

IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

REFERENCE SERIES

VARDIS FISHER - 1895-1968

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Vardis Fisher was an Idaho native known as the dean of western novelists. His biographer, Tim Woodward, notes that Fisher was "the father of our regional literature." As a result, western writers owe Fisher their gratitude. Fisher's writings have been noted as the "first significant fiction to come from the Rocky Mountain region."

Fisher was born in Annis, Idaho on March 31, 1895 but later settled in Hagerman where he wrote most of his thirty-six books.

One of his most famous books, Mountain Man, was made into the movie Jeremiah Johnson. He was also recognized for his literary works; his 1939 book Children of God was awarded the Harper Prize Novel Award for that year. The book documented the area's Mormon history. The Mothers (1943) told about the tragedy of the Donner Party. His second book, Dark Bridwell, was cited by the New York Times as being one of the best ten American novels ever written.

Fisher graduated from the University of Utah with a Bachelor of Arts Degree, and acquired both his M.A. and Ph.D. from the University of Chicago, graduating summa cum laude. Fisher taught at the University of Utah; one of his students was Wallace Stegner. He also taught English at New York University with Thomas Wolfe. In 1935 Fisher directed the Federal Writer's Project in Idaho and greatly contributed to the production of The Idaho Guide and The Idaho Encyclopedia.

In addition to his novels, Fisher was a journalist with columns in Idaho newspapers appearing from 1941 until his death in 1968. According to Woodward, "no sacred cow was safe, and no one else removed the hide with such acerbic grace. His newspaper work won him a nickname: 'Old Irascible.'" Vardis Fisher wrote what he wanted in an often brutally honest fashion.

Twentieth Century Authors (1942) contains a self-written biography of Fisher; the following are excerpts from the piece:

I was born on a wild, windy night that ushered in All Fool's Day a few minutes later, in a one-room cottonwood shack on a bleak Mormon outpost in Idaho; with a caul which for my mother augured that I'd be a bishop at least and perhaps an apostle. . . . I have one brother, Dr. V. E. Fisher, a psychologist, and an atheist like myself; and a sister, Irene, who is pious enough for a whole tribe. . . . My career began, I suppose, early in high school; for before I was half-way through a wild-eyed and sentimental

adolescence, I wrote what I called a novel, as well as a ton of horrible verse. . . . My only literary preference is for intelligent books. . . . I like intelligence; persons who do not think with their emotions; and persons who discipline their egoistic demands with a rebuking sense of irony.

Vardis Fisher died July 9, 1968, in Hagerman, Idaho. In 1995 two of his unpublished manuscripts were found in his widow's home in Boise after her death; both of which will hopefully be published.

By Guila Ford and Elizabeth Jacox

(This information has not been edited.)

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