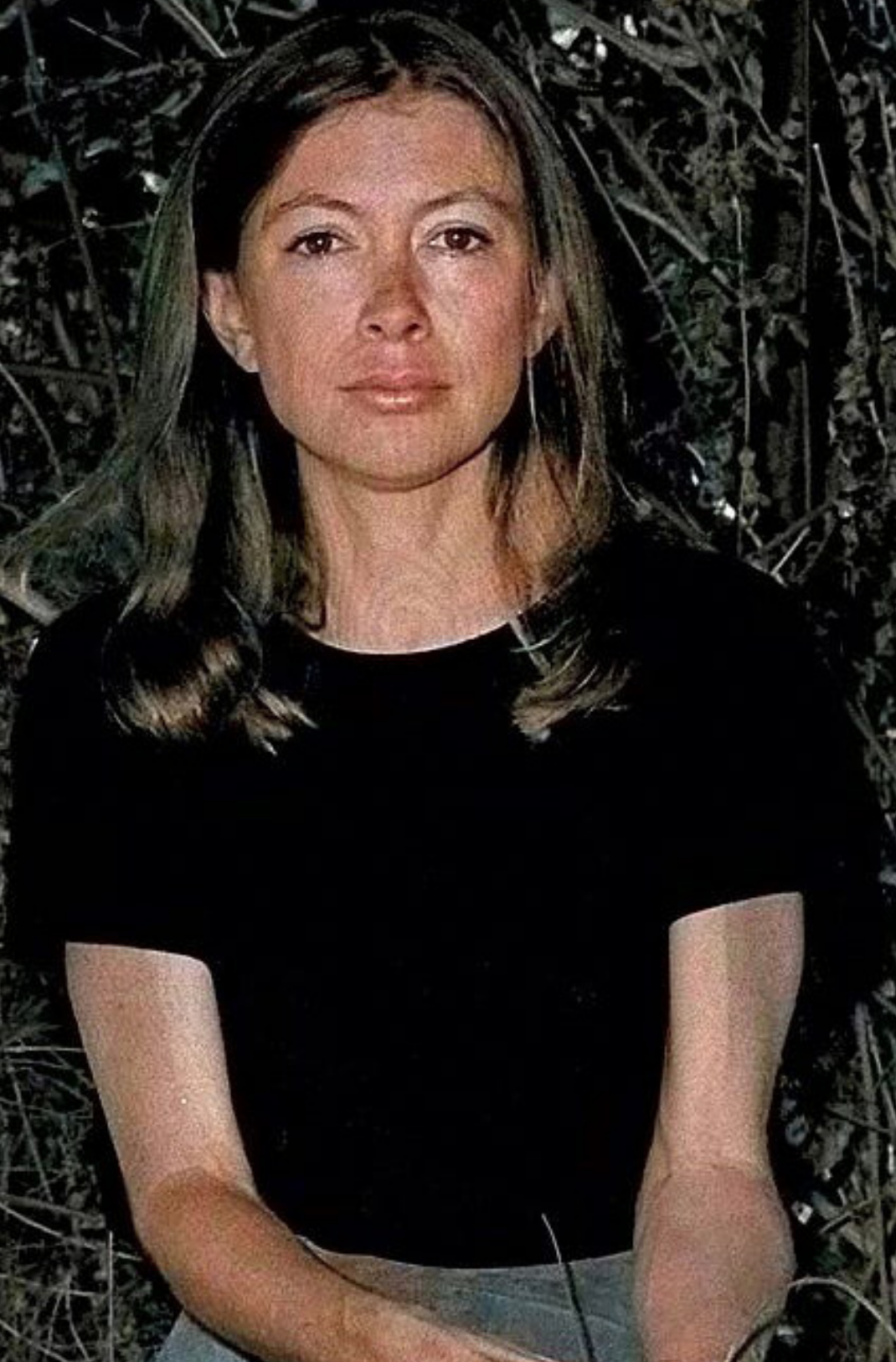


Books\Week.









