

THE LITERARY EMANCIPATION OF A REGION:
THE CHANGING IMAGE OF THE AMERICAN WEST IN FICTION

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AN ABSTRACT OF A THESIS

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Abstract

In our past, no region has had greater impact on the American mind and mythology than the Far West. The West, so long a land unknown to most Americans, has been the loveliest of all our myths, a lure which drew men beyond the next meridian for centuries. Yet in the hundred years after Lewis and Clark stretched the map to the Pacific and the West became a force in American experience, it found no meaningful expression in American literature.

More than the common delay between historical experience and its use in fiction was involved. The West possessed in the American consciousness a geography of fantasy engendered by desire working in the vacuum of ignorance. Behind early fiction of the region, as Henry Nash Smith has shown in Virgin Land, can be discerned two contrasting images of a land shrouded from the first in mystery and misconception.

One image, the agrarian, derived from the physiocratic thought of the eighteenth century and envisioned an agrarian utopia to be established beyond the frontier, a vast Garden of the World occupied by contented freeholders tilling their fruitful acres. Clustered about this image were virtues that gave it imaginative force: independence, self-subsistence, political stability, wisdom drawn from contact with the soil. Historically, this image found issue in the surge of an agricultural population across the continent and reached political fulfillment in the Homestead Act.

The second image, the image of empire, envisioned a limitless and untamed wilderness inhabited by lonely anarchists. Certain values attached to this image also: escape from society, self-reliance in a perilous environment, fortune, adventure, and above all freedom. Translated into economic terms this image found issue in the reckless exploitation of the fur trade, mining boom, and early cattle kingdom.

Neither image adequately described reality in the West, but together they shaped American thinking about the region. Because literature of the nineteenth century was generally dominated by the genteel tradition, which did not accord high place to agrarian values, fiction of the West, in general, followed the empire image.

Cooper was among the first to use the land beyond the frontier extensively in fiction, and the Leatherstocking novels, prevented from adequately exploring the tension between civilization and the wilderness (their major theme) by the intellectual inconsistencies involved in joining genteel conventions with the empire image of the West, established conventions and stereotypes that, debased by the dime novelists, became the formula that has characterized the "Western" down to the present.

For fiction to escape this sterile tradition, it would be necessary to see the West in new perspective. Inadvertent breaks in the pattern appeared even in the formula-ridden novels of Mayne Reid, and more clearly in the honest, if elemental, social history that Andy Adams tried to transform into fiction. Nevertheless, at the turn of the century Owen Wister, though he did better things

elsewhere, reimposed the old artistic and intellectual assumptions upon the West in The Virginian. Eugene Rhodes's indiscriminate egalitarianism and opposition to formula marked a definite advance, but the basis of emancipation became unmistakably clear with Bernard DeVoto's early Western novels. Though in many respects they fail artistically, they mark the end of the old images of the West in serious fiction.

Since the 1920's the image of the West in fiction has changed rapidly. In the pages of Edwin Corle, Harvey Fergusson, Harold Davis, A. B. Guthrie, Jr., and Walter Van Tilburg Clark American experience in the West has assumed an importance for literature it never had before.

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My first obligation is to a book which seems destined to occupy a seminal place among histories of the American consciousness. Henry Nash Smith's Virgin Land is the best examination we have had of the West as idea. The first four chapters of my study take their direction, many of their conclusions, and much of their evidence from Smith's work in this book and elsewhere. Reliance upon what has been done before and done better has been necessary because of a difference in ultimate purpose. Professor Smith, at the end of Virgin Land, correctly concludes that America had to find a new way of looking at its West before there could be fruitful interpretation of the region in literature. This study is an attempt to discover the basis of that new intellectual image.

I wish also to extend thanks to the librarians and staffs of Michigan State Library, the Michigan State University Library, the University of Michigan Library, the University of Illinois Library, the Washington, D.C. Public Library, and the Library of Congress.

Every sunset which I witness inspires me with the desire to go to a West as distant and as fair as that into which the sun goes down. He appears to migrate westward daily, and tempt us to follow him. He is the Great Western Pioneer whom the nations follow. We dream all night of those mountain-ridges in the horizon, though they may be of vapor only, which were last gilded by his rays. The island of Atlantis, and the islands and gardens of the Hesperides, a sort of terrestrial paradise, appear to have been the Great West of the ancients, enveloped in mystery and poetry. Who has not seen in imagination, when looking into the sunset sky, the gardens of the Hesperides, and the foundation of all those fables?

--Henry David Thoreau

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Introduction

We ever held it certain that going toward
the sunset we would find what we desired.

—Cabeza de Vaca in 1536 after
eight years of wandering in the
wilderness, entirely across the
present states of Mississippi,
Arkansas, Oklahoma, Colorado, New
Mexico, and Arizona, to Culiacan
near the Gulf of California.

In Hopi theology the gods labored and brought forth the first human life upon the earth through an orifice at the bottom of the Grand Canyon. The Hopis, a provincial people, understandably placed the universal womb of man in their own land and in the depths of a natural phenomenon which has since overwhelmed far less primitive minds. Yet in their way they were right. If the first Adam did not rise from the murky waters of the raging Colorado, the Far West nonetheless created a new species of American, discernibly different from his fellows in the South, the Midwest, or New England. The mountains and deserts and great plains shaped and changed the men who came to them. From the East the emigrant bore with him two centuries or more of heritage as an American, but the land of his desiring was a new land, different from anything he had known. Slowly, inevitably the country had its way with him. Upon it he erected new institutions or altered old ones, adapted to the conditions the land imposed or failed to adapt and suffered for his failures. He changed the boundaries of his mind itself to fit a new and vaster conception of the land mass that is North America and the political structure

that is the United States.

For the student of this region and its fiction there are two fundamental facts. The first is that the West has been a force almost incalculable in that composite of the past which we call the American experience. In whatever terms that experience can be described—in time and in area, in multiplicity of incident, in complexity of social adjustment, perhaps most of all in impact on that elusive entity known as the national mind—the West has been immeasurably important. Historians, whose business it is to measure the immeasurable, have judged that impact by reconstructing the West as historical actuality. They have explored the records of a land which from the beginning had been shrouded in misconceptions born of ignorance. Carefully they have dispelled the myths and restored the facts, enriching our comprehension of our past.

Yet we begin to understand that their books tell only half the story, perhaps, indeed, the lesser half; that in stripping away misconception to find fact they may have discarded the greater truth for the American past. We know now that the misconceptions which attached to the West, though born of ignorance, were engendered by desire. History must measure a dream. For the West has been the leveliest of all our myths, a force which transcended logic and swept the rational before it. It reached deep into American psychology and tugged at fundamental strings. The fever-ridden farmer on the Sangamon would not have heard of the Garden of the Hesperides, but he answered an ancient cry of yearning when

he traded his physical ills for that deeper malady called Oregon fever. The Argonaut who toiled wearily toward riches in California knew nothing of the seven golden cities of Cibola or the magic land of Quivira, but he followed a vision that had drawn men beyond the next meridian for centuries.

Manifest destiny, continental integrity, the promised land, fifty-four forty, the big rock candy mountain—they are not the words to convey a dream. Yet they, or words like them, were pillars of smoke and fire to a nation which agreed with De Vaca that fulfillment lay where the sun went down. In our past, the West was an image in the mind, the unknown which lay beyond the great river the Indians called the Meschacébé, even beyond the most magic boundary of all, the wide and rolling Missouri. Its names were a litany and its call a lure. The man whose world had been defined by the limits of his Kentucky clearing might soon graze his oxen beside the Grande Rondo, give thanks that here were the gentle Cayuses after the Pawnees and the Sioux, and already in his mind see past the lift of the Blues and Cascades to the green valley of the Willamette. He was hurrah for Oregon, and the journey began at a town named Independence. The strange names and great distances were part of his consciousness now, the vast reach of the Platte and the deep scar of the Snake and overhead a sky so big it frightened the mind. His going answered a vision and changed a nation forever. He responded to a West that had given a new dimension to the American dream, and he made it a part of the American heritage.

It was a part of our heritage largely lost to literature, and that is the second fundamental fact. Our writers knew the image and felt its power. The force that set Thoreau's steps inexorably westward as he turned from his Concord dooryard had engaged Cooper's mind, intrigued Irving, and would set Whitman to shouting that "these states tend inward and toward the Western sea." In time it would send even Henry James, when he wanted a second Columbus for the return journey to Europe, to the coast of the Pacific for his specimen of the new man that had been created in America. "I see now that this has been a story of the West after all," observed Fitzgerald's Nick Carraway, understanding at last that he and his world were born of a dream that had both its birth and fulfillment in that moment when the first Dutch sailors saw the green breast of a new world, a dream that fled before men as they chased it to the Pacific and back, and left them empty when it died. "We have always gone west," said Robert Penn Warren's Jack Burden, another man who came to understand that much of America's past was flight toward an orgiastic future in a new land. But no one ever put it better than that shrewd and undeluded boy who defined a civilization while floating through it on a raft and would reject it at the end to "light out for the territory" and a new beginning for a new humanity.

And yet the West itself had no literature. In the century after Lewis and Clark carried the map to its Pacific border, the region made its ineradicable impact on our thought and mythology, but it found no meaningful expression in our fiction. What,

cried Owen Wister in 1891, "was fiction doing, fiction, the only thing that has always outlived fact?" And thirty years later Bernard DeVoto wondered why the immense energies that catapulted Americans over the Oregon Trail had found no better novel than The Covered Wagon and if the best we could hope from the mining epoch was Bret Harte. He might also have asked if fiction could do no more with the Mormons than Zane Grey's Nevada or find greater significance in the mountain men than appears in the romantic pages of Mayne Reid. Roughing It and Gabriel Conroy seemed to be literary high water marks for a century of American experience in the West, with the remainder given over to Ned Buntline.

From the first the West had fiction in plenty, but it was fiction that formed a long record of betrayal. In its pages, America's unknown province became overnight a region already lost to the meretricious and the infantile. For experience this Western fiction substituted puerile fantasy, puppets for human beings, formula for art. It created a West fit only for the minds of children. From Cooper's Prairie to the Taos esthetes who looked at neolithic cultures through the beguiling window of primitivism and spoke with reverence of the Amerind, fiction imposed upon the West intellectual assumptions that had no relevance to human experience there.

The conventions and stereotypes that grew up around the fictional region and imprisoned it nevertheless expressed something more meaningful than literary formula. They derived, ultimately,

from America's image of its West: from that composite of misconceptions created by desire working in the vacuum of ignorance. The dream-world created by this fiction was a child's world, but the dream upon which it fed expressed the longing of a nation which looked westward with Thoreau to see the fulfillment of its fables.

In time history supplanted the dream with fact, dispelled the myth with knowledge. This meant viewing the West from a new perspective and with different assumptions. The old image had to give way to new methods of inquiry, new understanding of the region and the forces that shaped life there. In literature too it would be necessary to shatter an image of the West, to see the region from a new perspective and with greater understanding.

The result of this slow emancipation has been a fiction that scrupulously avoids the old formulas and seriously attempts to probe the century that fiction had lost in the land that lies beyond the hundredth meridian. It has produced mature and intelligent books beside which Harte's mining camp stories are tawdry and infantile, books on the Southwest that make Death Comes for the Archbishop seem as thin as a travelogue. From the mountain men at rendezvous in Santa Fe to the emigrants who followed Marcus Whitman on the upper reaches of the Columbia, these books have recreated American experience with intelligence and honesty. They have done more: they have dramatized the past in order to explore its meaning for the present, have recreated in imagination the wonder and strangeness that filled the minds of men before the

unknown. At their best they have given us back, through the magic pages of fiction, our image of the West from a new perspective and in a context of greater meaning.

These are not great novels, nor has the West produced great writers. The case is easily lost by overstating it. Partisans of Western fiction, happy when they discover worthwhile material, rise without effort to hyperbole and uncritical comparisons. Walter Clark is not, as has been suggested, a modern Thoreau, nor can The Track of the Cat bear comparison with Moby Dick. Aside from the contradictory quality of these evaluations and the inherent disregard of historical context of all such comparisons, they are obvious nonsense. The West produced no Hawthorne, Melville, or James in the past, and it has no Faulkner today. Its writers have sung in a lower register than that of the angels. It is nonetheless true that they have received less critical cognizance than they deserve. If Harvey Fergusson and Harold Davis fall short of that elusive criterion we reserve for greatness, they have nevertheless written books that merit the serious attention of those who study American literature. To many such students, perhaps to most, they are not even names.

It is clear now that writers of the West have been neglected and are still neglected in part because of their subject matter. The Western novel, to literary critics, ranks somewhere below the detective story, perhaps on a level with science fiction. It calls to mind Hoffman Birney's collections of horse opera in the back pages of the New York Times Book Review, where "fast pace" is a

standard criterion of literary excellence. When a critic introduces his admiration of The Ox-Bow Incident by denying that it is a Western novel he is no less in the realm of nonsense than are those who see Melville reborn in Andy Adams. Clark's book makes use of Western history, belief, and behavior; it is as clearly related to the West as a region as Faulkner's Light in August is to the South. To say that it is not Western fiction is to assume that regional materials defeat communication beyond the region, that Light in August has nothing to say to readers north of the Ohio River.

The West has produced something more than horse opera, and it is literary provincialism to ignore that fact. Study of this fiction suggests that America, spreading out to occupy its continent, has produced a continental literature, and the West has its place in that literature. A new breadth of attention could help to redress the inevitable distortions that literary history makes of the past. If asked to recall the millennial movements of the early decades of the nineteenth century, the literary scholar will remember New Harmony, Breek Farm, and the Oneida Community. But millennium appeared also as words engraved on golden plates, words that fired the greatest colonization movement of our history. This was the dream that became flesh, the utopia that succeeded and endured. Socially and historically Mormonism has been far more important than all the others combined. But no Hawthorne followed the Saints to the slope of the Wasatch, and Deseret had to wait almost a century for expression in intelligent

fiction.

It is the aim of this study to discover why the Western experience had to wait so long for the fiction which would interpret it to America, a process which involves examining the intellectual and artistic assumptions of those who wrote about the region. It is clear now that for most of the nineteenth century the West, in our intellectual and literary history, was less important for what it was than for what America—particularly the East—thought it was. In this respect the history of Western fiction is a study in emancipation from fantasy and a dead past.

The process also involves selection. Here I have had to ignore two areas of Western fiction which did not, in my opinion, lead directly to the best that the West would in time produce. One area is the farm novel, a genre traditionally attached to the West during much of the nineteenth century but not truly characteristic of the region. The other and more important area is the local color tradition that began in the West with Harte and Twain and became in time the tradition of O. Henry's Out of the West and Alfred Henry Lewis's Wolfville volumes. Mark Twain as an artist of course does not belong with the others, but his Western work just as obviously did not engage his full powers. Roughing It admirably expresses the spirit of the Washee, but neither here nor in his other Western sketches did Twain find the form that would raise his material to the level of literature. His work did not lead toward the best fiction of the West we have had.

The selection of a dominant tradition means, indeed, that

every figure chosen is open to question. Writers like Helen Hunt Jackson, Gertrude Atherton, John Neihardt, and Mary Austin may have a rightful place in any attempt to find a pattern in writing of the West. Stewart Edward White was once a chapter in this study, and so were figures as diverse as Harold Bell Wright, Vardis Fisher, and Wallace Stegner. Each of these, for various reasons, has been abandoned. Those writers that remain seem to me best to represent an evolving tradition that has produced, at last, a fictional West that merits serious attention.

Chapter One

The Popular Image of the West: Empire and Agrarianism

The American West has never been successfully identified as a geographical region. Topography, natural resources, patterns of agriculture and industry, aridity and humidity of climate—all these have been used as standards of definition, but without convincing results. The latest effort, offered by a leading historian of the West but no more convincing than the others, relies upon the familiar criterion of annual rainfall, places the eastern limit of the region at about the ninety-eighth meridian (traditionally, perhaps, the hundredth meridian has been the most popular demarcation), and proposes that the dominating and unifying feature of the region is the desert, something Coronado felt equally sure of more than three hundred years ago. The West, within this somewhat glib and oversimplified identification, is "a region that can be marked off on a map, traveled to, and seen. Everyone knows when he gets there."¹ Despite this assurance, the evidence suggests that the West cannot be so easily identified.

Commentators on the problem have long recognized one major difficulty: the West is at least partly a state of consciousness. Thus Mitchell, Nebraska, one historian may say, is clearly not the West, but Torrington, Wyoming, a few miles farther up the

¹Walter Prescott Webb, "The American West, Perpetual Mirage," Harper's, CCXIV (May, 1957), 25.

Platte, belongs without question to the enchanted region. ("But," cries the Cowboy of Crane's "Blue Hotel" when he learns that the Swede is afraid of violence in the West, "this ain't Wyoming, ner none of them places. This is Nebrasker.") By this standard San Francisco has been excluded from the region as too international, Los Angeles as artificial and unrepresentative, Taos because its native culture has been overlaid with an imported art colony, and eastern Texas has been assigned to the South.

Whatever the virtues of these individual judgments, recognition that in our past the West has occupied a place indescribable in terms of latitude and longitude has led investigators to reconstruct the region as it has been defined in the American consciousness. We are aware now that the West possessed a geography born of dream, that for centuries Americans pictured the land beyond the settlements in accordance with their own desires. In three hundred and fifty years no one said it better than Cabeza de Vaca, who was sure that the things of his longing lay toward the sunset.

In the beginning the New World as a whole existed in the blissful realm of the "geography of fantasy" (the phrase is Bernard DeVoto's), a happy blend of ignorance and rampant imagination which portrayed the unknown as the fulfillment of a wish. The men who fumbled at the edges of a continent could not believe that they were to find the ordinary or familiar. What the maps could not show the imagination supplied. And as the frontiers of settlement and exploration pushed forward, the geography of fantasy was steadily extended to the new lands beyond the line

of advance. The West became an American symbol, or rather many symbols. In our mythology "it has worn many faces. It has meant escape, relief, freedom, sanctuary. It has meant opportunity, the new start, the saving chance. It has meant oblivion. It has meant manifest destiny, the heroic wayfaring, the birth and fulfillment of a race."² The Waters of Manitou, said Indian legend, held both freedom and desire, and for Americans the Waters seemed to be ever just beyond the frontier.

The best and most complete study we have had of the West as symbol and myth, Henry Nash Smith's Virgin Land, reduces these widely scattered symbols to a pattern which expresses two dominant images of the early West: one of an empire to be exploited, one of an agrarian Eden to be established.³ Each image embodied

²Bernard DeVoto, "The West: A Plundered Province," Harper's, CLXIX (August, 1934), 356. How little was known of the land to the west is apparent in the fact that it was not uncommon in the seventeenth century for the British to grant a colony all the land from sea to sea. Thus the Second Charter of Virginia of 1609, after outlining the northern and southern boundaries of the colony, goes on to add "and all that Space and Circuit of Land, lying from the Sea Coast of the Precinct aforesaid, up into the Land, throughout from Sea to Sea, West and Northwest." From Henry Steele Commager (ed.), Documents of American History (New York, 1948), p. 11. Again, in 1737 the governor of Virginia optimistically commissioned one John Howard to supply maps of the state "from sea to sea." See Douglas Branch, Westward: The Romance of the American Frontier (New York, 1930), p. 52. Official correspondence as late as the Revolution commonly assumed that Virginia extended to the Mississippi. See T. P. Abernathy, Western Lands and the American Revolution (New York, 1937), p. 363.

³(Cambridge, Mass., 1950), p. 12. Smith identifies the images as mercantile and agrarian. Since the adjective mercantile does not suggest all the attitudes that I wish to include in this image of the West, I have chosen the term empire as more descriptive. Smith concentrates on the agrarian image as the

attitudes, ideas, and political, economic, and social values which were important in the American character during the eighteenth century and much of the nineteenth. Certainly these two images did not encompass all views of the West during these years, but the evidence left by records of exploration, travelers' reports, emigrant and expansionist propaganda, guide books, and Western fiction suggests that they included the major ideas America held of its unknown hinterland.

The empire and agrarian images of the West rested first of all on opposing attitudes toward the land itself, attitudes that went back to the first records we have. De Vaca, the wanderer, saw the land as something to travel over and get behind him. De Soto's chroniclers, in their turn, were equally unimpressed with the possibilities for settlement. Coronado's annalist, Castañeda, however, by nature a settler, looked at the land for its agricultural potential.⁴ One attitude led naturally to visions of riches, power, and exploitation in the West; the other, in the course of time, found expression in the dream of an agrarian utopia.

As successive Wests moved across the continent, the empire and agrarian images of the wilderness battled for supremacy in the American mind. The empire image was attached to the land beyond the agricultural frontier, the place where wealth was to be won by the speculator, the trapper, the fur trader, the prospector,

more important for history. The empire image, I believe, is the more important for the development of Western fiction.

⁴Bernard DeVoto, The Course of Empire (Boston, 1952), p. 48.

the miner, the cattle baron. Clustered about it and altering from time to time were a number of non-commercial values: escape from the bonds of society, self-reliance in a hostile environment, courage, skill, physical prowess, adventure, and above all freedom. Extended to its full ramifications, the empire image does much to identify the impact of the unexplored wilderness upon the American mind. Economically, it found issue in the most prolonged and reckless exploitation of a region which the country has ever known. Culturally, it gave us symbols of America and the American which still bear emotional impact.

The agrarian image, deriving from the concept of agrarianism in eighteenth century political and economic thought, was attached to the land behind the frontier and envisioned a vast realm of contented freeholders tilling their fruitful acres. This image also carried certain virtues as part of its imaginative force: independence, self-subsistence, political stability, and a fundamental wisdom and honesty which the farmer drew from his relationship to the soil. Historically, this image found issue in the restless surge of an agricultural population across the continent, made the Oregon Trail an emigrant road to destiny, and reached political fulfillment in the Homestead Act.

Separately or together, the empire and agrarian images dominated American thinking about the West for a very long time. Underlying them both was that theory of history which proposed that the focus of civilization moved inexorably westward, an idea already old when the philosopher George Berkeley gave it its

most famous poetic expression. His verses are a paean of praise for a civilization rising anew from the ashes of the old to be born again on far western shores:

There shall be sung another golden age,
The rise of empire and of arts
The good and great inspiring epic rage
The wisest heads and noblest hearts.

Not such as Europe breeds in her decay,
Such as she bred when fresh and young,
When heavenly flame did animate her clay
By future poets shall be sung.

Westward the course of empire takes its way
The four first Acts already past,
A fifth shall close the Drama with the day;
Time's noblest offspring is the last.⁵

The theme was flattering to rising American nationalism, and Freneau and Brackenridge used it again in their exuberant poem for a Princeton Commencement in 1771, "The Rising Glory of America," celebrating in turn the themes of agrarianism, commerce, science, and religion in the new world.

The image of a new Greece rising from the wilderness was too pervasive to belong exclusively to poets, however, and after the settlement of the Atlantic coast it was easily transferred to the unknown land to the west. An early seeker for a Northwest Passage, Jonathan Carver, came back from the Great Lakes area with his own view of the movement of history in 1768:

To what power or authority this new world will become
dependent, after it has arisen from its present

⁵"Verses on the Prospect of Planting Arts and Learning in America," The Works of George Berkeley, ed. Alexander Campbell Fraser (Oxford, 1901), IV, 366.

uncultivated state, time alone can discover. But as the seat of empire, from time immemorial has been gradually progressive toward the West, there is no doubt but that at some future period mighty kingdoms will emerge from the wilderness and stately palaces and solemn temples, with gilded spires reaching the skies, supplant the Indian huts, whose only decorations are the barbarous trophies of their vanquished enemies.⁶

It is a commonplace of historiography that the idea of marching empire held peculiar significance for America and differentiated our culture from all others. Observes De Tocqueville:

In Europe people talk a great deal about the wilds of America, but the Americans themselves never think about them....Their eyes are fixed upon another sight: the American people views its own march across these wilds, draining swamps, turning the course of rivers, peopling solitudes, and subduing nature. This magnificent image...may be said to haunt every one of them...and to be always flitting before his mind.⁷

"The American," as Walter Webb puts it, "thinks of the frontier as lying within and not at the edge of a country. It is not a line to stop at, but an area inviting entrance."⁸ The idea made westward advance to the Pacific an imaginative necessity, the exploration and settlement of the unknown lands and the extension

⁶Travels Through the Interior Parts of North America in the Years 1766, 1767, 1768 (London, 1778), pp. vii-viii. Carver, captain of a company of provincial troops during the French and Indian War, went west afterwards to explore the new territory Britain had acquired and developed imperial visions worthy of an emperor. Like so many visionaries in the West, he was luckless in implementing his grandiose plans. For a resumé of his career, see Mile M. Quaife, "Jonathan Carver and the Carver Grant," Mississippi Valley Historical Review, VII (June, 1920), 3-25.

⁷Democracy in America (New York, 1954), II, 78.

⁸The Great Frontier (Boston, 1952), p. 2.

of sovereignty of the political organism to the borders of the continent "an embodiment of the continental consciousness."⁹

Thus the official explorers, Lewis and Clark, Long, Pike, Frémont, as well as unofficial pathfinders like the Ashleys, Jed Smith, Fitzpatrick, and Bridger were, in the popular mind, not only serving political or economic or scientific ends; on the level of the imagination they were enacting American destiny, meeting the logical requirements of geography by pushing out the map until it met the borders of the continent. When expansion and annexation encountered active resistance in the Mexican War, the poetic ideas of westward marching empire and continental integrity could be invoked as splendid incantations. American expansion was, after all, manifest destiny. "We love," wrote Whitman in the Brooklyn Eagle,

to indulge in thoughts of the future extent and power of this Republic—because with its increase is the increase of human happiness and liberty.—Therefore hope we that the United States will keep a fast grip on California. What has miserable, inefficient Mexico—with her superstition, her burlesque upon freedom, her actual tyranny by the few over the many—what has she to do with the great mission of peopling the New World with a noble race? Be it ours, to achieve that mission! ¹⁰

⁹ DeVeto, The Course of Empire, p. 344.

¹⁰ Editorial for July 7, 1846, reprinted in The Gathering of the Forces by Walt Whitman, eds. Cleveland Rodgers and John Black (New York, 1920), I, 246-47. Whitman phrased his expansionist sympathies always as articles of faith, emphasizing their mythic rather than their rational qualities. "We claim these lands," he wrote six months later, "...by a law superior to parchments and dry diplomatic rules." The Gathering of the Forces, I, 262. The same sort of higher law informs Thomas

Americans agreed that the focus of human destiny lay to the west, but they sharply disagreed about the premise of the land that lay beyond the frontier.

One image of the West, the empire image, had its origins in the expansionist temper of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The Spanish explorers who came first to the region brought with them the ready-made myths of Quivira and the seven golden cities of Cibola, and they listened eagerly to Indian stories of El Dorado, the fabulous golden man. For Coronado, "just over the hill—the very next hill—might lie Cathay. Or, if not that fabulous empire of the Grand Khan, some other land of equal opulence, such as India."¹¹ French belief in Canadian riches visualized gold and precious stones to be gathered from the ground by the enterprising in the wilderness and gave the French language a new synonym for the fraudulent and meretricious in the phrase, "Voilà un Diamant de Canada!"¹²

Hart Benton's Senate speeches of a few years earlier on Oregon and on John Charles Frémont's first expedition. See, for instance, Thirty Years' View (New York, 1861), II, 468-82. Benton, probably the most famous expansionist of the period, was one of the best informed men in the country on the subject of the West—certainly the best informed in high office. Through his own prestige and the willing instrument of his son-in-law, Frémont, he did more than anyone else to focus national attention on the region. Benton and Whitman's sentiments were pervasive enough to be echoed by men actually on the scene. "The old Saxon bleed must stride the continent...and erect the altar of civil and religious freedom on the plains of the Californias," wrote J. T. Farnham of his travels through the West in the 1840's, in The Early Days of California (Philadelphia, 1860), p. 313.

¹¹Paul I. Wellman, Glory, God, and Gold (Garden City, 1954), p. 3. The immediate impetus behind Coronado's search for Quivira was apparently De Vaca's strange appearance from the wilderness

These were the visions of exploiters, not settlers. This view—and it runs through the history of the American West throughout much of the nineteenth century—made the region a romantic land of fortune. It was peopled not by farmers but by daring men who roamed fearlessly beyond the limits of civilization in a perilous realm filled with Indians and danger. At the center of this image man stood alone against the wilderness. It was the Wild West of romance—the free trapper on his lonely mountain streams, the miner striking it rich, the cowboy riding down a stampede or swimming the Cimarron. This West meant opportunity, escape, adventure, and freedom. The empire image envisioned a wilderness that would never be tamed, a glorious playground and the scene of exciting treasure hunts.

The British, desiring to maintain in America a mercantile economy which would supply raw materials and consume British manufactures, clung to the image of a wilderness empire by trying to restrict the restless settlers to the seaboard and to reserve the Ohio Valley—the West of the mid-eighteenth century—to the fur trade. The famous Proclamation of 1763 enjoined Americans from settling on "any lands beyond the heads or sources of any

at Culiacan in 1536, although there is disagreement over whether De Vaca told of seeing gold himself or merely repeated tales told him by Indians. See, for instance, John Bartlet Brebner, The Explorers of North America (New York, 1933), pp. 70-76; Dorothy Anne Bender, The Prairie and the Making of Middle America: Four Centuries of Description (Cedar Rapids, Iowa, 1926), p. 4; and Jean Descala, The Conquistadors, trans. Malcolm Barnes (New York, 1957), pp. 318-19.

¹² Brebner, The Explorers, p. 132.

of the rivers which fall into the Atlantic Ocean from the west or northwest";¹³ and the Quebec Act of 1774, in turn, nullified the Western claims of the colonies and thwarted the plans of the American land companies.¹⁴ Yet such acts did not contain westward expansion. Instead, they angered both the speculators and the frontiersmen who wanted new lands opened to settlement.¹⁵ Emigrants continued to move west, and when independence was declared, flocked to the new land in unprecedented numbers, "not for political freedom, but for private gain."¹⁶ In the war settlement the commissioners got the land to the Mississippi, and America had its Western empire at last.

When the United States turned its attention to its Western land problems, the result was Jefferson's plan of 1784 and, finally, the Northwest Ordinance of 1787. The Ordinance reversed the former British policy, opened the West to settlement, and dictated that the new lands would be states, not territories. The West, then, would become an integral part of the political organism, not a region reserved to the fur trade empire.¹⁷

¹³Commager, (ed.) Documents, p. 49.

¹⁴Commager, pp. 74-76. For an excellent discussion of pre-Revolution speculation in Western lands, see Ray Allen Billington, Westward Expansion (New York, 1949), pp. 132-153.

¹⁵This point has been made many times. See, for instance, LeRoy R. Hafen and Carl Coke Rister, Western America (New York, 1941), pp. 101 ff.; and Frederick L. Paxson, When the West Is Gone (New York, 1930), pp. 22 ff.

¹⁶Abernathy, Western Lands, p. 367.

¹⁷For discussion of this point see Harold Underwood Faulkner, American Economic History (New York, 1924), pp. 191-200.

The Northwest Ordinance, however, did nothing to destroy hopes of empire in the West, for it was to prove an area rich as no other in the country in possibilities for quick and easy fortune. More immediately, for Americans at the end of the eighteenth century, it was known to have rich stores of furs. Even more entrancing to those with visions of empire, beyond the West lay the Pacific and the fabulous Orient. What was needed--what had been needed since Columbus--was a waterway across the continent.

Belief in a Northwest Passage, a central myth in the early empire image, had from the first been founded on deductive logic that would have done credit to mediaeval schoolmen. The Spanish called it the Straits of Anian and Cerenade had it in mind, among other things, as he marched to Cibola and Quivira. More than two centuries later it was still a current issue. Jonathan Carver published, with the record of his travels, a map which shows the "River of the West" flowing into the Pacific, with headwaters which virtually interlock with those of the Missouri.¹⁸ He projects that there are "four great rivers that take their rise within a few leagues of each other, nearly about the center of this great continent; viz. The River Bourbon, which empties itself into Hudson's [*sic*] Bay; the Waters of the Saint Lawrence; the Mississippi, and the River Oregon, or the River of the West [the

¹⁸"A New Map of North America, From the Latest Discoveries, 1778," Travels, frontispiece.

Columbia], that falls into the Pacific at the straits of Annian."¹⁹

For Carver, and for many others who sought the Passage, its existence would be proof that America was indeed unique, the very promised land toward which man had been moving for centuries. The four natural waterways flowing north, south, east, and west, dividing the country into approximately equal sections, would be part of a divine plan for man's earthly utopia. The Passage myth satisfied the eighteenth century desire for geographical symmetry and struck a responsive note in the hearts of men deeply aware of America as the Edenic land of fresh beginning.

Jefferson was enough a man of his time to give credit to the idea. Acting as a committeeman for the American Philosophical Society, he wrote to the explorer André Michaux: "It would seem by the latest maps as if a river called Oregon, interlocked with the Missouri for a considerable distance, and entered the Pacific not far southward of Neetka Sound."²⁰ He was still hoping

¹⁹ Travels, p. ix. DeVeto provides a convenient summary of eighteenth century attempts to find the Passage in The Course of Empire, pp. 278 ff. Brehner discusses earlier attempts in detail; see The Explorers, pp. 182-236.

²⁰ The Writings of Thomas Jefferson, ed. Paul Leicester Ford (New York, 1894), VI, 159. Jefferson, because of republican political sentiments, was firmly on the side of the agrarian image of the West, but his instructions to Michaux and his confidential message to Congress on the Lewis and Clark expedition strike the note of empire; see The Writings, III, 194-201. "His immediate attitude toward the Far West," Smith has indicated, "was in some respects like that of the British authorities toward the Ohio Valley before the Revolution: he thought of it as an area to be occupied by fur traders rather than farmers." Virgin Land, p. 15.

for a water passage to the sea when he sent Lewis and Clark off into the wilderness, but the myth of a thoroughfare to the Orient was merging into a more substantial form of empire by this time. The United States was ready to take its place in the race for the furs and territory of the Far West.

Alexander Mackenzie had traveled to the Pacific for the North West Company of Montreal in 1793, the first white man to cross the continent north of Mexico since Cabeza de Vaca, and the company fur traders followed hard upon his heels.²¹ But Mackenzie's route involved a long land portage and was not feasible for transporting furs and trading goods. Montreal, moreover, was a long way from the new Canadian fur trade of the Northwest. So the Lewis and Clark expedition had in view a carriage route for the furs of the Northwest, the maritime trade in sea otter and goods for the Orient, and the establishment of a claim to the basin of the Columbia.²² Canadian explorations had demonstrated that there was no water passage west from Hudson Bay. The last hope for a Northwest Passage was the Missouri, so Jefferson instructed Lewis to explore it with that in mind.²³

²¹Hiram M. Chittenden, The American Fur Trade of the Far West (New York, 1902), I, 89 ff. Chittenden's massive history is still standard for the trade, although Harrison Clifford Dale's The Ashley-Smith Explorations and the Discovery of a Central Route to the Pacific, 1822-1829 (Cleveland, 1918) gives a more detailed account of certain figures, and DeVeto's Across the Wide Missouri (Boston, 1947) provides a broader social history of the trade.

²²Bernard DeVeto (ed.), The Journals of Lewis and Clark (Boston, 1953), pp. xxv ff.

The Lewis and Clark expedition proved to be one of America's most successful essays in empire in the West. On the return trip the explorers, while still on the upper reaches of the Missouri near the mouth of the Yellowstone, met the first two trappers to follow in their wake.²⁴ The era of the mountain man had begun. He had a short and gaudy history. Chittenden dates America's participation in the trade from the return of Lewis and Clark in 1806 to 1843, when Jim Bridger, mountain man turned emigrant guide, established a trading post on a tributary of the Green River for the express purpose of selling goods and services to the emigrant trains.²⁵ The trade soon trapped out the beaver, encountered changing tastes in hats, and gave way to the migration of agriculture. Yet while it lasted it was as exploitative as any advocate of Western empire could ask, spreading quickly west and south from the upper Missouri and north and west from Taos until it covered the West.

²³The Writings, III, 194-99. The expedition destroyed the Passage notion, at last, for all but the most idle dreamers. Commercial interests accepted the fact immediately. See, for instance, DeVeto's remarks on Astor's reaction in The Journals, p. xlix. Yet even without the Passage the idea that Oregon was the key to the Orient remained a factor in Oregon fever. Frémont was still writing of it in these terms in his Report of the Exploring Expedition to the Rocky Mountains in the Year 1842 and to Oregon and California in 1843-44 (Washington, D.C., 1845), pp. 276-77.

²⁴Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, Lewis and Clark Journals (New York, 1904), III, 245-46. They continued to meet traders all the way down the Missouri, eleven parties in all. Following Jefferson's instructions, they did their best to prepare for America's participation in the trade. Thus we see Clark outlining a good site for a post on the Yellowstone and promising the Cheyennes that Americans will soon be among them; see Lewis and Clark Journals, III, 240-41, 261.

²⁵The American Fur Trade, I, 2, 257-59.

It was wild, violent, adventurous, and endlessly exciting. The trappers themselves were anarchic nomads who lived and worked hundreds of miles beyond the borders of civilization among such dangers as the East could scarcely imagine. In the wealth it promised, in the qualities it demanded of its participants, in the excitement it offered to the imagination—the fur trade was the first full expression of the empire image of the West for America.

Others soon followed. The Mexican War, however repellent it might have been to many Americans, brought new visions of gold and glory to the image of the West, this time to be won in the Halls of Montezuma. Frontiersmen flocked to the Army of the West and made it a collection of rugged individualists.²⁶ Trappers left Bent's Fort on the Santa Fe Trail to mix in the fight.²⁷ Mountain men carried destiny forward as guides for Kearny and Beniphan or, even more exciting to the American imagination, in the opulent land of California helped the most flamboyant of all American conquistadors, John Charles Frémont, put the Western border of the United States where the geographers of destiny had

²⁶ Rufus R. Wilson, Out of the West (New York, 1936), p. 51.

²⁷ Lewis H. Garrard, Wah-to-Yah and the Taos Trail, ed. Ralph P. Bieber (Glendale, Calif., 1938), p. 25. Garrard, a schoolboy when he left Westport within a few months of Francis Parkman's departure in 1846, went with the annual caravan of Bent, St. Vrain and Company to Bent's Fort. When news reached the Fort that Charles Bent, governor of New Mexico, had been scalped at Taos in a Mexican uprising, an expedition left to join in the war to the south. Garrard's book is a classic record of this enterprising and wild affair.

always known it should be—at the Pacific.²⁸

The map had scarcely been stretched to the edge of the continent before a man named Marshall found yellow metal in a mill-race and opened a whole new world to the imagination. The race for empire was on in earnest. "Man, grown superman, could over-leap time itself at the stroke of a pick,"²⁹ and the empire image found its expression, for a time, in gold fever. As one San Franciscan remembered it,

Piles of gold rose up before me at every step; castles of marble, dazzling the eye with their rich appliances; thousands of slaves bowing to my beck and call; myriads of fair virgins contending with each other for my love—were among the fancies of my fevered imagination. The Rothschilds...and Asters appeared to me but poor people.³⁰

The restless, shifting groups gathered from all over the world at the lawless "diggings" and gave a new dimension to the dream of riches in the West. By the time of the Pike's Peak discovery in 1859 the gold rush was an American habit. Before a thousand dollars' worth of metal was out of the ground the trails were thronged by emigrants with visions of riches as bright as

²⁸Frémont had had Kit Carson—and sometimes Tom Fitzpatrick as well—as a guide on his earlier expeditions. Carson was with him again in May, 1846, when he marched back into California to initiate the uprising that led to the Bear Flag Republic. Meanwhile, the Senator from Missouri was laboring mightily—and making Gavilan Peak sound like the Alamo—to convince Congress and the country that only his son-in-law stood between the treacherous British and California. See Benton, Thirty Years' View, II, 688-95.

²⁹Emerson Hough, The Passing of the Frontier, Vol. XXVI of The Chronicle of America Series (New Haven, 1921), 60.

