Although his name is now virtually unknown, James Earle Fraser’s works were among the most prominent of his day. His unpublished memoirs, held in SU’s Arents Library, describe how both Fraser and his art were shaped by his Dakota upbringing.

by Alix Mitchell

As a boy living on a ranch in the Dakota Territory, James Earle Fraser roamed the prairie on a pony in search of new discoveries. “I must have been a strange sight to see crossing the prairie—a small boy on a little pony, accompanied by a collection of dogs of every size, color and breed,” Fraser wrote years later in his memoirs.

By the time Fraser wrote those words, he had long since left the prairie. He had studied art in Chicago and Paris, established his own sculpture studios in New York and Connecticut, completed dozens of commissions for public monuments, and gained recognition as one of the most important artists of his era. Nevertheless, he continued to look on his childhood years as the most influential and satisfying time of his life.

In 1880, when Fraser was four years old, his family moved to the Dakota Territory from Winona, Minn. His father, a railroad engineer, had been transferred there to help build a railroad line.

“I know now, although my boyhood in Dakota was unusual,” Fraser wrote in his memoirs, “that I wouldn’t have had it different, for I grew fond of the wild and colorful beauty of the prairie and learned, little by little, of the courage and ingenuity of man, fighting against the primitive; to know animal and bird life, and to have had close contact with Indians in their natural state. These things have been of great interest to me always.”

When Fraser first came to the prairie, he did not have such feelings, however. Arriving during a brutal winter, he and his family spent their first few months in their new home huddling in Indian-painted buffalo skins trying to keep warm. Spring brought a change that awed Fraser, instilling in him a deep respect for nature.

“After the terribly cold winters, the spring brought forcibly to those who lived on Indian prairies the realization that the earth was actually ‘Mother Earth.’ All hibernating animals would leave their warm shelter, come from their burrows, lazy and dull after their long sleep. It seemed unbelievable to a small boy that under the vast snow-covered prairie were thousands of creatures silently sleeping away the long winter months. Yes, it was a wonderful life for a boy!

“My childhood there was virtually without the company of other children and their usual playthings,” he writes. “I was not conscious, however, of missing anything for I caught frogs and toads, and grandfather aided my interest by adding several kinds of gophers, jack rabbits, and a badger...”

The living creatures that so fascinated Fraser also inspired him artistically. This young boy was not content to simply watch, collect, tame, and care for the animals with which he shared the prairie. He was also driven to try to recreate them. He did this in part by drawing, but when he discovered the work of a local artisan, he tried his hand at carving the creatures of the wild.

“I have a vivid memory of a young man in Mitchell—a hunchback—who may have had much to do with my career as a sculptor. It was his habit to sit on the porch of a tiny house while he carved chalkstone into various forms. Many of his carvings I remember. Among them he had cut from a square block a small cubicule with pillars on the corners. Inside the pillars he carved a ball which was entirely separated from the columns. It was perfectly round and very well done. I went every day on my way from..."
James Earle Fraser applies the finishing touches to one of his Indian busts. Fraser gained prominence as a sculptor and designer of medals, and later designed many public monuments in Washington and New York. This photograph is included in SU's Fraser collection along with more than 500 sculptures and 50 drawings by Fraser and his wife, Laura Gardin Fraser. The collection also includes Fraser's unpublished memoirs, which describe his childhood on the prairie, his student years in Chicago and Paris, and his early career.

school to see if he was sitting there and to watch him carve. I asked him where he got the stone and he told me from a quarry, the same quarry that supplied the stone for the facades of buildings. It was east of Mitchell toward the Jim River. I went out there and got a good many pieces with which to carve, not architectural shapes, but animals—chickens, dogs...."

Fraser thrived on this quiet artistic pastime. But like most young boys, he was also intrigued by more daring pastimes, such as watching the shooting antics of the cowboys.

"The cowboys at certain periods," he writes, "had little to do in looking after their cattle. They had to have outlets for their energies, and spent much of this time working out tricks with pistols, or with shooting. One of the tricks they particularly liked was to take an old pack of cards and try to shoot out the spots of clubs and spades. The ten-spot was the most difficult. They stood at a distance of about fifteen feet; I have seen some cards with every spot shot through by one of the boys who was a wizard as a pistol shot. They were superstitious about shooting at the hearts and diamonds. They didn't want to antagonize love or money, so they said."

Along with cowboys, Fraser came to know the Indians and to see American history through their eyes as well. One who became a friend was a Dartmouth-educated Sioux, whom Fraser calls simply Dr. Eastman. Custer's Last Stand had drawn deep divisions between the settlers and Indians, and Eastman was curious to find the reasons behind the massacre.

"He questioned all of the old warriors to get their version for killing all of Custer's soldiers," writes Fraser. "The story that he gathered from them was that two or three years before the Custer battle the Indians had made camp for the winter under a protecting cliff. ... Suddenly many companies of soldiers appeared and asked whether or not whiskey was being made in the camp. Evidently they discovered that it was being made. Their orders were in that case to burn the camp to the ground. This they did, leaving the Indians homeless. Following this the weather turned dreadfully cold, far below zero, and most of the babies and many of the men and women were frozen to death. Their losses were so terrible that the Indians of that village swore vengeance on all soldiers."

