

Born to Be Published

Ivan Doig and Taylor Gordon

BY LAURA FERGUSON

IVAN DOIG was a prolific researcher with a passion for history. His diaries, research notes, and letters chronicle a century of white settlement in Montana's central and Rocky Mountain Front regions. By incorporating that history into his novels, Doig

successfully cultivated a sense of familiarity and veracity that endeared his writing to his readers and gave his fiction a footing in historic verisimilitude. His Montana-based books almost exclusively drew on the history Doig knew intimately—that of his own family, their immediate neighbors, and the settler communities to which they belonged. With one novel, however, Doig set out on a different track: to write a story that encompassed aspects of Montana's broader historical narrative that he knew only at the margins of his own experience and to fashion it around the interactions between Montana's white, African American, and indigenous peoples. That endeavor is *Prairie Nocturne*, published in 2003.

Prairie Nocturne features a triad of strong-willed characters who, as the story unfolds, give Doig an opportunity to bring historical issues of race and racial prejudice in Montana to the surface. He introduced two of these characters to readers in earlier novels: Susan Duff, a musically talented immigrants' daughter who broke free from the hardscrabble life of ranching, and Major Wes Williamson, a wealthy would-be politician. The third character is Monty Rathbun, an up-

The remarkable life of Emmanuel Taylor Gordon, pictured at left in 1919, inspired Ivan Doig to write an article on his career as a singer during the Harlem Renaissance. Although that article was never published, Gordon's story became the seed for Doig's 2003 novel *Prairie Nocturne* and the character Monty Rathbun.



Apeada Studio, New York, photographer. MHS Photograph Archives, Helena 951-707



White Sulphur Springs downtown panorama, circa 1920. For Ivan Doig, his hometown was a place where he could not find happiness, but for Taylor Gordon—who was born there in 1893—being one of the few African Americans in the nearly all-white town allowed him a surprising freedom that helped him thrive.

and-coming African American singer with the potential to make it big during the Harlem Renaissance. Presented as a love story, *Prairie Nocturne* is Doig's only novel that prominently features the experiences of nonwhites in Montana. Building on the life and career of the talented spiritualist singer Emmanuel Taylor Gordon, who, like Doig, had his roots in White Sulphur Springs, Doig also deftly incorporates the deportation of landless Métis and Cree political refugees by the all-black U.S. Tenth Cavalry into the storyline. By connecting these events, Doig positioned *Prairie Nocturne* to present a historically relevant narrative of race relations as they played out in Montana between 1885 and the 1920s.

Originally titled *Fireflies at the Parthenon*, the book that became *Prairie Nocturne* contains at its heart a story Doig had been trying to tell, in one form or another, for many years. Doig wrote in the book prospectus:

As with *This House of Sky*, this is a story whose shoulder I have peered over most of my life. Monty's real-life counterpart, Taylor Gordon, was the only black man in my Montana hometown and his singing voice did carry him to Harlem, and for that matter [to] Carnegie Hall, briefly in the 1920s. . . . I tape-recorded his memories of those times not long before he died . . . and his papers and other Harlem Renaissance archival holdings are rich with detail.¹

Montana's small African American population was scattered throughout the state and across all walks of life when Emmanuel Taylor Gordon was born in White Sulphur Springs in 1893. His father, John Gordon, cooked for gold mining camps and the railroad before disappearing when Taylor was a toddler. His mother, Mary Gordon, a former slave whose children fondly called "Angel Momma," worked as a washerwoman. Taylor Gordon was a sickly child but, nonetheless, enjoyed playing baseball and worked as a messenger and delivery boy for White Sulphur Springs' houses of ill repute. As a teenager, he was hired by circus owner John Ringling as his chauffeur and then as a chef on Ringling's railroad car. Ringling recognized Gordon's musical talent, but it was not until 1925, when Gordon began performing with pianist J. Rosamond Johnson in New York, that he quickly became known for his vocal versatility and style. His decade-long career included performance tours in Europe.²

Doig's interest in Gordon's story began thirty-five years before the publication of *Prairie Nocturne*. In 1968, while Ivan Doig was working as a freelance writer in Seattle and teaching history at the University of Washington, he planned a trip to see his father and grandmother, who were then living in White Sulphur Springs, where Taylor Gordon had also returned in 1959. Doig had heard Gordon in concert many years earlier and had read Gordon's 1929 memoir, *Born to Be*. Intrigued by the narrative potential of Gordon's impressive career, Doig was also fascinated by the