³⁰Branch, Westward, pp. 429-30.

those which had lured Coronado. Incalculable wealth could be wrested from the earth. "Gold exists throughout all this region," said the guide book. "It can be found anywhere....In fact, there is no end of the precious metal. Nature herself would seem to have turned into a most successful alchemist in converting the very sands of the streams into gold."³¹ "Immense gold discoveries!" trumpeted the headlines. "Pike's Peak a Glorious Reality!"³²

The other forms of empire in the West are equally familiar. Samuel Colt had made his unique gift to Western history in the late 1830's (although the revolver was out of production from 1842 to 1847), and at last the Westerner had the proper weapon to fight the mounted Plains Indians.³³ After the Civil War, Congress dropped its policy of making treaties with the Indians as if each tribe were a sovereign nation, and concentrated them on reservations.³⁴ The means were at hand for a new kind of empire, with its focus on the interior West. Encourage the hunters to kill off the buffalo, General Philip Sheridan urged the Texas legislature:

They are destroying the Indians' commissary....Send them powder and lead, and, for the sake of a lasting peace, let them kill, skin, and sell until they have exterminated the buffalo. Then your prairies will be covered with cattle and the cowboy, who follows the hunter as a second forerunner of civilization.³⁵

³¹Wilson, Out of the West, p. 246.

³²Branch, Westward, p. 490.

³³Walter Prescott Webb, The Great Plains (Boston, 1931), pp. 167 ff.

³⁴Billington, Westward Expansion, pp. 655-63.

³⁵Wilson, Out of the West, p. 57.

The shaggy herds, which had excited visitors to the West since Cabeza de Vaca, fell to feed railroad construction crews or to supply the tanneries of the East, fell to the rifles of William Cody and a thousand others. The cattle empire spread out over the vast area from the Rio Grande to Canada, from central Kansas to the Rockies. The era of the cowboy, the cattle baren, and the lawless trail town had come.

Impeverished Civil War veterans were entranced with stories of Colonel Richard King, who had reached Texas with a horse, a saddle, and ten dollars. A few years later, they were told, a hundred miles separated his front door from his yard gate.³⁶

"Promoters went to Europe selling range rights (there was no such thing, of course), carrying maps and lithographs rivalling those of the town-boomers on the agricultural frontier."³⁷ The race for fortune meant overstocking and the end of the cattle boom in the devastating winter of 1886-87, but the era left to the American image of the West the apparently imperishable symbols of the cowboy, the rustler, and the gunman.

In economics, the empire image of the West aimed at the plunder of a continent; it left behind a boom-and-bust psychology that the region has never entirely escaped. From the beginning this West was characterized by dream and delusion, grandiose hope and bitter disappointment. It was a land with its eye on the

³⁶ Hafen and Rister, Western America, p. 575.

³⁷ Everett Dick, Vanguards of the Frontier (New York, 1941), p. 495.

future, but it was needless of any consequences the future might bring. It produced innumerable symbols: the violent boom town and the silent ghost town; the Washee diggings as we have them in Reaching It, or Virginia City after the Comstock was gone, reduced from thirty-five thousand citizens to thirty-five hundred;³⁸ the violence of a tiny railhead town in Kansas that managed a murder a day for ninety-three days running; the impermanence of life in Benton, Wyoming, which picked up its twenty-three saloons and five dance halls and moved on, leaving no trace upon the earth;³⁹ the grotesque splendor of Sandy Bowers' mansion outside of Reno, with windowglass and furniture from France and doors hung on hinges of solid silver.⁴⁰ It possessed the measureless hope of James Pattie, mountain man, who won and lost a dozen fortunes, returned penniless to Cincinnati and dictated a book which moralistically admonished young men to stay home,⁴¹ and who then, of course, went West again on the book's proceeds to seek his fortune. It was all the dreams summed up in the Northwest Passage and all the visions expressed by Jonathan Carver when he saw spires rising to the skies in the wilderness and felt in touch with destiny. It was a land where tomorrow was bound to be, in the popular phrase, "bigger than the Comstock."

³⁸Wilson, Out of the West, p. 219.

³⁹Dick, Vanguards, pp. 384-85.

⁴⁰Wilson, Out of the West, p. 225. Walter Van Tilburg Clark uses the Bowers' mansion, by then a roadhouse, as a symbol of past dreams in the West in The City of Trembling Leaves (Garden City, 1946).

⁴¹The Personal Narrative of James O. Pattie of Kentucky, ed. Timothy Flint (Chicago, 1930), p. 415.

It was, besides, a West where all was new. Here Frémont stood in the Great Basin and knew how Balboa felt when he saw the Pacific.⁴² It was a land so imprisoned in adventure and romance that so great an American historian as Francis Parkman could ride through it and ignore the history that was everywhere about him because he wanted to see Ogallala Sioux in war paint. It promised freedom such as man had never known. From the mountain man with his Hawken to the gunman with his two Colts, the empire West was the place of exciting anarchs, men who answered to a bare minimum of societal forms or none at all, men who stood alone and carved out destiny. In it the social institutions of centuries could be dispensed with. Justice could be swift and sure, vigilante justice, with the formality of a trial coming, as Josiah Royce sadly noted, after the bodies were swinging from the cotton-woods.⁴³ It seemed to be a land where all things were in their first beginnings.

Though its exploits and promises were endlessly exciting, the empire West did not point the dominant direction of American expansion. The true advance to the Pacific was not the rush of the fur hunter and placer miner but the movement of agriculture and settlement. As Henry Nash Smith points out: "The forces which were to control the future did not originate in the

⁴²Allan Nevins, Frémont, Pathmarker of the West (New York, 1955), p. 140.

⁴³California (New York, 1948), p. 293.

picturesque Wild West beyond the frontier, but in the domesticated West that lay behind it."⁴⁴ The agrarian image, with Jefferson and Crèvecoeur as the principal early spokesmen of its assumptions, gave an imaginative force to the idea of the West that persisted for almost a century.

Jefferson's celebration of the farmer rested on his firm belief that the husbandman was the rock which anchored the republic. The political level, in turn, had behind it an agrarian ethic and metaphysic. "These who labour in the earth," he wrote,

are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people; whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue. It is the focus in which he keeps alive that sacred fire, which otherwise might escape from the face of the earth. Corruption of morals in the mass of cultivators is a phenomenon of which no age nor nation has furnished an example.⁴⁵

When combined with the freehold concept of land tenure and the political principles of the Declaration, Jefferson's views became an agrarian doctrine. "During the eighteenth century," one study states,

poets, politicians, and economists created in America a complex of ideas which has been called the "Jeffersonian myth." This myth apothecized virtues like simplicity and purity which had been traditional among champions of the rural life since the days of Hesiod, and it dictated social choices consistent with these virtues, such as preferring the country to the city, the farmer to the capitalist or day laborer, and democracy to aristocracy.⁴⁶

⁴⁴Virgin Land, p. 123.

⁴⁵The Writings, III, 268.

⁴⁶Chester E. Eisinger, "The Freehold Concept in Eighteenth Century American Letters," William and Mary Quarterly, IV (January, 1947), 42.

It was obviously a philosophy appropriate to a land-hungry people. As lands of unimagined immensity and fertility were opened up by agriculture's movement west, the sturdy yeoman society of independent freeholders became a symbol of agrarian aspirations and the West became the promised land where the ideal came into being. "The Rising Glory of America" had sung the agrarian hopes for a new Eden:

Paradise anew
 Shall flourish, by no second Adam lost,
 No tempting serpent to allure the soul
 From native innocence. A Canaan here,
 Another Canaan shall excel the old.⁴⁷

The agrarian way of life was idealized into an idyll, and the West was its garden, the new Canaan.

With each surge of westward movement a new community came into being. These communities devoted themselves not to marching onward but to cultivating the earth. They plowed the virgin land and put in crops, and the great Interior Valley was transformed into a garden: for the imagination, The Garden of the World. The image of this vast and constantly growing agricultural society in the interior of the continent became one of the dominant symbols of nineteenth century American society--a collective representation...that defined the premise of American life.⁴⁸

The image of a Garden of the World in the West quickly became pervasive. Travelers' reports helped it along with tales of ever more fertile lands to the west. Wrote Timothy Flint of the prairies at the junction of the Missouri and Mississippi,

⁴⁷The Poems of Philip Freneau, ed. Fred L. Pattee (Princeton, 1902), I, 82.

⁴⁸Smith, Virgin Land, p. 123.

"It is not necessary to be very young or very romantic, in order to have dreams steal over the mind, of spending an Arcadian life in these remote plains, which just begin to be vexed with the plow, far removed from the haunts of wealth and fashion, in the midst of rustic plenty, and of this beautiful nature."⁴⁹

Missionaries, explorers, expansionists, believers in manifest destiny all contributed to the westward fever and the garden notion. As always in a land governed by the geography of fantasy, some of them had never been there. One of the best known propagandists of westward agricultural expansion was Hall J. Kelley, a Boston schoolmaster. The publication of the Lewis and Clark journals in 1814 fired his imagination and made him an expansionist for life. In 1829, well before agricultural emigration to the Pacific was underway, he gathered a small group of kindred spirits and founded the American Society for Encouraging the Settlement of the Oregon Territory to publish pamphlets, write public letters, and issue a steady barrage of propaganda for Oregon.⁵⁰

In 1830 Kelley and his group published a pamphlet, "A Geographical Sketch of that Part of North America Called Oregon,"

⁴⁹ Recollections of the Last Ten Years, ed. C. Hartley Grattan (New York, 1932), pp. 119-20.

⁵⁰ Fred Wilbur Powell, Hall J. Kelley on Oregon (Princeton, 1932), pp. vii-xxi. Kelley finally saw the land of his desire on an ill-fated journey by way of Mexico and California in 1832-33, arriving penniless in Oregon in 1834 after many mishaps. He was given aid and comfort, like so many other American wayfarers, by the good Dr. John McLaughlin, Hudson's Bay Company factor at Vancouver. He returned to Boston by ship in 1836, took up his propaganda work, and died in poverty without seeing the promised land again.

which makes Oregon another Eden that might rival the first.⁵¹ The following year, as General Agent of his American Society, he issued "A General Circular to All Persons of Good Character Who Wish to Emigrate to the Oregon Territory"—as delightful a bit of wish-fulfillment as the geography of fantasy ever produced. In it Kelley outlined the route the settlement group would travel—roughly the Oregon Trail—in terms which would have amazed the emigrant who had just struggled through the desert cut-off from Pacific Springs to the valley of the Bear and was looking ahead from Fort Hall to two murderous fordings of the Snake.⁵² Included in this dream image were detailed plans for towns and cities, complete to the last village square—all, of course, in a land Kelley had never seen. Oregon was the promised land in the West where all one's dreams might come true.

The efforts of Kelley and other expansionists had their effect. Nathaniel Wyeth listened to Kelley and went West, to become an able mountain man and in 1832 to lead a pack train to Walla Walla and down the Columbia to Fort Vancouver. With him was one John Ball, a New Hampshire schoolteacher, who became the first Oregon settler from the States.⁵³ Reports came back from missionaries and trappers and propagandists and plain visionaries of manifest destiny and were eagerly devoured, for they fed

⁵¹Powell, pp. 3-67.

⁵²Powell, pp. 85-86.

⁵³Wilson, Out of the West, p. 64.

American desire. Farmers read them in Massachusetts and Missouri and on the banks of the Sangamon, and came on to the West. Above all, they were told, was the easiness of living there. Just as Flint had told them of an agricultural paradise beyond the Ohio, new reporters evoked similar images of the land farther west.

Frémont told them about Oregon and California, held up visions of agricultural settlement in the Great Basin, and filled his books with a mine of accurate information. Other reporters were less restrained. A reputable government surveyor in Oregon became so entranced with his Eden-like image of the Garden of the World that he added a full eight thousand feet to the height of Mt. Hood.⁵⁴ One missionary who went by sea to Oregon in 1839 tried to be temperate and wrote of Oregon, "It does not 'flow with honey,' like the land of Canaan; but in some places it literally flows with milk."⁵⁵

Perhaps the most flamboyant of all the promoters of emigration was Lansford W. Hastings. A young Ohio lawyer with his eye always on the main chance, Hastings went to Oregon in 1842. Having in mind bigger things than practicing law in an agricultural settlement, he moved on to California the next year.⁵⁶ There he planned some mythical towns and set out to promote emigration to

⁵⁴A. N. Armstrong, Oregon and Washington (Chicago, 1857), p. 38.

⁵⁵Reverend Gustavus Hines, Oregon: Its History, Conditions and Prospects (Auburn, 1851), p. 346.

⁵⁶Lansford W. Hastings, The Emigrants' Guide to Oregon and California With Historical Note and Bibliography by Charles Henry Carey (Princeton, 1932), pp. ix-xii.

California, with a view to splitting it off from Mexico and, incidentally, making Lansford Hastings the president of an independent republic. He wrote a visionary book, The Emigrants' Guide to Oregon and California, and took it East to be published. The Emigrants' Guide gives a passing bow to the fertility of the Willamette Valley, but Oregon comes off a poor second to California, where, among other things, oats grew eight feet high.⁵⁷ Of California in general he trumpeted:

There is no country in the known world, possessing a soil so fertile and productive, with such varied and inexhaustible resources, and a climate of such mildness, uniformity and salubrity; nor is there a country...which is so eminently calculated, by nature herself, in all respects, to promote the unbounded happiness and prosperity, of civilized and enlightened man.⁵⁸

To steer emigrants to California, Hastings painted the Oregon Trail beyond Fort Hall as one long horror, and preyed upon the desire for a trail directly west from Fort Bridger to the Humboldt Sink by outlining a route through the Wasatch Mountains and past the south end of Great Salt Lake, through country he had never seen.⁵⁹ It was the geography of fantasy, the Northwest Passage and Hall Kelley's version of the Oregon Trail all over again. It marooned the Donner party in the Sierra Nevada, victims of a

⁵⁷Hastings, p. 87. *I Saw It First in California* (New York, 1945).

⁵⁸Hastings, p. 133.

⁵⁹Hastings, pp. 137-38.

U. S. Dana, *The Garden of the World*, quoted in Dorothy Anne Ponder, *The Prairie and the Making of Middle America: First Hand Series of Description* (Wedar Rapids, Iowa, 1928), p. 200.

literary fallacy, people who believed that a man must know because he had written a book.⁶⁰

The agrarian image of the West grew steadily. Edwin Bryant, whose book is one of the few classics of the emigration, heard constant tales of the richness of the land to the west as he waited in Independence in the spring of 1846 for the prairies to dry. California land was so rich and the climate so good, he was told, that a man couldn't die there. One oldster of two-hundred and fifty got tired of life and moved out of the state in order to die. He managed it all right, but friends brought him back to California for burial, and when they put his body in that luxuriant soil he arose again as a young man.⁶¹ Truly, even if in the form of humor, it was the land of Eden before the Fall. So, said other sources, were Texas and New Mexico.⁶² All the West, in fact, was the Garden of the World: "The Land of Promise and the Canaan of our time, is the region which, commencing on the slope of the Alleghenies, broadens grandly over the vast prairies and mighty rivers, ever queenly lakes and lofty mountains, until the ebb and flow of the Pacific tide kisses the golden shores of El Dorado."⁶³ The image of the garden in the West, peopled by

⁶⁰ Bernard DeVoto, The Year of Decision: 1846 (Boston, 1943), p. 317.

⁶¹ Edwin Bryant, What I Saw in California (New York, 1849), pp. 16-17.

⁶² John C. Van Tramp, Prairie and Rocky Mountain Adventures: or, Life in the West (Columbus, 1866), pp. 124 ff.

⁶³ C. W. Dana, The Garden of the World, quoted in Dorothy Anne Dendore, The Prairie and the Making of Middle America: Four Centuries of Description (Cedar Rapids, Iowa, 1926), p. 206.

self-subsistent, independent freeholders who adhered to the political principles of the Declaration and drew their natural goodness from their closeness to the soil, had become the official doctrine of the agricultural advance.

Nevertheless, the agrarian image had to overcome lingering opposition. Supporters of westward expansion like Thomas Hart Benton had to be converted from empire to agrarianism.⁶⁴ More than that, the garden theme had to overcome an opposing belief, the myth of the Great American Desert. Coronado had stressed the aridity of the West, but Zebulon Pike's journal in 1810 covering his expedition across the plains to the upper Rio Grande was the first warning Americans had of a desert in the region.⁶⁵ Travelers like Farnham, Gregg, and Parkman helped the notion along,⁶⁶ and it spread rapidly. Journals seriously advanced the idea that civilization could not penetrate beyond central Kansas and Nebraska.⁶⁷ For the first half of the nineteenth century and in some quarters

⁶⁴Smith, Virgin Land, p. 32.

⁶⁵The Southwestern Expedition of Zebulon M. Pike, ed. Milo M. Quaife (Chicago, 1925), pp. 34-37, 43, 77. Lewis and Clark, because they kept to the river valleys, made only casual mention of arid lands.

⁶⁶Thomas J. Farnham, Travels in the Great Western Prairies, the Anahuac and Rocky Mountains, Vol. XXVIII of Early Western Travels, ed. Reuben Gold Thwaites (Cleveland, 1904-1907), 109 ff.; Josiah Gregg, Commerce of the Prairies: or, The Journals of a Santa Fe Trader, Vol. XIX of Early Western Travels, ed. Thwaites, 285 ff.; Francis Parkman, The Oregon Trail (Boston, 1883), p. 61 et passim. See also C. F. Hoffman, Wild Scenes in the Forest (London, 1839), pp. 127-31.

⁶⁷Ralph G. Morris, "The Notion of a Great American Desert East of the Rockies," Mississippi Valley Historical Review, XIII (September, 1926), 196.

much longer there existed in the public mind a Great American Desert stretching from central Kansas to the Rockies.⁶⁸

The treeless, arid lands of the Great Plains were new to the American experience. New tools and techniques were required to settle the plains, new methods of fencing, new means of drawing water from the earth. Plainscraft had to take the place of woodcraft. But the garden image, having behind it fifteen hundred miles of successful agricultural advance, would not be denied. Railroads with land grants in the areas covered by the desert myth organized land companies and propaganda campaigns.⁶⁹ Speculators and real estate promoters joined in. Propaganda became so strong that one traveler, writing in the late 1870's, felt constrained to preface his record with a statement that there were, after all, arid lands in the West.⁷⁰

In support of the agrarian image, various notions arose to the effect that man's activities would increase the natural rainfall on the Great Plains. Some believed that electricity from the new telegraph wires would elicit a cosmic response from nature and increase rainfall, others that trees planted by homesteaders would somehow make the arid lands humid. The imaginative need for a solution, for a means of extending the garden image to the new lands, was so great that any scheme could find supporters. A

⁶⁸ Webb, The Great Plains, pp. 152 ff.

⁶⁹ Branch, Westward, p. 557.

⁷⁰ J. H. Beadle, Western Wilds and the Men Who Redeem Them (Cincinnati, 1882), p. iii.

director of the United States Geological Survey was an advocate of the "trees" doctrine and reputable scientists gave all the theories serious consideration.⁷¹

The convincing myth appeared, however, in the fascinating doctrine that cultivation increases rainfall. Josiah Gregg gave an early and typical view of it. "Why may we not suppose," he wrote, "that the genial influences of civilization—that extensive cultivation of the earth—might contribute to the multiplication of showers?"⁷² Newspapers, exploiting the post-Civil War Western fever, carried the idea East. A salesman for railroad lands promoted it in articles that were published in scientific journals. A speculative town builder in Nebraska reduced the doctrine to the slogan "Rain Follows the Plow" and wrote a book proving his point from every conceivable source, including Genesis.⁷³ The notion served to bring settlement onto the Great Plains in the wet years after the Civil War, before the techniques and tools of dry farming had been evolved, to be driven off again, of course, in times of drought. It served to keep alive the image of an agrarian utopia.

The dream of a society of Jeffersonian, physiocratic yeomen reached its political fulfillment in the Homestead Act of 1862.

⁷¹Henry Nash Smith in "Rain Follows the Plow: The Notion of Increased Rainfall for the Great Plains, 1844-1880," Huntington Library Quarterly, X (February, 1947), 169-93, covers all these fancies and recounts the history of the doctrine in detail.

⁷²Commerce of the Prairies, 257.

⁷³Smith, Huntington Library Quarterly, X, 186-90.

It was the enactment by law of the agrarian utopia. The political campaigning behind the act "showed that the Republicans meant to capture the myth of the garden and the symbol of the hardy yeoman, and thus to command the imagination of Northwestern farmers."⁷⁴

Said an early historian of the public land system, "The homestead act stands as the concentrated wisdom of legislation for settlement of the public lands. It protects the Government, it fills the States with homes, it builds up communities, and lessens the chances of social and civil disorder by giving ownership of the soil, in small tracts, to the occupants thereof."⁷⁵ It was the agrarian answer to the industrial revolution, a hope to establish by statute a simpler, happier version of life in the West.⁷⁶

The act was almost a complete failure. It did not drain off surplus labor from industry, it did not settle the West, it did not offer a saving chance to the depressed poor, it did not stop speculation or land monopolization.⁷⁷ The Homestead Act failed because anachronistically it tried to preserve a simple past in the face of the industrial revolution. Moreover, it did

⁷⁴Smith, Virgin Land, p. 168.

⁷⁵Thomas Donaldson, The Public Domain (Washington, D.C., 1884), p. 350.

⁷⁶Fred A. Shannon, "The Homestead Act and the Labor Surplus," American Historical Review, XLI (July, 1936), 640.

⁷⁷Paul Wallace Gates, "The Homestead Law in an Incongruous Land System," American Historical Review, XLI (July, 1936), 655-62; Fred A. Shannon, "A Post Mortem on the Labor-Safety-Valve Theory," Agricultural History, XIX (January, 1945), 31-32.

not meet the conditions of life in a land that could not, by its nature, be a region of one hundred and sixty acre farms.⁷⁸

The final function of the agrarian image of the West was to perpetuate those virtues which made up its imaginative force—direct democracy, hardy independence, and self-reliance—into an era of railroad monopolies, farm machinery trusts, and agricultural dependence on world markets. Their persistence as ideals sharpened the clash between traditional concepts of liberty, equality, and individualism and the new economics, a clash that sent Midwestern and Western farmers into cooperative political movements in search of economic justice and taught America at last the nonsense of the ideal of a subsistence agriculture in an industrial age.⁷⁹ To measure this conflict is to measure the inadequacy of the agrarian image as a description of reality in the West.

We know now that neither the agrarian nor the empire image of America's enchanted province was broad enough to encompass the direction of American experience in the West. Nevertheless, they governed the nation's thinking about its West, dominated the popular understanding of Western heroes, and condemned fiction of the West to mediocrity or worse than mediocrity throughout the nineteenth century.

⁷⁸Henry Nash Smith, "Clarence King, John Wesley Powell, and the Establishment of the United States Geological Survey," Mississippi Valley Historical Review, XXXIV (June, 1947), 40.

⁷⁹Smith, Virgin Land, p. 188; Selma J. Buck, The Agrarian Crusade, Vol. XLV, Chronicles of America Series (New Haven, 1921), 11.

Due largely to the conventions of the genteel tradition, there were few attempts to use in literature the agrarian image of a society of contented freeholders, but, Smith has found, these few serve as instructive failures.⁸⁰ Eventually this fiction took its place in the farm literature of the late nineteenth century. Crèvecoeur's agrarian dream was confronted with the kind of reality Hamlin Garland found on the Middle Border. And in time Garland's cry that the happy farmer in his green fields was a lie became Frank Norris's assertion that the octopus with iron tentacles was the only truth. Whatever the agricultural West might be in literature henceforth, it would be free of the old agrarian image. The Farmers' Alliance, corporate finance, and industrialized agriculture had killed it.

But the empire image, which characterized major phases of the Western experience from the fur trade through the cattle kingdom and the westering experience itself, had a different history. The genteel tradition, though scornful of the small farmer, found a way to bring within its pattern of values the adventurers who roamed the wilderness. A Western fiction emerged that clamped upon the region intellectual and artistic assumptions that had no relevance to human experience there. An immense part of the American past was lost in the banality of what we call "Western."

⁸⁰Henry Nash Smith, "The Western Farmer in Imaginative Literature, 1818-1891," Mississippi Valley Historical Review, XXVI (December, 1949), 479-90. See also David Donald and Frederick A. Palmer, "Toward a Western Literature, 1820-1860," Mississippi Valley Historical Review, XXV (December, 1948), 413-28. For an estimate of the destination of the old agrarian themes in fiction see Joseph E. Baker, "Western Man against Nature," College English, IV (October, 1942), 19-26.

Westering was a national aspiration. It went deep into the American past, expressed a hunger that reached beyond the rational level of experience. "I have often perplexed myself to divine the various motives that give impulse to this migration," said Francis Parkman,⁸¹ who saw his romance-land being transformed and had little sympathy with settlers. Sometimes the emigrants themselves were perplexed. Moses Austin, inveterate pioneer moving west in 1796 toward the Oregon of his time, wondered about his companions. "Can any thing," he asked, "be more Absurd than the Conduct of man, here is hundreds Travelling hundreds of Miles, they Knew not what for Nor Whither, except its to Kentucky, passing land almost as good and easy obtained, the Proprietors of which would gladly give on any terms, but it would not do, its not Kentucky, not the Premis'd land, its not the goodly inheratence, the Land of Milk and Honey."⁸² And Edwin Bryant, good man and true, stood in the lonely prairie night and watched the three major events of human life, a birth, a marriage, a death, compressed into a single hour in the wilderness, and wondered too what it was that drew men and women from the familiar securities in a perilous journey to a land they knew not of.⁸³ Perhaps another traveler who stood upon a hill above the Platte and looked westward said it all in one sentence: "That way lay

⁸¹The Oregon Trail, p. 6.

⁸²Quoted in Branch, Westward, p. 182.

⁸³What I Saw in California, p. 91.

adventure and novel scenes; that way I was mightily drawn."⁸⁴

History can tell us now of the manner of their going and the world they built there. The perspective of time and the collected facts can give us an inkling of the imaginative force of the dream they held, the dream that Mrs. Farnham stitched into her train's flag with the motto "Oregon or the Grave," or that Tamsen Donner packed with her books that would give polite young ladies a seminary education in the wilds of the West—and were abandoned instead on the Great Salt Desert. History can tell us the facts, but literature, whose mission it is to impose form upon human experience, found nothing of meaning in the West for almost a century after Lewis and Clark walked into the sunset. "A new intellectual system," Smith wrote at the end of Virgin Land, "was requisite before the West could be adequately dealt with in literature or its social development fully understood."⁸⁵ The growth of that intellectual system is a study in the emancipation of a region in fiction.

⁸⁴ Beadle, Western Wilds, p. 24.

⁸⁵ p. 260.

Chapter Two

The Popular Hero in Legend and Folklore

As symbols of America's westward march a new race of heroes arose in the West, demigods who inhabited the mountains and rivers beyond the fringes of society. The concepts which had shaped American thinking about the West, and which had produced antithetical images of the lands beyond and behind the frontier, shaped these men as well.

The Western hero of legend and folklore was controlled by either the agrarian or the empire image of the West, often by a mixture of both. The concept of agrarianism involved belief in the westward progression of civilization, law and order, and the free simple realm of industrious freeholders. The concept of empire, on the contrary, suggested untamed nature beyond civilization, freedom, and the exploitative empire of strong men. It followed that heroic figures must be found to symbolize these values.

Americans agreed that the lands beyond the frontier were the habitat of demigods, of lonely heroes who existed outside the pale of ordinary society. Yet they strongly disagreed on the roles these men were performing for history and the motives that sent them there. Agrarianism saw them as stalwart forerunners of civilization, dedicated explorers who found the trails, charted the lakes and rivers, and opened the virgin lands in the cause of advancing settlement. Yet the gentility which was the official

code of upperclass Americans throughout much of the country's expansion period had nothing in its scheme of values to suggest an exalted place for the farmer or the man who furthered agricultural advancement. The Western here, to be brought into this value system, had to be viewed in another light.

Francis Parkman's position indicates the manner in which the Wild West here could be forced into high place in a system of genteel values. Parkman was uninterested in manifest destiny in its agricultural sense (he was able to manage a good deal more enthusiasm for the American Fur Company's empire in the Laramie region, finding it more fitting to his view of Western destiny), and he had no sympathy with agrarian immigrants. To this consummate product of upperclass urban culture they were a tedious, ill-bred people.¹ Yet Parkman's guide, the French-Canadian squaw man Henry Chatillon, was altogether another matter. "The prairies," wrote the historian, "had been his school; he could neither read nor write, but he had a natural refinement and delicacy of mind, such as is rare even in women. His manly face was a mirror of uprightness, simplicity and kindness of heart....He was a proof of what unaided nature will sometimes do."² Within the value-pattern of gentility the Western here came to symbolize the exciting freedom of man unfettered by the conventions of society, uncorrupted by civilization, relying on natural wisdom

¹Francis Parkman, The Oregon Trail (Boston, 1883), pp. 126-27.

²The Oregon Trail, pp. 12-13.

and roaming a limitless natural environment. Henry Chatillon was one with the buffalo hunts and savage trappers and Sioux war parties that excited Parkman as no wave of emigrants ever could. The guide's sense of morality and justice were the natural products of a natural life. He was, in short, when seen in his romantic setting through the eyes of gentility, one of nature's noblemen. Primitivism became one of the key facets of the empire image of the West.

The biographical fortunes of Daniel Boone, one of the earliest Westerners to achieve heroic proportions, fully illustrate those opposing views of the Western hero suggested by the empire and agrarian images. A key question to each biographer was why Boone left the North Carolina settlements for the Kentucky wilderness. Each answered the question according to his own predilections, and the results of their efforts were two mutually exclusive views of the frontier hero, a pattern which characterized popular Western heroes for a long time.

John Filson, the biographer to whom Boone dictated his supposed autobiography in 1784, held that Boone was a leader of agricultural progress, that his westward passage was intended to drive back the savage hordes and establish an agrarian civilization in the wilderness. Boone explains, through Filson, that one must resign himself to the will of Providence and "in time the mysterious will of Heaven is unfolded, and we behold our conduct,

from whatever motives excited, operating to answer the important designs of heaven. Thus we beheld Kentucke, lately an howling wilderness, the habitation of savages and wild beasts, become a fruitful field...the habitation of civilization."³ Having satisfied the literary conventions of his time by attributing to Boone learned allusions to the ruins of Persepolis and Palmyra (Boone was illiterate), Filson goes on to portray him here as a sacrificial figure in the cause of agrarian progress. "Many dark and sleepless nights," Boone proclaims, "have I been a companion for evils, separated from the cheerful society of men, scorched by the summer's sun and pinched by the winter's cold—an instrument ordained to settle the wilderness."⁴

This is the Daniel Boone of the agrarian image, a heavenly-appointed figure in the westward march of American agricultural civilization, a hero of destiny who opened up the wilderness to the settlement of stalwart freeholders.

Not so at all, said other biographers. Boone was not a harbinger of advancing civilization, but was rather a natural nobleman who fled before its encroachment. He was, in point of fact, a philosopher of primitivism.

"Boone," said a mid-nineteenth century biography,

deliberately chose the peace of solitude rather than to mingle in the wild wranglings and disputings of the society around him. He found in the forest and in the chase, scenes and adventures that talked with him, in a language unsullied by the wretchedness of duplicity, and fraud, and petty scheming....

³Kentucke and the Adventures of Col. Daniel Boone (Louisville, 1934), p. 49.

⁴Kentucke, pp. 80-81.

There seemed to be too much of form, and not enough of the distinct and plain equities of just judgment, about it all.⁵

Within ten years another biographer reversed the image once more and Boone was again "an instrument in the hands of Providence for accomplishing great purposes."⁶

The confusion did not abate with later studies. Edward S. Ellis, the dime novelist, wrote a biography which clearly made Boone the emissary who brought civilization to the wilderness, with Providence taking a rather obvious hand in his selection.⁷ But another treatment republished at about the same time disagreed completely. Boone, presented here as having all the polish of any gentleman in Cooper, "pitched his tent among the barren hills as a security against the intrusion of other men, who, being swayed by a love of wealth, would naturally seek their homes in the rich level prairies."⁸ Biographies of our own century, written after the passing of the agrarian image of the West, tend to discount the prophet of progress theme. Their tone may be indicated by a quotation from one of them: "When Daniel Boone undertook to open up a road between the border settlements and the

⁵William H. Bogart, Daniel Boone, and the Hunters of Kentucky (New York, 1856), pp. 39-40.

⁶Cecil B. Hartley, Life of Daniel Boone (Philadelphia, 1865), p. 332.

⁷The Life and Times of Colonel Daniel Boone, Hunter, Soldier, and Pioneer (Philadelphia, 1884), p. 68.

⁸J. B. Jones, Wild Western Scenes (Philadelphia, 1875), p. 16. First published in 1849.

interior of Kentucky, it was impossible for him to foresee the important place this rugged highway was to hold in the history of the territorial expansion of the American people."⁹

Timothy Flint's biography of Boone, one of the most widely read books about a Western figure in the first half of the nineteenth century,¹⁰ is perhaps the best example of confusion over Boone's character and motives. At one point in Flint's text Boone is delighted that "the rich and boundless valleys of the great west—the garden of the earth—and the paradise of hunters, had been won from the dominion of the savage tribes, and opened as an asylum for the oppressed, the enterprising, and the free of every land."¹¹ Yet, when Boone persuades his North Carolina neighbors to follow him into Kentucky, Flint has him present an eloquent contrast between the evils of civilization and the virtues of pristine nature. The wilderness, Boone proclaims, would breed children "whose breasts were not steeled by ambition, nor hardened by avarice; in whom the beautiful influences of the indulgences of none but natural desires and pure affections would not be deadened by the selfishness, vanity, and fear of ridicule, that are the harvest of what is called civilized and cultivated life."¹² Torn between two conflicting images of the West and its

⁹H. Addington Bruce, Daniel Boone and the Wilderness Road (New York, 1916), p. 101.

¹⁰Henry Nash Smith, Virgin Land (Cambridge, Mass., 1950), p. 55.

¹¹The Life and Adventures of Daniel Boone, the First Settler of Kentucky (Cincinnati, 1868), pp. 226-27.

¹²Life and Adventures, p. 41.

heroes, Flint could not decide whether Boone was a prophet of progress or a philosopher of primitivism.

Treatments of other figures in legend and folklore continued the practice of dividing the Western hero into two, each concretizing the values of one of the two dominant images of the region. Sometimes, as in Davy Crockett's case, a hero became a myth within his own time, a myth from which could be forged many different images. Indeed, the Crockett myth dominated the man; for a hero of such cosmic and comic proportions death in a blaze of glory at the Alamo was the only fit end.

Most of the legends attached to Crockett celebrate the frontier virtues of strength, marksmanship, and shrewdness—exaggerated, through the devices of the tall tale and frontier beast, into the realm of the comic. He was a latterday Prometheus in an age when gods could be demigods only.¹³ This is the Crockett who has come down to us through legend, embodying the skills and virtues of men who were conquering a continent, a product of the crude mythology of a nation bent on empire.

Yet there were other Crocketts. Indeed, Walter Blair finds six separable identities, six popular images created by frontier conditions, politically motivated journalism, and the hero's own strange career. The pre-Jackson newspapers before Crockett's

¹³The story of Crockett unfreezing the earth's axis and carrying the sunrise to the people has been told many times. Convenient references are Richard Derson, ed., Davy Crockett, American Comic Legend (New York, 1939), p. 16; and Constance Rourke, American Humor (Garden City, New York, 1953), pp. 55-56.

defection from the party, as well as the anti-Jackson papers after it, made him a westernized version of Peor Richard, a man without formal education who drew his wisdom from his intimate relationship with the nature of the wilderness West.¹⁴ This is the Cckett of the 1834 autobiography issued by the Whigs. The melodrama of the hero's death and the legendary character and great currency of the later almanacs decreed, however, that the figure who personified the conquering frontier and spread-eagle rhetoric should prevail for our time, to be reincarnated in the popular song of recent years.

Historians reconstructing the past have found two very different versions of Cckett within his own time, reflecting the prevailing American images of the West. In one view he was a restless, unsocial migrant who fled to the West before the advancing fringes of society, a man who, when his Whig politics disaffected his constituents, could tell Tennessee to go to hell—he was going to Texas.¹⁵ He was thus a fugitive from society, a man of nature, blood brother to all the natural noblemen from Cooper's Bumpo to Wister's Virginian. Natural nobility and gargantuan physical prowess characterized this Cckett of the empire image of the West. But in the agrarian image he was a far-seeing

¹⁴Walter Blair, "Six Davy Ccketts," Southwest Review, XXV (July, 1940), 454-56. The other Ccketts that Blair finds are: the Kentucky hunter, the Alamo hero, the backwoods buffoon who was sometimes also vicious, and the restless migrant.

¹⁵Medy C. Beatright, Folk Laughter on the American Frontier (New York, 1949), p. 166.

legislator, the prophet of progress who died at the Alamo in the cause of American expansion, pushing out America's frontiers and preparing the way for agricultural settlement.¹⁶

The mountain-man here who arose from the development of the Rocky Mountain fur trade posed new problems for the dominant American images of the West. Operating hundreds of miles beyond the frontier and in a region that had no immediately apparent agricultural potential, he was not so easily brought within the claims of civilization and progress as Boone and Crockett had been.

Clearly, of course, he was in the best tradition of the empire image, a fugitive from society, a noble anarchist roaming his wilderness domain to wrest an empire by his own unaided strength from a dangerous and exciting environment. Touching civilization only when he appeared at June rendezvous to trade his furs, returning then to his lonely mountain lakes and streams for another year, the free trapper belonged entirely to the wilderness. To civilized travelers like Garrard, Parkman, Farnham, and Frémont who met the mountain man in his habitat, he was endlessly romantic, endlessly exciting. To be brought within the value-patterns of civilization, however, he had to be assigned certain admirable characteristics. Consequently, a cultured writer like Mrs. Frances Fuller Victor made a natural nobleman of trapper Joe Meek.¹⁷ J. T. Farnham's description of a trapper

¹⁶ Blair, Southwest Review, XIV, 459.

¹⁷ The River of the West (Columbus, 1950), passim.

he met in California in the 1840's serves as an index of this attitude. His man was, Farnham writes, "a stout, sturdy backwoodsman, of a stamp which exists only on the frontiers of the American states—men with the blood of the ancient Normans and Saxons in their veins—with hearts as large as their bodies, beating nothing but kindness till injustice shows its fangs, and then, lion-like, striking for vengeance. This trait of natural character had been fostered in Graham by the life he had led."¹⁸

To Farnham and Mrs. Victor and many others the beaver trapper, dressed in buckskin and moccasins, his long hair tied in a queue, armed with rifle and knife and mounted on a horse, was the cavalier of the wilderness, the romance of the past reincarnated in new form. Just as important, he was free as other Americans had only dreamed of being. As he came back to the American public in the pages of Frémont and Pattie and Bryant and Van Tramp and Buxton and a hundred others, he became a symbol of freedom, romance, adventure, and fortune. For the genteel, in addition, he could easily be shaped into a philosopher of primitivism. Altogether, the mountain man was a ready-made figure for the empire image of the West.

It was somewhat more difficult, however, to bring him into society and make him a prophet of progress. Certainly he was the forerunner of America's agricultural advance, since he explored new lands and made them known. Though there was little evidence

¹⁸The Early Days of California (Philadelphia, 1860), p. 61.

that his advance of agrarian destiny was intentional, the agrarian image of the West was strong enough to require little evidence. These mountain men who became popular heroes in their own time thus served both images of the West with almost equal facility.