Stories like this deeply affected Fraser, making him sympathetic to the plight of the American Indian. Later, as a professional sculptor, these feelings would be expressed in a variety of ways, including the execution of stunning portrait busts of two Indians, one titled White Eagle, and one of Two Moons, a chief of the Northern Cheyennes.

Despite rumors that once caused them to flee their ranch for Mitchell in fear of braves on the warpath, Fraser and his family never had reason to fear the Indians, and their experiences with them were always pleasant. While most tribes had been relegated to reservations by that time, they were occasionally allowed back to their hunting grounds, near Fraser's ranch. At these times, he played with the Indian boys. Once, while with these playmates, he saw a scene that he would later transform into the sculpture, The Buffalo Prayer.

"In the early morning just at sunrise I saw this counselor of the tribe make his prayer. It was for the return of the buffalo. It impressed me as a boy to see the old man on a knoll near the Firesteel. His prayer to the
Great Spirit was made after a night in a sweat lodge, having partaken of no food. He would go to the creek, bathe himself, put on a few strips of buffalo hide, place in front of him a buffalo skull, then build a fire of buffalo chips beyond and toward the East. A thin column of smoke would lift to the sky and the rising sun would shed a glow over the whole surroundings. The bronze color of the man, his black hair with bits of red wound into his braids, and his religious attitude, made an indelible picture in my mind. The Indian boys and I watched from a respectful distance with a decided feeling of awe.

The Indians, the animals, the beauties of nature, the wild ways of the cowboys—all inspired Fraser. He was at home on the prairie. When, at the age of 12, his father announced his job would take them to Minneapolis, Fraser was despondent.

But Fraser nevertheless adapted well to Minneapolis, winning a city-wide drawing competition. The following year his family moved to Chicago, where he enrolled in the Polytechnic and the Art Institute.

While in Chicago, Fraser also assisted the monument sculptor Richard Bock, and there rubbed shoulders with many artists, including the portrait artist Franz Dvorak. Although thrilled with this new, stimulating environment, Fraser had not forgotten his earlier life on the prairie. In 1893, while at the World’s Fair, a vague image which he had carried inside him for years suddenly came into focus, and Fraser set to work on what would become his most important sculpture.

"Seeing fine sculpture of all characters from the enormous figure [at the Columbian Exposition] of Columbia by [Daniel Chester] French, to the MacMonnies fountains [of 27 colossal figures, for the Columbian Exposition Court of Honor], to equestrian sculptures, of cowboys and buffalo—these all showed me how I could do a group that I had in mind which was suggested by hearing the trappers say—‘The Indians would some day be pushed in to the Pacific Ocean.’ I began making the model shortly afterward and finished it as far as I could. I called it The End of the Trail.”

Fraser was on the road to becoming a professional artist, but first he had to convince his father that this would be a wise choice. It was Sir William Van Horn, an art collector and colleague of his father’s, who convinced the senior Fraser that his son was indeed talented enough to become a successful artist.

“I shall always be thankful to him,” Fraser writes. “My father agreed to his decision, and therefore within a short
time I found myself on an ocean liner sailing to France, and to the art schools in Paris...."

Once in Paris, Fraser arranged an interview with the influential French sculptor, Jean Alexandre Joseph Falguiere, master teacher of L'Ecole des Beaux Arts, who had apprenticed Bock and MacMonnies.

"When he saw the photographs of my model of The End of the Trail, he became quite enthusiastic and very cordial, escorting [me] around his large studio showing [me] various statues—many of them are very well known....," writes Fraser.

Thanks to The End of the Trail, Falguiere took him on. This inspired work also opened another door for Fraser while he was in Paris. The great American sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens was working in Paris at the time and was so impressed with The End of the Trail that he invited Fraser to assist with a statue of General William T. Sherman, for the City of New York. The experience gave Fraser the confidence and training he needed to begin work on his own.

"After the Saint-Gaudens Sherman statue had been finished, packed, and shipped abroad, to be cast in bronze, I felt it was the moment to strike out for myself," Fraser writes. "With feelings of regret at leaving Saint-Gaudens and his fabulous studio, where I had gained so much, I gathered my belongings and came to New York."

In New York, Fraser made friends with the likes of the poet Edward Arlington Robinson, the painter Ernest Lawson, and painter and printmaker George Bellows. Commissions came quickly and easily to him; his first—a commission for a medallion—had come while he was still in Paris, and was completed in 1901. Fraser went on to do busts and statues and by 1917 was commissioned for major public monument projects.

Fraser died in 1953 at the age of 76. A product of his own American heritage, Fraser's work memorialized the pioneer heritage of all Americans. His art and his life were bound by the "haunting melody" of his childhood experiences on the Dakota prairie.

Late in his career as he sat writing his memoirs in his Connecticut studio, a piece of that melody returned to him. It was a birdsong that he had first heard on the Indian prairie.

On that long-ago day, Fraser writes, he had heard a "breathtaking birdsong...." The beauty of its music, intensified possibly by my lonely feelings, raised the hair at the back of my neck and ran chills down my spine. It left such an impression that ever since I have listened for that particular song, and have heard it occasionally during the years. Now, strangely enough, for the past few springs I have been thrilled again by the song near my studio in the country—the same haunting melody."