stately, less rangy, and less well-adapted species, the American elm. The choice is in some ways typical of North

Dakotans. We have never quite gotten things right, although we've been fighting about them for a long time.

The truth about North Dakota is that it attracts attention from outside its borders only in extreme times, like during the extraordinary uprising that produced the Nonpartisan League, the closest any state has ever come to a government of democratic socialists. Democratic Socialists created the nation's only state-owned bank, an institution to which the state's current residents (and especially its politicians) pay daily homage, since it has helped balance the state's budgets, educate its children, expand its farms, build its small towns and mine its resources—in other words, to make the state economically successful, even in the wake of the wreckage of the Great Depression, which struck North Dakota more brutally than almost any other state, causing a dramatic decline in population that took seven decades to overcome. Today, North Dakota gets attention for the stupendous richness of its oil fields and for the rightward lurch of its politics. Less than a decade ago, all members of North Dakota's congressional delegation were Democrats, all three of them. Today not a single Democrat occupies any statewide or federal office. Not one. And the party has been reduced to a remnant in the state legislature. Only one other state gave Donald Trump a larger victory margin than North Dakota.

Jenkinson seeks the soul of his homeland in this book.

It has been a lifelong search for him, and I am extremely proud to have helped set him on this journey. I met young Jenkinson when he was a student at Dickinson High School in one of North Dakota's few real cities, population 7,000, sometimes more, sometimes less, depending on the price of oil mostly, because even then the wide-open, sunbaked and windswept southwestern corner of the state relied on oil for whatever comforts could be created. It was a modest boom and an uncertain one, but it brought open-minded and eager people to the town, including a newspaper editor who'd worked overseas, editing *Stars and Stripes*, and an oil promoter who settled down as circulation director of *The Dickinson Press*. And it brought me, a freshly minted

cub reporter. Jenkinson latched on to the *Press*. He was a junior in high school who owned a camera. He got the photographer job at the *Press*, he teases me, because I couldn't take pictures.

Those were great days in a great country. Southwestern North Dakota was under-covered. Reporters from bigger papers showed up once in a while, from Bismarck or far-off Fargo, less often from Billings, Montana, or Minneapolis, Minnesota. Once a reporter from New York City passed through. Unbelievable. Otherwise, we had the territory to ourselves, and we set out to discover all that it had in it, the raw and the cooked.

Jenkinson renewed his search when he returned to the state, and he brought an assortment of entrepreneurial ideas. In effect, he monetized his breadth of knowledge in the humanities, creating *The Thomas Jefferson Hour*, in which he portrayed The Founder addressing fundamental issues of his time and our own. To this he added a kind of travel agency which organized trips to explore all sorts of places: Paris, Rome, Greece, the Panama Canal, California's Central Valley. He became an important scholar of the Lewis and Clark Expedition of Discovery, of Robert Oppenheimer, of John Steinbeck (the California connection). He established the Theodore Roosevelt Center at Dickinson State University in his hometown.

This is his thirteenth book.

Dig in. Enjoy.

It is an important book about an important place, a deep look into the workings of one of the fifty states, at once a look of concern, bewilderment and wonder, a loving look and a critical one that illuminates the quirkiness of the pride that North Dakotans have in the place and in themselves. For an example, read about the competition for bragging rights as the Geographical Center of North America.

Mike Jacobs
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