BIOGRAPHY & MEMOIR

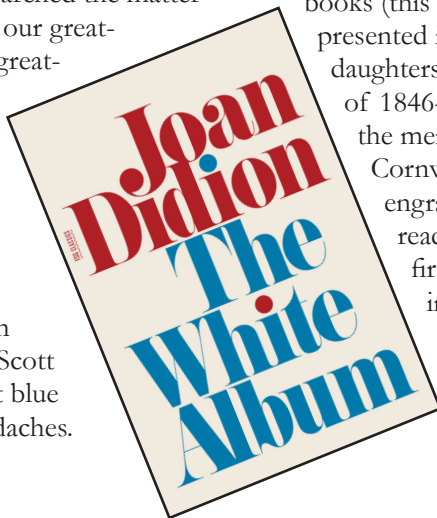
Where I was From

Didion's journal was crafted with the singular intelligence, precision, and elegance that characterize all of her writing.



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My great-great-great-great-great-grandmother Elizabeth Scott was born in 1766, grew up on the Virginia and Carolina frontiers, at age sixteen married an eighteen-year-old veteran of the Revolution and the Cherokee expeditions named Benjamin Hardin IV, moved with him into Tennessee and Kentucky and died on still another frontier, the Oil Trough Bottom on the south bank of the White River in what is now Arkansas but was then Missouri Territory. Elizabeth Scott Hardin was remembered to have hidden in a cave with her children (there were said to have been eleven, only eight of which got recorded) during Indian fighting, and to have been so strong a swimmer that she could ford a river in flood with an infant in her arms. Either in her defense or for reasons of his own, her husband was said to have killed, not counting English soldiers or Cherokees, ten men. This may be true or it may be, in a local oral tradition inclined to stories that turn on decisive gestures, embroidery. I have it on the word of a cousin who researched the matter that the husband, our great-great-great-great-great-grandfather, "appears in the standard printed histories of Arkansas as 'Old Colonel Ben Hardin, the hero of so many Indian wars.'" Elizabeth Scott Hardin had bright blue eyes and sick headaches.



The White River on which she lived was the same White River on which, a century and a half later, James McDougal would locate his failed Whitewater development. This is a country at some level not as big as we like to say it is.

I know nothing else about Elizabeth Scott Hardin, but I have her recipe for corn bread, and also for India relish: her granddaughter brought these recipes west in 1846, traveling with the Donner-Reed party as far as the Humboldt Sink, then cutting north for Oregon, where her husband, the Reverend Josephus Adamson Cornwall, was determined to be the first Cumberland Presbyterian circuit rider in what was then called Oregon country. Because that granddaughter, Nancy Hardin Cornwall, was my great-great-great-grandmother, I have, besides her recipes, a piece of applique she made on the crossing. This applique, green and red calico on a muslin field, hangs now in my dining room in New York and hung before that in the living room of a house I had on the Pacific Ocean.

I also have a photograph of the stone marker placed on the site of the cabin in which Nancy Hardin Cornwall and her family, still short of their destination in the Willamette Valley but unable to get their wagons through a steep defile on the Umpqua River without abandoning Josephus Cornwall's books (this option seems to have presented itself only to his daughters), spent the winter of 1846-47. "Dedicated to the memory of Rev. J.A. Cornwall and family," the engraving on the marker reads. "They built the first immigrant cabin in Douglas County near this site, hence the name Cabin Creek. The family wintered here in



1846-1847, were saved from extreme want by Israel Stoley, a nephew who was a good hunter. The Indians were friendly. The Cornwalls traveled part way westward with the ill-fated Donner Party."

My mother was sent the photograph of this marker by her mother's cousin Oliver Huston, a family historian so ardent that as recently as 1957 he was alerting descendants to "an occasion which no heir should miss," the



"Character – the willingness to accept responsibility for one's own life – is the source from which self-respect springs." Photograph: Julian Wasser/Time Life Pictures/Getty Images

presentation to the Pacific University Museum of, among other artifacts, "the old potato masher which the Cornwall family brought across the plains in 1846." The letter continued: "By this procedure, such items can then be seen by all Geiger and Cornwall heirs at any time in the future by simply visiting the Museum." I have not myself found occasion to visit the potato masher, but I do have a typescript of certain memories, elicited from one

of Nancy Hardin Cornwall's twelve children, Narcissa, of those months on what would later be called Cabin Creek:

