

History Access Reading Group

Meet with Professor John Findlay
to discuss:

Winter Brothers:
A Season at the Edge of America
by Ivan Doig

Monday, April 26

1:30 – 3:20

Smith 306

Please RSVP, (206) 543-5691

The book is widely available at most bookstores and on-line
from Amazon or Barnes and Noble.

Introduction and study questions on the reverse.

Winter Brothers offers an enjoyable introduction to western Washington through the eyes of two remarkably perceptive individuals—the pioneer James G. Swan and the writer Ivan Doig. The book grew out of a journal Doig kept while spending one winter immersed in the voluminous diaries and letters of Swan. Swan’s diaries and letters, from the period 1853-1900, capture much of the history of Washington during its formative years. Doig incorporates a great many of Swan’s own words into his account, and also conducts research to illuminate a few things that Swan left out of his writings. Doig also tells us about his own experiences in western Washington during the late 1970s, thereby allowing us to see the parallels and differences between two western lives.

Some questions to consider:

1. How familiar were you with Ivan Doig and James Swan before reading *Winter Brothers*? If you did not know much about either man, what are the strengths and weaknesses of the book as an introduction to Swan and Doig? If you were familiar with them, does *Winter Brothers* revise your impression of the two individuals?
2. Look for the different ways that Doig casts *Winter Brothers* as an account of the American West. How successful are his efforts to make his and Swan’s writings into a study of the trans-Mississippi region? More particularly, to what extent has the development of the northwestern part of Washington mirrored—or diverged from—the development of the broader American West? To what extent were Swan’s experiences as a pioneer and his relations with Indians typical of 19th-century colonization of the West by the United States? Finally, does *Winter Brothers* tell us much about key 19th-century events like the Civil War and the industrialization of the United States, or was Swan’s West simply too remote from such currents of American development?
3. Comment on James Swan’s and Ivan Doig’s attitudes toward the natural resources they encountered in Washington. What—if anything—had changed in people’s attitudes over the decades separating the two men’s lives?
4. Doig wrote *Winter Brothers* approximately twenty-five years ago. Given the changes since 1979 in the way people write history and in the topics in which people are interested, speculate on how a 2004 edition of *Winter Brothers* might differ. For example, might its treatment of women be different?
6. *Winter Brothers* is unusual in that there are very few other examples of this kind of work (Doig dubs it “a journal of a journal”). What is your reaction to the genre? Would you have preferred to read Swan without the filter provided by Doig (if so, you might consult his *The Northwest Coast* (1857) or *The Indians of Cape Flattery* (1870)? Would you have liked Doig to write a more conventional biography or novel based on Swan’s life? For more on *Winter Brothers* and other Doig works, visit www.IvanDoig.com.