Mike Fink, though not properly a mountain man as he has survived in our folklore, was a case in point. Before he became a trapper in the mountain wilds he had been a keelboatman. The keelboats carried settlers down the Ohio and up and down the Mississippi, and so, we are told, Fink was one of these "mighty men who, because of their craft and their strength, became heroes of the stalwart movers and settlers of the old West."¹⁹ So he was a giant among these men who moved a nation frontierward by water, a paragon with a central role in destiny. A few pages later in the same study, however, we learn that, like Boone, "he shifted as the frontier advanced, resenting the invasions of the settlers who followed him."²⁰ Far from advancing agrarian progress, it seems, he fled before it.

The Fink who has survived in the recreations of present-day folklorists is the Fink of empire, the man outside society, the king among men who respected no laws.²¹ It is the here who wore the red feather that designated the champion of all rivermen, who was top dog in Natchez-under-the-hill in the days when that unlevelly

¹⁹Walter Blair and Franklin J. Meine, Mike Fink (New York, 1933), p. v.

²⁰Mike Fink, p. xi.

²¹Walter Blair, Tall Tale America (New York, 1944), pp. 34-65.

town was comparable to the later Deadwood of Dakota or the Dodge City of Kansas. Like Crockett, Fink became one of those half-gods who dominated the physical West, and as in earlier heroes, the strong man of empire survived in our folklore.

Jim Bridger, unlike Fink, was a true mountain man. His career had all the ingredients necessary to make him in the popular mind both a figure of empire and a hero of the agrarian advance. He was generally considered the ablest hunter, mountaineer, and guide of the West. By 1830, at twenty-six, he was a partner in the new Rocky Mountain Fur Company, and had achieved his measure of empire. Later he wandered all over the wilderness West, in the best tradition of the lonely anarchists of the mountains. He has been treated even in our own century in thoroughly primitive terms.²² Obviously he was a hero of the empire image.

But in 1843 Bridger established his post on Black's Fork of the Green River for the purpose of serving agrarian emigrants to California and Oregon, and acted as a guide for emigrant trains and official exploratory expeditions.²³ This, of course, made him an apostle of progress. A recent biography begins by describing him as one of these men

noted for their valor, daring and fearless skill
in guiding emigrant trains and military or exploring

²²See Emerson Hough's treatment of Bridger in The Covered Wagon (New York, 1922).

²³Hiram M. Chittenden, The American Fur Trade of the Far West (New York, 1902), I, 257-59; J. Cecil Alter, James Bridger (Salt Lake City, 1925), p. xv.

expeditions across the trackless prairie and barren desert, through snow-capped mountain fastnesses on the way toward the setting sun. Many became famous for bringing to bay the savage hordes who sought to push back the tide of civilization from their domain.²⁴

"Old Gabe" was both the man of empire and the apostle of agrarian progress, depending upon which image of the West governed one's viewpoint.

Even more instructive of the dual role played by heroes of the far empire is the case of Kit Carson. Through Frémont's reports Carson became the most famed of all mountain men, the prime symbol of the exciting anarchy of the West. In Frémont's pages it is the Carson of physical prowess that we see, the superb horseman, expert marksman, and intrepid Indian fighter.²⁵ And an army lieutenant whom Carson served as guide described the scout as "one of Dame Nature's gentlemen" in the best Leatherstocking tradition.²⁶ A study made of Carson as he appeared in books finds that the nobleman of nature image (usually the view of early biographers) existed side by side with the other facet of the empire-man, the two-gun Carson, the "Indian fighter, the daredevil horseman of the plains and mountains, the slayer of grizzly bears, the ancestor of hundreds of gunmen in the Beadle

²⁴Louis O. Henig, James Bridger (Kansas City, 1951), p. 1.

²⁵Report of the Exploring Expedition to the Rocky Mountains in the Year 1842 and to Oregon and California in the Years 1843-'44 (Washington, D.C., 1845), p. 263 et passim.

²⁶Jehn C. Van Tramp, Prairie and Rocky Mountain Adventures: or, Life in the West (Columbus, 1866), p. 173.

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dine novels."²⁷

Carson was clearly the proper hero for the empire image. He was the sun-god of the plains and mountains, and, for those who must view the Western hero within the moral values of gentility, a man of astonishing natural moral elevation. But the agrarian image must also make him a pioneer of progress.²⁸ Thus the biographers presented a Carson who acted from altruistic motives in the agrarian cause.²⁹ Carson, after all, served as emigrant guide and as a distinguished officer in the war that extended America's borders and opened vast new lands to settlement. He was, then, an instrument of progress, designated by Providence to further America's destiny.

The Carson who survived, however, is the sublimely isolated anachronism, the perfect man of action who controlled his own destiny. He was the man for whom thought and action were perfectly united, as they were in the single sentence he often used to describe a skirmish: "Concluded to charge them, done so."³⁰ The shift is apparent in later treatments of the mountain man, both fictional and nonfictional. Stanley Vestal's biography, probably the best recent study, presents Carson as a happy warrior, makes no attempt

²⁷Henry Nash Smith, "Kit Carson in Books," Southwest Review, XVIII (Winter, 1943), 174.

²⁸Smith, Virgin Land, p. 84.

²⁹Stanley Vestal, Kit Carson (Boston, 1928), p. viii.

³⁰Vestal, p. 104.

to hide these aspects of his character which would not find favor within the code of gentility, and does not suggest that the warrior thought of himself as an instrument for agrarian progress. Carson, like Boone and Fink and Creckett, survived as the strong man.

The reasons behind this change in attitude are important for Western fiction. The gradual decline of the genteel tradition removed the necessity of assigning characteristics to the hero that would fit the value-pattern of gentility. Changing views of nature in the late nineteenth century, deriving from Darwin and those who followed him, made it seem less and less likely that nature would foster values in men comparable to the best that civilization could produce. Primitivism of the sort that went into fashioning the Western hero could not long survive in a Darwinian world.

Meanwhile, the agrarian image of a land of happy and independent freeholders in the West fell before other forces. The Populist movement made it obvious that the farmer, far from glorying in subsistence agriculture, was a restless and unhappy victim of railroads and machinery corporations and that he wanted a better place in the industrial economic system of his time. It was no longer reasonable to see the Western hero as a providential instrument designed to establish a new agricultural Eden.

With these things in mind, the hero of the cattle industry must be seen as a complete anachronism. The cowboy has been by far the most ubiquitous of our Western heroes. He is the symbol

which mention of the West most often evokes in the American mind, as well as an important image of our culture exported to the world at large. A cafe in Rome, once visited by Keats and Leopardi and Mark Twain, proudly displays a photograph of Buffalo Bill complete with ten-gallon Stetson.³¹ American movies have carried our singing horseman all over the world.

Like his predecessors, the hero of the cattle trade became two separable heroes. As developed through the years in dime novels and Western thrillers, he became the gunman. The ever-simplified moral values which first characterized him faded in repetition until he became morally indistinguishable from his opponents in the two-gun sagas. To the American imagination the gunman was one last extension of that strain of rugged individualism that, in the popular mind, always characterized man in the Wild West. Like the mountain man before him, he was the epitome of self-reliance, standing "out on the lonely prairie, dependent on neither man nor God."³² He has survived in our folklore as a last nostalgic breath from that happy past when a man stood squarely alone and relied on his own resources in meeting destiny.

The other hero of the range kingdom was something else altogether. Owen Wister plucked him from the mire of the dying dime

³¹Horace Gregory, "Guns of the Rearing West," Aven Book of Modern Writing No. 2 (New York, 1954), p. 218.

³²David B. Davis, "Ten-Gallon Hero," American Quarterly, VI (Summer, 1954), 121. See also Eugene Cunningham, Triggerometry: A Gallery of Gunfighters (Caldwell, Idaho, 1952), p. 1.

nevel and created a thorough historical anachronism. His Virginian, the "cowboy without cows" as Frank Debie calls him,³³ was the roving bachelor nomad of Andy Adams and Charlie Siringe made respectable. He was also the direct lineal descendant of Leatherstocking, the nobleman of nature in a new role and a late day—long after the view of nature which had fostered primitivism was dead. The Virginian and Lin McLean and their thousands of successors set standards of courage, morality, religion, and humor that appealed to a nostalgic desire for an earlier, simpler life. Unlike the gunman, this cowboy here was deeply, naturally moral, capable of no greater evil than boyish pranks. His relationship with women was never more than that of rescuing here; his horse was his "link with the cavalier and the plumed knight."³⁴ The rescue accomplished, he satisfied adolescent standards of the relationship between the sexes by smiling grandly on the adoring lady and riding away, to return at the appropriate moment of peril in next week's episode.

As the natural nobleman and the strong man the cowboy here was a survival of the empire image of the West. Yet the agrarian image has had its way with him as well. Patrons of Western films and pulps can be reasonably certain that the here will side with the good little homesteaders against the big bad cattle barons. It was only one of the anomalies of the cowboy here's situation that he supported the tide of civilization which would destroy him

³³Guide to Life and Literature of the Southwest (Dallas, 1952), p. 124.

³⁴Davis, American Quarterly, VI, 121.

and his function. This version of the hero gradually became confined to the least sophisticated of Hollywood's efforts, but the gunslinger, the tall man in the saddle, has dominated fiction about the West down to the present.

It was not a fruitful domination, nor did it lead to significant use of the West in literature. Relentlessly stereotyped in ten thousand pieces of bad fiction the Western hero emerged finally and irrevocably as the symbol of an adolescent worship of the strong man. The empire image, asserting that the barriers to man's self-realization were only physical, denied any complexity to man's relations with himself and with society. It said, in effect, that man's significance lay in his external activities rather than in his internal drama,³⁵ and reduced those activities to the level of melodrama. It sublimated human problems into horseplay and the tall tale, into the confident assertion that no such problems existed. It led to ridiculously over-simplified moral values and externalized good and evil into physical factors. The sun-god was its proper hero, and his light clothing and white horse were his identification. Literary expression was left, as Howard Mumford Jones has pointed out, to Will James on one level, Zane Grey on another, and the pulp thriller on a third.³⁶ In the American experience, it seemed, the West belonged irretrievably to Saturday afternoon horse opera and an occasional visit to the circus.

³⁵ Lucy Hazard, The Frontier in American Literature (New York, 1927), p. 96.

³⁶ Foreward to Davy Crockett, American Comic Legend, ed. Richard Derson (New York, 1939), p. xi.

Chapter Three

The Literary and Sub-Literary Wild West:
Cooper, Irving, and the Dime Novel

James Fenimore Cooper was the first American writer to use the land beyond the frontier extensively in fiction. The values implicit in the empire image of the West, the values which formed this version of the Western hero in legend and folklore, appear in the major theme and central character of the Leatherstocking Tales. The Tales, in turn, reinforced old myths (such as the Great American Desert) and provided a pattern of ideas and conventions which were imitated in writing about the West for a long time to come.

The West about which Cooper wrote was the land beyond the frontier, the vast and almost unknown domain beyond the fringes of society. When the agricultural frontier appears in his pages it is the ill-bred, exploitative society of The Pioneers. Ishmael Bush and his seven leutish sons are Cooper's version of the agrarian emigrant.¹ The West in which Natty Bumppo roams and performs his valorous deeds is the wilderness land of adventure, the untamed nature of the empire image, not the cultivated nature of the agrarian dream. It is a region of romance and improbable exploits, of savage Indians and hairbreadth escapes. It has nothing in common with the tedious and unromantic life of frontier agriculture.

¹The Prairie (New York, 1867), p. 17.

Natty Bumppo, the unifying element and major character of the Leatherstocking novels, is the most famous natural nobleman in American literature and the lineal ancestor of most of those who followed. Cooper has himself given us an adequate statement of his intentions in creating the character of Bumppo.

In the moral point of view it was the intention to illustrate the effect of seed scattered by the way-side. To use his own language, his "gifts," were "white gifts," and he was not disposed to bring on them discredit. On the other hand, removed from nearly all the temptations of civilized life, placed in the best associations of that which is deemed savage, and favorably disposed by nature to improve such advantages, it appeared to the writer that his hero was a fit subject to represent the better qualities of both conditions, without pushing either to extremes....The imagination has no great task in portraying to itself a being removed from the everyday inducements to err, which abound in civilized life, while he retains the best and simplest of his early impressions; who sees God in the forest; hears Him in the winds; bows to Him in the firmament that o'ercanopies all; submits to his sway in a humble belief of his justice and mercy; in a word, a being who finds the impress of the Deity in all the works of nature, without any of the blets produced by the expedients, and passion, and mistakes of men.²

Leatherstocking's natural virtues are the product of a natural religion, of a life lived apart from the sins of the settlements. Since he had Christian training before going to live with the Delawares, he is never allowed to become a thorough pagan, but his Christianity has little to do with creed. He has only contempt for Calvinistic haggling about covenants and articles, quickly overcoming such niceties with his direct access to

²The Deerslayer (New York, 1897), pp. v-vi.

God's truth as it is found in the wilderness.³ He cannot believe that true religion could exist in the settlements. "It seems to me," he remarks,

that the people who live in such places must be always thinkin' of their own inds, and of universal decay..., the decay that follows waste and violenceFerts and churches almost always go together, and yet they're downright contradictions....No, no —give me the strong places of the wilderness, which is the trees, and the churches, too, which are arbors raised by the hand of natur'.⁴

When urged, as an old man, to leave his prairie wandering and return to honor and riches in the settlements he replies,

Settlements, boy! It is long sin' I took my leave of the waste and wickedness of the settlements and the villages. If I live in a clearing here, it is one of the Lord's making, and I have no hard thoughts on the matter; but never again shall I be seen running wilfully into the danger of immoralities.⁵

He himself is the innocent product of unspoiled nature,

a fair example of what a just-minded and pure man might be, while untampted by unruly or ambitious desires, and let to follow the bias of his feelings, amid the solitary grandeur and enobling influences of a sublime nature; neither led aside by the inducements which influence all to do evil amid the incentives of civilization, nor forgetful of the Almighty Being.⁶

We are often reminded that he owes something to his early training, that his "nature" and "gifts" are those of white men, and that for

³The Last of the Mohicans (New York, Grosset and Dunlap, n.d.), pp. 139-40.

⁴The Deerslayer, p. 269.

⁵The Prairie, p. 505.

⁶The Pathfinder, (New York, 1897), p. 140.

him to become as his red companions would be a violation of natural law. He may condone scalping for his Delaware and Pawnee friends, but it would be unnatural for a white. Yet, as with his nebulous Christianity, Leatherstocking's "gifts" from white society are far less important to him than the characteristics he has absorbed from wilderness life. Nature's nobleman, it is apparent, requires a slight tincture of white civilization in order not to become a savage, but Cooper's emphasis is always on the virtues that have come to Natty through nature.

Bumppe's primitivism, however, goes beyond natural religion to an indictment of all civilization. A refugee from society, he has no use for its advantages. His illiteracy itself is a matter of pride. "My eddication," he says grandly, "has been altogether in the woods; the only book I read, or care about reading, is the one which God has opened afore all his creatur's in the noble forests, broad lakes, rolling rivers....This book I can read, and I find it full of wisdom and knowledge."⁷ A noble anarchist roaming the wilderness, he does not require the companionship of the settlements. "I have been a solitary man much of my time," he tells us in old age, "if he can be called solitary, who has lived for seventy years in the very bosom of natur', and where he could at any instant open his heart to God without having to strip it of the cares and wickednesses of the settlements."⁸

⁷The Deerslayer, p. 432.

⁸The Prairie, p. 342.

He is clearly subversive of society. He even detests the surveying instruments which lead civilization on its destructive path.⁹ He hates society's laws as an infringement of natural freedom, and as an old man flees to the West before the sound of settlers' axes. As he explains to a Teton chief on the prairie,

I passed the spring, summer, and autumn of life among the trees. The winter of my days had come, and found me where I loved to be, in the quiet—ay, and in the honesty of the woods....I slept happily where my eyes could look up through the branches of the pines and beeches, to the very dwelling of the Good Spirit of my people....But the axes of the choppers awoke me....I came here to escape the wasteful temper of my people.¹⁰

The Leatherstocking novels themselves, though in somewhat confused fashion, support this opposition between goodness in nature and corruption in society. In The Deerslayer, for instance, the mother of Judith and Hetty Hutter, who had fallen into sin in society, found true repentance only in the wilderness. Her daughter Judith, in turn, has followed the same course in her visits to the settlements and army garrisons. Her contacts with society have made her forget her God and how to pray: it is because of her social contamination that Deerslayer, the natural man, cannot love her. The younger daughter, Hetty, by far the truest Christian in the novel, despises the settlements, for "they are full of wickedness and heart-burnings, while God dwells unoffended in these hills!"¹¹ Since Hetty is supposed to be feeble-minded—though

⁹The Deerslayer, p. 222.

¹⁰The Prairie, p. 292.

¹¹The Deerslayer, pp. 387-88.

certainly one of the most improbable imbeciles in literature—Cooper's primitivism is extended to imply that irrationality (like Leatherstocking's illiteracy) is an aid rather than a hindrance to the apprehension of fundamental and immutable truths.

This relationship between society and nature, between man-made law and natural freedom, between the complex appearance of the civilized world and the simple reality of the wilderness—these constitute the major theme of the Leatherstocking Tales as a whole. The novels are to be read, Roy Harvey Pearce has said,

as essentially the story of Natty Bumppo—as the beau ideal of the frontiersman—in the context of the frontier, with what was for Cooper and his fellows a tension of civilization and non-civilization. Bumppo is the superman in a milieu in which such could develop. But even the frontiersman in all his perfection—and this was Cooper's major insight—could not last; he was to be swept over by the very civilization for which he had cleared the way and to which in some respects he was superior.¹²

Cooper believed too deeply in civilization to side ultimately with Natty, but he could feel that the inevitable march of progress crushed something very admirable in the American experience.

The Leatherstocking novels do not, however, adequately explore this theme of tension between civilization and non-civilization. It is a constant in the tales, but it is nowhere artistically realized. Cooper's attempts to explore dramatically the implications of his material split squarely on the rock of gentility.

Writing within the genteel tradition, within the conventions of the love story having for its hero and heroine people of acceptable class status, Cooper reacted to his material in the same

¹²"The Leatherstocking Tales Re-examined," South Atlantic Quarterly, XLVI (October, 1947), 527.

way as did Mrs. Victor and Francis Parkman and many others who wrote of the West from the viewpoint of the East. To attach significance to the frontier experience and the wilderness West within the values of gentility, the writer had somehow "to prove his unlettered natives had an innate and unaccountable moral virtue acceptable as a substitute for culture."¹³

Cooper's major character creation, his natural nobleman, had to be brought into harmony with characters and conventions derived from polite society; Leatherstocking must play his role within a framework which included class status and civilized manners. Cooper could not simply write an adventure tale of hunters and Indians performing exploits in the wilderness. The results of bringing the wilderness here into relationship with refined society are artistically and intellectually ludicrous. If he is to be given a significant place in such a framework, he must be transformed in accordance with genteel conventions--this is the case with several of Cooper's wilderness heroes. Natty himself, who is not so transformed, remains a noble anachronism outside society, deferring to the proper social standards of a civilization that he is everywhere indicting, or serving to further the tide of westward progress that is engulfing him and destroying his way of life.

Bumpo cannot, for example, with his illiteracy, homely dialect, and natural simplicity, possess the refinement necessary

¹³Henry Nash Smith, "The Southwest: An Introduction," Saturday Review, XXV (May 16, 1942), 6.

to become a genteel here in the accepted sense. He may serve as guide and protector for the cultivated young ladies who people the novels, but he can never marry one of them. He must constantly pay respect to the social structure of a civilization which, as he well knows, is sweeping over him and destroying his place in the world. As Hawkeye, for instance, he places himself to the rear of those genteel beings he is protecting "with a deference to the superior rank of his companions, that no similarity in the state of their present fortunes could induce him to forget."¹⁴ Thus the man who stands outside all class structure, the subverter of society who draws his gifts and virtues from nature and nature's God, must be made to support the polite conventions of class status. The novel based on genteel values could not have it otherwise.

When Leatherstocking falls in love and momentarily, under the influence of a father who wants him to marry his daughter, considers himself the girl's equal, the result is instructive. Mabel Dunham, Leatherstocking's intended, is the daughter of a British sergeant at a frontier army garrison on Lake Ontario. Since this is obviously not an adequate heritage for a genteel heroine, we discover that Mabel, reared in the settlements by the widow of a field officer, has been provided by her with all the necessary refinements. Mabel's conversational use of literary references which her father and Leatherstocking do not understand indicates her cultural superiority, and with such evidence as

¹⁴The Last of the Mohicans, p. 360.

this before him, Leatherstocking realizes in a moment of anguish that their marriage would be an "unnatural" alliance, that he is too "wild" for her.¹⁵ Nature's nobleman, Cooper concludes, must be found wanting for lack of genteel attributes.

Who, then, may be the proper hero to match with this genteel heroine? For nine-tenths of the novel Jasper Western appears to be as complete a product of the frontier as Leatherstocking himself. Reared on the shores of Lake Ontario, he has never seen the settlements. Selected for his intimate acquaintance with his native region, he serves as civilian master of a small cutter that plies the lake for the army garrison. However, he does not speak in dialect, always a good clue in a Cooper novel. More than this, he suddenly—and quite unaccountably—turns out to be a "scholar" who speaks French (another good clue in Cooper), and it develops that he and Mabel read the same books.¹⁶ Though Mabel, as a sergeant's daughter, may not disregard class lines and marry the officer who has proposed to her, there can be no such objection to Jasper. And since it is unthinkable that his modest occupation could suit his new role of genteel hero, Jasper must leave his beloved lake, a possibility which had horrified everyone a few pages earlier as being against his very nature.¹⁷ To solve the problem, he becomes a successful merchant in New York, thus

¹⁵The Pathfinder, p. 489.

¹⁶The Pathfinder, p. 488.

¹⁷The Pathfinder, p. 475.

acquiring the requisite social rank for his new literary status.

The case of Paul Haver in The Prairie is similar. When he wins Ellen Wade, another young lady who has risen above her social class by reason of superior training, he must give up his lowly occupation of bee hunter. The efforts of his wife and others of superior rank, we are told, "succeeded, in the process of time, in working a great and beneficial change in his character. He soon became a landholder, then a prosperous cultivator of the soil, and shortly after a town-officer."¹⁸ It is evident that if a wilderness here is to be elevated into a genteel love match he must be transformed through a male equivalent of the ladies' seminary into something other than a simple wilderness here. An even more direct, though time-worn method of bringing about the miraculous transformation is to shroud a genteel hero of irrepreachable ancestry in a lowly disguise. Thus Oliver Effingham poses as the most unlikely half-breed in all of literature—with, of course, the unexplained ability to speak French.¹⁹

These were the conventions of gentility which hindered Cooper from a full and artistic realization of the potentialities of his material. Three successive chapters of The Pioneers, for example, represent dramatically the despoliation of the natural resources of the land by frontier society. Trees are wantonly slashed for their sap or felled for no good reason. Passenger pigeons are

¹⁸The Prairie, p. 513.

¹⁹The Pioneers (New York, 1897), p. 226.

slaughtered wholesale until the ground is covered with their broken bodies. The lakes are recklessly seined of their fish, most of which will simply rot. Clearly this is an exploitative civilization, heedless of the consequences of raping the land.

Leatherstecking, as always, stands in stalwart opposition to these "wasty ways."²⁰ Judge Temple, a prime representative of gentility in the novel, himself has misgivings about such wholesale destruction.²¹ What, then, of those who join enthusiastically in the senseless waste? The most one can say is that they lack both Leatherstecking's natural goodness and the judge's cultural heritage. They are led by Richard Jones, a pretentious fool who betrays his lack of gentility by boasting too much of his bloodlines, and who displays lack of natural wisdom by his townsman's ignorance of the wilderness.

The civilization of this novel is newly established in the forest. It is a transitional society, one in which, in terms of the novel itself, men have lost the natural virtues which complete reliance on nature gives, and have not yet attained the stable class structure which permits intelligent social direction by a cultivated elite. In the world of Cooper's novels this stage of civilization is but one step removed from the domain of men like Ishmael Bush, who

had passed the whole of a life of more than fifty years on the skirts of society. He boasted that

²⁰The Pioneers, p. 251.

²¹The Pioneers, p. 232 et passim.

he had never dwelt where he might not safely
 fell every tree he could view from his own
 threshold; that the law had rarely been known
 to enter his clearing, and that his ears had
 never willingly admitted the sound of a church
 bell.²²

The frontier society of The Pioneers is coming to hear the church bell in the forests, to impose law on lawlessness. It is a world caught in tension between social organization and anarchy. This is the basic theme in the novel, but it is not explored on any adequate level. It is also a good and important theme, one whose ramifications and implications would bear developing. This particular stage of frontier society, perceived by few at the time and treated in fiction by none, might have received at Cooper's hands—had he not been bound by genteel conventions—an intelligent and comprehensive treatment.

Judge Temple very consciously sees himself as the emissary of civilization in the wilderness. He must imprison the naturally good man, Leatherstocking, to uphold the laws of that civilization, but his support of society does not extend to halting the wasteful depredations of his tenants and townsmen who are destroying the naturally good man's existence, even though it is his own lands they are despoiling. Leatherstocking, lacking the attributes of gentility which could confer upon him a significant role in connection with society and make him a worthy opponent of the judge's world, remains a simple, undeserving victim. He may rail

²²The Prairie, p. 89.

at the civilization Judge Temple is bringing to the wilderness, but Coeper cannot allow this indictment to extend to the genteel values which Temple represents. After playing out his assigned role of saving fainting maidens from wild beasts and forest fires, and serving as the instrument to bring "Mr. Oliver" out of disguise and into a proper marriage, Leatherstocking fades once again into the wilderness.

Coeper feels compelled, however, to make a last, ludicrous attempt to give his natural nobleman a societal function, to bring him into relationship to these social values which Judge Temple and his friends represent. At the end of the novel civilization has robbed the old hunter of his means of livelihood, its courts and laws have imprisoned and shamed him, its meddling in his simple life has driven him from his home of forty years. Yet as he sets out in desperation for the virgin lands to the west in his old age, Coeper remarks of him, "He had gone far towards the setting sun,—the foremost in that band of pioneers who are opening the way for the march of the nation across the continent."²³ Poor old Natty must be shown, at last, as an emissary of progress, a pioneer here in America's westward march. The agrarian dream of civilizing the West must be given its meager due.

The nature of Coeper's artistic failure determined the nature of his legacy to fiction about the West. He imposed the framework of the genteel novel on Western materials, and writers who followed

²³The Pioneers, p. 477.

continued to employ many of the same conventions. Cooper's tremendous popularity and reputation made it extremely difficult for his successors to break through the restrictive pattern within which he had straitjacketed fiction of the West. Those literary traditions which prevented him from realizing the dramatic implications of his basic theme of conflict between society and nature continued to plague Western fiction, and continued to guarantee its literary insignificance. The Leatherstocking Tales, in failing to explore their thematic implications, became adventure stories, full of scalping Indians and the terrors of the howling wilderness. This was their contribution to literature of the West, a pattern of disguised heroes and savage Indians and perilous escapes that was to be endlessly exploited by the inferior writers who followed.

Cooper's major contribution, however, was to the creation of the Western literary hero. In the words of one historian of American frontier literature, Leatherstocking symbolized three hero-types in one: "a nobleman of nature, a refugee from civilization, a conquerer of the continent."²⁴ Each of these hero-motifs had a long history in subsequent literature about the West. Noblemen of nature have persisted in Western fiction well into our own century. But as in the case of the Western hero of legend and folklore, the refugee-from-civilization and the conquerer-of-the-continent motifs proved more popular and

²⁴Lucy Hazard, The Frontier in American Literature (New York, 1927), p. 139.

enduring. In the pages of the writers who followed Cooper this hero evolved quite naturally into the simple strong man, the sun-god hero. Natty Bumppo might with justification call himself the literary ancestor of Western heroes as diverse as Deadwood Dick and Lin McLean.

Perceiving in the frontier the conflict between freedom in untamed nature and the restrictions of advancing civilization, Cooper made it the dominant theme of his Western fiction. He did not find a suitable artistic form for the portrayal of this theme, perhaps prevented as he was by an emotional attachment to one half of his perception and an intellectual commitment to the other—less speculatively, prevented by the conventions of the artistic tradition within which he worked. Washington Irving's work on the West, confined in a framework made up of many of the same conventions, also fails to achieve the self-consistency that could have given it true literary significance, but for different reasons. Irving's assumptions about his material were different from Cooper's, deriving from the opposite image of the West, but they were equally limiting and unfruitful assumptions for handling Western material in a literary art form.

Irving's three works on the West, of course, are not fiction, and thus not subject to formal analysis in the same sense as are Cooper's novels. Yet the assumptions and conventions which underlie A Tour on the Prairies, Astoria, and Captain Bonneville are

nearly as important for American literature as those of the Leatherstocking Tales, illustrating as they do another Eastern literary attitude toward the West. Analysis of Irving's Western books indicates that his assumptions also presented an artistic dead end to the writer who would impose form on Western materials.

Like Cooper, Irving wrote of the lands beyond the frontier, and like Cooper he viewed his material from the lofty standpoint of the genteel East. In revising the Robert Stuart manuscript for use in his history of Astoria, for instance, he was always careful to correct Stuart's lax, democratic habit of assigning the title of "Mr." to gentleman and commoner alike. Irving pointedly reserved this mark of respect for the well-born among his characters.²⁵ In the catalogue of sins with which he charges the French fur merchant at his lonely post, the disregard of class status comes high.²⁶ Also, of course, well aware of the delicate sensibilities of his genteel audience, Irving edited his source material to eliminate too graphic descriptions of crude life in the West that might give offense.²⁷

Yet in treating the contrasting values suggested by the empire and agrarian images of the West, in depicting the opposition of nature and society, freedom and law, primitivism and

²⁵Kenneth A. Spaulding, "A Note on Astoria: Irving's Use of the Robert Stuart Manuscript," American Literature, XXII (May, 1950), 156.

²⁶Washington Irving, Astoria (New York, 1895), I, 9.

²⁷Spaulding, American Literature, XXII, 150-53.

civilization that seemed inherent in the frontier, Irving, unlike Cooper, clearly aligned his views with the doctrine of progress and civilization. He did not find the empire West full of nature's nobleman, nor life in the wilderness conducive to morality; instead, he felt, "the existence of a savage in these parts seems little better than a prolonged and all-besetting death. It is, in fact, a caricature of the boasted romance of feudal times; chivalry in its native and uncultured state, and knight-errantry run wild."²⁸ The whites who live permanently in the wilderness, far from learning virtues from uncontaminated nature, share this life that is nasty, brutish, and short. "Having passed their early youth in the wilderness," he writes of the free trappers,

separated almost entirely from civilized man, and in frequent intercourse with the Indians, they relapse, with a facility common to human nature, into the habitudes of savage life...they look back with repugnance on the restraints of civilization. Most of them intermarry with the natives, and... have often a plurality of wives. Wanderers of the wilderness...they lead a precarious and unsettled existence.²⁹

Though Irving ultimately supported the doctrine of civilization, the empire image of man roaming strong and free in the wilderness was too prevalent in American thought for him to disregard altogether. He was capable, at odd moments, of praising the total independence of the trapper, or of dropping a casual phrase of admiration for the noble savage. He speaks at times of the

²⁸ Asteria, I, 268.

²⁹ Asteria, I, 164.

trappers as "these strange and fearless wanderers of the wilderness"³⁰ or "cavaliers of the mountains."³¹ Indians, on occasion, can be "red warriors of the wilderness, unsophisticated children of nature,"³² an Osage boy, a "native-born gentleman."³³ But these are the exceptions in Irving's work. More characteristic are the sentiments found in his description of an Osage Agency on the Verdigris, a place inhabited by "a sprinkling of trappers, hunters, half-breeds, creeles, negroes of every hue; and all that ether rabble rout of nondescript beings that keep about the frontiers, between civilized and savage life, as those equivocal birds, the bats, hover about the confines of light and darkness."³⁴ When they are understood within the context of Irving's work, the comparisons of civilization to light, and of savage life to darkness, are not accidental.

As in Cooper, the conflict between civilization and untamed nature is a major theme in Irving's Western writing. But in his conviction that civilization is a vast improvement of man's lot, Irving portrays a different sort of wilderness from that found in the *Leatherstocking Tales*. Pierre Beatte, the French-Osage guide

³⁰ Asteria, I, 244.

³¹ Captain Benneville (New York, 1895), I, 95.

³² Captain Benneville, I, 24.

³³ A Teur on the Prairies in The Crayon Miscellany (New York, 1895), I, 46.

³⁴ A Teur, p. 16.

and hunter whom Irving engaged for his tour of the prairies, might have been a perfect parallel to Parkman's Henry Chatillon. Irving, however, does not find his son of the wilderness a "proof of what unaided nature may sometimes do," but rather a sullen, ill-bred, unattractive demi-savage.³⁵ When a party of Bonneville's trappers burns an Indian for horsetealing, Irving blames their nomadic, lawless life beyond society, for "such are the savage cruelties that white men learn to practice, who mingle in savage life."³⁶

Belief in the desirability of advancing civilization, in the necessity of eradicating the cruelty and barbarism of anarchic existence in the wilderness—this is the controlling theme of all three of Irving's Western books. His idealization of Astor is a commonplace of literary history. A man of "persevering industry, rigid economy, and strict integrity...an aspiring spirit that always looked upwards; a genius bold, fertile and expansive; a sagacity quick to grasp and convert every circumstance to its advantage,"³⁷ Astor, for Irving, was a commercial titan and financial genius. But it is important to note that in Irving's eyes he was also the emissary of civilization. His grandiose plan to capture the fur trade of the Northwest, to establish a line of posts the length of the Missouri and the Columbia, and to initiate profitable

³⁵ A Tour, pp. 17-19.

³⁶ Captain Bonneville, I, 224.

³⁷ Asteria, I, 24.

commerce with the Orient was, to Irving, exciting and praiseworthy in itself. Yet it had a higher meaning, for Astor

was not actuated by mere motives of individual profit. He was already wealthy beyond the ordinary desires of men, but he now aspired to that honorable fame which is awarded to men of similar scope of mind, who by their great commercial enterprise have enriched nations, peopled wildernesses, and extended the bounds of empire. He considered his projected establishment at the mouth of the Columbia as the emporium to an immense commerce; as a colony that would form the germ of a wide civilization; that would, in fact, carry the American population across the Rocky Mountains and spread it along the shores of the Pacific.³⁸

For Irving, as Lucy Hazard has pointed out, the real hero of the frontier epic was not the trapper or the Indian fighter, but the promoter or financial genius who stood behind them, establishing and developing civilization.³⁹

Irving's vision of an American civilization marching swiftly and inevitably across the unorganized, empty spaces beyond the Mississippi colored other phases of his view of the West. The unsettled prairies over which he journeyed promised not the wilderness of empire but the fertility of agriculture, answered "literally to the land of promise, 'a land flowing with milk and honey.'"⁴⁰ He hoped to see agriculture draw the Indians from their nomadic existence.⁴¹ As he saw them within the context of advancing society, the seekers for precious metals and the fur trade had been

³⁸ Astoria, I, 40.

³⁹ The Frontier in American Literature, pp. 124-25.

⁴⁰ A Tour, p. 52.

⁴¹ A Tour, p. 202.

the pioneers and precursors of civilization. Without pausing on the borders, they have penetrated at once, in defiance of difficulties and dangers, to the heart of the savage countries; laying open the hidden secrets of the wilderness; leading the way to remote regions of beauty and fertility that might have remained unexplored for ages, and beckoning after them the slow and pausing steps of agriculture and civilization.⁴²

Irving shared the belief of his time in a Great American Desert, and it disturbed him, since "it is to be feared that a great part of it will form a lawless interval between the abodes of civilized man, like the wastes of the ocean or the deserts of Arabia; and, like them, be subject to the depredations of the marauder."⁴³ Such a region, he was afraid, would become the permanent habitat of "adventurers and desperadoes of every class and country, yearly ejected from the bosom of society into the wilderness."⁴⁴

He deeply regretted that the War of 1812 and Madison's wavering attitude had allowed Astoria and the Columbia region to slip from American possession into the greedy grasp of the Hudson's Bay Company, for, "in our hands, besides the roving bands of trappers and traders, the country would have been explored and settled by industrious husbandmen; and the fertile valleys bordering the rivers, and shut up among its mountains, would have been made to pour forth their agricultural treasures to contribute to the general

⁴² Astoria, I, 2.

⁴³ Astoria, I, 313.

⁴⁴ Astoria, I, 314.

wealth."⁴⁵ He read Bonneville's description of the Grande Ronde, so far beyond the fringes of society, and foresaw farms in this beautiful and fertile valley.⁴⁶ He envisioned a commercial and agrarian empire rising in California.⁴⁷

Irving carried his civilization like a shield into the wilderness, interpreting what he saw in terms of its familiar symbols. The lofty forests, instead of symbolizing solitude or freedom, reminded him of a Gothic cathedral, for "indeed there is a grandeur and solemnity in our spacious forests of the West, that awaken in me the same feeling I have experienced in those vast and venerable piles, and the sound of the wind sweeping through them supplies occasionally the deep breathings of the organ."⁴⁸ It required "but little stretch of fancy" to imagine that buffalo feeding near a grove in the prairie distance were "so many cattle grazing on the edge of a common, and that the grove might shelter some lonely farm-house."⁴⁹ He fretted moralistically about the effect of the wilderness on himself as a civilized man. "Man," he wrote, "is naturally an animal of prey; and however changed by civilization, will readily lapse into his instinct for destruction. I found my ravenous and sanguinary propensities daily growing stronger upon the prairies."⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Asteria, II, 356.

⁴⁶ Captain Bonneville, II, 5.

⁴⁷ Captain Bonneville, II, 105.

⁴⁸ A Tour, p. 39.

⁴⁹ A Tour, p. 223.

⁵⁰ A Tour, p. 104.

It is this firm substratum of belief in civilization which lends the specious air to Irving's praise of the wilderness and man in a state of nature. Almost as a matter of literary convention he must make a "real old Leatherstocking" of the hunter Ryan.⁵¹ The old man's moral superiority is demonstrated by his refusal to lure deer by bleating like a fawn ("It is a rascally trick," he says, for all the world like Natty Bumppo, "to take advantage of a mother's love for her young."),⁵² but this is a matter of dropping a casual phrase or two, and Irving develops no natural noblemen.

He pays conventional homage to the idea of nomadic freedom, writing of an Osage boy who was ready to leave his home for a long journey without preparation:

Such is the glorious independence of man in a savage state. This youth with his rifle, his blanket, and his horse, was ready at a moment's warning to rove the world; he carried all his worldly effects with him, and in the absence of artificial wants possessed the great secret of personal freedom. We of society are slaves, not so much to others as to ourselves; our superfluities are the chains that bind us, impeding every movement of our bodies, and thwarting every impulse of our souls. Such, at least, were my speculations at the time.⁵³

There must always in Irving's mind be this final qualification, the recognition that these are only pleasant sentiments for the man of civilization. He may charmingly describe "the exulting feelings of the worthy captain, at finding himself at the head of

⁵¹ A Tour, p. 170.

⁵² A Tour, p. 210

⁵³ A Tour, p. 30.

a stout band of hunters, trappers, and woodmen; fairly launched on the broad prairies, with his face to the boundless West": or he may trumpet that "the tamest inhabitant of cities, the veriest spoiled child of civilization, feels his heart dilate and his pulse beat high, on finding himself on horseback in the glorious wilderness"⁵⁴—but these are the indulgences of a literary man. Within the context of his books, each buttressed front and rear with the doctrine of progress and studded with civilized moral precepts, they can be only romantic inconsistencies, the conventional tributes from the literary study to the emotions and desires of another world.

Belief in himself as a civilized man, quite unlike the semi-savages around him, made Irving an observer rather than a participant in his own tour of wilderness life. There is always the detachment of the spectator in his relation of incidents. "It was with a sensation half serious, half comic," he writes of fording a river in a bullboat, "that I found myself thus afloat, on the skin of a buffalo, in the midst of a wild river, surrounded by wilderness, and towed along by a half savage, wheeping and yelling like a devil incarnate."⁵⁵ Under the spur of excitement he may join in a buffalo hunt, but once the chase is over and the animal is killed, he must reprove himself for this lapse into barbarism.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Captain Bonneville, I, 18.

