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Retrieved on January 1st, 2023 from
https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/324-fall-1986/the-strait/
Fifth Estate # 324, Fall, 1986

FE note: At the time of his unexpected death in July of 1985, Fredy Perlman was in the midst of working on his second historical novel to be called *The Strait* (d'etroit) (see FE #321, Indian Summer 1985 for an appreciation of his life and writings). What follows are Lorraine Perlman's impressions of his massive, two-volume manuscript, which she is currently editing with the prospect of printing it at some future time.

The Strait Book review

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a review of
The Strait: An Unfinished Novel by Fredy Perlman. Black & Red, Detroit

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In *The Strait*, Fredy communicates his vision of a human community. Painstakingly researched, Fredy's work tells the story of the Great Lakes and Ohio Valley region from its mythical origins to the 1840s. Book I ends with the U.S. army defeating the warriors led by Pontiac at Fallen Timbers in 1794. Although the various narrators do not know the grim future their people will have to face, the reader knows what is coming and the history takes on tragic dimensions. Rootkin ways survived only in fragmented form and Fredy communicates the anguish of the loss. Analysis of this history led him to the anti-progress, anti-technological perspective which he held in recent years.

Though the westward march of Europeans seems inexorable, Fredy focuses on certain situations when it was temporarily halted and on events whose outcome was crucial in the history of North America. As the devastation unfolds, we wish that the invaders from across the Salt Sea had been met by the unified antagonism of the Rootkin who, in fact,

welcomed them. Fredy's understanding of the ways of these peoples made it clear to him that a unified response would have been impossible. Rootkin society was made up of individuals who weren't obliged to follow the dictates of another individual or of the group.

Fredy depicts characters who respond very differently to the newcomers they encounter:

"Those known as Peacekeepers respond with uncritical generosity toward the European whom they see as kin—or as potential kin. One of the early narrators takes this position toward various Root-kin peoples and her attitude is extended to include Europeans. In the course of the story, individuals with this perspective often come to accept the rationality of treaties, chiefs and authoritative representatives.

—Some find the way of Europeans to be incomprehensible. Coexistence is impossible. They prefer to go elsewhere and follow the ways of their ancestors.

—There are others with the vision that the Invaders threaten life itself. They urge driving the Europeans into the Salt Sea from whence they came. Trying to achieve this goal, these individuals are obliged to rely on techniques and weapons alien to their ancient ways.

—Some become enamored of the Invaders' 'gifts.' An individual who becomes a mediator between cultures gains prestige by distributing gifts to his kin. Even when disasters from plagues or massacres occur, this person takes the position that the event was untypical or that his ally was not personally responsible."

Fredy endeavored to describe the social relations of Europeans from the perspective of this continent's early inhabitants. Europeans had words for social relations which were incomprehensible to the people they encountered: trade, property, obedience, sovereignty; as well as words which insulted the Rootkin and their environment: savage, wilderness. Although the Invaders' bizarre concepts gradually encroached on Rootkin re-

ality, they made headway slowly, in the face of incredulity and resistance.

The narrator who relates events in the late 18th century attempts to account for the differing responses shown to certain members of her family when they visit Tiosa Rondion, the Algonquian name for the strait. To a reader long-familiar with racist categories, the discrimination exhibited by the Strait's villagers is clear enough, but the narrator remains baffled.

Book I draws to a close with the narrator grimly observing that her kin are beginning to understand what the word Empty signifies in the Invaders' tongue. Even though the warriors defeated the Second Invader Army, "There was no victory celebration in Kekionga…We lost a few, but couldn't bear a single loss; many warriors had no surviving kin, neither elders nor women nor children; They had neither fields nor lodges to return to. A word the Landgangs were said to be using stuck in our throats; the word was Empty; it was being used to describe various parts of the Beautiful Valley."

Consistent with the narrative, Fredy used Rootkin names for individuals and locations. This makes the story more difficult to read, but its integrity and perspective are retained. Sometimes it is hard to keep track of the characters—especially over several generations. They are identified by tribe (Serpents, Turtlefolk, Red Earth kin) and by their personalities (keeper of the old ways, Peacemaker between conflicting groups, ardent Cross-wearers). Because hierarchy was unknown in their society, fixed roles or designated spokesmen didn't exist.

Reference to earlier historical events is cumbersome because the narrators do not use the European numbering system for years. It may be of interest that each of the 196 single-spaced pages in the manuscript has a heading consisting of a letter followed by the year in which that page's events occurred. The letter refers to one of eight general themes whose history he traced. Among these themes are: Destruction of Nature; Civility leading to the End of Play;

Education/Domestication/Reduction of Nature to Logos; Resistance; Dreams/Visions/Reconstitution of rhythm and harmony; Symbol.

Fredy's notes and outlines for this work fill several hundred pages. His meticulous approach to the subject is obvious when one sees the extensive historical charts he prepared and the chronologies of hundreds of characters. He worried that a fastidious reader might say "Aleshi couldn't have married Shen's niece. She wasn't born yet!"

Conclusions familiar from Fredy's other writings are, in this work, put in a carefully constructed historical setting:

— Mad-Ant Vain's army which advances against the Rootkin warriors at Fallen Trees is not human, but a machine. Two generations earlier, some warriors already recognized that to the Europeans, warfare is not a human activity.

— Pioneers who let themselves be mobilized to fight against the "savages" were themselves victims of a system which acknowledges greed as a virtue and accepts subordination of all Nature's gifts to achieve an inhuman goal.

Though this complex work is Fredy's somber appraisal of the monster that overran this continent and is with us still, it is also a testament to the tenacity and creativity of the human spirit. In the confrontation between world views which are so different, it seems unfair that the wrong side always seemed to win. While reading some passages, I marveled that Fredy (who "lived" this material for almost ten years) had not sunk into despair. Then I remembered that Fredy, like the Rootkin he was writing about, was part of a community whose support was able to soften some of the blows inflicted by the World-Eaters' ways. He no doubt saw himself in the role he created for his narrators: they reported the anguish-filled events but also recorded the joys, passions and drama of their communities.