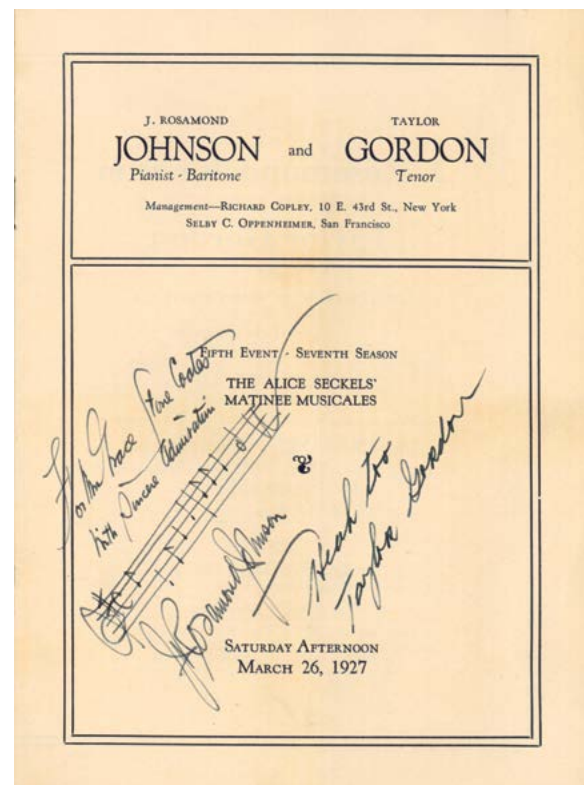
fact that both of them grew up in White Sulphur Springs and found success outside Montana. Beyond that, however, he and Gordon shared little in common other than Doig's unlikely childhood familiarity with the town's eight bars and Gordon's even more unlikely childhood familiarity with White Sulphur's brothels.³ He wrote to Gordon and requested an interview: "I think your memories of the New York scene in the 1920s, for instance, may be valuable to history some day; it would be very worthwhile to have them preserved for the future."⁴

Doig interviewed Taylor Gordon and his sister, Rose, during three taped sessions in July 1968. From those interviews and Gordon's biography, and through Gordon's letters and photographs archived at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University, Doig compiled a lengthy profile on the singer's early life. The manuscript traced Gordon's journey from Meagher County, Montana, to his career as a singer of Negro spirituals during the Harlem Renaissance.⁵ Doig framed Gordon's story within the wider context of African American musicians and other celebrities in order to emphasize the extraordinary accomplishment of a young black man from a nearly all-white community rising to the heights of artistic and social success in New York City in the 1920s. At Gordon's request, Doig did not write about the rough years that followed these glory days. In 1947, Gordon had been admitted to

a mental hospital on the grounds that he was paranoid and delusional. Over the next twelve years, his musical career crumbled and many of his former social connections turned sour. Upon returning to Montana in 1959, Gordon continued to perform, but only sporadically and for local audiences. At the time of the interviews, Doig observed that Gordon "was a cordial, charming man with a considerable gift of insight and a crystalline memory."⁶

Doig hoped to publish an article culled from this research in *Montana The Magazine of Western History* and contacted editor Vivian Paladin in

Touring with pianist J. Rosamond Johnson for nearly a decade, Gordon performed to high society in the United States and enthusiastic audiences in Europe. This autographed program from a 1927 performance displays Johnson's note to Montana poet Grace Stone Coates.



Taylor Gordon vertical files, MHS Research Center Library

September 1968. Paladin agreed Gordon's story was remarkable, but not quite the type of history *Montana* typically published. Nevertheless, she encouraged Doig to write the piece.⁷ He submitted his finished manuscript in late 1968. A year later, Paladin responded, saying that the essay lacked organization and cohesion and recommended Doig rewrite it if he wanted it to meet the needs of *Montana* or, she hinted heavily, consider sending it to an alternate publication.⁸ Optimistically, Doig submitted revisions.