⁵⁵ A Tour, p. 78.

⁵⁶ A Tour, pp. 226-27.

He is careful, likewise, in writing about the exploits of others, to point out that the higher products of culture—those deserving the respectful "Mr."—do not indulge in the wild orgies and roustabout games of the trappers and common rout, but hold themselves under such restraints as become civilized gentlemen.⁵⁷

The agrarian image of the West, the vision of civilization spreading and transforming the wilderness into a replica of the ordered East, thus determined the nature and scope of Irving's writing on the region. From such a viewpoint the wilderness West could be regarded only as a transient phase of civilization, a moment in development toward a higher end. The West was merely the land of Becoming; the East was the land of Being, the highest point of American development and therefore the true place of significance in the American experience. When the writer with such a conviction turned from his proper field in older, more highly developed societies to this new land, he was indulging his penchant for romance, for sentiments and scenes and incidents romantically attractive in themselves but without real meaning. Irving, unlike Cooper, did not feel that something valuable was being crushed by society's westward march, nor was he caught in irresolution between civilization and nature. The significance of the West, to him, lay solely in its yielding to new ways, to the values and forms of the East. Meanwhile, its wild and uncouth life was no more than material suitable for nostalgic romance.

⁵⁷Captain Bonneville, I, 228-29.

Like Owen Wister later, Irving wrote the epitaph of a romantic era, immortalizing a passing age, capturing in print the flavor of a vanishing epoch. Viewing his framework of civilization supplanting barbarous nature, carefully surrounded by the moral judgments of ordered society, we should expect from Irving the romance of the wild, the bizarre, and the picturesque—and that, in full measure, is what we get.

With the passing of the fur trade, he felt,

the gay free trapper and his steed, decked out in wild array, and tinkling with bells and trinketry; the savage war chief, plumed and painted; the trader's cavalcade, winding through defiles or over naked plains, with the stealthy war party lurking on its trail; the buffalo chase, the hunting camp, the mad carouse in the midst of danger, the night attack, the stampade, the fierce skirmish among rocks and cliffs,—all this romance of savage life, which yet exists among the mountains, will then exist but in frontier story, and seem like the fiction of chivalry or fairy tale.⁵⁸

This is the burden of Irving's West. "Painters," he remarks, "are fond of representing banditti at their rude and picturesque carousels; but here were groups still more rude and picturesque; and it needed but a sudden onset of Blackfeet, and a quick transition from a fantastic revel to a furious melee, to have rendered this picture of a trapper's life complete."⁵⁹ Irving's books provide this romantic picture, complete even to numerous skirmishes with the dreaded Pied Noir. It is not by chance that he is so fond of describing encampments as they appear by firelight, the

⁵⁸ Captain Bonneville, II, 224-25.

⁵⁹ Captain Bonneville, II, 88.

romantic flickering that gives the cluster of tents and hunters "a savage appearance" or an appearance "singularly wild."⁶⁰ These scenes, and the words "rude," "wild," and "picturesque," abound in his descriptions.

Having sketched his version of the mountain man as a wild nomad, he remarks, "such is the mountaineer, the hardy trapper of the West; and such...is the wild, Robin Hood kind of life, with all its strange and motley populace, now existing in full vigor in the Rocky Mountains."⁶¹ In this portrait the fur trapper has little to do with trapping furs. Although Irving professed to be writing a history of the trade in Astoria, he eliminated pedestrian, factual material bearing on the trade from Stuart's manuscript, and so revised his sources as "to change a serious report into a tale of adventure."⁶² Thus, he blandly omits description of Bonneville's entire winter trapping campaign in order to tell of an exciting buffalo hunt on the way to rendezvous.⁶³ He describes trappers at rendezvous again and again ("what feasting, what reveling, what boasting, what bragging, what ranting and roaring, racing and gambling, and squabbling and fighting"),⁶⁴ but he has virtually nothing to say of the less romantic aspects of a trapper's life. From Irving's civilized viewpoint the world of the West could only be romantic, and it was romance, rather than fidelity to his material, that he sought for his books.

⁶⁰ A Tour, pp. 125, 144.

⁶¹ Captain Bonneville, I, 13-14.

⁶² Spaulding, American Literature, XXII, 153.

Irving's doctrine of civilization, then, served him no better in handling the lands beyond the frontier than the tension between civilization and nature operating in the frame of gentility served Cooper. In Irving's view the West could only be the land of exciting exploits and improbable romance, of things picturesque, a land as meaningless indeed to the American experience as "the fiction of chivalry or the fairy tale." He was an earlier counterpart of the modern vacationing New Yorker taking snapshots of Navajos; he wanted his scenes to be as quaintly romantic as possible, but he knew they had nothing to do with life at home.

It is this inability to find an intellectual framework for his material, a meeting place for his values and subject, that leaves Irving's books filled with intellectual inconsistencies and with no organizational principle beyond simple chronology. This is the reason also, as one critic has shrewdly noted, that Irving was unable to raise the stories he heard round the campfire to the level of folk tales.⁶³ This land of little past and, for him, of a future totally different from that past, did not offer the stable values and cultural framework necessary to his usual mode. No legends could be written here that extended outside themselves to illuminate a cultural heritage. Since they

⁶³Captain Bonneville, I, 200-201.

⁶⁴Captain Bonneville, II, 201.

⁶⁵Leonard B. Beach, "Washington Irving," University of Kansas City Review, XIV (Summer, 1948), 265.

cannot be given cultural significance, Irving's anecdotes and their heroes remain unintegrated into any whole, and meaningless in isolation—as impossible to harmonize with the societal values within which he wrote as was Cooper's Leatherstocking figure.

The West, in such an intellectual system, could attain significance only as it became indistinguishable from the parent East. Its own history, traditions, and culture could have nothing important to say to America. Its use in literature, for those writers who accepted the traditions Irving laid down, must partake of the never-never land of meaningless romance.

The legacy left to the literature of the West in the pages of Cooper and Irving—the furious skirmishes with Mingoes and Blackfeet, the perilous escapes, the heroes in disguise, the rescues of genteel young ladies, the terrors, perils, and exciting escapades of the wilderness, all the wild, the bizarre, and the picturesque—found their proper, sub-literary level in the nineteenth century publishing phenomenon which we identify under the generic term "Dime Novel." Writers looking for a profitable formula that might be endlessly repeated with slight variations found what they sought in these traditions.

Cheap, paper-covered fiction had appeared sporadically for more than thirty years before Irwin Beadle began his Dime Novels series in 1860 with the republication of Mrs. Ann S. Stephens' Maleaka; The Indian Wife of the White Hunter.⁶⁶ But the

⁶⁶ Albert Johannsen, The House of Beadle and Adams and Its Dime and Nickel Novels (Norman, Oklahoma, 1950), I, 3, 31.

distinctive, salmon-colored paperbacks issued by the Beadles were the first to be published in a continuous series at a fixed price of ten cents. They found a mass market that no one had known existed and stimulated other publishers to issue their own dime series. The genre of the Dime Novel came into being with the appearance of the Beadle product.

The new fictional medium quickly gained an audience of sensational size by nineteenth century standards, with the Beadles' sales between 1860 and 1865 approaching five million copies.⁶⁷ Mrs. Stephens' thriller "was followed by more than three hundred tales in the original series, and in due course by thousands of similar titles in more than thirty distinct series issued over a period of three decades."⁶⁸ The Dime Novel became a cultural force in American life.

Intended as they were for a mass audience, the novels sought "the lowest common denominator: themes that were found to be popular, attitudes that met with the most general approval, became stereotyped."⁶⁹ The editor in charge of the Beadle stable of writers, Orville J. Victor, a sort of human seismograph of American desires in popular fiction, laid down the plot formulas and established the rules of possibility, morality, and action for the genre. The early efforts were intensely moral, in a

⁶⁷ Henry Nash Smith, "The Western Hero in the Dime Novel," Southwest Review, XXXIII (Summer, 1948), 276.

⁶⁸ Henry Nash Smith, Virgin Land (Cambridge, Mass., 1950), p. 90.

⁶⁹ Merle Curti, "Dime Novels and the American Tradition," Yale Review, XXVI (Summer, 1937), 761.

simple-minded fashion. No drinking or gambling was allowed, and all female characters were ladies as pure as any Cooper heroine. Said Victor of his fictional wares, "All were clean and instructive."⁷⁰

"The writers on Victor's staff," says one historian, "composed at great speed and in unbelievable volume; many of them could turn out a thousand words an hour for twelve hours at a stretch."⁷¹ Edward S. Ellis, one of the most prolific and successful of the Beadle writers, wrote widely for practically every other popular medium of his time as well. In addition, apparently as a casual sideline, he managed to turn out fifty large volumes of history, a volume on arithmetic, and one on physiology!⁷²

"Fiction produced in these circumstances," writes Henry Nash Smith, "virtually takes on the character of automatic writing..., an objectified mass dream, like the moving pictures or the soap operas that are the present-day equivalent of the Beadle stories."⁷³

The Dime Novels portrayed a level of character, of morality, courage, honor, and action, that found a response in the popular mind. They offered Americans an image of America and themselves that met widely-felt needs.

⁷⁰Charles M. Harvey, "The Dime Novel in American Life," Atlantic Monthly, C (July, 1907), 42.

⁷¹Smith, Southwest Review, XXXIII, 277.

⁷²Johannsen, The House of Beadle and Adams, II, 193-97.

⁷³Southwest Review, XXXIII, 277.

A very pronounced part of this image of America was an image of the American West. A check of the plot synopses provided by Albert Johannsen in his formidable history of the Beadles' publishing activities indicates that, of the first two hundred novels issued by this organ, covering a period of ten years, ninety were directly concerned with the West.⁷⁴ Since the others were widely distributed among subjects ranging from the American Revolution to piracy on the high seas, with a generous sprinkling of straight romance and tales of mistaken identity, the West was disproportionately popular from the first. A later series, American Tales, probably a Beadle issue but published only under an agent's name, leaned even more strongly to Westerns.⁷⁵

The preference of dime novelists for Western materials is easily explained. The West was a natural for such fiction. All its history and its treatment in literature suggested the very things which cheap fiction sought—scenes that were romantic and picturesque, animals that were properly ferocious, heroes that were pure and uncomplicated, deeds that were heroic and sensational, and, of course, devilish, villainous Indians.

Coeper's Leatherstocking provided an obvious hero for these imitative writers. Smith has found that, "of seventy-nine Dime Novels selected as a sample of those dealing with the West between 1860 and 1893, forty contain one or more hunters or trappers whose age, costume, and general functions entitle them to be considered

⁷⁴The House of Beadle and Adams, II, 81-93.

⁷⁵Johannsen, The House of Beadle and Adams, II, 127 ff.

lineal descendants of the great original."⁷⁶ Victor himself testified that the Leatherstocking series was a primary source of material for his writers.⁷⁷

Cooper's legacy was not, however, an unmixed blessing, for with it the dime novelists inherited the values of gentility. Characters in the early Dime Novels were no less aware of class status than they had been in Cooper. The novel still demanded a genteel hero and heroine and a proper love match. The problem of bringing the noble son of the wilderness into organic relationship with such refinement remained; marrying him to a genteel heroine would still have been the equivalent of miscegenation. The resolutions of the problem worked out by practitioners within the loose standards of this sub-literary genre, of course, could not be artistically satisfactory.

Edward S. Ellis indicated one popular solution in his first effort for the Beadles, Seth Jones, or the Captives of the Frontier, published in 1860, which became the most successful of all the Beadle products, eventually selling six hundred thousand copies. Seth, it develops, is really Eugene Morton in disguise, and the rough clothes and low-level diction are only a mask for his true self.⁷⁸ This, of course, was scarcely a new way out of the difficulty, for Cooper's Oliver Effingham had already posed

⁷⁶ Southwest Review, XXXIII, 279.

⁷⁷ Henry Nash Smith, Virgin Land, p. 92.

⁷⁸ Harvey, Atlantic Monthly, C, 39-40.

as the son of a Delaware.

A slightly more inventive solution consisted in doubling the Leatherstocking figure, giving the old scout a younger and more genteel companion who is thereby more eligible for the romantic lead.⁷⁹ As in Cooper, language could be a means of demonstrating a level of gentility not easily ascribable to birth and environment, for "both the sons and daughters of parents who speak a pronounced dialect are themselves free of dialect if they are involved in a love affair."⁸⁰ Since Cooper had employed the devices of language and disguise, and at least the suggestion for doubling the Leatherstocking figure had been present in the Natty Bumppo-Jasper Western relationship in The Pathfinder, it is evident that the dime novelists managed little in the way of a fresh approach to the problem.

The solution of the status problem came, finally, in the denial of its existence. The appearance of Edward L. Wheeler's Deadwood Dick toward 1880 marked a significant change. Dick was not an upper-class hero, but he was eligible for romantic attachments. In fact, his world was full of beautiful ladies who desired him.⁸¹ He was immensely popular as a character. He ran through thirty-three numbers of the Half-Dime Library, and when Wheeler finally killed him off for the last time, popular demand

⁷⁹Smith, Southwest Review, XXXIII, 282.

⁸⁰Smith, Southwest Review, XXXIII, 281.

⁸¹Smith, Virgin Land, p. 100.

forced the publishers to continue the series with Deadwood Dick, Jr., who lasted for ninety-seven numbers.⁸² Dick, embodying "all the skills, functions, graces, and successes that had ever fallen to the lot of any Western character,"⁸³ answered to a different image Americans held of themselves. He attained status not through genteel birth, but by self-improvement; he answered to the image that Merle Curti finds central in the Dime Novel, the ideal of the self-made man.⁸⁴ Democratic individualism had successfully stormed the walls of gentility.

Later Western heroes followed similar patterns of development in cheap fiction. Dime novelists had a precedent in treating the scout, the buffalo hunter, the Indian. The cowboy, however, was something new on their literary horizon. "Not until Buffalo Bill brought his famous Wild West show to New York in 1883," writes one literary historian, "and 'Colonel' Prentiss Ingraham began to immortalize the dashing scout, did the exploitation of the cowboy begin. Cody probably had a greater effect upon the American imagination than any other showman."⁸⁵ The cowboy came into the Dime Novel, and his treatment recapitulated the lot of all previous Western heroes.

⁸²Johannsen, The House of Beadle and Adams, I, 5-6.

⁸³Smith, Virgin Land, pp. 101-02.

⁸⁴Yale Review, XXVI, 763.

⁸⁵Warren French, "The Cowboy and the Dime Novel," The University of Texas Studies in English, XXX (1951), 221.

Three writers, all on the Beadle and Adams staff, indicated the various possibilities. One, Captain Frederick Whittaker, a firm advocate of civilization, made the cowboy a repulsive reversion to the primitive, a dirty, uncouth barbarian very reminiscent of Irving's trappers and half-breeds. The cowboy must, Whittaker felt, be civilized by Easterners and brought into society.⁸⁶

William G. Patten, on the other hand, depicted a "moral superman," the noble primitivist of the Leatherstocking pattern who still thunders across the screen at Saturday matinees.⁸⁷ But the literary future (as distinguished from the Hollywood scenarios) belonged to Ingraham, who cast Cody and his troupe in figures of mammoth size. This Buffalo Bill appeared in more than a hundred of the Beadle novels, and these were endlessly reprinted in other series.⁸⁸ As in legend and folklore, the cowboy hero who survived was the simple strong man, the happy warrior.

The heroine of the Dime Novel had no better fortune than her male counterpart. Beginning as the delicate damsel that Cooper had left, she followed a similar evolution. To bring her into the lusty action she could be disguised as a hard-riding, sharpshooting Indian girl who is really white and was kidnapped from genteel parents in childhood; or she could be disguised as a man.⁸⁹ At this point she was on her way to becoming the

⁸⁶French, 228.

⁸⁷French, 222.

⁸⁸Johannsen, The House of Beadle and Adams, I, 6.

⁸⁹Henry Nash Smith, "The Dime Novel Heroine," Southwest Review, XXXIV (Spring, 1949), 182. For an estimate of the

ferocious Amazon of the later Beadle novels, who might or might not be redeemed for polite society by being sent to a ladies' seminary. By the time of Wheeler's Hurricane Nell and Calamity Jane she "was distinguished from the hero solely by the physical fact of her sex."⁹⁰ The fit mate for the two-gun man was obviously the two-gun woman.

There was little further development of the Western hero in the Dime Novel. Exploit could only be piled on exploit, each a bit more sensational than the last. An amusing, often repeated, and probably apocryphal story tells of Carson, as an old man, being shown an illustration for a Beadle novel in which he "was depicted as slaying seven Indians with one hand, while he clasped a fainting maiden with the other." According to the story, "he adjusted his spectacles, studied the illustration a long time and finally said, 'That there may have happened, but I ain't got no recollection of it.'"⁹¹ Yet such relatively simple exploits were soon out of fashion. Where "Carson had been represented as slaying his hundreds of Indians, the Dime Novel hero slew his thousands, with one hand tied behind him."⁹²

The ever-simplified moral code of the genre, unable to fit such abundant violence into any ethical scheme, broke down

hereine's character in earlier Dime Novels see Mary Noel, Villains Galore: The Heyday of the Popular Weekly (New York, 1954), pp.157 ff.

⁹⁰Smith, Virgin Land, p. 119.

⁹¹Johannsen, The House of Beadle and Adams, I, 5.

⁹²Smith, Virgin Land, p. 103.

completely. Deadwood Dick, who had been a bandit, represents the stage of development at which hero and villain were morally indistinguishable. At this point "the Western hero had become a self-reliant two-gun man who behaved in almost exactly the same fashion whether he were outlaw or peace officer. Eventually he was transformed into a detective and ceased in any significant sense to be Western."⁹³ Dick was the progenitor of the amoral agent of vengeance who stands outside society and acts without reference to society's notion of right and wrong; he was equally the father of a thousand fictional gunmen in Street and Smith stories on the one hand, and Spillane's Mike Hammer on the other.

There was another problem confronting the Dime Novel, that of depicting the hero according to the canons of progress and civilization. Buffalo Bill, as a literary character, was in many ways similar to Deadwood Dick, hard-riding, sharpshooting, and a master of all the manly arts. Yet the agrarian image of the West, the doctrine of civilization, demanded an emissary of civilization. So, like Boone and Crockett and Carson, Cody "was to be interpreted as a pioneer of civilization and a standard bearer of progress."⁹⁴ His fictional exploiters portrayed this image of him so relentlessly that Cody himself took it up and used to say, in his old age, "I stood between savagery and civilization

⁹³Smith, Virgin Land, p. 119.

⁹⁴Smith, Virgin Land, pp. 106-07.

most all my early days."⁹⁵ The other and less exciting image of the West had to have its due; the agrarian image established a fictional precedent for the gunslinging hero who fights valiantly in the cause of grateful homesteaders in Hollywood scenarios.

The Dime Novel, strangely enough, performed certain services for the West in literature. It broke through the canons of gentility which had choked Western material into the pattern of Cooper's primitivism. It did a great deal to bring the West, even though a highly colored West full of vigilantes and desperadoes, into the American consciousness.

Partisans of the earlier Dime Novels are fond of ascribing their degeneration (a questionable word in this instance) to sharp publishing practices that required writers to find ever more sensational material and drove them finally to lower the moral tone of their books.⁹⁶ Literary theory, however, suggests that such deterioration was inevitable. Like Western legend and folklore, the Dime Novel asserted that man's significance lay in his external activities, in action alone rather than action combined with moral and rational judgment. Evil, too, must be an external, physical thing, outlaws and Indians to be overcome "by the sheer force of rugged individualism and courageous exploits."⁹⁷ A literature based on such values could develop only by exaggerating

⁹⁵Smith, Virgin Land, p. 107.

⁹⁶Harvey, Atlantic Monthly, C, 40.

⁹⁷Curti, Yale Review, XXVI, 764.

its own formulas, creating bigger and better evils (more Indians) to be vanquished by ever more sensational actions (faster-shooting heroes). Eventually, under the stress of increased violence, such an over-simplified view of good and evil broke down completely, with thrilling action alone remaining the necessary ingredient.

Legend and folklore left us a last, romantic image of man in the West, standing alone in his strength, master of his destiny through physical prowess. The Dime Novels, of the past and of our own time, are his proper burial place.

Chapter Four

The Intellectual Image of the West: Turner's Frontier

For fifty-odd years historians have waged academic controversy over the import of a brief paper presented to the American Historical Association in 1893. Not the least important purpose served by all the reasoned arguments for and against the paper's doctrine has been that of demonstrating the pervasiveness of its central ideas. Frederick Jackson Turner's doctrine of the frontier was a sharp divergence from a theory of history which had generally assumed that the American past was to be interpreted in terms of the slavery question. For historians, Turner's theory had to be mastered and used to open further investigations or it had to be disproved. It could not be ignored.

Both support and dissent resulted in further dissemination of Turner's concepts. The student of Western history encounters versions of his ideas in nearly every volume. The most important full-length study of Western fiction to date is an acknowledged attempt to transfer his historical theory to the field of literature.¹ The reader who came fresh to Turner's work would feel the shock of recognition on every page, for his ideas long ago became the clichés and commonplaces of the classroom. The significance Turner found in the frontier became the basis of an intellectual

¹Lucy Hazard, The Frontier in American Literature (New York, 1927).

image of the West that has persisted, despite all the flaws later commentators have found in his reasoning, right down to our own time.

Turner's doctrine found such ready acceptance not, as some historians would have it,² because his ideas were so new, but precisely because they were so old. He caught up an ancient and revered agrarian tradition that went back in American thought at least to Jefferson and Crèvecoeur and enshrined it lovingly in his pages. He gathered up the scattered pieces of the agrarian image of the West, found it to be the key to the American experience, thereby raising it to respectable intellectual status, and wrote its epitaph. Such a deep evocation of a simpler and more glorious past, so strong a tug at old feelings and half-forgotten aspirations, could not help but find a wide response in the American mind. Turner reincarnated the agrarian dream and made it the dominant intellectual image of the West.

Historians who discuss Turner quite naturally concern themselves with questions of fact and interpretation. The student of literature, however, may be allowed a different approach. Turner's concept of the frontier amounted to an interpretation of American life in terms of a principle, a philosophy of history. In this philosophy he gave the crucial role to the American West, and the pervasiveness of his ideas made them a fundamental

²Avery Craven, "Frederick Jackson Turner and the Frontier Approach," University of Kansas City Review, XVIII (Autumn, 1951), 3.

influence in shaping the views of other thinking men about the region. Artists felt their impact. Novels were written that transform Turner's intellectual concepts into aesthetic terms and recreate the West in terms of the frontier doctrine. Turner's work is remarkably amenable to such treatment because it is remarkably of a piece. No matter what the subject, his basis of interpretation is always the same. The student of literature, then, is justified in treating his work just as he would treat any other intellectual system—for its self-consistency and its potentialities and limitations in interpreting American life artistically. After the questions of fact and opinion are answered, the question for literature remains—did Turner's ideas form a way of looking at the West that could serve literature?

The central tenet of Turner's historical theory was that the American nationality and environment were shaped by the pull of the West. As a young historian he studied a now famous census report and noted that until 1880 "the country had a frontier of settlement, but at present the unsettled area has been so broken into by isolated bodies of settlement that there can hardly be said to be a frontier line."³ With this as a base he reasoned that "the existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development."⁴ All that followed in his later books and

³The Frontier in American History (New York, 1947), p. 1.

⁴The Frontier, p. 1.

essays derived from this central proposition. He employed it as a basis of interpreting all American history and, by implication, the history of Europe as well.

Yet for the genesis of his insight we must go further back. Other historians read census reports also, and attached no particular significance to vanishing frontiers. Turner, however, already had a view of history which predisposed him for his theory. In 1891 he wrote an essay for the Wisconsin Journal of Education to introduce the study of history into university extension courses. In it he stated the theory of social evolution which underlay his frontier doctrine. "In the past of the European world," he wrote, "peoples have grown from families into states, from peasantry into the complexity of city life, from animism into monetheism, from mythology into philosophy."⁵ America is the perfect place to study history, then, for the exodus from the old world to the new brought a recapitulation of the developmental stages of the past: "Louis XIV devastates the Palatinate, and seen hundreds of its inhabitants are hewing down the forest of Pennsylvania."⁶ Once the immigrants arrive social development begins all over again in the forest, to be repeated each time the frontier moved westward. The very land itself held the record of society's stages. "The student of aboriginal conditions," Turner wrote the following year, "learns also that the buffalo

⁵The Early Writings of Frederick Jackson Turner (Madison, 1938), p. 56.

⁶The Early Writings, p. 63.

trail became the Indian trail, that these lines were followed by the white hunter and trader, that the trails widened into roads, the roads into turnpikes, and these in turn were transformed into railroads."⁷ Francis Walker's census reports brought Turner to his insight "because the rebellious Johns Hopkins student had been developing a theory of social evolution: a theory of economic and social progress, by gradual, uninterrupted stages up to an ever-living present."⁸

In Turner's later essays the idea of stages of civilization became a fixture. Colonial settlement for the historian is like the mountain for the geologist,

bringing to light primitive stratifications....The United States lies like a huge page in the history of society. Line by line as we read this continental page from West to East we find the record of social evolution. It begins with the Indian and the hunter; it goes on to tell of the disintegration of savagery by the entrance of the trader, the pathfinder of civilization; we read the annals of the pastoral stage in ranch life; the exploitation of the soil by the raising of unrotated crops of corn and wheat in sparsely settled farming communities; the intensive culture of the denser farm settlements; and finally the manufacturing organization with city and factory system.⁹

In one of his most dramatic passages he counsels the reader,

Stand at Cumberland Gap and watch the precession of civilization, marching single-file--the buffalo following the trail to the salt springs, the Indian, the fur trader and hunter, the cattle-raiser, the

⁷The Early Writings, p. 76.

⁸George W. Pierson, "Recent Studies of Turner and the Frontier Doctrine," Mississippi Valley Historical Review, XXXIV (December, 1947), 455.

⁹The Frontier, p. 11.

pioneer farmer—and the frontier has passed by. Stand at South Pass in the Rockies a century later and see the same procession with wider intervals between.¹⁰

The idea of social evolution from simple to complex and from west to east would seem to suggest that the West was to Turner, as it was to Irving, merely a land of Becoming, only a replica of an earlier East. But this was not the case. Western environment was itself a conditioning factor. As soon as settlement crossed the Alleghenies a barrier to communication separated the two sections. "Beyond the mountains new conditions, new problems, aroused new ambitions and new social ideals."¹¹ To the older sections the frontier was always "the Wrong side of the Hedge."¹² By the middle of the eighteenth century, for instance, there were two distinct New Englands in environment and values, one coastal and one Western.¹³ Constant conflict over financial policies pointed up the differences, for the West was always a debtor area and the East a creditor.¹⁴

Other differences went even deeper. The Atlantic Coast, in the eighteenth century, had close ties with its English heritage. But immigrants from other European countries flowed to the West, and there, "in the crucible of the frontier the

¹⁰The Frontier, p. 12.

¹¹The Frontier, p. 166.

¹²The Frontier, p. 65.

¹³The Frontier, pp. 78-79.

¹⁴The Frontier, pp. 110, 248-49.

immigrants were Americanized, liberated, and fused into a mixed race, English in neither nationality nor characteristics."¹⁵ By the middle of the century,

a new society had been established, differing in essentials from the colonial society of the coast. It was a democratic, self-sufficing, primitive agricultural society, in which individualism was more pronounced than the community life of the lowlands. The indented servant and the slave were not a normal part of its labor system.¹⁶

A pattern of conflict emerged, a "familiar struggle of West against East, of democracy against privileged classes."¹⁷ The West would not slavishly reproduce the East:

From the beginning it was clear that the lands beyond the Alleghenies furnished an opportunity and an incentive to develop American society on independent and unconventional lines. The "men of the Western Waters" broke with the old order of things, subordinated social restraint to the freedom of the individual, won their title to the rich lands which they entered by hard fighting against the Indians, hotly challenged the right of the East to rule them, demanded their own states, and would not be refused, spoke with contempt of the old social order of ranks and classes in the lands between the Alleghenies and the Atlantic, and proclaimed the ideal of democracy for the vast country which they had entered.¹⁸

The importance of the West, however, lay not in its sectional differentiation from the East, but in the fact that it was a force that controlled the entire national development. For Turner,

¹⁵The Frontier, p. 23.

¹⁶The Frontier, p. 107.

¹⁷The Frontier, p. 121.

¹⁸The Frontier, p. 183.

to the frontier the American intellect owes its striking characteristics. That coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom—these are traits of the frontier, or traits called out elsewhere by the existence of the frontier.¹⁹

With its demand for internal trade, the West turned America's economic eye from the Old World "and diminished that colonial dependence on Europe in industrial matters shown by the maritime and staple-raising sections."²⁰ Its sturdy ideals of freedom and equality were the deciding factor in securing such fundamental American principles as religious freedom and liberalized suffrage provisions.²¹ With its mobility of population it worked mightily to break down sectionalism and promote nationalism: "It was this nationalizing tendency of the West that transformed the democracy of Jefferson into the national republicanism of Monroe and the democracy of Andrew Jackson."²² Out of the West, Turner was fond of remarking, came those leaders—Jefferson, Jackson, and above all Lincoln—who pointed the way for America.²³

¹⁹The Frontier, p. 37.

²⁰The Frontier, p. 108.

²¹The Frontier, p. 121.

²²The Frontier, p. 29.

²³The Frontier, pp. 250-55.

In all these things the West profoundly influenced the East. "But," Turner wrote,

the most important effect of the frontier has been the promotion of democracy both here and in Europe. As has been indicated, the frontier is productive of individualism. Complex society is precipitated by the wilderness into a kind of primitive organization based on the family. The tendency is anti-social. It produces antipathy to control....The frontier individualism has from the beginning promoted democracy.²⁴

The West exerted its democratic influence in a number of ways. The early Ohio Valley, for instance, "was a naturally radical society. It was moreover a rural section not of the planter or merchant type, but characterized by the small farmer, building his log cabin in the wilderness, raising a small crop and a few animals for family use."²⁵ Such squatters "forced the passage of preëmtion laws and these laws in their turn led to homestead agitation. There has been no single element more influential in shaping American democracy and its ideals than this land policy."²⁶

As a safety valve the West was always a democratic economic influence on the East. The Mississippi Valley put "pressure upon the older sections by the competition of its cheap lands, its abundant harvests, and its drainage of the labor supply. All of these things meant an upward lift for the Eastern wage earner."²⁷

²⁴The Frontier, p. 30. Turner had come to this belief before 1892. See The Early Writings, p. 83.

²⁵The Frontier, p. 165.

²⁶The Frontier, p. 170.

²⁷The Frontier, p. 193.

Free lands "promoted equality among the Western settlers, and reacted as a check on the aristocratic influences of the East. Where everybody could have a farm, almost for taking it, economic equality easily resulted, and this involved political equality."²⁸ "The wilderness," Turner wrote, "ever opened a gate of escape to the poor, the discontented, and the oppressed. If social conditions tended to crystallize in the east, beyond the Alleghenies there was freedom."²⁹

American democracy came from this free environment rather than from documents: "Not the constitution, but free land and an abundance of natural resources open to a fit people, made the democratic type of society in America for three centuries while it occupied its empire."³⁰ And when the Union was endangered by undemocratic forces, the democracy of the West preserved it:

The rail-splitter himself became the nation's President in that fierce time of struggle, and armies of the woodmen and pioneer farmers recruited in the Old Northwest made free the Father of Waters, marched through Georgia, and helped to force the struggle to a conclusion at Appomattox. The free pioneer democracy struck down the slave-holding aristocracy on its march to the West.³¹

Free land in the West, however, promoted democracy for America on an even deeper level. Turner, it was said earlier, held a

²⁸The Frontier, p. 212.

²⁹Rise of the New West 1819-1829, Vol. 14, American Nation Series (New York, 1906), p. 68.

³⁰The Frontier, p. 293.

³¹The Frontier, p. 257.

theory of social evolution by stages. Within such a scheme, America's march westward into the wilderness meant that society was reborn again on each new frontier. Man's social organization and culture must continually meet the test of a primitive environment, slough off inherited conventions, and take form again in relationship to nature. Thus,

American development has exhibited not merely advance along a single line, but a return to primitive conditions on a continually advancing frontier line, and a new development for that area. American social development has been continually beginning ever again on the frontier. This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnishes the forces dominating American character.³²

When the pioneer is first thrown into the woods he reverts to an undesirably early stage of development:

The wilderness is too strong for the colonist.... It strips off the garments of civilization and arrays him in the hunting shirt and the moccasinBefore long he has gone to planting Indian corn and plowing with a sharp stick; he shouts the war cry and takes the scalp in orthodox Indian fashion. In short, at the frontier the environment is at first too strong for the man. He must accept the conditions which it furnishes, or perish, so he fits himself into the Indian clearings and follows the Indian trails.³³

This was not a stage of civilization which Turner admired, but it was soon followed by something better:

³²The Frontier, pp. 2-3.

³³The Frontier, p. 4.

Dirt and squalor were too frequently found in the squatter's cabin and education and the refinements of life were denied to him. Often shiftless and indolent,...he was fonder of hunting than of settled agricultural life....The backwoodsman of this type represented the outer edge of the advance of civilization. Where settlement was closer, cooperative activity possible, and little villages, with the mill and the retail stores, existed, conditions of life were ameliorated, and a better type of pioneer was found.³⁴

It was this small-farmer stage of American development that Turner admired, the stage that had given the American character its most desirable traits and American society its best ideals. It was also the stage that another advocate of agrarian life, Crèvecoeur, had admired long before. Crèvecoeur also defined society in relationship to environment: "Men are like plants, the goodness and flavour of the fruit proceeds from the peculiar soil and exposition in which they grow."³⁵ What men are depends on the nature of their employment. He too had no use for the nomadic backwoodsmen who inhabited that extreme frontier which Turner called the "meeting point between savagery and civilization."³⁶ Wrote Crèvecoeur, "He who would wish to see America in its proper light, and have a true idea of its feeble beginnings, must visit our extended line of frontiers where the last settlers dwell," for there "men appear to be no better than carnivorous animals of superior rank."³⁷ Just as Turner looked back

³⁴Rise of the New West, p. 88.

³⁵Letters from an American Farmer (New York, 1924), p. 56.

³⁶The Frontier, p. 3.

³⁷Letters, p. 59.

to the amelioration of this condition, Crèvecoeur looked forward to that process of time that "will change in a few years that hitherto barbarous country into a fine fertile, well-regulated district."³⁸ For Turner as for Jefferson, those who labored in the earth were God's chosen people. He noted approvingly that Jefferson conceived of agriculture as the proper economic basis for political democracy.

This agrarian image of America's westward progress strongly colored Turner's version of the West. Not for him was the romance of the empire image of the West. Any notion of untamed nature producing a noble savage would be unthinkable in his pages. Indeed, there is nowhere in his work any suggestion that the Indians were anything more than nomadic savages who must be displaced by settled agriculture. Anything that preceded the agricultural frontier was only a prelude. The vaunted coureurs de bois and fur traders, far from being figures of romance, are merely "messengers between civilization and savagery"³⁹ in such a scheme. The mining and cattle frontiers are likewise important only as they prepared the way for agriculture. Nor is it insignificant that though Turner wrote constantly about the "West" it is always the Old Northwest territory he is talking about. He recognized that the vast tracts of unclaimed government land of his time, the mountain and arid regions lying beyond the prairies,

³⁸Letters, p. 60.

³⁹The Frontier, p. 104.

would require a very different type of agricultural settlement, "the application of capital and combined effort."⁴⁰ They would not call forth the traditional pioneer spirit of the individual settler of modest means, and he was not interested in them. The central place in his affections and in his historical scheme fell to the small, independent landholder of agrarian tradition.

Yet by Turner's time the agrarian tradition had to contend with new forces. Crèvecoeur had perceived three stages of American development, a pioneer period of frontier savagery, a splendid physiocratic society of small independent farmers, and the consolidation of society into an urban life that was over-refined and out of touch with the soil.⁴¹ As a believer in agrarian values he liked only the middle stage. To Turner, coming a century later, the East was not only that part of America most removed from the primitive renewal of the frontier; it had also come to represent the tremendous concentration of power that accompanied an industrialized economy. The new monster coming out of the East threatened the very existence of the traditional agrarian ideals of equality, liberty, and individualism. The necessity of reconciling the old ideals with the new industrial forces became the major message of his later essays.

America had been safe as long as it had the means of primitive renewal:

⁴⁰The Frontier, pp. 244-45.

⁴¹Letters, pp. 60-87.

1890-1891

The West, at bottom, is a form of society rather than an area. It is the term applied to the region whose social conditions result from the application of older institutions to the transforming influences of free land. By this application a new environment is suddenly entered, freedom of opportunity is opened, the cake of custom is broken, and new activities, new lines of growth, new institutions and new ideals, are brought into existence. The wilderness disappears, the "West" proper passes on to a new frontier, and in the former area, a new society has emerged from its contact with the backwoods. Gradually this society loses its primitive conditions, and assimilates itself to the type of the older social conditions of the East; but it bears within it enduring and distinguishing survivals of its frontier experience. Decade after decade, West after West, this rebirth of American society has gone on, has left its traces behind it, and has reacted on the East. The history of our political institutions, our democracy, is not a history of imitation, of simple borrowing; it is a history of the evolution and adaptation of organs in response to changed environment, a history of the origin of new political species.⁴²

The traditional American values could be depended upon to renew themselves in the forest so long as there was a forest.

But new conditions had changed:

The early society of the Middle West was not a complex, highly differentiated and organized society. Almost every family was a self-sufficing unit, and liberty and equality flourished...as perhaps never before in history. American democracy came from the forest, and its destiny drove it to material conquests; but the materialism of the pioneer was not the dull contented materialism of an old and fixed society. Both native settler and European immigrant saw in this free and competitive movement of the frontier the chance to break the bondage of social rank, and to rise to a higher plane of existence....Little by little nature pressed into her mold the plastic pioneer life. The Middle West, yesterday a pioneer province, is today the field of industrial resources and systematization.... From this society, seated amidst a wealth of material

⁴²The Frontier, pp. 205-06.

advantages, and breeding individualism, energetic competition, inventiveness, and spaciousness of design, came the triumph of the strongest. The captains of industry arose and seized on nature's gifts. Struggling with one another, increasing the scope of their ambitions as the largeness of the resources and the extent of the fields of activity revealed themselves, they were forced to accept the natural conditions of a province vast in area but simple in structure. Competition grew into consolidation. On the Pittsburgh border of the Middle West the completion of the process is most clearly seen. On the prairies of Kansas stands the Populist, a survival of the pioneer, striving to adjust present conditions to the old ideals.⁴³

The farming frontier and the traditions it gave America have run into new opposition: "In the arid West these pioneers have halted and have turned to perceive an altered nation and changed social ideals. They see the sharp contrast between their traditional idea of America as the land of opportunity, the land of the self-made man, free from class distinctions and the power of wealth, and the existing America, so unlike the earlier ideal."⁴⁴ The bitter unrest arising from this conflict is behind Populism, which "is a manifestation of the old pioneer ideals of the native American, with the added element of increasing readiness to utilize the national government to effect its ends."⁴⁵

In the face of the new forces,

the defenses of the pioneer democrat began to shift from free land to legislation, from the ideal of individualism to the ideal of social control through

⁴³The Frontier, pp. 153-55.

⁴⁴The Frontier, p. 239.