We were about ten miles from the Umpqua River and the Indians living there would come and spend the greater part of the day. There was one who spoke English, and he told Mother the Rogue River Indians were coming to kill us. Mother told them if they troubled us, in the spring the Bostons (the Indian name

for the white people) would come out and kill them all off. Whether this had any effect or not I don't know, but anyway they did not kill us. But we always thought they would come one day for that purpose. One day Father was busy reading and did not notice the house was filling with strange Indians until Mother spoke about it....As soon as Father noticed them he got up and got his pistols and asked the Indians to go out and see him shoot. They followed



him out, but kept at a distance. The pistols were a great curiosity to them. I doubt if they had ever seen any before. As soon as they were all out of the cabin Mother barred the door and would not let them in any more. Father entertained them outside until evening, when they got on their ponies and rode away. They never returned to trouble us any more.

In another room of this house I had on the Pacific Ocean there hung a quilt from another crossing, a quilt made by my great-great-grandmother Elizabeth Anthony Reese on a wagon journey during which she buried one child, gave birth to another, twice contracted mountain fever, and took turns driving a yoke of oxen, a span of mules, and twenty-two head of loose stock. In this quilt of Elizabeth Reese's were more stitches than I had ever seen in a quilt, a blinding and pointless compaction of stitches,

Didion said of her writing: "I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking, what I'm looking at, what I see and what it means." She died in December 2021.

and it occurred to me as I hung it that she must have finished it one day in the middle of the crossing, somewhere in the wilderness of her own grief and illness, and just kept on stitching. From her daughter's

account:

Tom was sick with fever the first day of the crossing, no chance for a doctor. He was only sick a day or two when he died. He had to be buried right away, as the train of wagons was going right on. He was two years old, and we were glad to get a trunk to bury him in. A friend gave a trunk. My aunt, the following year, when her baby died, carried it for a long time in her arms without letting anyone know for fear they would bury the baby before coming to a station.

These women in my family would seem to have been pragmatic and in their deepest instincts clinically radical, given to breaking clean with everyone and everything they knew. They could shoot and they could handle stock and when their children outgrew their shoes they could learn from the Indians how to make

moccasins. “An old lady in our wagon train taught my sister to make blood pudding,” Narcissa Cornwall recalled. “After killing a deer or steer you cut its throat and catch the blood. You add suet to this and a little salt, and meal or flour if you have it, and bake it. If you haven’t anything else to eat, it’s pretty good.” They tended to accommodate any means in pursuit of an uncertain end. They tended to avoid dwelling on just what that end might imply. When they could not think what else to do they moved another thousand miles, set out another garden: beans and squash and sweet peas from seeds carried from the last place. The past could be jettisoned, children buried and parents left behind, but seeds got carried. They were women, these women in my family, without much time for second thoughts, without much inclination toward equivocation, and later, when there was time or inclination, there developed a tendency, which I came to see as endemic, toward slight and major derangements, apparently eccentric pronouncements, opaque bewilderment and moves to places not quite on the schedule.

Mother viewed character as being the mainspring of life, and, therefore, as regulating our lives here and indicating our destiny in the life to come. She had fixed and settled principles, aims and motives in life. Her general health was excellent and in middle life she appeared almost incapable of fatigue. Winter and summer, at all seasons and every day, except Sunday, her life was one ceaseless round of activity. The care of her family, to provide for hired help, to entertain visitors, and to entertain preachers and others during meetings which were frequent.

That was the view of Nancy Hardin Cornwall taken by her son Joseph, who was thirteen years old during the crossing. Nancy Hardin Cornwall’s daughter Laura, two years old during the crossing, took a not dissimilar view: “Being a Daughter of the American Revolution, she was naturally a brave woman, never seeming afraid of Indians or shrinking from hardships.”

A photograph:

A woman standing on a rock in the Sierra Nevada in perhaps 1905.

Actually it is not just a rock but a granite promontory: an igneous outcropping. I use words like “igneous” and “outcropping” because my grandfather, one of whose mining camps can be seen in the background of this photograph, taught me to use them. He also taught me

to distinguish gold-bearing ores from the glittering but worthless serpentine I preferred as a child, an education

to no point, since by that time gold was no more worth mining than serpentine and the distinction academic, or possibly wishful.