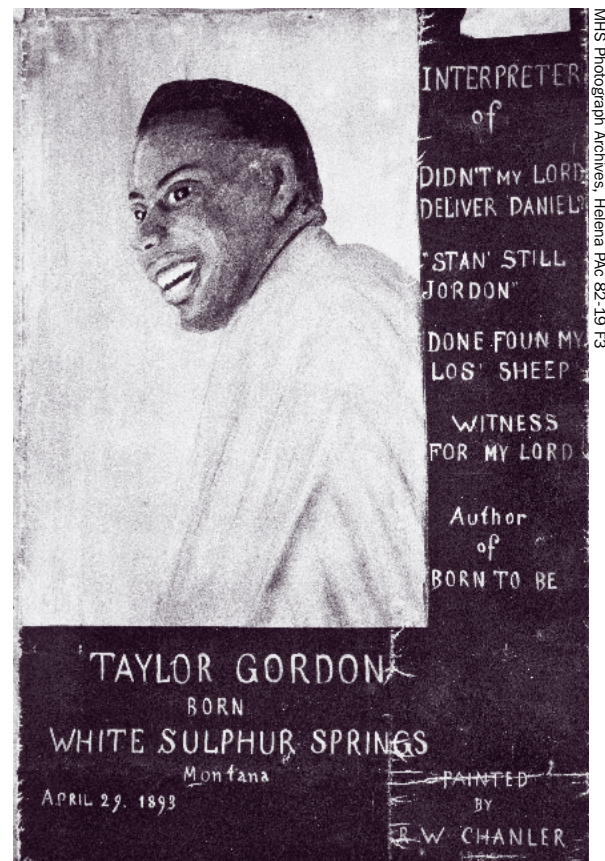
In mid-1970, Doig received Paladin's substantial modifications and was irritated with what he perceived to be an editorial attempt to downplay the significance of race in Taylor's experiences. In particular, he bristled at what he saw as the alteration of the historical record—in this case Taylor Gordon's own words as Doig had recorded them during the interviews. Doig strongly disagreed with the editor's claim: "That Taylor Gordon is black merely puts a slightly different accent on his own success story." That conclusion, Doig declared, was "entirely wrong." To support his point, Doig added, "I have three hours of tape recording, his letters to [Carl] Van Vechten, and my own background in White Sulphur, all of which tell me the case really is the opposite: that T.G. is black makes his story very different."⁹

Indeed, Gordon was keenly aware that being black in America set him apart. To a black boy in White Sulphur in the 1900s, it meant being able to voyage unseen into the seedier part of town and stay out long past curfew. No one questioned why he might be making a delivery late at night or in an alley, because he was black. As Gordon said, his "face was a passport stamped in full." After all, whites expected black boys to make backdoor deliveries, so he got away with it when a white boy in the same circumstances would have been scolded or viewed with suspicion.¹⁰ As an adult, Gordon knew that the members of New York's elite white society, who delighted in his rich voice, would keep him at arm's length when the entertainment and parties were over. Among Gordon's

personal papers collected between 1940 and 1968 are numerous newspaper clippings about lynchings in the South, black schoolchildren being shamed as schools were desegregated, and bat-toting white Americans chasing African Americans off business premises.¹¹ Gordon understood that blacks—individually and collectively—had few victories to celebrate in America. Publishing Gordon's story was important to Doig both as a matter of historical posterity and because of the status of race relations in the United States during the Civil Rights era.¹² Furthermore, as Gordon noted, Montana's black history began the same time its white history did—with the arrival of York and the Corps of Discovery—yet remained largely invisible in printed histories.¹³

In early 1971, Paladin informed Doig that *Montana* would run his article sometime that calendar year.¹⁴ At the time, *Montana* paid authors roughly \$100 per article, and Doig asked that the money be sent to Gordon, who was living close to poverty and whose career had fallen into obscurity. Then, in April 1971, Charlie Doig died suddenly, and Ivan returned to White Sulphur to attend his funeral. As it turned out, that would be the last time Doig would see Gordon

A painting by Robert W. Chanler, aptly titled "Taylor Gordon," portrayed the golden-voiced singer at the height of his career. The Great Depression would signal the decline of his fame and prosperity. This photograph of the painting is among Gordon's personal papers donated to the Montana Historical Society after Gordon's death in 1971.





As a child, Taylor “Mannie” Gordon (pictured here with friends, circa 1903) worked as a messenger for the town’s brothels. His dark skin was, he later wrote, “a passport stamped in full” that gave him access to the seedier establishments of White Sulphur Springs without arousing suspicion or concern.

as well. A month later, Taylor Gordon died of heart failure.