⁴⁵The Frontier, p. 148.

regulation by law. He had no sympathy with a radical reconstruction of society by the revolution of socialism....But he was becoming alarmed over the future of his free democratic ideal. The wisdom of his legislation it is not necessary to discuss here. The essential point is that his conception of the right of government to control social process had undergone a change....The individualism of the Kentucky pioneer of 1796 was giving way to the Populism of the Kansas pioneer of 1896.⁴⁶

And while the western end of the frontier area seethed with political discontent, the earlier frontiers to the east were caught in the throes of industrialism: "Where Braddock and his men, 'carving a cross on the wilderness rim,' were struck by the painted savages in the primeval woods, huge furnaces belch forth perpetual fires and Huns and Bulgars, Poles and Sicilians struggle for a chance to earn their daily bread, and live a brutal and degraded life."⁴⁷ The old free West is being whittled away by the industry of the East and its values are being lost: "With the influx of capital and the rise of cities and manufactures, portions of the Mississippi Valley have become assimilated with the East. With the end of the era of free lands the basis of its democratic society is passing away."⁴⁸

Did this mean then that the contribution of the West was to be lost, that American society would become something other than a democracy? The question haunted Turner.

⁴⁶The Frontier, p. 277.

⁴⁷The Frontier, p. 300.

⁴⁸The Frontier, p. 202.

Has the Mississippi Valley a permanent contribution to make in American society, or is it to be adjusted into a type characteristically Eastern or European?...The most significant thing in the Mississippi Valley is its ideals. Here has been developed, not by revolutionary theory, but by growth among free opportunities, the conception of a vast democracy made up of mobile ascending individuals, conscious of their power and responsibilities. Can these ideals of individualism and democracy be reconciled and applied to the twentieth century type of civilization?⁴⁹

And he asked at another point,

What ideals persist from the democratic experience in the West; and have they acquired sufficient momentum to sustain themselves under conditions so radically unlike these in the days of their origin? ...Under the forms of American democracy is there in reality evolving such a concentration of economic and social power in the hands of a comparatively few men as make political democracy an appearance rather than a reality? The free lands are gone. The material forces that gave vitality to Western democracy are passing away.⁵⁰

Turner's answers to his question were obviously complicated by his historical doctrine. He had tied political democracy indissolubly to the physical existence of free lands. He had made the wilderness an enchanted wood wherein men went forth and found liberty and equality and independence. But now the westward march was over, the Pacific had been reached, the map filled out. His doctrine said that society perpetuated its worthwhile values only by the renewal that came through contact with pristine nature. The stable American values of the agrarian tradition could be maintained only through physical movement; to stop meant

⁴⁹The Frontier, pp. 202-03.

⁵⁰The Frontier, pp. 260-61.

to stagnate and to lose these values.

These were the difficulties in Turner's position as he turned to face the new forces that were abroad in the land. He recognized as certainly as any man of his time that the day of the independent, self-sufficient farmer was over, that America was to become an industrial nation. Yet the principle by which he explained the past seemed to have little to say to the future. This difficulty was behind the casting about for answers, and the inconsistencies, of his later essays.

The individualism of the agrarian image of the West had produced a strong distrust of governmental regulation, and Turner could not bring himself to trust it fully. He recognized that Grangerism and Populism were political attempts to secure economic justice, but he feared their consequences:

Legislation is taking the place of free lands as the means of preserving the ideal of democracy. But at the same time it is endangering the other pioneer ideal of creative and competitive individualism. Both were essential and constituted what was best in America's contribution to history and to progress. Both must be preserved if the nation would be true to its past, and would fulfill its highest destiny. It would be a grave misfortune if these people so rich in experience, in self-confidence and aspiration, should turn to some Old World discipline of socialism or plutocracy, or despotic rule, whether by class or by dictator.⁵¹

For one thing he distrusted the financial policies of the political dissidents. The West, traditionally a debtor area, had always been irresponsible in fiscal matters; men there had always

⁵¹The Frontier, p. 307.

"resented attempts to restrain the reckless state banking which their optimism fostered."⁵² He had ever disliked "the influence of frontier conditions in permitting lax business honor, inflated paper currency, and wild-cat banking."⁵³ Such financial irresponsibility is evidence of a stage of society which has not yet reached that stability of agrarian desire,

for each one of the periods of lax financial integrity coincides with periods when a new set of frontier communities had arisen, and coincides in area with these successive frontiers, for the most part. The recent Populist agitation is a case in point. Many a State that now declines any connection with the tenets of the Populists, itself adhered to such ideas in an earlier stage of the development of the State. A primitive society can hardly be expected to show the intelligent appreciation of the complexity of business interests in a developed society.⁵⁴

Yet the crucial question was not finances but whether values that were organic, that had come from the very soil, could now be preserved artificially by law and regulation. Turner was never sure that they could.

Other possibilities received their modicum of support. He toyed momentarily with the notion that physical expansion might continue in "the extension of American influence to outlying islands and adjoining countries."⁵⁵ But this was only an aside; at best it would delay the problem, not solve it. He had slightly

⁵²Rise of the New West, p. 106.

⁵³The Frontier, p. 32.

⁵⁴The Frontier, p. 32.

⁵⁵The Frontier, p. 219.

more hope for sectionalism. He had praised the West for promoting nationalism. Now, however, if the old ideals were to be preserved, sectionalism must be maintained and encouraged, to prevent "monotony and stagnation."⁵⁶ The West, no longer possessing the free lands that had made it the controlling element in American history, might now be able to close off its borders and sit tight with the old ideals to prevent the encroachment of the industrial society of the East.

With the stubborn optimism of his tradition, Turner even managed to hope that the new titans of industry would somehow prove to be agents of democracy in disguise. Though the West—the Old Northwest, that is—"has produced a type of industrial leader so powerful as to be the wonder of the world, nevertheless, it is still to be determined whether these men constitute a menace to democratic institutions or the most efficient factor for adjusting democratic control to the new conditions."⁵⁷

Yet for the conservation of the old in the context of the new, Turner put his faith largely in education. He told a graduating class at Indiana University that,

as the process of industrial consolidation goes on, and as Eastern industrial conditions spread across the West, the problems of traditional American democracy will become increasingly grave. The time has come when University men may well consider pioneer ideals, for American society has reached the end of the first great period in its formation.... How shall we conserve what was best in pioneer

⁵⁶The Frontier, p. 160.

⁵⁷The Frontier, p. 267.

ideals? How adjust the old conceptions to the changed conditions of modern life?⁵⁸

Jackson had marked the "end of the old era of trained statesmen for the Presidency,"⁵⁹ and Turner had admired this assertive demonstration of popular democracy. But now, "the times call for educated leaders."⁶⁰

His principal hope was for a class of disinterested experts:

By training in science, in law, politics, economics and history the universities may supply from the ranks of democracy administrators, legislators, judges and experts for commissions who shall disinterestedly and intelligently mediate between contending interests. When the words "capitalistic classes" and "the proletariat" can be used and understood in America it is surely time to develop such men, with the ideal of service to the State, who may help to find common grounds between the contestants and to possess the respect and confidence of all parties which are genuinely loyal to the best American ideals.⁶¹

The old energies must be redirected:

In place of the old frontiers of the wilderness, there are new frontiers of unwon fields of science, fruitful for the needs of the race; there are frontiers of better social domains yet unexplored. Let us hold to our attitude of faith and courage, and creative zeal. Let us dream as our fathers dreamt and let us make the dreams come true.⁶²

⁵⁸The Frontier, p. 281.

⁵⁹The Frontier, p. 281.

⁶⁰The Frontier, p. 284.

⁶¹The Frontier, p. 285.

⁶²The Frontier, pp. 300-01.

All of Turner's solutions came back, finally, to a simple faith in the goodness and wisdom of the American people: "Our ancient hopes, our courageous faith, our underlying humor and love of fair play will triumph in the end. There will be give and take in all directions. There will be disinterested leadership, under loyalty to the best American ideals."⁶³

The historians who followed Turner have proved many of his assumptions to be in error. A former colleague could believe loyally as late as the 1930's that the frontier hypothesis was as serviceable as ever,⁶⁴ but general historical opinion has swung the other way. The safety-valve, a keystone in Turner's concept of the frontier, did not in fact exist.⁶⁵ In fact it worked the other way: the city acted as a safety-valve for the frontier. When rural discontent lacked an urban outlet in the late nineteenth century, it exploded in Populism.⁶⁶ Even more fundamentally, it has been pointed out, Turner cut the frontier off from the usual laws of economic development the historian employs; his "phases" of development derive not from the viewpoint of man in society,

⁶³The Frontier, p. 307.

⁶⁴Frederic L. Paxson, "A Generation of the Frontier Hypothesis," Pacific Historical Review, II (1933), 51.

⁶⁵Murray Kane, "Some Considerations on the Safety Valve Doctrine," Mississippi Valley Historical Review, XXIII (September, 1936), 170 et passim; George W. Pierson, "Recent Studies of Turner and the Frontier Doctrine," Mississippi Valley Historical Review, XXXIV (December, 1947), 458; Fred A. Shannon, "The Homestead Act and the Labor Surplus," American Historical Review, XLI (July, 1936), 638, 641.

⁶⁶Fred A. Shannon, "A Post Mortem on the Labor-Safety-Valve Theory," Agricultural History, XIX (January, 1945), 37.

but of man in nature.⁶⁷

All commentators are agreed, however, that it would be difficult to over-estimate Turner's influence on the American attitude toward the West.⁶⁸ This is of crucial importance, of course, to the student of Western literature. Turner gave new impetus to an old image of the West that had found expression as far back as Jefferson, Crèvecoeur, and De Tocqueville. He caught up the hopes of the past, all the desires of the agrarian image, and planted them anew in the American mind. The corrections of later commentators could not dispel this influence, for it was too deeply rooted in desire.

Yet Turner's intellectualized agrarianism could not serve as the basis of fruitful interpretation of the West in literature. Despite the association of his frontier doctrine with the West, it had really had no application—whatever its faults or virtues—to the mountainous and arid country that made up much of the Far West. Agriculture there, as John Wesley Powell had long before pointed out, could not follow the pattern of homestead settlement. Moreover, Turner was writing an epitaph, a heart-felt tribute to

⁶⁷ Henry Nash Smith, "The West as an Image of the American Past," University of Kansas City Review, XVIII (Autumn, 1951), 34-39.

⁶⁸ E. E. Dale, "Turner—The Man and Teacher," University of Kansas City Review, XVIII (Autumn, 1951), 18; Merle Curti, "The Section and the Frontier in American History: The Methodological Concepts of Frederick Jackson Turner," Methods in Social Science, ed. Stuart A. Rice (Chicago, 1931), pp. 365-67; Rudolph Freund, "Turner's Theory of Social Evolution," Agricultural History, XIX (April, 1945), 85; Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, "The Traits and Contributions of Frederick Jackson Turner," Agricultural History, XIX (January, 1945), 22.

something dead. Novels which employ his image of the West are also founded on nostalgia. They too are a tribute to an earlier, simpler age, a time of stalwart yeomen when life was clean and good and democratic because it was lived close to the earth. They are historical novels which cannot escape the history they depict, cannot go beyond desire for that which is lost. The cultural primitivism of renewal in nature had to end at the Pacific. Society had to go on without it. The empire image of the West gave us, among other things, Wister's nostalgia for a time when man roamed wild and free in his natural goodness. The agrarian image gave us Conrad Richter's agrarian pioneers, the happy people of a dear, dead past. Neither could point the way for a developing fiction.

Chapter Five

The Crude Beginnings of Emancipation

1. Mayne Reid

One of the first to follow Cooper in writing fiction about the West that lay beyond the province of the plow was Thomas Mayne Reid. Born in Ireland in 1818, the son of a Presbyterian minister, Reid studied four years for the ministry, winning prizes in everything but theology, before emigrating to New Orleans in 1840.¹ He worked for a time on a Louisiana plantation as storekeeper, overseer of Negro slaves, tutor, and schoolteacher. Then he traveled in the vast area still labeled Great American Desert on the maps, accompanying hunters and traders and trappers in their wanderings over the buffalo plains and up the Red, Missouri, and Platte Rivers.²

In 1843 he settled for a time in Philadelphia, and, along with Longfellow, Lowell, Bryant, Cooper and many others, contributed stories and poems to Graham's Magazine.³ While there he became the neighbor and close friend of Poe, meeting him almost daily for two years. Reid had no "exalted opinion" of Poe as a poet, "more especially as...the poem upon which rests the head

¹Elizabeth Reid, Mayne Reid, A Memoir of His Life (London, 1890), pp. 1-5.

²Charles F. Lummis, Mesa, Cañon, and Pueblo (New York, 1925), p. 17.

³Ellis Paxton Oberholtzer, The Literary History of Philadelphia (Philadelphia, 1906), p. 217.

corner-stone of his fame is...the creation...of Elizabeth Barrett Browning. 'Lady Geraldine's Courtship' is 'The Raven.'" Nevertheless, Reid warmly defended his friend against the "spiteful biographer...Dr. Rufus Griswold."⁴

At the outbreak of the Mexican War in 1846 Reid secured a commission as a second lieutenant and marched into Mexico. He was, writes a friend, "the hero of the storming of Chapultepec, where he fell upon the very parapet with a wound from which he never fully recovered. General Scott praised him in general orders for conspicuous gallantry, and he won the friendship and commendation of General Phil Kearny."⁵ "For some time," writes the literary historian of Philadelphia,

he was mourned for dead and his paeans as a writer and a soldier were sung in the newspapers. He came to life again, however, like the heroes of his stories, returned for a time to Philadelphia, now a Captain, and in 1849 raised a company of volunteers in New York to go to Hungary and help Kossuth in his war of freedom. The insurrection collapsed before he got farther than Paris and Captain Mayne Reid...now settled in England.⁶

He did not return to the United States until 1867, and then remained only three years. In New York in 1868 he published a juvenile magazine called Onward which died in fourteen months.⁷ Similar publishing ventures abroad met with no greater success.

⁴Mayne Reid, Edgar Allen Poe (Ysleta, Calif., 1933) no pagination.

⁵Lummis, Mesa, Cañon, and Pueblo, pp. 17-18.

⁶Oberholtzer, Literary History, p. 308.

⁷Elizabeth Reid, Mayne Reid, pp. 238-39.

Reid died in 1883, not having seen since the 1840's the wild lands of the West about which he was still writing.

During the many years of his active career he produced a prodigious amount of fiction. His list of titles, say the bibliographers, contains over ninety items.⁸ Somewhat surprisingly, Reid took himself with entire seriousness as a writer. In a letter to his father from Mexico City in 1848 (the first in the eight years he had been away), he explained the plight of the artist in America: "My genius, unfortunately for my purse, was not of that marketable class which prostitutes itself to the low literature of the day." Nevertheless there are people of sensibility who

believe that my capabilities in this field are not surpassed, if equalled, by any writer on this continent. This is the under-current of feeling regarding me in the United States; the current, I am happy to say, that runs in the minds of the educated and intelligent.⁹

Seldom, surely, has any brash young man assumed such high ground with less reason.

No one today would claim serious literary merit for Reid. His early work, written during his first stay in Philadelphia, was tailored to the magazine trade, although he did write a tragedy which received local performance.¹⁰ Writes Oberholtzer in The Literary History of Philadelphia of Reid's poetry of

⁸James D. Hart, The Oxford Companion to American Literature (New York, 1941), p. 631.

⁹Elizabeth Reid, Mayne Reid, p. 24.

¹⁰Elizabeth Reid, Mayne Reid, p. 8.

this period, "It is hard to conceive of any reason for the publication of his verse, but it was published."¹¹ This judgment may be substantiated by quoting the opening stanza of an effort which Reid called "Another Heart Broken":

Oh, vainly I'm weeping; he thinks not of me,
And little he recks of the grief that consumes me—
Unspoken and silent my sorrow shall be;
He shall not know the cause of the anguish that
dooms me.

Reid's prose was also, in good part at least, hack work. He was not above stealing outright a large section of someone else's book and incorporating it wholesale into his own.¹² Many of his novels were issued by the dime novel publishers, and suited their literary standards admirably. They met Orville Victor's criterion of being "clean and instructive." In so far as Reid has survived at all he is most often remembered today as a writer of juvenile adventure tales.¹³

Yet this is not the whole story. The transitory material of popular writing, though it fails to survive as literature, is often the very stuff of literary history. Such is the case with Reid. His best efforts in the novel grew out of his early experiences in the West, and they have importance for the

¹¹p. 307.

¹²Robert E. Spiller, et al., Literary History of the United States (New York, 1948), II, 681.

¹³For a dissenting opinion see Mayne Reid, Afloat in the Forest, with a Memoir by R. H. Stoddard (New York, 1885), p. 5. Stoddard believes that Reid was appreciated by the mature critics of his time and was, indeed, another Defoe.

development of the West in fiction. "The fiction of the Southwest before the Civil War," states a literary history of the area, "belongs to the Scott-Cooper tradition. It abounds in picturesque descriptions, heroic deeds, type characters, and a plot dependent largely on coincidence."¹⁴ Reid was a prominent example of this tradition, for he "wrote almost a dozen novels of Southwestern adventure. His books, while not significant as literature, were widely read and important in forming the concept of the Southwest in the East and Europe."¹⁵ Since his novels were often published first in Europe and only subsequently achieved popularity in the United States, he became "a prominent foreign follower of Cooper in depicting pioneer customs and the life of the Indians."¹⁶

Reid's first romance, The Rifle Rangers, was written in 1848 at the home of a friend in Ohio just after he resigned his army commission.¹⁷ Unable to find an American publisher for it, he took it abroad with him, where it was published in England in 1850. Thus began a steady production of adventure novels, interspersed with nature books, juveniles, and two translations from the French, which lasted until his death. Though his novels employed exotic settings from all over the world (Bush Boys: or,

¹⁴Mabel Major, Rebecca W. Smith, and T. M. Pearce, Southwest Heritage: A Literary History with Bibliography (Albuquerque, 1938), p. 75.

¹⁵Major, pp. 76-77.

¹⁶Hart, The Oxford Companion, p. 631.

¹⁷Lummis, Mesa, Cañon, and Pueblo, p. 18.

Adventures in Southern Africa; Castaways: A Story of Adventure in the Wilds of Borneo) Reid never forgot his young manhood in America, and more particularly the American West. At the end of No Quarter, a novel celebrating Cromwell's victory and lamenting the Restoration, written late enough to be published posthumously, he has his heroes and heroines escape from the clutches of the returning Charles by emigrating to America, "to become a part of that people, the freest, most powerful, and most prosperous on earth."¹⁸ He continued to write occasionally about the West until the end of his life, with one of his last books, The Free Lances (1881), having its setting there. Just before his death in 1883 he wrote from Europe to an old friend in the West, "Alas! my disabled state may hinder me from ever again seeing that far, fair land of the West, so endeared to me by early recollections."¹⁹

It was always as that "far, fair land" of romance and wild adventure that Reid wrote of the West. In his books we see again the conventions that Cooper imposed on literature of the land beyond the frontier, find once more the figure of the naturally noble scout, the genteel romance of hero and heroine of proper class status, and read again of improbable exploits conducted in a wild land far removed from civilized habitation. Reid's books, of course, do not concern themselves with Cooper's major theme--the theme of conflict between civilization and nature upon which

¹⁸No Quarter (New York, n.d.), p. 456.

¹⁹Lummis, Mesa, Cañon, and Pueblo, p. 19.

the Leatherstocking Tales foundered. Any significant conceptual level would be out of place in Reid's novels. Yet they are important for their continuance of Cooper's conventions, for their own contribution to stereotypes of character and action in Western fiction, and for their refreshing suggestions of ways in which the sterile pattern might one day be broken.

Reid's first novel, The Rifle Rangers (1850), opens with a long description of Mexico, the setting of the book. His introduction to the physical province is obviously designed to suggest the romantic nature of the landscape to the reader:

Go with us, tourist! Fear not. You shall look upon scenes grand and gloomy, bright and beautiful. Poet! you shall find themes for poesy worthy its leftiest strains. Painter! for you there are pictures fresh from the hand of God. Writer! there are stories still untold by the author-artist--legends of love and hate, of gratitude and revenge, of falsehood and devotion, of noble virtue and ignoble crime--legends redolent of romance, rich in reality.²⁰

This is the burden of Mayne Reid's West. He was writing of a land almost unknown in the middle of the nineteenth century, and his books fed popular desire for exotic settings and strange customs, for daredevil adventure and hair-raising exploits. It followed that his characters should become stereotypes, paper-thin puppets who move woodenly through an interminable series of sensational actions. Such plots as he employed hinged constantly on coincidence, and the thematic level of his books is negligible. The heroes of these tales are all stalwart and pure

²⁰The Rifle Rangers (New York, 1899), p. 6.

of heart, the heroines are virginal, and no redeeming feature mitigates the villainy of Reid's villains.

Within a few pages of The Rifle Rangers the hero finds his proper Leatherstocking. Evidence of the mutation that the Bumppe figure was to undergo at the hands of the dime novelists is already apparent, however. In this novel he is somewhat younger than the usual persona of the aged hunter. Little is said, also, of his virtues being the product of a life lived in nature. Reid, unlike Cooper, made no attempt to ground his Leatherstocking figures in an explicit philosophy of primitivism; he simply employed as a stock character the natural nobleman that Cooper had bequeathed to literature of the West. All the traits and functions of Reid's Bob Lincoln make him directly derivative from Cooper's creation. He is celibate, has received no formal education from society, has an instinctive knowledge of right and wrong, an equally instinctive respect for the social values of that higher world from which the hero comes, and speaks in a dialect which unfits him for any serious part in a love affair. He is deeply knowledgeable in wilderness lore, a fabulous marksman with his long rifle, unswervingly loyal to his young hero, and acts as the agent of escape from as many perils in one book as Natty Bumppe ever managed in three.

Henry Haller, hero and narrator of the novel, is a gentleman of adventure, a man who "had hunted buffaloes with the Pawnees of the Platte, and ostriches upon the Pampas of the Plata."²¹

²¹The Rifle Rangers, p. 21.

At the opening of the book he is at loose ends in New Orleans, with no new adventure on hand at the moment. He quickly decides that the proper place for his venturesome nature is at the wars in Mexico. A gentleman, of course, must secure a commission, for in Reid's army all officers, without exception, speak grammatical and unaccented English, and all enlisted men, without exception, speak in dialect. At the urging of his Leatherstocking, Lincoln, Haller joins a company of volunteers and seeks election as captain. His opponent in the election, of course, is the villain in the piece, a dastardly Creole, whose evil nature inevitably shows in his physical features. For some reason that never becomes fully apparent Haller must best the Creole in a duel in order to win the election. Our hero wins both contests handily and is off to Mexico at the head of his company of Rifle Rangers.

The remainder of the novel is ostensibly concerned with the Mexican War, but actually touches the war only incidentally. In the main it is an account of weird topography in the Southwest, a series of perilous captures and escapes for the hero with the aid of his faithful scout, and, above all, the hero's romance with a Spanish beauty.

Haller first meets his paramour when he rescues her and her sister from a voracious cayman near her home in the Mexican interior. We might anticipate some status difficulty in their relationship, for a Mexican girl scarcely seems a fit mate for an American gentleman. The lady's father solves this, however, by immediately exclaiming, "No soy Mexicano--soy Español!" and

producing "a large sheet of prachment" that proves he is of the Spanish gentry, "a true hidalgo."²² The status problem disposed of, the father further simplifies matters by declaring himself an enemy of Santa Anna (the implication is strong that any decent Mexican would be equally pro-American), which makes rescuers rather than invaders of Haller and his Rangers.

With the curiously debased transcendentalism that pervades Reid's books, the hero and heroine have a mutual and immediate spiritual response:

I felt and knew that I was in love. It had come like a thought, as it comes upon all men whose souls are attuned to vibrate under the mystical impressions of the beautiful. And well I knew she was beautiful. I saw its unfailing index in those oval developments—the index, too of the intellectual; for experience had taught me that intellect takes a shape; and that those peculiarities of form that we admire, without knowing why, are but the material illustrations of the diviner principles of mind.²³ [*italics Reid's*]

The love plot thus easily satisfied, the hero returns to adventures, to a monotonous succession of captures and escapes that are connected only by being in the same book. These end, finally, with Haller killing the villain, who turns out to have been a spy all along, having sought election back in New Orleans only with the intention of leading the Rangers into capture. The war itself merits scarcely an occasional paragraph, for it serves only as a vehicle for Haller's exploits, expertly abetted always

²²The Rifle Rangers, p. 116.

²³The Rifle Rangers, p. 144.

by his trusty Leatherstocking, and as an impediment to the consummation of his love in marriage. With that ceremony accomplished the hero and his bride immediately return to the civilized East. As in Cooper's pages, lovers may find each other in the wilds of the West, but so respectable a state as marriage requires more civilized climes.

The Scalp Hunters (1851) is the novel of the Reid canon most often singled out by the literary historians, who usually judge it to be his best. It represents a distinct advancement in Reid's response to his material. That is not to say that all the romantic trappings of The Rifle Rangers are not to be found here also. The Scalp Hunters is constructed on the same tired formula of noble hero and pure heroine, desperate escapes and deadly perils, and a conventional love match. Yet it also represents a partial liberation of the Leatherstocking persona, foreshadowing the day when Owen Wister might substitute natural nobility for high birth in a hero, and it uses dialect both more realistically and more organically than had the earlier novel.

The Scalp Hunters is Reid's story of the mountain men. The hero—Henry Haller again, and once more the narrator of his own tale—travels in search of adventure with a group of traders down the Santa Fe Trail, nearly perishes while lost in New Mexico's Jornada del Muerto, is rescued by a hunter of Indian scalps, falls in love with his daughter, and is enlisted in a long and dangerous mission by the father to test the quality of his love. During the course of all this, Haller is rescued from

imminent and violent death again and again by his trusty horse and faithful dog—animals that would put their present-day Hollywood counterparts to shame.

The novel thus does not differ materially in plot or action from The Rifle Rangers. The Scalp Hunters also opens with a topographical description designed to stimulate desire for the exotic: "Follow me, with the eye of your mind, through scenes of wild beauty, of savage sublimity," for "such are the aspects of the wild west; such is the scenery of our drama."²⁴ Language still indicates social class; the traders among whom Haller travels—some of them actual men like Bill Bent, the Sublettes, the Choteaus—who are presented as the hero's equals, do not talk the dialect of the mountain men they historically were. Indeed, with their "By Joves!" they sound for all the world like British gentlemen.

Haller, although new to the prairies, soon proves his heroic mettle. Caught in a buffalo stampede, he saves himself by leaping to the back of a bull and riding out the thundering charge for several miles. "From that hour," he remarks, "I was looked upon as a 'captain' on the prairies."²⁵ In quick succession he is rescued from death in quicksand by his horse, stabbed by a treacherous Mexican at a Santa Fe fandango (his horse, not being at the dance, apparently could not save him from this), and

²⁴The Scalp Hunters (New York, n.d.), pp. 6, 11.

²⁵The Scalp Hunters, p. 31.

tumbles unconscious over a thousand-foot precipice in the Jornada del Muerto, again being saved by his faithful steed, which stands for hours with its neck arched against the rope that supports the hero's swinging body. He wakes from this experience to find himself in the home of Seguin, the scalp hunter, and falls immediately in love with the twelve-year-old daughter. Again this is a transcendental meeting of spirits, for "intellect has its forms and shapes in the physical world."²⁶

Since the lovely Zoe, "child of nature in its most perfect innocence,"²⁷ lives in Mexican territory, we might expect her nationality and her father's bizarre occupation to place difficulties in the way of marriage for a proper American gentleman. Zoe, however, proves to be of French blood, descended from wealthy gentry of St. Demingo. Her father, not a bloodthirsty butcher at all, is a well-to-do mine-owner who has adopted his present profession as the only means of rescuing his elder daughter from the Apaches. Haller is thus able to announce: "I am her equal in rank as she is mine."²⁸

Before he may have Zoe in marriage, however, he must accompany Seguin and a band of mountain men turned scalp hunters in a rescue mission after the imprisoned daughter. This requires nearly four hundred additional pages of perilous and heroic exploits, with further rescues of our hero by his horse and dog.

²⁶The Scalp Hunters, p. 96.

²⁷The Scalp Hunters, p. 106.

²⁸The Scalp Hunters, p. 117.

The major characters of the novel move mechanically through their assigned number of sensational actions, stopping only occasionally to indulge in trite, breast-smiting rhetoric about the depth of their love. The heroine, except for the color of her hair, is interchangeable with Guadalupe of The Rifle Rangers, something the illustrator of one edition tacitly admitted by using the same portrait for both ladies. At the end of The Scalp Hunters, Seguin, his prisoner daughter secure once more, is free to leave the wilderness, and Haller and Zoe will be married and live in civilization—in the best Cooper manner. In none of these things has the dreary formula been altered; the trite love story and thrilling action are still all.

Only in his minor characters and incidental scenes did Reid indicate ways in which the sterile pattern might be broken. For one thing he doubled the Leatherstocking character, giving his old, celibate hunter a younger companion. This, it will be recalled, became a favorite device with the dime novelists, and had been suggested in the Jasper Western-Natty Bumppo relationship in The Pathfinder. Such a duplication ordinarily meant that the younger hunter, to become eligible for a role in a love match, was made more genteel. Little of this is apparent in Reid's Bill Garey. Despite his romantic attachment he still speaks in dialect. Moreover, his love is an Indian woman, no common squaw to be sure, but the sister of a Maricopa chief who has been "educated at one of the most celebrated universities in

Europe."²⁹ Cooper's Natty, "the man without a cross," had railed incessantly against such race mixture. But Reid's novel exhibits no horror at the prospect of a white marrying his savage beauty. The novelist apparently accepts it as a condition of life in the wilderness, although, of course, not proper for a genteel hero.

Reid's other Leatherstocking, the old hunter Rube, is an even wider deviation of the character from type. He has all the usual functions, knows the tricks of the wilderness better than the Indians themselves, and extricates his genteel wards from many difficulties. He is a child of nature, right enough, but of a very different nature from that which fashioned Bumpo. Scalped himself by the Indians, he takes scalps in return at every opportunity. To Natty such savagery had not been among the white man's "gifts." But Rube has even given up beaver trapping for the more profitable business of hunting Indians. His virtues, in fact, scarcely outweigh his vices. He is so far removed from the stereotype—and toward realistic characterization—that he is willing at one point to sacrifice the hero to save his own neck, although this is treated as if it were all a mistake and Rube quickly reverts to standard form. Yet he represents a definite freeing of the old hunter character from the prison of stereotype, from the conventions of primitivism.

Language is another factor in Reid's breaking away from the pattern in this novel. Dialect as he had used it in The Rifle

²⁹The Scalp Hunters, p. 192.

Rangers did little beyond separate commoners, who spoke it, from the genteel, who did not. It has the same function in The Scalp Hunters, but it has a further usefulness here. The language spoken by the mountain men, as it has been preserved for us in the chronicles of literate travelers like Clyman and Gregg and Ruxton and Palmer, was a remarkably expressive instrument, pithy, direct, filled with allusions to their way of life. Like all occupational speech it incorporated the fruits of common experience in adage form, fashioning its own peculiar metaphors and similes. The advisability of picketing horses on short fodder when in Indian country rather than letting them range on hobbles in search of food was summed up in the standard saying, "Bones is better'n tracks." Since the mountain men lived much on buffalo meat, "poor bull" and "fat cow" were standards of comparison to be used in any situation. Similarly, a floating stick was attached to a beaver trap to give the trapper a surface indication of the drowned beaver's location. "To see the float stick" thus meant to be forewarned about something.

Reid had known these men, and his transcription of their language in The Scalp Hunters is remarkably authentic. He found in it possibilities for characterization, for humor and anecdote, far outstripping anything in his earlier novel. It is this, in fact, which makes old Rube and the other mountain men more memorable than any of the major characters. The latter speak book English, conventional, stilted language that leaves them all sounding precisely alike. It would be a remarkable memory that

could recall characteristics that distinguish the hero of one Reid novel from another a month after reading them, for they have no individuality, particularly no individuality in language. Rube and his fellows, on the other hand, speak a rich patois compounded of several languages and allowing for expression of individual differences. Rube, being pre-eminent among the mountain men, appropriately has the greatest gift of metaphor.

Authenticity in language led inevitably to a certain realism in incidental scenes. The narrator of The Rifle Rangers had been very sure that no American soldiers, even if not commanded by an officer, could be capable of any ungentleman-like act toward the enemy. Their very citizenship made the common soldiers simply less genteel replicas of the officer-gentlemen who commanded them. To state a man's nationality meant to describe his central traits, to tell the reader what he was or was not capable of. But in the Santa Fe fandango in The Scalp Hunters fidelity to language itself suggests something of the nature of the trappers as individuals. Their talk, realistically reproduced, tells us something of their work and their lives, of their substance as human beings. Throughout the book, though none of them is sharply realized (this being, after all, the genteel novel where the author must keep his eye on the proper people), the mountain men constantly approach the status of individual beings, falling away from Reid's earlier stereotype of what an American of a given class status should be.

The Free Lances (1881), written near the end of Reid's life,

is The Rifle Rangers over again with even less suggestion of potentiality. Far from emancipating himself from the conventions over the years, Reid perfected the formula until even the possibility of breaking through it was eradicated. This novel is once more the standard plot, the stereotyped characters, and the proven mixture of thrilling action and romantic love.

Again we meet the hero in New Orleans, and again he is off to the wars, this time in Texas. Within two pages, of course, the hero has met his faithful Leatherstocking, who recognizes on two minutes' acquaintance that this is the very man his company must have as its captain. Again our hero, Florence Kearney, must beat a dastardly Creele (once more a spy from Santa Anna) to win election as company commander, with the duel coming up the following day. The Creele proves satisfactorily treacherous (he wears a coat of mail under his duelling shirt which breaks Kearney's sword), giving trusty Leatherstocking (Chris Rock) his proper opportunity to save his hero's life. Then they are off to Texas, leaving the villain to plot revenge, for letting him off to be killed at a later date is important in bringing such a tale to successful conclusion; it is practically the only thing that connects beginning and end.

The Free Lances is simply a tedious retelling of The Rifle Rangers with the addition of a few new incidents of peril. The love match is conducted in thoroughly familiar terms, with the heroine again of pure "Hidalgo blood."³⁰ All officers are

³⁰The Free Lances (New York, n.d.), p. 22.

gentlemen and all gentlemen are officers, and they are indistinguishable one from another. Physical qualities are once more the reflection of a higher reality, for, we are told sententiously, the tortured body of a hunchback mirrors his twisted soul.

Leatherstocking here has reverted resoundingly to type, a pale imitation of Cooper's creation. At the end we leave him, faith unshaken in his "single blessedness," to wander again as a lonely denizen of the "wild 'purairas."³¹ Somewhere over the years Reid had heard of the fate worse than death, and this allows the introduction of two pages of incredibly melodramatic resolutions to die rather than be dishonored—the one new element in the book.

Thus it is evident that Reid never managed to emancipate his work from the conventions of his formula. The possibilities of breaking away suggested in The Scalp Hunters were never artistically realized. One could argue that the modern literary historian's preference for this novel over Reid's other books is a result of our preference for realism in incident and authenticity in language, of our dislike of the unexamined aristocracy and unthinking snobbery that governed the selection of characters in the genteel novel, and of our distaste for melodramatic romance. Yet the judgment is not so relative as that. Rigid conventions of plot, action, and character add up to writing by formula, a formula that prevented Reid, as in a far more significant way it had prevented Cooper, from imposing organic form on his Western

³¹The Free Lances, p. 318.

materials. In this larger view those passages of authentic language and individualization of character in The Scalp Hunters become not so much a step toward realism as a step away from convention, from writing by prescription.

Reid did not make this step; he only tentatively advanced one foot and drew it back into conformity. Yet there are isolated suggestions that the formula became too restrictive at times even for his simple-minded view of literary endeavor. Near the end of The Rifle Rangers occurs a long, extraneous section concerning the love of an American officer for a Mexican Indian girl. Reid, of course, quickly turns the affair to account by making it the vehicle of further dangerous adventures. Nor can the officer be allowed to marry the girl. But the novel does suggest, with a good deal of hesitancy, that it is possible for love to break through class and ethnic lines if the gentleman has "the romantic wildness...of disposition"³² of the lieutenant in question. A Reid hero may even once in his life get drunk, though with rather profuse apologies to the reader. No hero in Cooper could exhibit such human failings.

Reid's desire for the bizarre carried him into other breaks with genteel taste. His description of the Mexico City sewers is altogether more graphic than we should expect within such conventions. Old Rube's tale of catching and eating buzzards when starving on the prairies has a rugged realism out of consonance

³²The Rifle Rangers, p. 384.

with the delicate sensibilities that Reid's books everywhere profess. The mother of one of his heroines smokes "cigarritos," although, of course, the heroine herself finds the habit unladylike and distasteful. Reid's mountain men lust after squaws in a manner quite unlike the genteel conventions of how white Americans, even of lower class status, act toward Indians.

If these are Reid's innovations in the pattern, his spasmodic fumbblings toward a more flexible view of life and the literary art, the body of his work belongs squarely in the main stream of writing about the West that was to reach indestructible crystallization and persist to our own time. Reid belongs to a literary tradition of the empire West, the land where man roamed free and brave, that reached solidification and endured.

Reid's books, of course, allowed for no depth of character whatever. The moral questions confronting his heroes are so totally oversimplified as to make the heroes virtually amoral, mindless agents of a justice that admits no complexity. Panderer to popular prejudice that he was, he filled his books with a tacit chauvinistic racism. Anglo-Saxon Americans are simply better people. All of this, of course, forecast Zane Grey's avenging Nordics gunning down "greasers," forecast all the amoral two-gun heroes who have populated Western fiction for more than fifty years.

Reid's contribution to the developing literary image of the West was thus roughly four-fold. His modification of the Leatherstocking character, giving him acceptable status for a love match

without high birth, was a stage in that figure's development toward the Virginian and Lin McLean. The racism implicit in his pages, when coupled with worship of the strong man, became the puerile, "scientific" Anglo-Saxon superiority of Owen Wister and the tawdry racial stereotypes of Harold Bell Wright and Zane Grey. These traditions were to plague Western writing for a long time.

Yet Reid also has a place in another line of development. He deviated from the Cooper tradition, as mentioned earlier, in his rare attempts to transcribe the actual language of men in the West. He also deviated from the tradition in attempting to ground his work more firmly in a specific locale. Cooper's landscape in The Prairie was a featureless barren land, inhabited almost entirely by characters from Cooper's version of the East. Reid knew his section of the West, and in his early novels described it minutely. "He had," writes his most ardent defender, "a very genius for accurate observation and logical deduction, a rare instinct for the truth, and a genuine love of nature."³³ Though such praise is far too strong, Reid did attempt to use the topography of his locale functionally in his work, though he constantly romanticized it and emphasized its bizarre qualities. And, in his own chauvinistic fashion, he even attempted to take some account of the people who inhabited the land he wrote about, though his eye rarely strayed far from the genteel figures proper to his romance.

³³Lummis, Mesa, Cañon, and Pueblo, p. 16.

Both these techniques could, in other hands, become methods of breaking through the fantasies that had been laid upon the West to the underlying actuality. This is precisely what Charlie Siringo and Andy Adams were to try to do in their artless pages. They would attempt to dispel all the illusions of the past and to present the West and its people as they really were. In a sense the West had to have truth before it could have art, history before it could have literature. Mayne Reid has his small place in this story of development.

2. Charlie Siringo

The University of Texas at Austin had on display some years ago a series of bronze tablets commemorating various phases of Texas history. One of these was dedicated simply to "Charlie Cowboy." The "Charlie" of this inscription was Charles A. Siringo,³⁴ native Texan cowboy and "the first of the cowboy tale tellers."³⁵ The tablet was recognition that Siringo, though his books possess nothing to raise them to the status of literature, had been an effective agent in bringing life on the Texas plains into the consciousness of the American people.

Nothing in his early training or environment suggested that Siringo would one day have a literary career. He was born in Matagorda County, Texas, in 1855 in extreme poverty; he got his first trousers as spoils from ships driven ashore on the Matagorda Peninsula by Yankee gunboats during the Civil War. His father died when the boy was a year old, and for the first eleven years of his life he ran wild on the sparsely settled Peninsula, almost totally without schooling.³⁶ He was never educated beyond the ability to read and write.

³⁴Neil Clark, "Close Calls: An Interview with Charles A. Siringo," The American Magazine, CVII (January, 1929), 38.