The photograph. The promontory. The camp in the background.

And the woman: Edna Magee Jerrett. She is Nancy Hardin Cornwall’s great-granddaughter, she will in time be my grandmother. She is Black Irish, English, Welsh, possibly (this is uncertain) a fraction Jewish through her grandfather William Geiger, who liked to claim as an ancestor a German rabbi but was himself a Presbyterian missionary in the Sandwich Islands and along the Pacific coast; possibly (this is still more uncertain) a lesser fraction Indian, from some frontier somewhere, or maybe, because her skin darkens in the sun as she was told not to let it, she just likes to say that. She grew up in a house on the Oregon coast filled with the educational curiosities of the place and period: strings of shells and seeds from Tahiti, carved emu eggs, Satsuma vases, spears from the South Pacific, an alabaster miniature of the Taj Mahal and the baskets her mother was given by the local Indians. She is quite beautiful. She is also quite indulged, clearly given, although she knows enough about mountains to shake out her boots for snakes every morning, to more amenities than could have been offered in this mining camp in

To free us from
the expectations
of others. to
give us back
to ourselves –
there lies the
great, singular
power of self-
respect.

– Self-respect: Its Source,
Its Power (essay originally
published in Vogue in 1961)

the Sierra Nevada at the time in question. In this photograph she is wearing, for example, a long suede skirt and jacket made for her by the most expensive tailor in San Francisco. "You couldn't pay for her hats," her father, a ship's captain, had told her suitors by way of discouragement, and perhaps they had all been discouraged but my grandfather, an innocent from the Georgetown Divide who read books.

It was an extravagance of spirit that would persist through her life. Herself a child, she knew what children wanted. When I was six and had the mumps she brought me, as solace, not a coloring book, not ice cream, not bubble bath, but an ounce of expensive perfume, Elizabeth Arden "On Dit," in a crystal bottle sealed with gold thread. When I was eleven and declined to go any longer to church she gave me, as inducement, not the fear of God but a hat, not any hat, not a child's well-mannered cloche or beret, but a hat, gossamer Italian

face. As atonement, she spent the rest of the war knitting socks for the Red Cross to send to the front. The yarn she bought to knit these socks was cashmere, in regulation colors. She had vicuna coats, hand-milled soap, and not much money. A child could make her cry, and I am ashamed to say that I sometimes did.

She was bewildered by many of the events in her adult life. One of her seafaring brothers became unstable when his ship hit a mine crossing the Atlantic; the son of another committed suicide. She witnessed the abrupt slide into madness of her only sister. Raised to believe that her life would be, as her great-grandmother's was said to have been, one ceaseless round of fixed and settled principles, aims, motives, and activity, she could sometimes think of nothing to do but walk downtown, check out the Bon Marche for clothes she could not afford, buy a cracked crab for dinner and take a taxi home. She died when I was twenty-three and I have of hers a petit-point evening bag, two watercolors

she painted as a young girl in an Episcopal convent school (the watermelon still life, the mission she had never seen at San Juan Capistrano), twelve butter knives she had made at Shreve's in San Francisco, and fifty shares of Transamerica stock. I was instructed by her will to sell the stock for something I wanted and could not afford. "What will she have to look forward to," my mother scolded my grandmother on the occasions of the ounce of

"On Dit," the Lilly Dache hat, the black scarf embroidered with jet to assuage the pain of dancing school. In the generational theater my mother, despite what I came to recognize as a recklessness quite outside my grandmother's range, had been assigned the role described in the stage directions as sensible. "She'll find something," my grandmother always said, a reassuring conclusion if not one entirely supported by her own experience.

I did not always think he was right nor did he always think I was right but we were each the person the other trusted.

straw and French silk cornflowers and a heavy satin label that read "Lilly Dache." She made champagne punch for the grandchildren left to sit with her on New Year's Eve. During World War II she volunteered to help salvage the Central Valley tomato crop by working the line at the Del Monte cannery in Sacramento, took one look at the moving conveyer belt, got one of those sick headaches her great-grandmother brought west with the seeds, and spent that first and only day on the line with tears running down her