Doig worked with Montana Historical Society archivist John Coleman to ensure that the singer’s papers, music, and photographs were obtained by the Society. He also wrote to Paladin to inform her of his death. In turn, Paladin confessed that Gordon’s passing somehow made it easier to publish an article about such a complicated man, and she encouraged Doig to proceed with his revisions.¹⁵ Doig revised the manuscript and waited, yet for reasons unknown, *Montana* never printed his article. Eventually, a bewildered Doig requested the return of his manuscript.¹⁶

Gordon’s death and *Montana*’s failure to publish Doig’s article did not signal the end of the story or Gordon’s disappearance from public memory. Coincidentally, in 1976, the University of Washington republished *Born to Be*. A year later, Doig returned to Montana to write his own memoir in which his childhood recollections of Gordon and their mutual connection to White Sulphur Springs resurfaced. Ever con-

scious of their wholly different experiences as sons of that small mining and ranching town, Doig noted with irony in 1977: “That he, a black man and a poor man in a town not notably kind on either matters of race or poverty, found it the one place he could live congenially, while I as a lower-middle class bookish striver found it the prime place I could not live and work.”¹⁷



F. J. Haynes, photographer. MHS Photograph Archives, Helena H-2311

Doig used Monty Rathbun’s performance at the Broadwater Hotel and Natatorium (above, circa 1900) to shed light on the presence of the Ku Klux Klan in Montana during the 1920s. The white supremacist organization established itself here during the conservative, post-World War I era and was responsible for at least one act of violence during that time—the murder of James Belden on the Crow Indian Reservation.

In 2003, still inspired by Gordon and their shared link to Montana, Doig reshaped aspects of Gordon's story into his tenth novel, *Prairie Nocturne*, opening the door for a literary exploration of race relations in Montana's past. The book demonstrates Doig's ability to weave a fictional yet believable story out of historical events, but also shows where the novelist diverged from the historian. On the one hand, both Taylor Gordon and Monty Rathbun were golden-voiced, African American singers who worked as chauffeurs for wealthy white men and ascended to musical fame during the Harlem Renaissance. Both longed for lasting recognition and lasting love, and both encountered overt and institutional racism. On the other hand, Doig allowed himself sufficient creative license when creating Monty Rathbun. By doing so, he was able to incorporate the workings of the Ku Klux Klan—active in Montana in the 1920s—into his storyline and also brought to light Montana's 1896 deportation of several hundred landless Cree and Métis people.

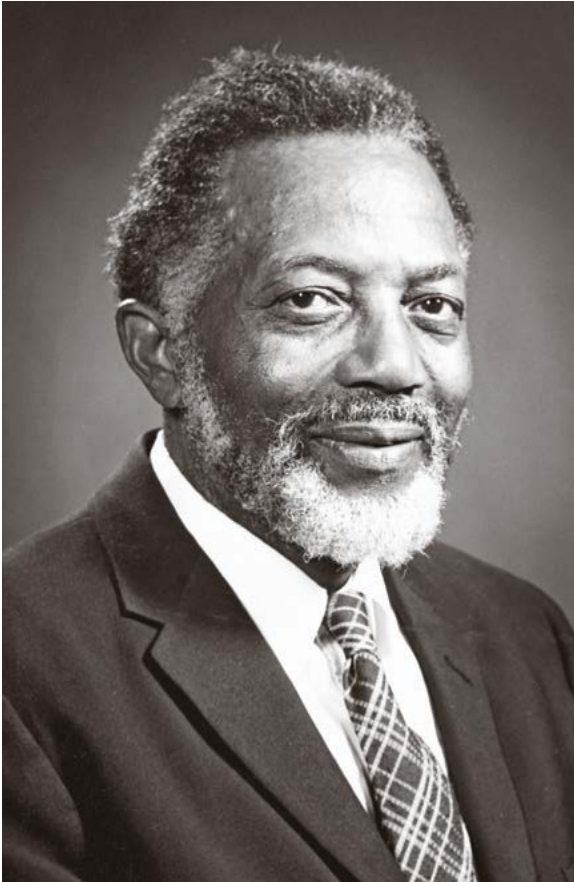
Like Taylor Gordon's story, Montana's anti-Cree history had hovered in the background of Doig's life since his youth on the Rocky Mountain Front. To

tell this history, which forms the backstory to *Prairie Nocturne*, Doig invented Mose Rathbun as Monty's father and made him a sergeant in the all-black Company D of the Tenth Cavalry serving under the command of General John Pershing. As in real life, Doig's fictional Tenth Cavalry "buffalo soldiers" were tasked with rounding up and deporting the Crees and other landless Indians over the Medicine Line to Canada.