³⁵Mabel Major, Rebecca W. Smith, and T. M. Pearce, South-west Heritage: A Literary History with Bibliography (Albuquerque, 1938), p. 80.

³⁶Charles A. Siringo, A Texas Cowboy, or, Fifteen Years on the Hurricane Deck of a Spanish Pony, with a bibliographical study and introduction by J. Frank Debie (New York, 1950), pp. 7-16.

For the next fifteen years or so he was a cowboy; then for two decades, a detective. Thereafter his life, lived mostly in New Mexico and California, was meager and splattered, some of it spent in writing, perhaps more of it spent in contesting a power that suppressed what he had written. Carrying them in a satchel, he peddled his own privately printed books.³⁷

Siringo died in Hollywood, California, in 1928.

The portraits that we have of him from friends describe a man of definite talents, but certainly do not suggest sensitivity or imagination in Siringo. A man who worked with him on the range remembered him as a happy-go-lucky cowboy, but also as the most fearless man he ever knew.³⁸ John Hays Hammond, president of the Bunker Hill and Sullivan Mine during the bloody Coeur d'Alene strike of 1891-92, recalled Siringo as "the most interesting, resourceful, and courageous detective I ever dealt with."³⁹ As a Pinkerton man Siringo was assigned to work with a Coeur d'Alene mine owners' association. He posed as a miner and joined the union in order to send out spy reports that could be used in breaking the strike. During these activities he was in constant peril and several times barely escaped being killed by the betrayed miners. His services were invaluable in breaking the strike and jailing the union leaders. Never, Hammond testifies, did Siringo show the least fear, even when expecting to be

³⁷J. Frank Debie, Introduction to Siringo, A Texas Cowboy, p. lx.

³⁸Debie, Introduction, p. xvii.

³⁹John Hays Hammond, "Strong Men of the Wild West," Scribner's Magazine, LXXVII (February, 1925), 121.

murdered the next minute.⁴⁰ Siringo himself, in an interview given shortly before his death, remarked that if he had ever doubted himself or been afraid he couldn't have done his job.⁴¹

Such partial glimpses add up to the character portrait of a man thoroughly competent in his work, deadly calm in the face of danger, and with a mind that did not question ends, means, or values, a mind that lived completely in the physical world and saw itself in no larger context.

This is the Siringo that comes through in his books. He wrote six of them, covering a span of forty-two years. The first, A Texas Cowboy, or, Fifteen Years on the Hurricane Deck of a Spanish Pony (1885), is an autobiography of his life on the range. It ends with his marriage and settling down as a merchant in Caldwell, Kansas. His second, A Cowboy Detective (1912), begins "with his employment as a private detective in Chicago in 1886. Two years before this a blind phrenologist...had felt his 'mule head' and assured him that he was 'cut out for a detective.'"⁴² Publication of this account of his work with the Pinkerton Detective Agency, first entitled Pinkerton's Cowboy Detective, was held up in the Superior Court of Chicago, through Pinkerton influence, until Siringo changed the title and much of the contents.

⁴⁰ Scribner's Magazine, LXXVII, 122-25.

⁴¹ Clark, The American Magazine, CVII, 131.

⁴² Debie, Introduction to Siringo, A Texas Cowboy, p. ix.

Three years later, undeterred by this formidable opposition, Siringo published another book telling exactly what he felt concerning "the most corrupt institution of the century."⁴³ Two Evil Iams: Pinkertonism and Anarchism (1915) names the names—for instance, that of a man hired by the Agency to help wealthy cattlemen get rid of small ranchers at six hundred dollars a head—and tells the facts of perjured testimony and confessions exacted by brutality. By this time, after a lapse of more than twenty years, Siringo regretted his work against the miners in their fight for justice.⁴⁴

His last three books, A Lone Star Cowboy (1919), Billy the Kid (1920), and Riata and Spurs (1927), are revisions of earlier material. The first of these is a rewriting of A Texas Cowboy, eliminating those incidents that seemed indecorous or indiscreet. Billy the Kid is also an expansion of materials used earlier. The cleaned-up version of his range experiences as they appeared in A Lone Star Cowboy was transferred once more into Riata and Spurs. "He had grown more cautious....In A Texas Cowboy the dew is on the vine and vitality is uncurbed by correctness, discretion, decorum and other respectabilities."⁴⁵

A Texas Cowboy is considered the best of Siringo's books. "His book," remarks a literary historian of the Southwest, "which

⁴³Dobie, p. xxxii.

⁴⁴Dobie, pp. xxxii-xxxiii.

⁴⁵Dobie, p. xiv.

circulated widely among plain readers at the time, was overlooked by literary circles; but now, rewritten, it is recognized as an early authority. Its value lies not in literary grace, to which it makes no claim, but in sincerity and first-hand information."⁴⁶ During forty years the book was widely distributed "under the imprint of five different publishers," and became "the most read non-fiction book on cowboy life."⁴⁷ "Dear Charley:" Will Rogers wrote to Siringo. "Somebody gave me the proof sheet of your new book, 'Riata and Spurs,' and wanted to know what I think of it.... I think the same of it as I do of the first cowboy book I ever read, 'Fifteen Years on the Hurricane Deck of a Spanish Pony.' Why, that was the Cowboy's Bible when I was growing up."⁴⁸ "That first book of his," said a former companion, "told things just like they was."⁴⁹

It was this quality of actuality, of literal fidelity to his material, which won and retained acceptance for Siringo's work. The purpose behind his writing, he said in the preface to his first book, "is money—and lots of it." Looking for an "untrodden field" for his pen he "finally hit upon the idea of writing a history of my own short, but rugged life, which dear reader you have before you."⁵⁰ Thus, Douglas Branch has written,

⁴⁶Major, Southwest Heritage, p. 80.

⁴⁷Dobie, Introduction to Siringo, A Texas Cowboy, pp. xiii-xiv.

⁴⁸Dobie, p. x.

⁴⁹Dobie, p. xvii.

⁵⁰A Texas Cowboy, p. 3.

"Charlie Siringo wrote his book...for butcher boys to sell in smoking cars."⁵¹

A Texas Cowboy is autobiography only in a limited sense. Though he wrote about himself always, Siringo put virtually nothing of himself into his books. What happened to him is there. What he felt about what happened, what he talked about or thought about or dreamed about or hoped for—nothing of these appear in his work. He was telling his version of the truth about a special occupation in a particular part of the West, telling it in the hope that the novelty and drama of his subject would find readers for his book. Because he was an honest reporter, he "told things just like they was."

Mayne Reid had been so thoroughly trapped by the conventions of his form that only by lapsing momentarily into reproduction of reality did his books suggest the possibilities that lay in his materials. Siringo was Reid's opposite. Ignorant of literary conventions, unblessed by any sense of structure or proportion, he produced only the raw materials of history and fiction. His ignorance, indeed, was his strength. Knowing nothing of the romantic conventions which had grown up around the West since Cooper, Siringo cut through these illusions and reported a kind of reality.

A Texas Cowboy has no principle of organization beyond simple chronology, at times not even that. It has neither wit

⁵¹"Texas Cattle and Texas Cowboys," Southwest Review, XI (January, 1926), 84.

nor perceptiveness, little humor and no sense of beauty whatever, even for physical surroundings. Siringo never describes the country except to mention conditions of water and grass; he may speak of the weather if a storm interferes with the work, but he never notes the landscape for itself. To this working cowboy, the land was simply a thing over which one trailed steers. He found nothing awesome in its vastness, nothing worth mention in its beauty or ugliness.

What we do find in his book are the working methods of an occupation and some of the mores and values of a way of life. His world is Texas and the cattle trail to Kansas in those turbulent, expansive years after the Civil War when the range kingdom was entering the first stage of its twenty-year boom. We learn, for instance, how fortunes were made in branding loose cattle right after the war:

"Shanghai" Pierce and his brother Jonathan had sold out their interests to Allen, Pool, and Co. for the snug little sum of one hundred and ten thousand dollars. That shows what could be done in those days, with no capital, but lots of cheek and a branding iron. The two Pierces had come out there from Yankeedom a few years before poorer than skimmed milk.⁵²

Others used different but equally direct methods.

Mr. Grimes had a slaughter house on his ranch where he killed cattle for their hides and tallow—the meat he threw to the hogs. Did you ask kind reader, if those were all his own cattle that he butchered? If so, will have to say that I never tell tales out of school.⁵³

⁵² A Texas Cowboy, p. 46.

⁵³ A Texas Cowboy, p. 53.

Siringo and his companion cowboys fell in with this easy morality, branding cattle for themselves instead of their employers when no one was looking; and to feed themselves as they ranged over the country, they "still clung to the old Texas style which is, never kill one of your own beeves when you can get somebody else's."⁵⁴

These men lived hard and dangerously. Cattle which had not been worked during the four long years of the war were as wild as deer, and catching and trailing them north to Kansas was hazardous and arduous work. Siringo himself made many such trips. Their fun, in their rare moments of leisure, was equally wild.

We arrived in Dodge City, Kansas on the third day of July and that night I quit and went to town to "whoop 'em up Liza Jane." I met an old friend that night by the name of "Wess" Adams and we both had a gay time, until towards morning when he got severely stabbed in a free-to-all fight.⁵⁵

Such a cowboy switched jobs casually, and was likely to find that his pay, after settling accounts with the local version of the company store, was negligible.

I worked with Logan one trip, until we got back to the ranch and then I settled up for the first time since going to work, nearly two years before.

An old Irishman by the name of "Hunky-dorey" Brown kept the store and did the settling up with the men. When he settled with me he laid all the money, in silver dollars, that I had earned since commencing work...out on the counter and then after eyeing me awhile, said: "Allen, Pool, & Co. owe you three hundred dollars," or whatever

⁵⁴ A Texas Cowboy, p. 136.

⁵⁵ A Texas Cowboy, pp. 92-93.

the amount was, "and you owe Allen, Pool, & Co. two hundred ninety-nine dollars and a quarter, which leaves you seventy-five cents." He then raked all but six bits into the money drawer.⁵⁶

It is characteristic of Siringo's cowboys, however, that they don't care about money.

After pocketing my six bits, I mounted "Fanny" a little mare that I had bought not long before and struck out for W. B. Grimes' ranch, a few miles up the river. I succeeded in getting a job from the old gentleman at fifteen dollars a month.⁵⁷

Siringo and his friends were equally casual about physical violence.

Some of the boys hated to part with Mr. Nie, but I was glad of the change, for he wouldn't allow me to rope large steers nor fight when I got on the war-path. I remember one time he gave me fits for laying out a negro with a four-year old club; and another time he laid me out with his open hand for trying to carve one of the boys up with a butcher knife.⁵⁸

Life for Siringo as a cowboy was lighthearted, free, and irresponsible. He was undismayed at starting an eleven-hundred mile ride with six dollars in his pocket, unconcerned at being fleeced in two days in Chicago of money earned in months on the trail. He is a bachelor nomad who takes life as it comes, unaware of the drama of his existence.

Just suffice it to say I had a tough time of it during the rest of the winter and came out carrying two bullet wounds. But I had some

⁵⁶ A Texas Cowboy, p. 52.

⁵⁷ A Texas Cowboy, pp. 52-53.

⁵⁸ A Texas Cowboy, p. 46.

gay times as well as tough and won considerable money running Whiskey-peat.⁵⁹

This is the world of the West as we have it in A Texas Cowboy. It is the cowboy's lot to be often cold, often hungry, usually poorly paid, occasionally gloriously drunk--and always free. He lives unsentimentally in a world of men, cows, guns, and horses. He is capable of selling a friend a lame horse ("Now kind reader you no doubt think that a shabby trick. If so, all I can say is 'such is life in the far west'"),⁶⁰ but likewise capable of giving a sound one to a stranded stranger. His ties with family and civilization are almost negligible: "To say that mother was glad to see me would only half express it. She bounced me the first thing about not coming back the next fall after leaving as I had promised. I had been gone nearly four years."⁶¹

Such a life gave Siringo but little language to handle situations involving emotion. His affairs of the heart, which mercifully receive little attention in his books, are as casual and matter-of-fact as the rest of his life. His marriage merits less attention than he would have paid the acquisition of a new horse: "Just three days after meeting we were engaged and at the end of the next three days we were made one. And three days later I was on my way to the Panhandle with an outfit of

⁵⁹ A Texas Cowboy, p. 92.

⁶⁰ A Texas Cowboy, p. 66.

⁶¹ A Texas Cowboy, p. 116.

twenty-five men, one hundred horses and six wagons"⁶²--and without the bride, who receives less description than his trail outfit. But marriage meant the end of cowboy life and when his next trail drive was over Siringo settled down as a merchant in Kansas "on a six-bit scale."

If Reid had been prevented from dealing intelligently with his material by the artificiality of his form, Siringo was never able to raise his reminiscences even to the level of the minor art we find in such earlier chronicles as Ruxton's Life in the Far West. Ignorance of the devices of good writing is itself a fundamental part of Siringo's fidelity to reality. Metaphor is unknown to his pages. He never strives for dramatic effect; no apt phrasing points up his anecdotes.

The reality that Siringo reports has significance only for the social and literary history of the West. A Texas Cowboy touches merely the surface of life. Fundamentally, Siringo, at least as we see his mind here, was insensitive to people, to experience, even to the Western landscape. Possessing no discernible system of values, totally unreflective about himself or his world, he missed more than he saw. The value of his report is that it provides a perfectly matter-of-fact account of a cowboy's physical existence, stripped of all romance. Siringo's cowboys are refreshingly different from the dime novel variety.

The people who move through Siringo's pages are almost faceless. Not even in his portrait of Billy the Kid could he create

⁶²A Texas Cowboy, p. 197.

recognizable human character. In the ludicrous manner that later became the fashion in writing of William Bonney, Siringo makes a rudimentary Robin Hood figure of the psychopath, but his sketch does not attempt to probe Bonney's mind or emotions. Siringo is writing about actions, not men.

Since he was unequipped to handle any sort of feeling, Siringo lapsed when confronted with emotion into the lugubrious sentimentality characteristic of the cowboy song. Thus he wrote of Bonney's death, "The remains of what was once a fond mother's darling were buried next day in the old dilapidated Military Cemetery, without a murmur, except from one, a pretty young half-breed mexican damsel, whose tears, no doubt, has dampened the lonely grave more than once."⁶³

His value judgments on the life around him are equally infrequent and of equally low order. He protested against his men hanging a swindler without trial, judge, or jury, but felt no sense of outrage at a mob which was narrowly prevented from hanging an old man for feeding the outlaw Bonney. He is similarly uncritical of regional attitudes. Mexicans are as likely as not to be "greasers" in his pages, and shooting up a town and driving out the Chinese population is a great joke. Siringo was the reporter of experience, not its evaluator.

Despite all these limitations, A Texas Cowboy has an elemental honesty that gives a sense of the West to its report. Its

⁶³ A Texas Cowboy, p. 177.

unconscious exuberance is that of a region which seemed to have all the future before it. If its portrait of ranch and trail life never reaches deeply into human experience, it nevertheless avoids romanticizing or sentimentalizing its subject. Though he deals often with violence, Siringo makes no attempt to dramatize this part of his material. His book is as alien to the tradition of the dime novel gunmen as to Cooper's natural nobleman.

The change apparent by the time of Riata and Spurs, Siringo's final book, is instructive. The book has a curious publishing history. The first printing transposed some eleven chapters from A Cowboy Detective, substituting actual names for the fictitious ones that had been imposed by the Pinkerton people. This time the Agency brought pressure upon the publishers and forced Siringo to delete all the material on his detective experiences. For those eleven chapters he substituted a series of sketches of Western bad men. So the second and all subsequent printings of the book differ substantially from the first, although no mention of the change is made in these later printings.⁶⁴

The first one hundred and nineteen pages of this revised edition cover, in condensed form, the same ground as A Texas Cowboy. The revision is somewhat better written, perhaps because condensation allowed for fewer digressions. In addition Siringo has eliminated cursing, no longer employs derogatory tag words for Mexicans and Negroes, and generally avoids the exuberant tone

⁶⁴Dobie, Introduction to Siringo, A Texas Cowboy, pp. xxxiii.

of the earlier book. And, in its more restrained fashion, Riata and Spurs probably provides more information about the country and the cowboy's trade than had A Texas Cowboy. Otherwise there are few changes. The years had given Siringo no greater perspective on his former life. It was over and he missed it; that was all. The quality of his infrequent reflections remains as adolescent as ever.

More interesting in a sense are the final one hundred and forty pages of the book. Nearly all of them deal with a dreary gallery of killers: John Wesley Harden, Wild Bill Hickok, Ben Thompson, King Fisher, the Ketchums, and a dozen others. This section of Riata and Spurs forms Siringo's final comment on life in the West (it was taken from a last literary effort left uncompleted at his death), and it is an eloquent one—at least for the history of Western literature.

Here Siringo was in his literary element. He held, says Frank Dobie, the dossiers of a thousand men in his mind.⁶⁵ He put them into words in this book as a court stenographer might, the facts recorded without emotion, without prejudice, virtually without value judgments. He admired the figures in his gallery, even though they were lawbreakers, because they were fearless, strong, and splendid marksmen—the virtues which made up his own code. It is a rare moment indeed when he is willing to make even so elementary a judgment as this: "Ben Thompson was a vicious

⁶⁵Dobie, p. xxx.

cowboy bad-man. He had a record of about twenty men killed.... Possibly I am prejudiced against Ben Thompson because he once shot a boy friend of mine. This boy...was still in his teens."⁶⁶

Once again Charlie Siringo was telling the truth about the West as he knew it. This time, however, he presents a West already familiar to the popular mind. These pages of Riata and Spurs are a monotonous catalog of violence and murder.

King Fisher...had a record of twelve men (not counting Mexicans) killed with his own hand....

In the seventies Horace Greeley went to San Antonio, Texas to look up cheap land for a colony on which to settle young men from his home State, New York....

Greeley made two trips into San Antonio, a few months apart. On the first trip he was introduced to Fisher. On the second visit the two met on the street. After shaking hands, Greeley said, "Mr. Fisher, why don't you stop killing men?"

The reply was: "Why, Mr. Greeley, I haven't killed a man since you were here before."

"That's strange," was Greeley's reply. "Yesterday I was told that a month or so ago you rode into Eagle Pass with sixteen human ears strung on your bridle reins."

With a smile Fisher answered: "Oh, them were Mexican ears—they don't count."

...About the year 1881, Fisher was indicted by the grand jury for murder, in Laredo....On the day that court opened, Fisher and about twenty of his cowboys rode into Laredo....They were heavily armedFisher reported to the court and told the judge that he wouldn't stand for a conviction; that he was willing to have a verdict of "not guilty." This was the verdict rendered and the crowd returned to Nueces River.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Riata and Spurs (Boston, 1931), p. 167.

⁶⁷ Riata and Spurs, pp. 164-66.

Siringo, though he had learned nothing to give his work literary value of its own, had learned something of what was expected in Western writing. The quality of his reflections upon the life he was portraying was still utterly banal ("Should any romantic boys who hanker to be 'bad' cowboys read these pages, I would advise them to forget it. Death by violence is nearly always the reward dealt out by some unseen power."⁶⁸), but his selection of material indicated his recognition that the workaday world of cowboys could not compete with exciting gunmen for public attention.

A Texas Cowboy had made a step toward truth about a region. Superficial though it was, it broke through the nets of convention with the originality of ignorance to record actuality. Here Siringo's cowboys work at their trade and enjoy their reckless pleasures without making bows toward the polite standards of a genteel audience. It was a faltering step toward realistic portrayal of the West.

But it was a realism with little future. By the time of Riata and Spurs Western writing belonged to the masters of blood and thunder and Siringo, though undramatic as ever in handling his material, provided a gallery of bad men. He had found, as did the dime novelists, that if unthinking action is your medium of interest, then the only avenue of progress is toward more melodramatic action. Mayne Reid's heroes, created under the same

⁶⁸Riata and Spurs, p. 133.

dictum that action is all but with the addition of the genteel conventions, had confronted moral questions so over-simplified as to make the heroes virtually amoral, one-dimensional creatures obviously incapable of significant moral choice. Siringo's characters, even more mindless and featureless, exist on a level of morality so relative as to make any moral choice irrelevant. We see them in his pages as we would see animals; they have nothing but their actions to bring them to our attention.

Siringo's version of "truth" in the West carried him, finally, only from cowman to gunman, and then to more gunmen; it led him in the end to write solely about the strong man with blazing Colts. The shallowness of his perception of life in the West brought him at last to the same position occupied by all the dime novelists who wrote endlessly about the West without ever having been there.

3. Andy Adams

Though his first book was not published until a year after The Virginian appeared, Andy Adams is closer to Siringo than to Wister in the development of Western fiction. Like Siringo, he set out, without literary training or the education necessary for social analysis, to tell the "truth" about his native region; unlike Wister, he did not impose on his material a ready-made hierarchy of literary conventions and values. Though he failed to make significant fiction of his Western material, he went beyond Siringo in the appraisal he made of his time and province, and his books were not vitiated by the imported image of the West that Wister brought to his writing.

Born on an Indiana farm in 1859, Adams moved to Texas in 1882, "drove horses and cattle, rode the trail to Abilene, made some money and then lost it in business, then drifted to Colorado to try mining and finally writing."⁶⁹ He had not planned a literary career. The impetus came in 1900 from seeing a Colorado production of Charles H. Hoyt's popular cowboy play, A Texas Steer: "If people would pay for such a false picture, surely they would welcome stories from one who had lived the life of a cowboy himself and would endeavor to give them the truth."⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Mabel Major, Rebecca W. Smith, and T. M. Pearce, Southwest Heritage: A Literary History with Bibliography (Albuquerque, 1938), p. 81.

⁷⁰ Levette J. Davidson, "The Unpublished Manuscripts of Andy Adams," Colorado Magazine, XXVIII (April, 1951), 103.

the first of these is the fact that the system is not a simple one, but a complex one, involving many different factors. The second is that the system is not a static one, but a dynamic one, involving many different factors. The third is that the system is not a closed one, but an open one, involving many different factors. The fourth is that the system is not a linear one, but a non-linear one, involving many different factors. The fifth is that the system is not a deterministic one, but a probabilistic one, involving many different factors. The sixth is that the system is not a simple one, but a complex one, involving many different factors. The seventh is that the system is not a static one, but a dynamic one, involving many different factors. The eighth is that the system is not a closed one, but an open one, involving many different factors. The ninth is that the system is not a linear one, but a non-linear one, involving many different factors. The tenth is that the system is not a deterministic one, but a probabilistic one, involving many different factors.

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Adams's first book, published three years later, was successful enough to confirm him as a professional writer, though his later books never attained the same level of popularity. When he died in 1935 he left behind, as evidence that he no longer met the requirements of the Western fiction market, more than thirteen hundred pages of unpublished manuscript.⁷¹

The Log of a Cowboy (1903) has been called by a number of critics "the finest piece of literature that the cattle-country has produced."⁷² Since enthusiasts of Western fiction are very often both ebullient and magnificently uncritical, several have gone so far as to class the book with Life on the Mississippi and Moby Dick.⁷³ This, of course, is patent nonsense. Frank Dobie, though one of the authors of this nonsense, knows Western fiction better than most commentators and is on more solid ground in another judgment: "It is my firm conviction that one hundred, three hundred years from now people will read Andy Adams to see what the life of those men who went up the trail from Texas was like, just as we now read the diary of Pepys to see what life in London was like following the Restoration."⁷⁴

The analogy is not capricious. Adams's book is true as a

⁷¹Davidson, 103.

⁷²Douglas Branch, The Cowboy and His Interpreters (New York, 1926), p. 255.

⁷³Branch, p. 255; J. Frank Dobie, "Andy Adams, Cowboy Chronicler," Southwest Review, XI (January, 1926), 94-95.

⁷⁴Southwest Review, XI, 101.

journal or diary is true—true to the observations of an intelligent recorder rather than to the transforming imagination of the artist. All his life he felt that fiction had failed to capture the truth of his own region and time. "The cattle industry," he wrote in his later years, "was a primal factor in winning the West and has proved to be an inviting field for pen and pencil. Yet when reduced to a last analysis, when subjected to an acid test or a fire assay, as transcripts of life, the books about it reveal few values."⁷⁵ Objecting to The Virginian and to Garland's Western novels for their romanticism and their failure to grasp the realities of life in the West, Adams concluded that competent literary interpreters of the region must come from the soil itself, must be "as spontaneous as the flora of the plains."⁷⁶ The West needed writers to match its plains and mountains, authors who would disdain the myths surrounding the West to seek the actuality.

It is as a "transcript of life" that The Log of a Cowboy has value. Though Adams called it a "narrative," it is more nearly a journal, recounting the biography of a trail herd on the long trek from the mouth of the Rio Grande to the Blackfoot Reservation in Montana in 1882. It is an account so accurate that no one now would undertake to write a history of the cattle trails without first reading Adams closely. The book is rich in its observation of those details that make up social history. Only

⁷⁵ Andy Adams, "Western Interpreters," Southwest Review, X (October, 1924), 70.

⁷⁶ Southwest Review, X, 74.

in the loosest sense, however, can it be called fiction, a fact most libraries have recognized by shelving it with Western history.

The Log of a Cowboy takes its structure from the odyssey of the journey itself, opening, after a few introductory pages, with the ceremony of receiving the cattle and horses in Brownsville, marching quietly along those twenty-five hundred miles with the herd and the men who guide it, and closing with delivery in Montana. Siringo's books had covered some of the same ground, but Adams is by far the more perceptive and intelligent observer. Siringo had been satisfied with reproducing the physical action of the cowboy's life, concentrating so wholly on action that his later books became mere catalogues of violence. Adams sought a deeper fidelity to man's experience in the West, striving to reproduce, years after the events, every detail of life on the trail.

There are no heroes and no gunmen in this book, but only men who work with cattle for a living. Everything about them is Adams's subject matter. All their lore is here, their work and customs and mores, their occasional sorties into the trail towns, their stories and lies around the campfire at night. Always the quiet narrative of their life together is firmly anchored to the country. The rivers, waterholes, arid stretches, badlands, and mountains are carefully described as the herd moves by them. From early March until mid-September the cattle plod slowly north and west, across a hundred rivers, the Nueces and Brazos and treacherous Canadian and Red and Cimarron and Arkansas and Platte

and Yellowstone and Powder and Tongue, until at last it is the Missouri itself and delivery at Montana's Fort Benton. Along the way there are the trail towns: Abilene, Dodge City, Nebraska's Ogalalla—"the Gomorrah of the cattle trail,"⁷⁷ Adams called it—and Frenchman's Ford at the Yellowstone:

One couldn't help being impressed with the unrestrained freedom of the village, whose sole product seemed to be buffalo hides. Every man in the place wore the regulation sixshooter in his belt, and quite a number wore two. The primitive law of nature known as self-preservation was very evident in August of '82 at Frenchman's Ford.⁷⁸

Perhaps no one since has written with such accuracy of trail life. From Adams we learn what it is like to pull out bogged steers, to build a cattle bridge over a stream with a quicksand bottom, or to turn a herd in stampede. Carefully he tells us what areas have good grass, how to handle the watering of a herd so it will bed down easily at night, how wandering Comanches beg beef and cattle thieves pose as representatives of owners to comb passing herds for accumulated strays. More important, he conveys the feelings of the men about the life they lead: the incipient terror of a dry drive when cattle go blind with thirst and turn back, despite all that men can do, to water they have known; the good-natured chagrin of men who are so starved for entertainment that, when they are duped into a horserace by an innocent old "homesteader" who shows them one mare and races another, they

⁷⁷The Log of a Cowboy (Boston, 1903), p. 259.

⁷⁸The Log, p. 335.

willingly pay the price; the infrequent pleasure of playing poker all night for an egg that the winner will have for breakfast or making a holiday feast of a stray buffalo calf; the sense of despair that settles over lonely men when a cowhand is drowned in a bad crossing of the North Platte.

There are, as well, the campfire stories that fill long evenings:

They used to tell the story in the army, that during one of the winter retreats, a cavalryman, riding along in the wake of the column at night, saw a hat apparently floating in the mud and water. In the hope that it might be a better hat than the one he was wearing, he dismounted to get it. Feeling his way carefully through the ooze until he reached the hat, he was surprised to find a man underneath and wearing it. "Hello, comrade," he sang out, "can I lend you a hand?"

"No, no," replied the fellow, "I'm all right; I've got a good mule yet under me."⁷⁹

When a story grows a little tall, the narrator is likely to be greeted with a chorus of snores from his audience or the quiet remark that, "If I loved a liar I'd hug that man to death."⁸⁰ Though they willingly endure endless brags about their native state, these Texans have no use for such lies as the story that California riders carry sixty-five foot lariats. They know no man ever threw such a rope to its full length—"without he threw it down a well."⁸¹

⁷⁹The Log, pp. 68-69.

⁸⁰The Log, p. 133.

⁸¹The Log, p. 320.

By 1882 the baccaneers of the flush period following the war, when a fortune might be made in a year in Texas with a branding iron, had themselves become almost legendary and were fit figures for stories. They told on the trail, for instance, about old Shanghai Pierce, who could sometimes induce unknowing agents for northern buyers to accept a running count on a herd. The long-legged coast cattle that Shanghai was selling would pass a checkpoint like a herd of frightened deer, increasing the count by ten per cent in Shanghai's favor if the maneuver were properly executed.

Though The Log thus faithfully reproduces both the facts and flavor of life on the cattle trail, with a total absence of false heroics or melodrama, Adams was never able to raise his narrative to the level of literature. This is not, as some critics have supposed, due to an absence of plot or love interest or dramatic effect, unless more than the obvious meaning of those terms is intended. Rather, it is due to the absence of the organic form that is on one level the relationship of part to part that makes a novel an organized whole; and on another level the relationship of event to character that gives all events human significance. The only form in this narrative is the form of the journey itself. As a novel, The Log is a roman à clef that fails to transform experience into art, that abounds with incidents which are unrelated to each other beyond the obvious relationship of all incidents to the journey, and which neither result from nor illuminate human character. The sense of form

necessary to create fiction in which each part belongs to an integrated whole and each event has significance in human experience remained beyond the powers of Adams's mind all his life.

The books that followed The Log illustrate the same virtues and faults. A Texas Matchmaker (1904), for instance, reproduces life on a ranch in southern Texas in the late 1870's with the same looseness of form and catholicity of incident. Since Adams's cowboys are always working cowboys (as Wister's never were), these pages are filled with the small details of handling cattle and horses, from the well-known techniques of branding and roping to such relatively obscure matters as the difference between a remuda and a manada, or the trick, when selling a herd of small Texas mustangs, of putting them on a sidehill and taking the prospective buyer by them from below to make the horses look larger. The cowhand's infrequent holiday pleasures are here too: puma hunts when the scent is strong after a heavy rain; neighborhood pigeon shoots when the carrier pigeons visit the area, with great pies baked around the campfire afterward and the inevitable stories; once there is even a revival of a tournament which first-cemers to Texas brought from the old South, with a contest descending from chivalry and involving lances and expert horsemanship as its climax. (Like all else in Adams's books the tournament was authentic, an early custom in the Southwest.)

As the basis of its form this novel has the quiet passage of the seasons and the work and play each of them brings. The ostensible plot, the efforts of an often-married old rancher to

marry off his ranchhands and thus have children playing about the place in his old age, neither dominates nor really intrudes upon the leisurely chronicle of cowboys, Mexican and gringo alike, working and playing under the tolerant eye of their employer.

The remainder of Adams's books follow a similar pattern, each recounting one aspect of life in the cattle country. They are the material of fiction rather than fiction itself. They offer a social history which, though it accurately depicts the techniques of the cattle trade and the exterior lives of the men who work at it, never explores man's experience in the West on a deeper level. The central ranch of A Texas Matchmaker, for instance, is presented as a feudal barony, complete with overlord. Whatever the economic, social or human implications of this, Adams never examines them. With complete honesty to his material, he is presenting the surface aspects of ranch life. Neither in human character nor in social analysis do his books probe deeply. If they fail to achieve that degree of form necessary to significant fiction, it is in part because they fail to penetrate beyond the description of behavior to the causes behind behavior. They are authentic books, completely escaping the stock situations and melodrama that made Reid's novels superficial, and the unremitting concentration upon unmotivated violence that made Siringo's later efforts adolescent trash; but they nevertheless fall short of the status we demand of good fiction.

Adams's books could have provided the material for fiction; yet it is instructive to note that no one built on his base. "It

is unfortunate," one critic has said with good reason, "that Adams never had great popular success as a writer. If his books had been best sellers, they would have affected the whole current of Western fiction, and decidedly for the better."⁸² To the student of Western fiction, what happened to Adams's kind of writing is almost as important as the writing itself. For a long time, fiction of the cattle kingdom would follow not Andy Adams's version of "truth" but Owen Wister's romanticized stereotype. In a letter in 1907 to Houghton-Mifflin, Adams declined to commit himself to a book of Western stories because "the eastern viewpoint of the West is a hard one to meet. Eastern writers, with little or no knowledge of their subject, can satisfy the short story market better than Western ones. Seemingly the standard is set, lurid and distorted, and unless one can drop into that vein, he or she will find their wares a drug on the market."⁸³ After twenty-eight years of additional disappointment, in the year he died, he wrote even more frankly to a friend: "My work made its appearance at an unfortunate time.... The pulp field, rejuvenated from the dime novel, swept the boards for Western stuff. In the minds of many, this bunk fills the illusion of a 'wild and wooly West.' Primal values were lost in the flood of junk."⁸⁴

⁸²Hal Borland, "The Magnetic West," New York Times Book Review, August 15, 1943, p. 6.

⁸³Davidson, Colorado Magazine, XXVIII, 106.

⁸⁴Borland, New York Times Book Review, August 15, 1943, pp. 6, 18.

Adams himself could not completely escape this popular image of the West, though he never succeeded in meeting it. Having moved to Colorado during the Cripple Creek gold strikes of 1891, he tried later to tell the story of the mines. The result, an unpublished novel now among his manuscripts in the collection of the State Historical Society of Colorado, according to a critic who has seen it, is destroyed by conventions and stereotypes.⁸⁵ The five plays he left in manuscript are likewise "amateur attempts at sentimental romance and at melodrama"⁸⁶ in Western settings.

Despite his deficiencies as a novelist, however, Adams represents a definite advance over what had preceded him in Western fiction. No one before him had tried with such honesty and fidelity to fact to raise the social history of his region to the level of literature. If he failed, if he was unable to penetrate the surface of his region's social history to explore its meaning for men who lived there, he nevertheless disdained—in his published work, at least—the conventions and stereotypes that made up the image the East held of the West. If, among the manuscripts he left behind, there are strong men on horseback, dastardly Redskins, and natural noblemen who are loved and civilized by genteel heroines, we have been mercifully spared them. His published books do not, like Siringo's later ones, try to

⁸⁵Davidson, Colorado Magazine, XXVIII, pp. 100-01.

⁸⁶Davidson, 105.

meet the market created by the dime novelists. Staunchedly they stick to the truth of his perceptions. To the best of his limited ability, Adams provided honest "transcripts of life" in the West. Yet neither his perception nor his art was great enough to carry him beyond fact to fiction that would endure. What was needed, what had always been needed, was a creative mind which knew the West as Adams knew it and yet saw it in a larger context, saw it as part of man's experience in America, saw deeper into the "truth" of the American West.

Chapter Six

The Failure of Caste Imprint: Owen Wister

Charlie Siringo and Andy Adams, though they possessed the advantage of native background in the West and long years of participation in the Western adventure, never succeeded in bringing their chosen subject matter into the cognizance of polite readers or to the attention of students of literature. The man who was to do this was an Easterner. And it was the East, despite his genuine and enduring attachment to the West, that largely conditioned Owen Wister's response to the West and governed the use he made of it in his books. He is remembered today, unfairly, as the author of The Virginian. He was much more: polemicist, naturalist, biographer, intimate of the highly placed, passionate commentator on the American scene and world affairs. The Virginian, moreover, does not provide an accurate index of his literary use of Western materials in those moments when he found his proper form.

Wister was born in Philadelphia in 1860. As a boy of ten he was taken abroad for part of his education in Switzerland, England and Italy. When he returned in 1873 he attended St. Paul's School in New Hampshire, for five years, proceeding to Harvard in 1878. His first interest in those early years was music. He studied piano in Europe, composed an opera (words by his actress-grandmother, Fanny Kemble) while at St. Paul's, and spent four years under the tutelage of J. K. Paine at Harvard,

graduating with highest honors in music.¹ It was at Harvard that Wister first met an upperclassman named Theodore Roosevelt, who was to become a lifelong friend. Fifty years later Wister set down a biographical record of that friendship. This account of his Harvard days and his developing relationship with Roosevelt goes far to explain the beliefs which permeated Wister's life and informed his work.

It is evident, for one thing, that Harvard confirmed certain of Wister's notions about the proper structure of society. Of the Dickey, a secret organization that in 1879 (when Wister was invited to join) represented the only gateway to complete participation in the more exclusive areas of social life at Harvard, he wrote:

To be left out of the Dickey meant that your social life at Harvard was likely to be in the back seats. What could be more alien to democratic theory? What more inevitable in human life? Injustice was done; yet, looking back over fifty years, it is astonishing that more injustice was not done. Some wrong ones we took in, some right ones we left out—but not many of either sort.²

Wister never lost the comfortable assurance of that "we," the easy conviction that the world could be accurately divided into first and third person pronouns. He was to spend much of his literary life in defining those who belonged in each category.

As an undergraduate, Wister employed his talents outside

¹Owen Wister, "Strictly Hereditary," Musical Quarterly, XXII (January, 1936), 3.

²Roosevelt: The Story of a Friendship, 1880-1919 (New York, 1930), p. 9.

the classroom in composing school musicals, often writing sprightly lyrics for his own music.³ He remembered such matters with nostalgic pleasure in later years, and he came to feel that the Harvard of his time had turned out an inimitable product, the "college-bred man"—a cultured being totally alien to the money-changers mass-produced for Wall Street in a later day. Life itself had been different and more gracious in those golden years when "pretty and witty comic operas from Paris and Vienna drew crowded houses" and "not a musical show had been concocted by the Broadway Jew for the American moron."⁴

When he left Harvard in 1882, Wister went once again abroad to study music. Paine was convinced that the boy must compose, but Wister's father wanted a European verdict on his talent. Wister studied in Paris at the Conservatoire and, in search of that judgment which would win parental approval, played his "proudest composition" for Franz Liszt at Wagner's house in Bayreuth. Moved to high approval, Liszt wrote to Fanny Kemble that her grandson had "un talent prononcé." Wister's instructor at the Conservatoire was equally enthusiastic, and a career in music seemed momentarily assured: "The paternal word had gone forth. The European verdict had been given by Liszt and Guiraud: I could be a composer. But Henry L. Higginson had told my father he would like me to try my fortunes as a stockbroker. I must come home."

³For examples see Owen Wister, "My Friendship with Roosevelt," Saturday Evening Post, CCII (March 22, 1930), 5.

⁴Wister, Roosevelt, p. 21.

When Wister returned to America in 1883, however, "Business in Boston had slumped; Mr. Higginson had no place for me; but if I waited, there would be one; so I sat thirteen months in the Union Safe Deposit Vaults...computing interest at 2 1/2 per cent. on daily balances."⁵

In Boston, Wister relieved the tedium of his drab life in the vaults by joining other young men—painters, musicians, writers, and doctors—in forming the Tavern Club. Together, in 1884, they approached William Dean Howells, asked him to be the club's first president, and were accepted.⁶ Under the stimulation of this group Wister wrote his first novel. Howells, a friend by this time, read it and recognized talent.

Howells had no doubts; he had felt a good many pulses in his time, he said. And then, after many encouraging words, he became an adviser to the clerk, who was just twenty-four. He urged that A Wise Man's Son be never shown to a publisher; some publisher might accept it, and the clerk would regret such a book when he was older.⁷

Involved in this judgment was the question of taste. Said Howells: "There are too much hard drinking and hard swearing in it—too much knowledge of good and evil. Were it a translation from the Russian, I shouldn't object."⁸ It was not to be the last time that Wister suppressed or modified his work to suit his friends and critics' notions of propriety. The artist in him was never

⁵Wister, Musical Quarterly, XXII, 7.

