

"Geographers crowd into the outer edges of their maps the parts of the world they know nothing about, adding a note, 'What lies beyond is sandy desert full of wild beasts . . .'" —Plutarch

There may have been a more dismal month in South Dakota's 100-year history, but to Susan Edwards, the state's Secretary of Tourism, last October took the prize.

"We got hit in the face twice," she told me on the phone from Pierre. "First there was the *Newsweek* story that claimed we were part of 'America's Outback,' whatever that may be—sounds like Australian bush country, doesn't it? Then Rand McNally comes out with its new atlas and we're not in it. Not what you'd call a fun October."

The timing of the two events was coincidental, but in people's minds they seemed perversely connected. In each case a famous, urban-based publisher had written off a sizeable stretch of rural America—the magazine by gloomy exaggeration, the atlas by casual omission.

Newsweek wasn't the first to probe the economic distress of the West's northern tier, but it brought to the task a peculiarly savage zest, an instinct for the jugular. *Newsweek's* analysis was unrelentingly black, its prose a deep purple.

Along with South Dakota, the four-page essay cast a pitiless light on North Dakota, Montana, Idaho, Wyoming and Washington—six states now celebrating their centennials. All, according to *Newsweek*, were "Tapped Out." Together they made up "America's Outback," a region "out of sight and out of step," a place "pocked by scarcity and stillborn dreams."

It wasn't the "Outback" label that vexed readers in

Rural Journal

INSULTING THE WEST

By Richard J. Margolis

South and North Dakota. "Quite a few of our people actually took that as a compliment," says Edwards. "They cherish their remoteness." As North Dakotans like to remind visitors, "There ain't nothing between here and the North Pole but a barbed wire fence."

No, what upset many Centennialites was the magazine's dismissive tone, its complacent assumption that the battle for survival had already been lost. The writers left no despairing phrase unturned: "The desolation encompasses an enormous swatch of land . . ." "People are sprinkled across the Centennial West like a light dusting of overnight snow." "A new Appalachia . . ." "Small towns hemorrhaging their young. In spots the land is slowly reasserting its dominion; wind-blown grit covers untended roads, scrubby sage fills abandoned rail beds."

Echoing Theodore Roosevelt's description of the Dakota Territory—"a land of vast silent spaces, of lonely rivers, and of plains where the wild game stared at the passing horseman"—*Newsweek* made a chilling prediction: "The breathtaking Centennial West may re-

turn to what it was: vast silent spaces where wild game stare at the passing horseman."

A reader in Rapid City summed up his reaction this way: "Lots of things said in that article were the God's truth. But that doesn't mean we've given up. Damn it! We're still here."

Nowadays even that modest assertion may be beyond the imaginative reach of many outsiders. Consider Rand McNally's latest *Photographic World Atlas* (\$34.95), which bills itself as "A Traveler's Portrait of the World." It is one of those coffee table marvels, a slick, bulky tome full of color pictures and elaborate maps, from New Zealand to the Arctic Circle. Yet somehow, in presenting seven sectional maps of the U.S.A., the publisher contrived to leave out all of South Dakota, North Dakota and Oklahoma, as well as wide stretches of Minnesota, Iowa and Kansas.

In effect, Rand McNally was doing what geographers have done since Plutarch's time—omitting the parts of the world they knew nothing about, or in this case, perhaps, the parts of the world they cared nothing about. With *Newsweek* they might have noted,

"What lies beyond is wind-blown grit and scrubby sage."

Question: How could the world's most renowned cartographers have excluded so large a portion of middle America? Answer: Too many pictures, not enough maps. "Now that this has come up," a Rand McNally spokesperson is reported to have said, "we realize this was not a good idea. I have been told that when [the editors] go back to print next year they're planning to add more maps." The first printing came to 30,000 copies.

"It must have been an editor's mistake," insists Edwards. "I can't believe they did it on purpose." I couldn't believe it either, so I got in touch with Conroy



V. Erickson, the publisher's public relations director in Skokie, Ill. "It was an editorial decision," he assured me, adding that "It's all much ado about nothing. We print thirty different world atlases, and this one is the most minor in the group." By "minor," he said, he meant it was the atlas with "the least market expectations."

That I can believe. Indeed, it's a mystery why anyone would voluntarily shell out \$34.95 for this yawn-producing work, whose editors have missed few opportunities to achieve tedium. A glossy shot of the Grand Canyon or of the Manhattan skyline at sunset seems to have fully satisfied their creative ambitions.

The prose that accompanies such photographs is ap-

propriately banal and, from a traveler's perspective, quite useless. One suspects that much of it was written 10 minutes before deadline by people who hadn't slept for 48 hours. What else could explain the inane captions? Portland and Seattle "are known for their peaceful prosperity . . ." Certain Native Americans "remain culturally active." In Portugal, "brightly painted small boats, often crewed by men in traditional garments, still go out to fish in the time-honored way."

Considering the quality of coverage, a state may fare better out of the Rand McNally atlas than in it. Oklahoma's Gov. Henry Bellmon has said almost as much. "We do not need your incomplete atlas," he snapped. "You won't get our business."

Not to be outdone, South Dakota Gov. George G. Mickelson fired off a letter of protest to Andrew McNally IV, the company's president. (His father, Andrew McNally III, is chairman of the board.) In response, McNally *files* sent back an oblique apology ("It is certainly not our intention to insult the people of South Dakota . . .") along with a catalogue of available company atlases.

Meanwhile, U.S. Sen. Tom Daschle and the South Dakota Jaycees are cosponsoring their own photography contest for the enlightenment of Rand McNally. "The idea," says Steven Kinsella, an aide to the senator, "is to collect a big bundle of beautiful pictures of South Dakota and send them to Rand McNally. So far we've gotten literally

hundreds of gorgeous photos—sunsets, prairie landscapes, ducks on lakes, you name it."

In addition, a bunch of sixth-grade schoolchildren in Sioux Falls have written letters to the publisher. One of the letter-writers asks, "Have you *been* to South Dakota? . . . It has beauty beyond belief."

Another probably speaks for most of her fellow South Dakotans when she tells Rand McNally, "I'm disappointed at you for not putting us in your atlas. We have national sites and beautiful scenery . . . I don't care if you don't like our state. I do." ●

Richard J. Margolis is a New Haven, Conn.-based writer specializing in rural affairs.