Since the early 1800s, fur companies moving into the western plains and Rocky Mountains employed mixed-blood Métis people and their Cree and Chippewa kin as hunters, trappers, interpreters, and hide processors. Beginning in the 1870s, an alliance of indigenous and Métis people, many with ties to Montana since the fur trade era, attempted to have their rights to land ownership and political autonomy recognized in Canada. Those efforts culminated in an unsuccessful armed resistance commonly called the Northwest Rebellion of 1885. When their political leader, Louis Riel, was captured, tried, and hanged by the Canadian government, some of the resisters returned to Montana and settled along the Rocky Mountain Front. White settlers, many of whom were immigrants themselves, abhorred the idea of freely



Little Bear (standing, center) and other landless Indians, many of whom were Cree or Métis, were photographed by Havre photographer Dan Dutro at the time of their deportation to Canada in 1896. Doig wove this historical event into the backstory of *Prairie Nocturne*. Dan Dutro, photographer. MHS Photograph Archives, Helena 955-696



Taylor Gordon, 1968. Gordon was just thirty-six when he wrote his memoir, *Born to Be*, which was republished in 1976 and 1995. Doig's recollections of the singer appear in his memoir, *This House of Sky*, and inspired Doig's tenth novel, *Prairie Nocturne*.

Grass. Some of them no sooner got up there and they were back in Choteau.²⁰

Along the ancient Old North Trail that runs the length of Montana's Rocky Mountain Front, Cree and Métis families maintained self-sufficient communities through the 1910s.²¹ But by 1930, ranchers and homesteaders had gained title to the land occupied by these communities, forcing them to move into nearby towns like Choteau, Augusta, and Dupuyer, where they took wage work. They also hired out to local ranches doing the same types of labor that Doig and his father did—herding, lambing, branding, shearing, fence-mending, and haying—thereby becoming a part of the larger Rocky Mountain Front community.

Although Doig evades commentary on the pervasive anti-Cree and anti-Métis sentiment that inspired the eviction of these alleged “undesirables” from Montana, his inclusion of this historic event gives readers a chance to ponder Montana's history of racial prejudice against indigenous and mixed-blood people. Alongside the story of Monty Rathbun and the challenges he faced, it forces readers to consider the complexity of race relations in Montana since territorial times. To readers who are unfamiliar with the real Taylor Gordon, or unaware of Montana's anti-Cree campaign, *Prairie Nocturne* may seem to be merely a story about Susan Duff's affairs with Wes Williamson and a black singer they helped launch into the spotlight. But to those who acknowledge Montana's troubled race history and who appreciate, as Doig did, the wondrous fame of an African American Montanan in the 1920s, *Prairie Nocturne* will be cherished for the important histories woven into its pages.

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mobile Indians or “mixed bloods” taking up land on the public domain, so they initiated a campaign to deport the so-called “Canadian Crees.”¹⁸

In *Prairie Nocturne*, Doig makes Sergeant Rathbun a key player in the deportation and has General Pershing describe to Major Wes Williamson the futility of those deportation efforts: “Like trying to carry water in a basket; the Crees would leak away into the brush . . .”¹⁹

As in Doig's telling, the people rounded up by the Tenth Cavalry in 1896 returned to Montana within weeks of having been deported. Bob Zion, who lived near Choteau and worked with many of the Cree and Métis descendants, grew up hearing accounts of their deportation:

Pershing was a young lieutenant up at Fort Assiniboine, and they gave him the commission to take a troop of the Tenth Cavalry and start down in Helena . . . and gather these people up wherever they could find them and herd them back to Canada. . . . They took them across the border at Sweet

Notes

Abbreviations used in the notes include Montana Historical Society Research Center, Helena (MHS) and *Montana The Magazine of Western History* (*Montana*). Unless otherwise noted, all newspapers were published in Montana.

Born to Be Published

1. Ivan Doig, *Fireflies at the Parthenon* Synopsis. Prairie Nocturne—early versions of opening scene & early prospectus, 2602-B044-F01-001-016, Ivan Doig Archive, Montana State University Library, Bozeman (hereafter Doig Archive, MSU).