⁶Owen Wister, "William Dean Howells," Atlantic Monthly, CLX (December, 1937), 706.

⁷Wister, Roosevelt, pp. 23-24.

⁸Wister, Atlantic Monthly, CLX, 713.

strong enough to assert that what he had written was right and unalterable.

Since there seemed to be no prospect of his sentence in the vaults coming to an end, Wister devised a new proposal and wrote to his father that he would go to Harvard Law School, "since American respectability accepted lawyers, no matter how bad, which I was likely to be, and rejected composers, even if they were good, which I might possibly be." He returned to Philadelphia in the summer of 1885 to sit "nibbling at Blackstone...until the Law School should begin a new year in the Autumn; and now my health very opportunely broke down. I was ordered by Dr. Weir Mitchell [Wister's novelist-physician cousin] to the ranch of some friends in Wyoming. Early in July, 1885, I went there. This accidental sight of the cattle country settled my career."⁹

By 1891 Wister had graduated from Harvard Law School, was a promising young attorney, and had spent five summers "in search of health and big game in Wyoming." It was Wyoming rather than the law that captured him. Never before had he kept a diary, but "upon every Western expedition I had kept a full, faithful, realistic diary: details about pack horses, camps in the mountains, camps in the sage-brush, nights in town."¹⁰ The time seemed ripe, after these five summers, to convert such observations into fiction, an honest, mature fiction suited to its high subject matter.

⁹Wister, Roosevelt, pp. 27-28.

¹⁰Roosevelt, p. 28.

And so one Autumn evening of 1891, fresh from Wyoming and its wild glories, I sat in the club dining with a man as enamoured of the West as I was. This was Walter Furness, son of the great editor of Shakespeare....From oysters to coffee we compared experiences. Why wasn't some Kipling saving the sage-brush for American literature.... Roosevelt had seen the sage-brush true, had felt its poetry; and also Remington who illustrated his articles so well. But what was fiction doing, fiction, the only thing that has always out-lived fact? Must it be perpetual tea-cups? Was Alkali Ike in the comic papers the one figure which the jejune American imagination, always at full cock to banter or brag, could discern in that epic which was being lived at a gallop out in the sage-brush? To hell with tea-cups and the great American laugh! we two said, as we sat dining at the club. The claret had been excellent.

"Walter, I'm going to try it myself!" I exclaimed to Walter Furness. "I'm going to start this minute."¹¹

Thus began the stories that were later to be collected in Wister's first book on the West, Red Men and White.

Success was instant. Harper's bought his first two stories, and continued to buy. After Red Men and White his books, often collections of previously published stories, appeared steadily. Before many years Wister could list behind his name such titles as American Academy of Arts and Letters, Membre Correspondant de la Société des Gens de Lettres, and Honorary Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. He continued to occupy a desk in a Philadelphia law office for twenty-five years, but as a writer, not a lawyer.¹²

¹¹Roosevelt, p. 29.

¹²Roosevelt, p. 30.

He kept up his acquaintance with Europe in frequent visits, occasionally for material for a book. His friendships with famous and important people of the world likewise continued. Henry James, whom Wister had known from the time he was twelve and whom he had "begged" during the 1880's to drop Europe and write about the West, stayed up all one night in 1896 going over Red Men and White with its fledgling author, "patiently, minutely pointing out many things."¹³ He also knew Kipling, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., and was on friendly terms with Henry Adams, who liked Wister's biography of Washington.¹⁴

Perhaps his proudest friendship was with Roosevelt. "We stayed," he remembered with satisfaction years later, "at the White House, my wife and I, from January 8 to January 12, 1903. It filled me with a certain pride to reflect that I was the fourth generation of my family that had stayed there....None of us had ever been invited for political reasons, but merely because of personal friendship; which seemed a better sort of welcome."¹⁵ About Roosevelt's "Familiars," who in time became his friends, he was particularly enthusiastic: "Never in our history...has such a company as these Familiars gathered in the White House. To the society of the present day, they seem to bear the same

¹³Owen Wister, Members of the Family (New York, 1911), p. 18.

¹⁴Jay B. Hubbell, "Owen Wister's Work," South Atlantic Quarterly, XXIX (October, 1930), 440; Wister, Roosevelt, p. 152.

¹⁵Roosevelt, pp. 106-07.

relation that Gobelin tapestry bears to linoleum."¹⁶

Wister's Harvard and European backgrounds, his friendships with the prominent of the world, his close ties with those he took to be the aristocracy of America, all had important effects for his work on the West. No one of any cultural pretensions had attempted to treat the West in fiction since Cooper. Wister brought to his Western experience a better than common knowledge of the best that contemporary American and European culture had to offer, the Harvard graduate's casual familiarity with the cultures of the past, and an assurance of acceptance by right of birth and breeding among the most cultivated people of the world.

Such a heritage had some obvious results. A man of this background would quite naturally, when writing of a man who mistreated a horse, name his character Balaam, or see California landscapes as similar to regions remembered from travels in Spain. He would, too, have little difficulty in bringing his work to the attention of the proper people. Wister's cousin, Weir Mitchell, provided access to H. M. Alden, editor of Harper's, and thereby smoothed the way to publication.¹⁷ Good connections also facilitated his search for background information. Coming properly recommended, he was made welcome in his travels by army officers all over the West. Even his material came on occasion from high sources. Leonard Wood provided the major incident for

¹⁶Roosevelt, p. 184.

¹⁷Fanny Kemble Wister, "Owen Wister's West, II," Atlantic Monthly, CXCV (June, 1955), 56.

one short story from his experience as a young army surgeon stationed at Fort Huachuca in Arizona.¹⁸

Far more important, Wister's heritage of social position and class consciousness led him to certain convictions that determined his politics, his social views, his definition of America and Americans, and his attitude toward the West. From this background emerged the beliefs that shaped his writing.

Wister never lost his Harvard belief that people could be divided easily into the right and wrong "sort." It is no step at all, of course, from such a conviction to the identification of one's own sort with the word American. Wister easily made this identification. "I had found in Charleston," he wrote, "and wherever I had gone in the South, many more people...who were the sort of people I was, with feelings and thoughts and general philosophy and humor and faith and attitude toward life like my own: Americans."¹⁹ His search for true "Americans" had much to do with his attraction to the West.

Yet if this elementary social view was a source of pride in caste, it was also a source of deep misgivings. Wister's entire life was beset by fears that he and his kind should cease to be. It is as if he were born looking backward to a gentler age and a world with room for him and his values; he spent his life feeling that this world and age were being swept away. He

¹⁸Roosevelt, p. 170.

¹⁹Roosevelt, p. 247.

saw the onslaught progressing on four fronts: 1) the immigration of undesirable foreigners who, if they didn't inundate America and overwhelm the native-born in one generation would accomplish those ends in two or three through an alarming birth rate and the sexual sloth of old-family Americans; 2) the rise of a gouging economics of industrialism which, in the form of gargantuan trusts and freedom-destroying labor unions, would soon engulf America and drive out old and trusted values; 3) the frightening continuance of a radical political tradition that represented the historical forces of disruption and disorder and which bade fair, in the persons of its contemporary inheritors and under the guise of the popular will, to destroy American institutions and freedoms; 4) the disquieting emergence from the polyglot slime of Eastern seaboard cities of a brawling, divorce-ridden nouveau riche who, unpossessed of tradition, intelligence, or common decency, already swarmed over Newport and might soon be dictating the sexual standards and cultural values of all Americans.

Wister fought his battles on as many fronts as he found the enemy. He preached large families for those with old American names. He wrote polemics defining un-American activities and predicting certain vulgarization and probable treachery from those new arrivals with old-world ties. He wrote a satiric story of Harvard in which he exposed the grubbing foreign mind, and a book of verses and cartoons castigating those of the past and present who represented un-American viewpoints. He searched out and codified a political and cultural tradition in support of his own

position and wove its results into his books. In one instance he even entered the political arena and ran for office on a reform platform, although in a spirit of sardonic detachment that anticipated defeat. But above all he fled spiritually to the West, finding, paradoxically, a faint and rapidly fading hope that the traditionless West might be the final refuge of traditional America. When he came to believe that this was not to be, he anesthetized his subject and wrote the story of what once was and what might have been. Wister's books on the West add up, finally, to a nostalgic epitaph.

Wister's search for a usable past began early. In a biography of Grant written in 1900, five years after his first book and two years before The Virginian, part of what he was in search of is discernible. The book was a labor of love: "It cost the author about eight months of hard labor...and, had he limited himself to three a day, its proceeds, carefully hoarded, might possibly have kept him in cigarettes these twenty-eight years."²⁰ In it Wister saw Grant as the leader who is produced in time of need by old and thoroughly American stock. It bothered him somewhat that Grant's Americanism had evidently not made of him a man of taste, but Wister attributed his hero's later difficulties to the "Jews and other traders" who are ever waiting to batten on the

²⁰Owen Wister, U. S. Grant and the Seven Ages of Washington (New York, 1928), p. v.

unsuspecting.²¹ Slight as biography, the book is an early indication of Wister's tendency toward hero-worship, his conviction that Jews were an alien and dangerous people, and his detestation of the Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution.²² Roosevelt, no mean hero-worshipper himself, wrote from the Vice President's Chamber, "It seems to me you have written the very best short biography which has ever been written of any prominent American."²³

The path of development that Wister was following becomes even more clear in his return to biography seven years later. His study of Washington, growing out of a lecture given as the Washington orator at the University of Pennsylvania in 1907, makes clear the character of the political gods he was to rely upon and the political tradition in which he was to find his roots. The task Wister set himself was to release the real Washington from the image portrayed by earlier biographers, "a frozen image of George Washington held up for Americans to admire, rigid with congealed virtue, ungenial, unreal." Instead he wanted the true man, "a man also with a hearty laugh, with a love of the theatre, with a white-hot temper."²⁴ In the course of this presentation Wister revealed his own political and social views.

Washington, Wister makes it plain, came of "good blood."

²¹U. S. Grant, p. 54.

²²U. S. Grant, p. 88.

²³Wister, Roosevelt, pp. 80-81.

²⁴The Seven Ages of Washington (New York, 1907), p. 3.

As a boy, his visits to Lord Fairfax's neighboring Belvoir estate brought the young surveyor into a happy society "where there were well-bred women, and Addison's essays, and all was of a piece of the same sound mellow civilization. In this good society the boy of sixteen grew steadily into a man of the world."²⁵ The notion that the England which sponsored this "sound mellow civilization" was a despotic master is a canard: "Every American every day is suffering ten times the tyranny from trusts and labor-unions that we suffered from England before the Revolution."²⁶ In general the eighteenth century was an altogether better age than our own--simpler, more honest, more vigorous, less decadent.

Such passages are evidence of a nostalgia for the past that came to border on necrolatry, and evidence also of Wister's growing belief that America's version of history did England a large disservice. It was from England that the United States got its culture, its law, and that good blood that showed itself sporadically in truly American heroes. Continued disparagement of England (Wister in later years was to make this a major cause and write entire books decrying it) is unjustified by history and blinds us to true friends as well as deadly dangers. A new Declaration of Independence, Wister suggests, far from announcing anew our independence of our true cultural sources, would see different threats to American integrity. It would, he believed, read this way:

²⁵The Seven Ages, p. 45.

²⁶The Seven Ages, p. 63.

Three dangers to-day threaten the United States, any one of which could be fatal: unscrupulous Capital, destroying man's liberty to compete; unscrupulous Labor, destroying man's liberty to work; and undesirable Immigration, in which four years of naturalization are not going to counter-act four hundred years of heredity. Unless the people check all of these, American liberty will become extinct.²⁷

Wister was also finding his own proper heroes in his study of Washington and the late eighteenth century. It was in near idolatry of Washington as the noblest representative of a sane and serene age, in high respect for Hamilton as the exponent of hard money and stable government, and in near hatred for Jefferson as a rebel that Wister found his personal political tradition. Jefferson should not be praised even for the Declaration, since he "merely drafted the document, expressing ideas well established in the contemporary air."²⁸ Rebellion, lawlessness, the insane notion that debts may be rightfully repudiated—these, wrote Wister, "are the 'principles' that we have inherited from Thomas Jefferson—if it can be said that he had any fixed principles—and it is no wonder that he remains a popular idol."²⁹ Indeed, Jefferson was the fountainhead of a despicable political tradition—the first grand liar in a long line of public panderers who have fed America falsehoods and masked them as expressions of the popular will. Jefferson's greatest lie, Wister wrote in later years,

²⁷The Seven Ages, pp. 147-48.

²⁸The Seven Ages, p. 147.

²⁹The Seven Ages, p. 211.

is at the heart of our society: "We were born at a season of phrase-making, and our birthday was celebrated by a phrase: All men are created equal. Into the Declaration of Independence Jefferson, a slave-holder, wrote this, and all the signers signed it; and thus phrases and falsehood were made bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh."³⁰

Roosevelt wrote immediately, upon reading this last, that he was

immensely pleased....I am very glad to see you treat Thomas Jefferson the way you did. Wilson is in his class. Bryan is not attractive to the average college bred man; but the Evening Post, Springfield Republican, and Atlantic Monthly creatures, who claim to represent all that is highest and most cultivated...are all ultra-supporters of Wilson, are all much damaged by him, and join with him to inculcate flabbiness of moral fibre among the very men, and especially the young men, who should stand for what is best in American life. Therefore to the men who read your writings Wilson is more dangerous than Bryan.³¹

Roosevelt had drawn the proper conclusions. Wister's thesis was always that such moderns as Bryan, La Follette, and Wilson were contemporary manifestations of Jeffersonian demagoguery. Bryan and free silver he hated as monetary madness in the tradition of Shays's Rebellion.³² His detestation of La Follette and Wilson inevitably came to be involved with his equally vehement hatred of the Germany of World War I. Not the least of La Follette's

³⁰"Quack Novels and Democracy," Atlantic Monthly, CXV (June, 1915), 733.

³¹Wister, Roosevelt, p. 344.

³²Roosevelt, pp. 50-51.

sins was his strength among German Americans, undesirable immigrants with foreign loyalties. In a satiric volume of verses and cartoons Wister pilloried the Wisconsin Progressive in this fashion:

Senator La Follette
Is easily to be met;
Just write him a note
Enclosing a German vote.³³

An accompanying cartoon depicted a fat German, complete with dachshund, declaiming in support of a portrait of the Senator. Wister was present at the disastrous Philadelphia dinner in 1912 when La Follette collapsed, and even years later he could not bring himself to view the unhappy principal of that debacle with any charity.³⁴

Wister blamed Wilson for nearly everything connected with America's conduct in World War I. In three books and the introduction to another he made the war a personal cause. He had been in Germany before the war and barely escaped ahead of the holocaust. From deep affection for the Germans (if he had had a choice of what country to be born into in early summer of 1914 he would have chosen Germany)³⁵ he moved to an equally deep conviction that

³³Indispensable Information for Infants: or, Easy Entrance to Education (New York, 1921), no pagination. Some of the less vicious verses in this collection of comments upon public figures of politics, religion, and letters show something of the cleverness that went into Wister's Hasty Pudding lyrics:

Edgar Allen Poe
Never could bear Harriet Beecher Stowe
He said that she would talk about slaves
When he wanted to talk about graves.

³⁴Roosevelt, pp. 299 ff.

³⁵Owen Wister, The Pentecost of Calamity (New York, 1917), p. 55.

all evidences of the Prussian mind must be obliterated from the earth. He wrote a long introduction to an alarmist tract by Gustavus Ohlinger (Roosevelt speculated that Ohlinger might be Wister himself)³⁶ which was designed to alert true Americans to the clear danger presented by citizens of German extraction. There are, Wister noted, two kinds of Germans in the United States, those who came long ago for freedom, and recent arrivals who "had run away from military service; they didn't come to pray in their own way, but to make money in their own way; they cast no lot with our new world, their oath of allegiance to the United States was in essence perjury, provided for in Berlin."³⁷ The Kaiser himself, had said, according to Wister, "Even now I rule supreme in the United States, where almost one half of the population is either of German birth or of German descent, and where three million voters do my bidding at the Presidential elections."³⁸ Such hyphenated Americans, Wister was sure, were keeping us from becoming prepared and stern measures were imperative:

Alien and sedition laws were necessary once. They would be wholesome today. What would be treason in any other country has been perpetrated here repeatedly under our easy-going laws and customs; these hyphens would (and will) join with the pacifists to keep the United States defenseless expressly to aid our possible enemies.³⁹

³⁶Wister, Roosevelt, p. 356.

³⁷Introduction to Gustavus Ohlinger, Their True Faith and Allegiance (New York, 1916), pp. ix-x.

³⁸Introduction, p. xiv.

³⁹Introduction, p. xxviii.

Wister first took up the cudgel in support of military preparedness in The Pentecost of Calamity, serialized in the Saturday Evening Post in 1915. In it he recounted his own disillusionment with Germany, and urged America to arm and give its voice to our true allies. It is possible, he warned, to pay too high a price for peace. Wilson's policy of Neutrality was obviously too high a price.

Having set aside all plans for fiction in order to write Pentecost, Wister continued his polemics in two additional books. A Straight Deal; or, The Ancient Grudge was designed "to persuade, if possible, a few readers, at least, that hatred of England is not wise, is not justified to-day, and has never been more than partly justified."⁴⁰ Such instruction is necessary because of general stupidity in a democracy and the prevalence of foreign ideas. "Thinking," he wrote, "comes hard to all of us. To some it never comes at all, because their heads lack the machinery.... The voting moron still runs amuck in our Democracy. Our native American air is infected with alien breath."⁴¹ Some of these voting morons, he was sure, were actually spies. Overhearing a street argument just before America's entry into the war between two men, one in favor of the British and one against them, he concluded of the latter in the best dime detective fashion: "Perhaps this man was a spy—a poor one, to be sure—yet doing

⁴⁰ A Straight Deal: or, The Ancient Grudge (New York, 1920), p. 8.

⁴¹ A Straight Deal, p. 4.

his best for his Kaiser: slinking about, peeping, listening, trying to wedge the allies apart."⁴² "Do you remember," he cried, "the mayor [Sweitzer] they tried to elect in Chicago? and certain members of Congress...The 'exchange professors' that came from Berlin to Harvard and other universities were so many camouflaged spies."⁴³

The fears of social and cultural dissolution that haunted Wister all his life became focused after the war upon the possibility of new menaces from abroad.

Mad mobs, whole races of people who have never thought at all, or who have now hurled away all pretense of thought, aim at mere destruction of everything that is. They don't attempt to offer any substitute. Down with religion, down with education, down with marriage, down with law, down with property. Such is their cry....Amid this stands Germany with her unchanged purpose to own the earth; and Japan is doing some thinking. Amid this also is the Anglo-Saxon race, the race that has brought our law, our order, our safety, our freedom into the modern world.⁴⁴

Wister returned to Europe twice after the war to find the solution to the world's problems. He found it in the hope that England and France and America might truly be, as his book title put it, Neighbors Henceforth. This apparent internationalism was the logical extension of his feeling for the reassertion of cultural ties—not, as one commentator has had it, a prophetic cry for "one world."⁴⁵ No more than ever ready to forgive Wilson and

⁴² A Straight Deal, p. 36.

⁴³ A Straight Deal, pp. 41-42.

⁴⁴ A Straight Deal, pp. 90-91.

⁴⁵ B. Cerf, "Trade Winds," Saturday Review, XXXV (July 19, 1952), 4.

the Germans for the world's plight, Wister saw our greatest hope for the future in renewed closeness with France and England, to him the prime sources of that Anglo-Saxon tradition which included all that was decent in Western civilization. He would have had no part of any organization that united nations without regard to common cultural heritage.

Wister had searched out years earlier a private equivalent of the cultural tradition he was expounding for all America in these books. One central point was that, if the nation was to avoid the specter of racial reduction to the lowest common denominator, people of culture and intelligence must have more children. As in so many things, Roosevelt had pointed the way in this. Early in their friendship Roosevelt had suggested that it was

simply a question of the multiplication table. If all our nice friends in Beacon Street, and Fifth Avenue, and Philadelphia, have one child, or no child at all, while all the Finnegans, Hooligans, Antonios, Mandelbaums, and Rabinskis have eight, or nine, or ten—it's simply a question of the multiplication table.⁴⁶

Wister, the father of six children himself, made of this a mystique of blood. He angrily repudiated the notion that Brandeis and Holmes were kindred minds, for one was descended "from the English Common Law, evolved by the genius of a people who have built themselves the greatest nation in a thousand years," while the other had the blood notions of an "Oriental race."⁴⁷ Unless those of the right blood lines could be encouraged to propagate more liberally,

⁴⁶Wister, Roosevelt, p. 66.

⁴⁷Roosevelt, pp. 134, 137.

it was only "a question of time when the old American stock would die out and our Republic fall to pieces in the hands of races that did not have the tradition or the power of self-government in their blood."⁴⁸

Wister had explored the "blood will tell" theme in elementary form as early as 1901 in Philosophy 4, a cheerfully vicious novelette of undergraduate life at Harvard in the 1880's. Here it appears in the contrast between two well-bred and happily un-studious undergraduates and the slum-born bookworm with a "suave and slightly alien accent" who tutors them at extortionist rates for a philosophy examination.⁴⁹ Oscar Maironi, the bookworm, is the product of that immigrant heredity and environment that Wister found so antithetical to true American values. He had known no philosophy but that of getting the better of his fellow man, and could not possibly understand the boys with good colonial names who care about other things more than money. Nor can Harvard change him. Oscar grubs his way through courses, memorizes notes, keeps his eye on the main chance, and never allows his mind a moment of originality. The limitations imposed by such attitudes are apparent in his future fortune when compared with that of young men who are, because of their good American backgrounds, truly successful as human beings. They move on to success in

⁴⁸Neighbors Henceforth (New York, 1922), p. 373.

⁴⁹Philosophy 4, A Story of Harvard University (New York, 1924), p. 14.

business. Oscar, on the other hand, plods and schemes his way to publishing a dry-as-dust book and to writing book reviews for a bad newspaper. Roosevelt, with his usual admiration of whatever in Wister's work confirmed his own notions of true Americanism, wrote years later: "Have just been re-reading Philosophy 4. You may think it a skit. I regard it as containing a deep and subtle moral."⁵⁰

Wister pursued this "deep and subtle moral" in expounding his attitudes toward the struggling forces of capital and labor in American life. He saw them both as extensions of those things implicit in Oscar: the drive to get ahead and become rich at any cost, combined with the alien's disregard for the true values of traditional America. He tried manfully to maintain an impartial pox-on-both-your-houses viewpoint, but inevitably found himself leaning toward the capitalist camp whence so many people of his own social class had drifted. "In short," he wrote in one of many such passages, "when it came to comparing the greed of Labor with the greed of Capital, Labor, being less intelligent, could easily outswine Capital."⁵¹

Though perhaps he would not have admitted it to himself, the fact that capitalists as a class were likely to dress better and smell better than laborers would have excused for him some of their other crudities. Asked, as the result of an article he

⁵⁰Wister, Roosevelt, p. 358.

⁵¹Roosevelt, p. 217.

had written, to run for selectman of Philadelphia's seventh ward on a reform ticket, Wister described his campaign as making speeches "in stinking halls and rank tobacco smoke to dirty niggers and dingy whites."⁵² These were the laboring people, and he could not love them. At least there was hope that in time the capitalists might be scrubbed and civilized. Meanwhile, the best that could happen was for the man of true genius (Theodore Roosevelt) to strike a balance between these disruptive forces. In his here-worship Wister believed quite literally that national salvation in time of crisis came through the appearance of the man of genius at the crucial moment. "To have produced," he wrote, in establishing a political tradition that would make most historians shudder, "at three stages of our growth three such men as Washington, Lincoln, and Roosevelt, is quite sufficient justification for our existence."⁵³

But in addition to fighting the jarring forces of American society, Wister fled from them. One refuge was the South. Here truly was a cultural tradition like his own, which was daily disappearing in the North. Himself the grandson of a Southern rice planter, he visited Charleston on his honeymoon in 1898 and returned four years later to complete the final pages of The Virginian. He found the city a wholesome relief from the general American scene, "an oasis in our great American desert of mongrel

⁵² Roosevelt, p. 267.

⁵³ A Straight Deal, p. 69.

din and haste."⁵⁴ In 1906 he commemorated what he found there in a novel. Ostensibly a light romance, it is actually a study of Wister's version of the good society and a convenient summary of his political, religious, racial, and social beliefs.

He had found in the South, he wrote, people "with whom I felt just as direct a national kinship as with the Western cow-punchers, and which I feel less and less in places like New York, Boston, and Philadelphia, that are affected by too many people of varying traditions."⁵⁵ Like the Old West, the South that Wister loved was disappearing. "In Lady Baltimore, my portrait of Charleston, the emphasis is laid upon the passing elders more than upon the coming youth, for the sake of the precious thing that was never to return."⁵⁶ But it was a brave and cheerful society that was dying, "So I wrote Lady Baltimore, not as a tragedy but as a comedy; calling Charleston Kings Port, owing to the suggestion made by Henry James that I invent some slight disguise for the real name; it would help me to move more freely. Into the action of the comedy, I wove the incident of Dr. Crum's appointment as Collector of the Port."⁵⁷

Roosevelt had appointed a Negro, Dr. Crum, Collector of the

⁵⁴Wister, Roosevelt, p. 103.

⁵⁵Roosevelt, p. 247.

⁵⁶Roosevelt, p. 104.

⁵⁷Roosevelt, p. 247.

Port at Charleston, and had further infuriated the South by having Booker T. Washington to dinner at the White House. For the only time on record Wister openly disagreed with his hero. Stormed the heroine of Lady Baltimore:

"Why can't somebody explain it to him? If I knew him, I would go to him myself, and I would say, 'Mr. President, we need not discuss our different tastes as to dinner company. Nor need we discuss how much you benefit the colored race by an act which makes every member of it immediately think that he is fit to dine with any king in the world. But you are staying in a house which is partly our house, ours, the South's, for we, too, pay taxes, you know. And since you also know our deep feeling—you may even call it a prejudice, if it so pleases you—do you not think that, so long as you are residing in that house, you should not gratuitously shock our deep feeling?'"⁵⁸

Wister, while staying at the White House, took up the argument with Roosevelt himself. At every meal for three days Roosevelt defended his appointment of Crum and his invitation to Washington, seeking approval from his old and loyal friend. Finally the President was worn down by Wister's stubborn refusal to agree: "'Well,' he said, his jaw struggling over what was coming, 'if I had it to do over again, I—don't—think—I'd—do it.'"⁵⁹

Roosevelt failed in his plea for approval because his actions on behalf of Crum and Booker Washington touched an even deeper taproot in Wister than the code of personal loyalty.

⁵⁸Lady Baltimore (New York, 1906), pp. 90-91.

⁵⁹Wister, Roosevelt, p. 118.

Wister's concept of social order was based firmly upon the class consciousness of that early Harvard "we," the belief in the inferiority of certain groups; he would have none of such egalitarian acts as placing a Negro in authority over whites or choosing dinner company without regard to race. Certain passages in Lady Baltimore, he wrote, "have been interpreted most surprisingly to signify a feeling against the colored race, that is by no means mine. My only wish regarding these people, to whom we owe an immeasurable responsibility, is to see the best that is in them prevail."⁶⁰

This emphatically did not mean social or political equality. The hero of Lady Baltimore, in a passage which the uninitiated might first read as irony but which candidly sets forth part of Wister's code of conduct, illustrates the proper attitude of the gentleman toward the Negro: "The young man hailed the negro by his first name with that particular and affectionate superiority which few Northerners can understand and none can acquire, and which resembles nothing so much as the way in which you speak to your old dog who has loved you and followed you, because you have cared for him."⁶¹ Good Negroes recognize the responsibility felt by the master for his dog and are grateful. Remarks one of them to the young Southern gentleman who has found himself suddenly in the intolerable position of being the subordinate of Roosevelt's

⁶⁰ Lady Baltimore, p. ix.

⁶¹ Lady Baltimore, p. 54.

Dr. Crum: "Mas' John, I speck de President he dun' know de cullud people like we knows 'um, else he nebber bin 'pint dat ar boss in de Cussum House, no sah."⁶²

The Negro's inferiority, Wister is at pains to prove, is scientifically demonstrable through physical anthropology. Viewing the skulls of an ape, a Negro, and a Caucasian, the narrator reaches this conclusion:

There was a similarity of shape, a kinship there between the three, which stared you in the face; but in the contours of the vaulted skull, the projecting jaws, and the great molar teeth—what was to be seen? Why, in every respect that the African departed from the Caucasian, he departed in the direction of the ape! Here was zoology mutely but eloquently telling us why there had blossomed no Confucius, no Moses, no Napoleon, upon that black stem; why no Iliad, no Parthenon, no Sistine Madonna, had ever risen from that tropic mud.⁶³

But the answer to social, political, and economic relationships is not a return to the cruelties of the past. If the Fifteenth Amendment is a monstrous folly, slavery was an equally monstrous barbarism. "We need not expect," muses Wister's narrator,

a Confucius from the negro, nor yet a Chesterfield; but I am an enemy also of that blind and base hate against him, which conducts nowhere save to the de-civilizing of white and black alike. Who brought him here? Did he invite himself? Then let us make the best of it and teach him, lead him, compel him to live self-respecting, not as a statesman, poet, or financier, but by the honorable toil of his hand and the sweat of his brow. Because the "door of hope" was once opened too suddenly for him is no reason for slamming it now ferever in his face.⁶⁴

⁶²Lady Baltimore, p. 116.

⁶³Lady Baltimore, p. 171.

⁶⁴Lady Baltimore, p. 175.

The situation, Wister believed, was "like two men having to live in the same house. The white man would keep the house in repair, the black would let it rot. Well the black must take orders from the white. And it will end so."⁶⁵

Built upon this recognition of the Negro's proper place was the Southern society that Wister found so admirable. It was a society of quality, not equality. It embraced order, decorum, reverence for tradition, the deep pride of place that showed itself in the endless recounting of an incident in which the wit of a local lady overmatched the visiting William Makepeace Thackeray. It implied compactness, homogeneity of membership, a rootedness in a common culture that took no account of sectionalism. As the Northern narrator tells his Southern friend:

But we were a family once, and a fine one, too. We knew each other, we visited each other, we wrote letters, sent presents, kept up relations; we, in short, coherently joined hands from one generation to another; the fibres of the sons tingled with the current from their fathers, back and back to the old beginnings, to Plymouth and Roanoke and Rip Van Winkle! It's all gone, all done, all over. You have to be a small well-knit country for that sort of exquisite personal unitedness. There's nothing united about these States any more, except Standard Oil and discontent. We're no longer a small people living and dying for a great idea; we're a big people living and dying for money. And these ladies of yours—well, they have made me homesick for a national and social past which I never saw, but which my old people knew....In their quiet clean-cut faces I seem to see a reflection of the old serene candlelight we all once talked and danced in..., the portraits by Copley and Gilbert Stuart; a young girl at a square piano, singing Moore's melodies—and Mr. Pinckney or Commodore Perry,

⁶⁵ Lady Baltimore, p. 205.

perhaps, dropping in for a hot supper...! Such quiet faces are gone now in the breathless, competing North: ground into oblivion between the clashing trades of the competing men and the clashing jewels and chandeliers of their competing wives--while yours have lingered on, spared by your very adversity. And that's why I shall miss your old people when they follow mine--because they're the last of their kind, the end of the chain, the bold original stock, the great race that made our glory grow and saw that it did grow through thick and thin: the good old native blood of independence.⁶⁶

In such a society breeding, taste, and propriety could be relied upon for guidance in all things, substituting acceptably for an earlier theology and all the lost gods of the past, for "even if one has ceased to believe some parts of the Bible, even if one does not always obey the Ten Commandments, one is bound, not as a believer but as a gentleman, to remember the difference between grossness and refinement, between excess and restraint."⁶⁷

No social order of this nature, no such code of mental and moral elegance, Wister felt, could long survive in contemporary America. They presupposed an agricultural base for the economic system (though he was comfortably vague about this), and had room for no brand of commercialism that included Wall Street and ticker tapes.

The freedom-loving American, the embattled farmer, is not yet extinct in the far recesses. But the great cities grow like a creeping paralysis, and the man from the country is walking into them all the time....And when he doesn't go to them, they come to him. The Wall Street bucket-shop goes

⁶⁶Lady Baltimore, pp. 65-66.

⁶⁷Lady Baltimore, pp. 77-78.

fishing in the woods with wires a thousand miles long....The labor union forbids the workingman to labor as his own virile energy and skill prompt him....Eternal vigilance cannot watch liberty and the ticker at the same time.⁶⁸

Kings Port—Charleston—was dying. Losing its young as soon as they could strike out for themselves, it remained "this little city of oblivion...shut in with its lavender and pressed-rose memories, a handful of people who were like that great society of the world, the high society of distinguished men and women who exist no more."⁶⁹

But if the good society survived only in isolated eddies of the past like Kings Port, the new social order which has replaced it is a sharp falling off. It is characterized by the "yellow rich," the "Replacers":

And these were the Replacers, whom Beverly's clear-sighted eyes saw swarming around the temple of his civilization, pushing down the aisles, climbing over the backs of the benches, walking over each other's bodies, and seizing those front seats which his family had sat in since New York had been New York.⁷⁰

Usually Jews or of foreign birth, the Replacers had risen from the slime of Eastern cities to dominate society in a debased age, parvenues who bought their family pictures and divorced and married each other with disconcerting regularity. It is one of Kings Port's many virtues that she "has a long road to go before

⁶⁸Lady Baltimore, p. 112.

⁶⁹Lady Baltimore, p. 49.

⁷⁰Lady Baltimore, p. 309.

she will consider marriage provincial and chastity obsolete."⁷¹

But for all America, in Wister's view, this road of loss and degradation and vulgarity was the one our citizenry was traveling, at whatever pace.

If one has in mind these aspects of Wister's view of the American scene, it is difficult at first to understand how the West could attract him as it did. He was deeply committed to the stable, tradition-bound society. The mobile, rootless social order of the West was virtually without tradition. He found his personal political roots in strong Hamiltonian government, government which permitted the best class of Americans to lead with a firm hand their less gifted countrymen. The West had ever rumbled with the heavy tramp of muddy Jacksonian boots. Wister admired the tightly-knit culture in which a commonly shared and long nurtured taste could be depended upon as the final arbiter of all questions, whether of music or morality, and where bonds of friendship and good manners overcame sectional differences. No historian has ever seen in the West, spread as it was over thousands of miles and without even a common economic base, any such homogeneity of taste and values, and the region has ever been deeply committed to sectionalism. How, then, could Wister carry his candlelight company of the well-bred, with their shared heritage of Moore's melodies and Stuart's portraits, into that raw land beyond the farming frontier and find there something to admire?

⁷¹Lady Baltimore, p. 68.

Part of the answer is made clear in an article he published in 1895, the year of his first book. In it he vented his disgust with the new East that had risen to supplant the quiet land of his fathers and set forth his view of the West. "No rood of modern ground," he wrote of the East,

is more debased and mongrel with its hordes of encroaching alien vermin, that turn our cities to Babels and our citizenship to a hybrid farce, who degrade our commonwealth from a nation into something half pawn-shop, half broker's office. But to survive in the clean cattle country requires spirit of adventure, courage, and self-sufficiency; you will not find many Poles or Huns or Russian Jews in that district.⁷²

The West, he felt, was the last refuge for that Anglo-Saxon blood which had built America. "The Frenchman today is seen at his best inside a house; he can paint and he can play comedy, but he seldom climbs a new mountain. The Italian has forgotten Columbus, and sells fruit....But the Anglo-Saxon is still forever homesick for out-of-doors."⁷³ The only out-of-doors left was the West, and there the Saxon's temperament inevitably drove him. The environment itself, moreover, kept at bay the hated Jews and foreigners.

Far from being a land without tradition as we might surmise, the West possessed the noblest of all traditions. It traced back to an Anglo-Saxon culture of a happier age, to an age of chivalry and high honor and gallant knights. The cowboy was himself the

⁷²"The Evolution of the Cow-Puncher," Harper's Magazine, XCI (September, 1895), 602-03.

⁷³Wister, Harper's Magazine, XCI, 604.

direct descendant of Anglo-Saxon knighthood, for to the eye equipped to see "the knight and the cowboy are nothing but the same Saxon of different environments, the nobleman in London and nobleman in Texas."⁷⁴ Responding to the call of his aristocratic blood the Saxon moved West from Virginia and Tennessee and Kentucky to displace the inferior Mexican on the Texas plains.

"Soon he had taken what was good from this small, deceitful alien, including his name, Vaquero, which he translated into Cowboy."⁷⁵ Faced with the challenge of a primitive environment the transplanted Saxon quickly broke through the thin shell of an Eastern civilization that harbored the foreign and unfit to the good, primitive core of instinct carried by his blood. He became the naturally good man, with an instinctive respect for a good woman, for true justice, for human dignity. His tragedy was that which Wister saw for the Anglo-Saxon heritage everywhere: he could not long survive. He was, Wister was aware, disappearing even as the words were written. Never had the knight on horseback been compatible with progress. "He has never made a good citizen, but only a good soldier, from his tournament days down."⁷⁶ One measure of his disappearance could be seen even then in the rise in the West of the Populist, one more recrudescence of un-American ideas.

⁷⁴Harper's Magazine, XCI, 606.

⁷⁵Harper's Magazine, XCI, 608.

⁷⁶Harper's Magazine, XCI, 617.

Thus the West answered Wister's desire for purity of racial stock. But, he felt sure, it produced something else equally dear to his heart: a natural aristocracy. The social Darwinism that Roosevelt applied to history in The Winning of the West, as one critic has noted, Wister incorporated in his fiction.⁷⁷ With his hatred of the effects produced upon American values and traditions by the new economics, he could not use Spencer's doctrines to justify robber barons and entrepreneurs as the predictable result of the untrammelled operation of natural laws. Indeed, he saw such figures as the consequence of violation of natural law. He inveighed against both trusts and labor unions because they prevented the individual from freely seeking his own level. But the West was something else again. There, in a simpler setting, the individual found his own way without benefit of such artificial restraints as interlocking directorates or economic alliances with fellow laborers. The result could only be that the cream would rise above the milk. The way was thus open for Wister to fuse his notion of the select and carefully ordered society with his romantic view of a primitive social order—and to prove that they came to the same thing, that both produced by natural selection an aristocracy capable of leading less gifted members of the human community. The happy time of his fathers could be re-enacted, if fleetingly, in a new land. Propounds the narrator of The Virginian:

⁷⁷ Mody C. Beatright, "The American Myth Rides the Range: Owen Wister's Man on Horseback," Southwest Review, XXXVI (Summer, 1951), 160.

There can be no doubt of this:—

All America is divided into two classes,—the quality and the equality. The latter will always recognize the former when mistaken for it. Both will be with us until our women bear nothing but kings.

It was through the Declaration of Independence that we Americans acknowledged the eternal inequality of man. For by it we abolished a cut-and-dried aristocracy. We had seen little men artificially held up in high places, and great men artificially held down in low places, and our own justice-loving hearts abhorred this violence to human nature. Therefore, we decreed that every man should thenceforth have equal liberty to find his own level. By this very decree we acknowledged and gave freedom to true aristocracy, saying, "Let the best man win, whoever he is." Let the best man win! That is America's word. That is true democracy. And true democracy and true aristocracy are one and the same thing. If anybody cannot see this, so much the worse for his eyesight.⁷⁸

If such an aristocracy seems to turn a deaf ear to the threatening mutters of Populism it is because Populism had nothing to do with Wister's West. Though he might invoke that "freedom-loving American, the embattled farmer" in a moment of patriotic fervor, he felt no more kinship with the plowman than with the factory hand. The West was that magic land where the enthralled Easterner could be blind to all but the object of his desire. An entry in Wister's journal for 1891 bears remarkable resemblance to Francis Parkman's observations of forty-five years earlier:

On way here yesterday, passed emigrants on their way from Black Hills to Oregon. Three slow crawling wagons ("prairie schooners") with their white tops and long teams. A woman riding straddle, several other women, and any amount of children. The women do this work, and the children are begotten and raised along the journey. A miserable population.