2. Taylor Gordon, *Born to Be* (Lincoln, NE, 1995, reprint).

3. After Ivan Doig's mother died, Charlie Doig, his father, spent considerable time in the bars, both socializing and looking for laborers. Although still of elementary school age, Doig often accompanied his father. As a young boy, Taylor Gordon—nicknamed Mannie—delivered messages and ran errands for the prostitutes in White Sulphur's brothels. Portions of his memoir, *Born to Be*, describe those experiences and the relative freedom being black accorded him at the time.

4. Ivan Doig to Taylor Gordon, letter, May 27, 1968. Prairie Nocturne-Taylor Gordon General Research, 2602-B048-F13-001-057. Doig Archive, MSU.

5. Negro spirituals are a genre of religious folk hymns that originated in African slave communities in the southern United States in the 1700s. Many of these songs were well known outside of African American communities, but the style in which they were sung, and the meanings embedded in them, distinguished them as “Negro spirituals” with ties to both West African musical traditions and blacks' resistance to slavery. See www.negrospirituals.com or “African American Spirituals,” in “The Library of Congress Celebrates the Songs of America,” Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/lhas.200197495/>.

6. Doig to Ann [no last name indicated], May 1977. Prairie Nocturne-Taylor Gordon General Research, 2602-B048-F13-001-057, Doig Archive, MSU.

7. Vivian Paladin to Ivan Doig, letter, Sept. 25, 1968. Prairie Nocturne-Taylor Gordon General Research, 2602-B048-F13-001-057, Doig Archive, MSU.

8. Paladin to Doig, Oct. 3, 1969, *ibid.*

9. Carl Van Vetchen encouraged

Taylor Gordon to write *Born to Be* and assisted him in getting it published. Doig to Paladin, July 5, 1970, Prairie Nocturne-Taylor Gordon, Montana Magazine Manuscript, 2602-B048-F11-F12-001-182, Doig Archive, MSU.

10. Gordon, *Born to Be*, 17.

11. Racial Issues 1909-1970, Box 17, Folders 1-8, in Emmanuel Taylor Gordon papers, 1881-1980, MC 150 (7:4-1), MHS Research Center Archives, Helena.

12. Doig to Paladin, July 5, 1970. Prairie Nocturne-Taylor Gordon, Montana Magazine Manuscript, 2602-B048-F11-F12-001-182, Doig Archive, MSU; Ivan Doig, 1970 rewrite of “Taylor Gordon” (unpublished manuscript), *ibid.*

13. Taylor Gordon Vertical File. MHS Research Center Archives, Helena.

14. Paladin to Doig, Jan. 4, 1971, Prairie Nocturne-Taylor Gordon General Research, 2602-B048-F13-001-057, Doig Archive, MSU.

15. Doig to Paladin, May 8, 1971, *ibid.*; Paladin to Doig, May 1971, *ibid.*

16. Doig to Paladin, Apr. 2, 1975, *ibid.*

17. Doig to Ann [no last name indicated], May 1977, *ibid.*

18. Montana's landless Indian population was comprised of Cree, Chippewa, Assiniboine, Dakota, and Métis people, many of whom had lived in Montana for many generations. Only some of those deported were of Canadian origin. See Laura Ferguson, *Montana's Landless Indians in Assimilation Era of Federal Indian Policy: A Case of Contradictions*. (Montana Office of Public Instruction, 2014; revised and reprinted, Montana Historical Society, 2018).

19. Ivan Doig, *Prairie Nocturne* (New York, 2003), 217.

20. Bob Zion, recounting the story as told to him by Jess Gleason, who witnessed the deportation. Robert Zion Oral History, June 27, 1997; Métis Oral History Recovery Project, OH 1657. MHS Research Center Archives, Helena, MT.

21. When gathering history for *Prairie Nocturne*, Doig discovered one of the many ironies in the landless Indians' deportation: Fort Assiniboine, the same garrison where Pershing and the Tenth Cavalry were stationed, was built by Cree Indians and their Métis and Assiniboine compatriots from both sides of the U.S.-Canadian border. For more on the history of Fort Assiniboine, see Nicholas P. Hardeman, “Brick Stronghold of the Border: Fort Assiniboine, 1879-1911,” *Montana The Magazine of Western History*, 29 (Spring 1979): 54-67.