⁷⁸Owen Wister, The Virginian (New York, 1903), p. 147.

These people, it seems, have been moving in this way pretty much all over the continent west of the Missouri, settling nowhere.⁷⁹

If Wister was not in search of Parkman's beloved Oglallah Sioux in his journeys to the West, he was certainly not looking for emigrant dirt farmers. If he felt roots in an agrarian tradition it was that of the plantation, not the homestead.

In addition to his social and political views, Wister brought with him to his writing of the West a body of literary tradition and theory. From his early friendship with Howells he took a familiarity--and disagreement--with the doctrine of realism as preached by its most influential exponent, finding it "pretentious in its assumption of superior veracity. Once the author creates the illusion of actuality, what matter if he tells me about Louis the Eleventh, or the smells his own nose has smelt in the slums?" Howells's realism, Wister felt, falls short because he "turns his mirror away from a very elemental reality in human nature, so compelled by the taste of his epoch and by that personal reticence which dwelt in him."⁸⁰ Not that Wister favored faithful reproduction of life's uglier aspects. On one Western trip he made a long ride in the company of a brutal rancher who, enraged with a horse he had pushed beyond its endurance, gouged out the animal's eye with his thumb. Wister's journal entry

⁷⁹Fanny Kemble Wister, "Owen Wister's West, II," Atlantic Monthly, CXCV (June, 1955), 53.

⁸⁰Owen Wister, "William Dean Howells," Atlantic Monthly, CLX (December, 1937), 712-13.

describing the incident is long and vivid, portraying as well his own reaction of horror and condemning his personal inability to act.⁸¹ He used the incident in a story that he later incorporated in The Virginian, but he twice altered it to suit Roosevelt, a critic who felt that literature should present scenes which elevate the mind, not degrade it.⁸² In its final version the bit of sadism appears as an unidentified and unmentionable act of cruelty. We are told that something barbaric has been done but not what it is.

As in politics and social theory, Wister would depend upon the accepted standards of the gentleman in literary matters; though he recognized that standards change, he would not push realism beyond that which was decent and tasteful to the well-bred. What he sought was that comfortable measure of fidelity and frankness which would not disgust. "When once," he wrote toward the end of his life, "I proposed a Western tale of passion gone wrong to the editor of Harper's Weekly, he threw up his hands and gasped, 'Nothing about sex!' Well, too little about it is better than the whoredom of Hollywood."⁸³

Yet if he excluded the offensive from his version of reality, Wister nevertheless approached his work on the West with a sense

⁸¹Fanny Kemble Wister, Atlantic Monthly, CXCV, 54-55.

⁸²Wister, Roosevelt, pp. 17, 99.

⁸³"In Homage to Mark Twain," Harper's Magazine, CLXXI (October, 1935), 554.

of high purpose and a sincere intention of laying bare the meaning of the region. In June of 1891, a few months before he wrote his first Western story, he made the following entry in his journal:

I begin to conclude, from five seasons of observation, that life in this negligent, irresponsible wilderness tends to turn people shiftless, incompetent, and cruel. I noticed in 1885 and I notice today a sloth, in doing anything and everything, that is born of the deceitful ease with which makeshifts answer here. Did I believe in the efficacy of prayer, I should petition to be the hand that once for all chronicled and laid bare the virtues and the vices of this extraordinary phase of American social progress. Nobody has done it. Nobody has touched anywhere near it. A few have described external sights and incidents, but the grand total thing—its rise, its hysterical unreal prosperity, and its disenchanting downfall; all this and its influence on the various sorts of human character that have been subjected to it—has not been hinted at by a single writer that I, at least, have heard of. The fact is, it is quite worthy of a Tolstoi or George Eliot or Dickens. Thackeray wouldn't do.⁸⁴

Long before he thought of depicting the West himself, in addition to trying to enlist James in the cause, Wister sat up till two in the morning preaching its possibilities for pictorial art to John Sargent. He found some hope in the stories of Mary Hallock Foote, in Charles King's portraits of frontier life, and in the pictures of Frederic Remington that the West would come into its own; and, of course, he admired the scenes of Montana drawn by Roosevelt.⁸⁵

⁸⁴Fanny Kemble Wister, Atlantic Monthly, CXCV, 55.

⁸⁵Wister, Members of the Family, pp. 14-15.

In addition to James, Wister felt that Twain, whom he visited during the 1890's, also influenced his work. In an article paying homage to the master, Wister spoke particularly of Roughing It, which had delighted him from schoolboy days.⁸⁶ Twain, Bret Harte, Artemus Ward, Bill Nye—all these, he felt, partook of a livelier spirit than that of his own time; they lived and wrote in America's day of expansion, before Ellis Island and the new economics of industrialism destroyed old dreams. It was Twain's tragedy to have lived on into a darker age. In his indictment of mankind Twain had passed from the sunshine of his first work into grim disillusionment. The heritage of Calvinism which had so long blighted the sunshine of American existence must bear part of the blame, but the sad changes in America were directly responsible: "How could he witness the death of the rough, heroic Lincoln era, the birth of our many-headed greed...and not feel that at this point in our growth we are like certain apples which rot while they are still green?"⁸⁷

The debt to Harte and to the tradition of the tall tale as it was developed by Ward, Nye, and Twain are apparent in Wister's work. He had been prepared for the West by still other writers. If he didn't know what Charlie Siringo was doing (and there is no evidence that he did), he knew the West presented in the pages of Cooper and Irving and Parkman. He remembered his first view

⁸⁶ Harper's Magazine, CLXXI, 548.

⁸⁷ Harper's Magazine, CLXXI, 555.

of it as fulfillment of the anticipation they had aroused, an anticipation of that wild and free empire West where all restraints were gone.

Wyoming burst upon the tenderfoot resplendent, like all the story-books, like Cooper and Irving and Parkman come true again; here, actually going on, was that something which the boy runs away from school to find, that land safe and far from Monday morning, nine o'clock, and the spelling book; here was Saturday eternal, where you slept out-of-doors, hunted big animals, rode a horse, roped steers, and wore deadly weapons. Make no mistake: fire-arms were at times practical and imperative, but this was not the whole reason for sporting them on your hip; you had escaped from civilization's schoolroom, an air never breathed before filled your lungs, and you were become one large shout of joy....Were you seeking fortune? Perhaps, incidentally, but money was not the point; you had escaped from school. This holiday was leavened by hard bodily work, manly deeds, and deeds heroic, and beneath all the bright brave ripple moved the ground-swell of tragedy. Something of promise, also, was in the air, promise of a democracy which the East had missed.⁸⁸

In his Western journals, only a minute portion of which are available, entries for the first years indicate the emergence into thought of these things which pervade his Western work: the enchantment of a young man with a romantic new world; the desire to comprehend and embrace and describe the region; the eagerness of coming fresh upon a gallant age and a virgin land, mixed with the sorrowful conviction that it is already late in the day and all will soon sink into that black abyss of American mediocrity.

One must come to the West to realize what one may have most probably believed all one's life long—that it is a very much bigger place than the East,

⁸⁸ Members of the Family, pp. 10-11.

and the future America is just bubbling and seething in bare legs and pinafores here.

We passed this morning the most ominous and forbidding chasm of rocks I ever saw in any country. Deep down below a camp fire is burning. It all looked like Die Walkure—this which is much more than my most romantic dream could have hoped.

Every man, woman, and cowboy I see comes from the East—and generally from New England, thank goodness. If that's the stock that is going to fill these big fields with people, our first hundred years will grow to be only the mythological beginnings in the time to come. I feel more certainly than ever that no matter how completely the East may be the headwaters from which the West has flown and is flowing, it won't be a century before the West is the true America, with thought, type, and life of its own kind.

The details of life here are interesting. Wish I could find out all about it—and master it—theoretically. It's a life as strange as any the country has seen and it will slowly make room for Cheyennes, Chicagos, and ultimately inland New Yorks—everything, reduced to the same flat prairie-like level of utilitarian civilization. Branans and Beeches will give way to Tweeds and Jay Goulds, and the ticker will replace the rifle.

Great God!! I've just killed a bear and I'm writing this by his bloody carcass—6:30 A.M.⁸⁹

The books which Wister fashioned out of such impressions, and out of his experiences, memories, and the tales told to him by army friends and cowboys, may be grouped into categories of contrasting themes: 1) stories of the Easterner in the West, juxtaposing the two cultures and owing something, certainly, to James's theme of the American in Europe; to be seen against stories in which the West and its people are the sole subject, implying acceptance of Western values without reference to any

⁸⁹Fanny Kemble Wister, "Owen Wister's West, I," Atlantic Monthly, CXCV (May, 1955), 30-33.

more sophisticated society; 2) stories in which the theme is the ultimate triumph of society and authority over the individual and lawlessness, in contrast to stories celebrating without censure the individual and his freedom in the West, though that freedom extend to crime; 3) and finally, the special case—though, of course, it contained elements which were constants in Wister's work—of The Virginian, his only sustained attempt to make the West conform to the East by fashioning an acceptably genteel hero. Long ago a notion arose to the effect that Wister's earlier books were merely preparation for The Virginian and that everything that followed was pale repetition. Even so astute a critic of Western letters as Bernard DeVoto has fallen into this failure to look deeply into Wister's work.⁹⁰ Actually, exactly the reverse is true. The earlier books had in them themes and suggestions of themes which Wister was to employ far more characteristically and successfully than anything in The Virginian—though it was The Virginian that became the prototype for countless shoddy novels on the West.

In the preface to his first book of short stories, Red Men and White, Wister refers to his subject matter as already the stuff of history, "our Western Frontier as it was in a past as near as yesterday and almost as by-gone as the Revolution." His purpose as a writer was to bring to the Atlantic American the meaning of the wild West, that "violent and romantic era in

⁹⁰ "Birth of an Art," Harper's Magazine, CCXI (December, 1955), 9.

eruption upon his soil."⁹¹ His method would be simple fidelity: "When our national life, our own soil, is so rich in adventures to record, what need is there for one to call upon his invention save to draw, if he can, characters who shall fit these strange and dramatic scenes? One cannot improve upon such realities."⁹²

Most of the stories in this volume indicate fidelity to this earnest, if rather artless, theory of literature. They deal with subjects indigenous to ordinary life in the West in the years following the Civil War; in them Wister tried to bring to Eastern readers those "strange and dramatic scenes" he had heard around the campfire.

In "Little Big Horn Medicine" a young Crow Indian, furnished with seltzer salts that effervesce in water and make it appear to boil, is deluded into believing himself a great medicine man by a white war profiteer. Convinced that he has been commissioned by his gods to regain the Crow homelands from the whites, the boy defies his father and the tribal elders to lead an abortive uprising of a few young Crows against the local cavalry troop. He is killed in a brief skirmish, and Indians and whites return to their outwardly placid, if inwardly uneasy, coexistence. The boy is a victim of an unlucky combination of ancient superstitions, old tales of tribal glory, and a white man's cupidity. His necessary destruction is an illustration of the pathos that attended the displacement of one people by another in the West,

⁹¹Red Men and White (New York, 1895), p. v.

⁹²Red Men and White, p. ix.

that strange and brutal land where human life could hang on seltzer salts.

In a somewhat similar tale General Crook has to drive back to the reservation a roving band of Paiutes for no greater offense than disturbing a rancher by drinking up his liniment and dipping his cats in molasses and feathers. Again it is a matter of clashing cultures, with necessity taking precedence over justice in governing action. As Crook remarks of the Paiute chief, "We've got to catch him. I'm sorry for him. He doesn't see why he shouldn't hunt anywhere as his fathers did. I shouldn't see that either."⁹³ The soldiers, recognizing a natural justice, almost cheer when the chief escapes to freedom, taking with him their squaw interpreter, who is abandoning her place of privilege with the whites and her brood of half-breed children to return to her kind.

Though he treats his Indians sympathetically, Wister directed his attention in these stories primarily toward the men of the army, men who did a lonely and difficult job without support or even understanding from the East. Frontier troops, he knew, spent their lives being ordered about by Easterners who had never seen Indians and who were concerned with policies only in terms of political repercussions and expediency, never in terms of justice. This army lived in hardship and boredom and danger on poor pay and bad rations; for good measure it fought its

⁹³ Red Men and White, p. 99.

infrequent battles and performed its constant patrols with shoddy equipment produced by grafting manufacturers. To Wister the soldiers were the forgotten men of America's Western march, and he told their story with sympathy.

Other tales in this collection are obviously derivative. One recounts the mining camp murder of a dance hall proprietress by her middle-aged lover when he learns she has taken up with a younger man. The miners, lusting for a speedy and elemental justice, catch the young interloper in suspicious circumstances and summarily hang him. The real murderer, who had been planning to deal with his supplanter in man-to-man fashion, feels cheated of true justice:

Drylyn's eyes ran painfully over ditch and diggings, the near cabins and the distant hills, then returned to the messenger. "Him and me," he muttered. "It ain't square. Him and me--" Suddenly he broke out, "I don't choose him to think I was that kind of man!"

Before they could catch him he fell, and the wet knife slid from his fingers. "Sheriff," he began, but his tone changed. "I'm overtakin' him!" he said. "He's going to know now. Lay me alongside--"

And so they did.⁹⁴

And so, too, did Wister indicate his debt to Bret Harte.

"La Tinaja Bonita" also has an ending in the manner of Harte, but for all that it is a more complex and interesting story. This time the clash of cultures is concretized in an American peddler and a Mexican girl. "Never had a woman been

⁹⁴Red Men and White, p. 130.

for him like Lolita, conjuring the Saxon to forget himself and bask openly in that Southern joy and laughter of the moment."⁹⁵ It is inability to understand and trust the Mexican temperament that drives the American into attempting a desert crossing which destroys them both. If the ending is melodramatic and contrived, the central ordeal of the desert journey is well conceived and executed, convincingly depicting a man's struggle against the elemental forces of a harsh land and the no less elemental forces of distrust and humorlessness in his own narrow Yankee nature. In this story Wister was able to rise for once above his view of the Mexican as no more than a "small and deceitful alien."

Two stories have a theme which was to become common in Wister's pages: the triumph of law and order over foolish sentiment and recalcitrant individualism. In one, the citizens of a California town are angered into lynching two murdering stage robbers as a rebuke to the ridiculous philanthropism of the local Ladies' Reform and Literary Lyceum. In the other the newly-appointed governor of Idaho Territory, in the years just following the Civil War, brings about a second Missouri Compromise by tricking Southern-born legislators into taking the required oath to support the federal Constitution.

The last and longest story in this volume presents a more complex view of the West than Wister had managed up to that time. In "A Pilgrim on the Gila" a young Eastern narrator (Wister himself

⁹⁵ Red Men and White, p. 186.

can never be really separated from the faceless, nameless narrator he so often employed; the narrator's views are Wister's own) travels, fresh from hearing extravagant pro-statehood descriptions of Arizona in Washington, to the Territory itself. What he finds is not the fertile land of milk and honey described by the Boy Orator of the Rio Grande but a grim and magnificent country inhabited by a people who are capable of great decency and great baseness in equal measure. The San Carlos-Thatcher-Safford area along the Gila, the Eastern pilgrim finds, is ruled by a Mormon bishop who fixes county elections and the price of tomatoes with equal efficiency. "Bishop Meakum," relates one of the characters, "worked his way down here from Utah through desert and starvation, mostly afoot, for a thousand miles, and his flock today is about the only class in the Territory that knows what prosperity feels like, and his laws are about the only laws folks don't care to break."⁹⁶ The Bishop's sermons deal with such homely matters as keeping pig pens and garbage well away from the houses, and his leadership holds his people from falling into the shiftless ways of the gentiles. But his wisdom stops short at the borders of the Territory; anything that comes from the outside is the Territory's lawful prey. This includes army paymasters, one of whom is robbed by a gang that includes some of the Bishop's many sons. The robbers are exonerated by a Tucson jury also packed with Meakum disciples. The narrator's impressions

⁹⁶Red Men and White, p. 223.

of the trial summarize the theme of the story:

I began to notice how popular sympathy was not only quite against the United States, but a sentiment amounting to hatred was shown against all soldiers. The voice of respectability seemed entirely silent.... The mildest opinion was that Uncle Sam could afford to lose money better than poor people, and the strongest was that it was a pity the soldiers had not been killed. This seemed inappropriate in a Territory desiring admission to our Union. I supposed it to be something local then, but have since observed it to be a prevailing Western antipathy. The unthinking sons of the sage-brush ill tolerate a thing which stands for discipline, good order, and obedience, and the man who lets another command him they despise. I can think of no threat more evil for our democracy, for it is a fine thing diseased and perverted—namely, independence gone drunk.⁹⁷

This aspect of the empire West both fascinated and frightened Wister. Defining that delicate balance between freedom and license, between independence and anarchy, came to be a major project in his pages. In The Virginian Wister answered his question, How free can man be in the West? as an Easterner, making over the West in the image of the East. But "A Pilgrim on the Gila" treats with tolerance and understanding the mores of an isolated region, describes without condescension a social system that would have seemed preposterously unsophisticated and uncivilized in Newport. The story's good-humored tone suggests, if not comprehension, then at least lively appreciation of a people who have learned to live together as best they might in a harsh and forbidding land.

For the most part these are unpretentious tales, the honest

⁹⁷ Red Men and White, pp. 268-69.

impressions of a novel country and people by a sympathetic observer. It would be wrong to impute to them profundity or great complexity. Yet here Wister tried to present the West as he saw it. In these pages are no satanic villains or flawless heroes--just representatives of a social order catholic enough to embrace many disparate elements. Fascination with the pageant being enacted, and admiration of the courage and honesty he found, are mixed with dismay at the prevalence of lawlessness and disorder. Missing are the familiar Wister cowboys, and missing too is the familiar lament for a moment of history that has been forever lost. Red Men and White is Wister's morning voyage to the West, untinged with regret, open-eyed with innocence and delight, filled with hope for a splendid land once order prevails there. If some of the stories are derivative and anecdotal, others are honest attempts to capture the humor and idiom and temper of the people. At best they suggest something of the inevitable loss that accompanies the cultural transformation of a region and the fumbling efforts by which people come to find a basis of living together in a new land.

Lin McLean, published in 1897, was Wister's second book. This, too, is a collection of stories, but this time they are connected by a chronicle of the fortunes of a central character. The hero of these tales is a young cowboy, one of Wister's happy, unheeding wanderers of the cattle country. The stories here collected cover his career from the total irresponsibility of the wandering nomad to the settled existence of a man of property and

family. "The nomadic, bachelor West is over," Wister wrote in the preface to a later book; "the housed, married West is established."⁹⁸ Lin McLean is the record of one man's journey over that common road.

McLean's passage to maturity begins with a journey back to his home in Massachusetts. There he learns, through a brother who is ashamed of Lin's Western clothes and manner, that the Westerner truly can never go home again, for the East (a favorite Wister thesis, of course) is no longer really America. Remarks Lin: "It weren't home I had went to back East, layin' round them big cities, where a man can't help but feel strange all the week. No sir! yu' can blow in a thousand dollars like I did in New York, and it'll not give yu' any more home feelin' than what cattle has put in a stockyard."⁹⁹

McLean's growth continues through a brief, inadvertent marriage to a lady of the sagebrush who forgot to mention that she already had a husband living; through the acquisition of responsibility in the form of a street waif; and, finally, into a real marriage and a ranch of his own. This, in Wister's view, was the history of the West. It began with every man on an equal footing:

Wyoming's Chief Executive knocked elbows with the spurred and jingling waif, one man as good as another in that raw, hopeful, full-blooded cattle

⁹⁸Members of the Family, p. 10.

⁹⁹Lin McLean (New York, 1902), p. 36.

era, which now the sobered West remembers as the days of its fond youth. For one man has been as good as another in three places—Paradise before the Fall; the Rocky Mountains before the wire fence, and the Declaration of Independence.¹⁰⁰

But we must not mistake this true democracy for the egalitarian society of the crowded, scrambling East. The West requires, as Lin's journey makes clear, a large-souled man; Lin's brother and his fellow clerks could never survive there. The West could be a democracy because it was an aristocracy, with inhabitants who were the products of natural selection, pioneers who had answered the call of their good blood.

Yet in Wister's version of history this democracy was itself but a way station to the future. The morning of the cowboy's lighthearted individualism must grow into a more solid afternoon. When we first meet him, Lin, despite his good heart and generous nature, is drifting toward worthlessness in his wandering existence and frequent changes of employment. When he has found a good woman and is prepared to become a rancher, he is forced to participate in one last escapade with his former comrades. This time it is a funeral, as good an occasion as any for hilarity to Wister's simple sons of the sagebrush, who accept death and life with equal cheerfulness. As Lin stands watching this well-intentioned parody of solemnity he reflects that "it feels like I was looking at ten dozen Lin McLeans."¹⁰¹ The cowboy who doesn't

¹⁰⁰Lin McLean, p. 109.

¹⁰¹Lin McLean, p. 273.

grow to this more mature perspective is in danger of extending his freedom into perpetual disorder, that "independence gone drunk" that so worried Wister in the West.

The history of Drybone, Wyoming, was for Wister the history of that empire West he both loved and feared; it expressed a way of life both attractive and filled with peril:

To-day, Drybone has altogether returned to the dust. Even in that day its hour could have been heard beginning to sound, but its inhabitants were rather deaf. Gamblers, saloon-keepers, murderers, outlaws male and female, all were so busy with their cards, their lovers, and their bottles as to make the place seem young and vigorous; but it was second childhood which had set in.

Drybone had known a wholesome adventurous youth.... It had been an army post. It had seen horse and foot, and heard the trumpet. Brave wives had kept house for their captains upon its bluffs. Winter and summer they had made the best of it. When the War Department ordered the captains to catch Indians, the wives bade them Godspeed. When the Interior Department ordered the captains to let the Indians go again, still they made the best of it. You must not waste Indians. Indians were a source of revenue to so many people in Washington and elsewhere. But the process of catching Indians armed with weapons sold them by friends of the Interior Department was not entirely harmless. Therefore there came to be graves in the Drybone graveyard....But even the financiers at Washington could not wholly preserve the Indian in Drybone's neighborhood. As the cattle by ten thousands came treading with the next step of civilization into this huge domain, the soldiers were taken away....Into these empty barracks came to dwell and do business every joy that made the cow-puncher's holiday, and every hunted person who was baffling the sheriff....

Above, on the hill, the graveyard quietly chronicled this new epoch of Drybone....steadily writing Drybone's history, and making that history lay the town at the bottom—one thin line of houses framing three sides of the old parade-ground. In these slowly rotting shells people rioted, believing the golden age was here, the age when everybody should have money and nobody should

be arrested. For Drybone soil, you see, was still government soil, not yet handed over to Wyoming; and only government could arrest there, and only for government crimes. But government had gone, and seldom worried Drybone! The spot was a postage-stamp of sanctuary pasted in the middle of Wyoming's big map, a paradise for the Four-ace Johnstons....And all the citizens made out a living. The happy cow-punchers on ranches far and near still earned and instantly spent the high wages still paid them. With their bodies full of youth and their pockets full of gold, they rode into town by twenties, by fifties, and out again next morning, penniless always and happy. And then the Four-ace Johnstons would sit card-playing with each other till the innocents should come to town again.¹⁰²

Life in the West, Wister believed, must grow beyond this prolonged childhood to some new stability. To escape Drybone's graveyard the region must come to maturity and responsibility. Yet as the years passed Wister came to feel more and more that something precious had been lost in the process of historical change. The expansive and freedom-loving West of empire days became, like the good society of his forefathers, one more lost past to mourn.

Like its predecessor, Lin McLean is an unpretentious book. Wister, in his emerging view of natural selection, was moving toward the creation of a familiar and unbelievable stock figure of romance, the natural nobleman, but he had not reached that puerile version of the hero in his characterization of McLean, who is no moral paragon. He spree when there is opportunity, gambles, and has known women of easy virtue. Into the chronicle of his hero's fortunes Wister wove a large skein of life in the

¹⁰²Lin McLean, pp. 243-47.

cattle country West as he saw it. It is good-natured, high-spirited country, a place so starved for women that the arrival of an unmarried female visitor is a bigger event than a new railroad or a rise in the price of steers, a land so isolated that news is always "two weeks stale and a lie when it was fresh."¹⁰³ In a country where anything would grow "with irrigation" and where it almost never rains, the efforts of a charlatan rain-maker are sufficient occasion for all Cheyenne to whoop up a holiday and back Providence or the rain-maker, according to individual sentiment.

This is a society cheerfully defiant of all organized authority, goodnaturedly fighting the railroad by sending back its special deputy (sent to investigate the prevalence of holes in the water tank) tied to the cow-catcher and bearing a note reading, "Send along one dozen as per sample."¹⁰⁴ Here Wister's cowboys are simple, joyous men, "ready with all their might to live or die, to be animals or heroes, as the hours might bring them opportunity."¹⁰⁵ Though he depicts them only at play (Wister's cowboys never work), he describes their life with sympathy, finding in it humor, charm, and the exhilaration of a new and magnificent country. In these early Wister books the West indeed lived in that happy moment of time that was "safe and far from Monday morning."

¹⁰³ Lin McLean, p. 65.

¹⁰⁴ Lin McLean, p. 150.

¹⁰⁵ Lin McLean, p. 275.

In 1902 Wister published the most famous of all Western novels, The Virginian.¹⁰⁶ The book went through six printings in six weeks, headed the best-seller list for more than two years, and has been made a movie four times.¹⁰⁷ Even more important has been the book's influence. The Virginian's progeny of strong and silent heroes have galloped across tens of thousands of pages and almost as many movie screens at Saturday matinees. In this novel Wister elevated the West into a never-never land of romance: it would be rash to assert that the region (at least for the purposes of popular literature) has ever fully descended again to reality.

Critics have been fond of pointing to Wister's opus as the first of its kind, the beginning of popular fiction about the cattle country on a level above the dime novel. But Wister's tale was not a new thing on the face of the earth. Indeed, the novel's popularity is best explained by noting that it imposed old forms and themes on new material, that it succeeded because to its few innovations were added conventions traditionally acceptable and themes that had answered to American desires—particularly to

¹⁰⁶Padre Ignacio: or, the Song of Temptation (New York, 1911), which made its appearance in 1900 in the period between Lin McLean and The Virginian, is unlike any other of Wister's books. The story of a Spanish priest who is spending his life at a small mission in California in the first half of the nineteenth century, the book is nearly an allegory of good and evil, contentment and renunciation. Its major theme is the one that became increasingly familiar in Wister's work during these years: the fruitful submission of self to order and tradition.

¹⁰⁷Seth Agnew, "God's Country and the Publisher," Saturday Review, XXXVI (March 14, 1953), 26.

American desires touching the West—for generations. It was this blend of old and new, traditional themes and excitingly novel material, that won and kept for The Virginian its great vogue, a vogue that has scarcely diminished. As late as March, 1956, the novel appeared on two separate lists of all-time favorites among books on the West.¹⁰⁸

One thing Wister did invent in The Virginian, as Bernard DeVoto has pointed out, was the "walkdown." This is Hollywood's designation of that familiar, violent meeting of Good Man and Bad Man.

A sun god in leather pants, The Hero, and his adversary, who represents Evil, approach each other across an open space. The guns speak and The Hero, who has or has not suffered a flesh wound, steps sideward into a girl's expectant arms. This outcome solves all problems of the art form and eliminates all problems of ethics, social sanction, and human motivation. It is the climax of the fantasy that has kept the cowboy story from becoming serious fiction.¹⁰⁹

It is also the ultimate extension of individualism. All gradations of moral evil, all frustrations, all the conflicts that make up life in society, are conveniently reduced to one physical being, to be destroyed by a burst of gunfire. In the "walkdown," represented by the Hero, every reader has his moment of vicarious triumph over the world.

But if this device is intellectually puerile and artistically preposterous, it is not a full measure of The Virginian or of the

¹⁰⁸Hoffman Birney, "Western Roundup," New York Times Book Review, XXXVI (March 4, 1956), 26.

¹⁰⁹Harper's Magazine, CCXI, 7.

direction of Wister's writing. This book is Wister's only one on the West that can be called a novel. Even so it was put together from previously published stories and new episodes written for the occasion. All available evidence suggests that the novel was not Wister's proper form; he was more at home in the short story. For one thing the novel demanded a hero, in Wister's view a genteel hero. His inventive powers evidently did not extend to the creation of a new hero to fit the demands of his new material, for it was here that he turned to old forms. In The Virginian Wister's beloved West bumped squarely against many inheritances (literary and otherwise) from the East; in all cases the West lost.

The central artistic and intellectual problem was the same one Cooper had faced three-quarters of a century earlier. Wister and his desired audience were products of the genteel tradition, of belief in caste, established values, the ordered society. A character worthy of the stature of hero must accept these values and be acceptable in the world where they are dominant. If Wister was to write a novel about the West he must find in the land beyond civilization a hero who would answer to the graces and mores and conventions of society—to the code of the gentleman as Wister understood that code. His artistic problem was that of elevating one of his sons of the sagebrush into that lofty position; he solved it by stepping in the giant footsteps laid down by Cooper and Parkman. He did it by asserting that the good man in the good society—the society built on taste and the

recognition of one's proper place--and the good man in the wilderness beyond society, are the same man. What society produces in a thousand years of selective breeding and training, the Old West produced almost instantaneously by its less encumbered process of natural selection. And though they come from the opposite ends of the earth the products of these two processes will instantly recognize their mutual affinity, be they Mabel and her Jasper Western, Parkman and his Henry Chatillon, or Molly Wood and her Virginian. Wister's hero is a natural nobleman, blood kinsman of Natty Bumppo, descended from Cooper's hunter through Jasper Western and the other younger duplicates of the aged scout as they had evolved in the dime novel.

The Eastern tenderfoot narrator of The Virginian, within minutes after the train drops him in Medicine Bow, Wyoming, recognizes the natural quality of his hero:

Having been sent to look after me, he would do so; but I could not be jocular with him. This handsome, ungrammatical son of the soil had set between us the bar of his cold and perfect civility. No polished person could have done it better. What was the matter? I looked at him, and suddenly it came to me. If he had tried familiarity with me the first two minutes of our acquaintance, I should have resented it; by what right, then, had I tried it with him? It smacked of patronizing: on this occasion he had come off the better gentleman of the two. Here in flesh and blood was a truth I had long believed in words, but never met before. The creature we call a gentleman lies deep in the hearts of thousands that are born without a chance to master the outward graces of the type.¹¹⁰

¹¹⁰ The Virginian, pp. 11-12.

Wister's cowboys in this novel all partake of this nobility derived from the soil, combined with the joyous innocence of childhood.

Daring, laughter, endurance—these were what I saw upon the countenances of the cow-boys. And this very first day of my knowledge of them marks a date with me. For something about them, and the idea of them, smote my American heart, and I have never forgotten it, nor ever shall, as long as I live. In their flesh our natural passions ran tumultuous; but often in their spirit sat hidden a true nobility, and often beneath its unexpected shining their figures took on heroic stature.¹¹¹

For indeed had Cooper and Parkman come true again for Wister.

But the Virginian is not of these run-of-the-mill natural noblemen. To Rousseau and Cooper's nobleman in nature had been added Herbert Spencer and natural selection. The Virginian is the end product of these processes, the leader of his fellow sons of the soil produced by nature's survival tests. He can face down Evil at a card game with a level voice, a ready gun, and those famous words, "When you call me that, smile"; or he can cajole a crew made up of that "average rough male blood, merely needing to be told the proper things at the right time"¹¹² by tricking them into believing a tall tale that owes much to the tradition of Twain and which would not have shamed the master. "A fine comic spirit," DeVoto has written, "informs much of the book."¹¹³ Humor is important in a country where entertainment

¹¹¹The Virginian, p. 33.

¹¹²The Virginian, pp. 29, 173.

¹¹³Harper's Magazine, CCXI, 9.

seldom comes and people must amuse each other; it is a fundamental weapon in the Virginian's arsenal. He must be able to tell a bigger lie more convincingly than his fellows, for it is a mark of his ascendancy. He uses his gift for such varied tasks as bilking a traveling drummer out of his bed by pretending to violent nightmares, or rendering a public service in vanquishing a hell-fire Calvinist preacher by keeping him up all night driving sin from a repentant and fearful breast.

The Virginian (his anonymity, of course, makes him a symbol of all that wild band whom Wister loved) grows and changes through his tale. In his story is compressed once again Wister's version of Western history. When we first meet him, despite the fact that he has been roaming the country from Mexico to British Columbia for ten years, he is a frolicking colt. Hard work on the ranch and, on those rare trips to town, cards, liquor, and casual successes with women—these make up his life. (His successes, by the way, may come even with another man's wife, a great liberty for a Western novel to take.) It was altogether a young land and brave time, still "Saturday eternal."

The coming of Molly Wood to Bear Creek changes all this, just as the values and conventions of ordered society were to change Wister's West. No longer may the hero be casually amoral. When the Bad Man ventures to suggest that Molly may have lost her virtue to an ardent cowboy, nature's nobleman forces him to admit publicly that he lies. Then the Virginian appeals to the better instincts of his audience:

"Honey Wiggin, you and me and the boys have hit town too frequent for any of us to play Sunday on the balance of the gang." He stopped and surveyed Public Opinion, seated around in carefully inexpressive attention. "We ain't a Christian outfit a little bit, and maybe we have most forgotten what decency feels like. But I reckon we haven't plumb forgot what it means...."

The liar stood and sneered experimentally, looking at Public Opinion. But this changeful deity was no longer with him, and he heard it variously assenting, "That's so," and "She's a lady" and otherwise excellently moralizing.¹¹⁴

There is no doubt that regeneration is at hand in the sagebrush.

The Virginian must undergo other changes. Molly represents the best of that genteel society in the East that was even then being overrun by the Replacers. Her family had been prominent and respected since the American Revolution. But, as for so many of Wister's old American families, fortune had turned upon the Woods. Molly, instead of taking her rightful place in a small, select society, must do fancy needlework and give music lessons. The desire to escape the confines of Bennington and her hapless position as a lady of family and no fortune brings her to Wyoming as a schoolmarm.

The hero must be made to fit this genteel heritage. Though a gentleman by nature, he must assume those "outward graces" of cultivated society. Principally this seems to mean Shakespeare and spelling, with Molly his willing teacher. He is an apt pupil, and soon the insight given him by his days in nature's bosom is opening up for Molly the mysteries of Browning's poetry. But the

¹¹⁴The Virginian, p. 111.

Virginian must also give over his wild ways. Quickly he becomes a philosopher of natural selection, determined that he is to come out on top. He lectures Molly:

"I'll tell you what...equality is a great big bluff. It's easy called....Some holds four aces...and some holds nothin' and some poor fello' gets the aces and no show to play 'em; but a man has got to prove himself my equal before I'll believe him....I know what yu' meant...by sayin' you're not the wife I'd want. But I am the kind that moves up. I am going to be your best scholar."¹¹⁵

In good part The Virginian is the story of man moving up in the West.

Judge Henry, the hero's employer, recognizes virtue by promoting him to foreman. The Virginian is soon matured to his new responsibility by having to chase down and lynch an old friend to protect the interests of his employer. This is the supreme moral decision of the Virginian's life. The boyhood chum is a rustler; the courts of Wyoming's Johnson County are packed with the friends of rustlers, and justice is never done; but the conflict between loyalty to an old friend and loyalty to justice and his employer wrenches the hero deeply. "You have a friend," muses the Virginian,

and his ways are your ways. You travel together, you spree together confidentially, and you suit each other down to the ground. Then one day you find him putting his iron on another man's calf. You tell him fair and square those ways have never been your ways and ain't going to be your ways. Well, that does not change him any, for it seems he's disturbed over getting rich quick and being

¹¹⁵The Virginian, pp. 144-45.

a big man in the Territory. And the years go on, until you are foreman of Judge Henry's ranch and he—is dangling back in the cottonwoods. What can he claim? Who made the choice? He cannot say, "Here is my old friend that I would have stood by." Can he say that?¹¹⁶

This moral dilemma is solved easily—all moral problems are in Wister's books—by having Steve, the friend, go to his death gamely and leave behind a note forgiving the hero.

The narrator is an innocent observer at this affair, and thus provides Wister his opportunity to justify lynching as a necessary folkway.

How could I tell them that I shrank from any contact with what they were doing, although I knew that only so could justice be dealt in this country? Their wholesome frontier nerves knew nothing of such refinements.¹¹⁷

Wister, the lawyer, stood ready to see law give way to murder. For in the West his respect for law collided with two things far deeper in his nature: his hatred of disorder and his deep belief that law should support those on the top rung of society's ladder. In the South, and in the traditional Eastern past for which he always longed, law, as he saw it, was the instrument by which those whom natural selection had placed at the top of society's heap imposed their will on the masses. Like tradition and custom, law was the protection of society's best values—the values of the aristocracy. But in Wyoming Territory

¹¹⁶The Virginian, p. 396.

¹¹⁷The Virginian, pp. 381-82.

during the Johnson County War of 1892 (and this, despite Wister's misleading use of dates, is the era of The Virginian) law might be used for other purposes. Homesteaders and small ranchers might not recognize immediately that the big cattlemen were the aristocratic result of natural selection, that their values represented the accumulated wisdom of an inevitable historical process. Homesteaders might, like the Replacers, make the law an instrument for their own rise. Then Wister's beloved West would also be overrun with trusts and labor unions, from which would emerge the same unnatural aristocracy of rich Jews and foreigners that plagued the industrial East.

The Virginian and his employers are determined that this shall not happen, that the order imposed by those who naturally stand above their fellows shall not be broken by so small a thing as law. In describing Shorty, a hapless incompetent at rustling as he is at all things else, the hero tells us how it is in the West:

Now back East you can be middling and get along. But if you go to try a thing on in this Western country, you've got to do it well. You've got to deal cyards well; you've got to steal well; and if you claim to be quick with your gun, you must be quick, for you're a public temptation, and some man will not resist trying to prove he is the quicker. You must break all the Commandments well in this Western country, and Shorty should have stayed in Brooklyn, for he will be a novice his livelong days.¹¹⁸

Out of a nature red in tooth and claw have arisen the men competent

¹¹⁸The Virginian, p. 399.

to lead all the Shortys of the West. To break through their order by so frail a thing as law would be to sin against nature.

Judge Henry, who is one of those whom nature has selected to lead others, explains it all to Molly Wood, for the East must become accustomed to watching its primitive inheritance being re-enacted in the West.

"Call them the ordinary citizens....They are where the law comes from, you see. For they chose the delegates who made the Constitution that provided for the courts...These are the hands into which ordinary citizens have put the law. So you see, at best, when they lynch they only take back what they once gave. Now we'll take your two cases that you say are the same in principle. I think that they are not. For in the South they take a negro from jail where he was waiting to be duly hung. The South has never claimed that the law would let him go. But in Wyoming the law has been letting our cattle-thieves go for two years. We are in a very bad way, and we are trying to make that way a little better until civilization can reach us. At present we lie beyond its pale. The courts, or rather the juries, into whose hands we have put the law, are not dealing the law....They cannot hold a cattle-thief. And so when your ordinary citizen sees this, and sees that he has placed justice in a dead hand, he must take justice back into his own hands where it was once at the beginning of all things. Call this primitive if you will. But so far from being a defiance of law, it is an assertion of it--the fundamental assertion of self-governing men, upon whom our whole social fabric is based. There is your principle, Miss Wood, as I see it. Now can you help me to see anything different?"

She could not.¹¹⁹

It does not occur to the none-too-bright Molly to ask how it happens that all those citizens who sit on juries are such

¹¹⁹The Virginian, pp. 435-36.

"extraordinary" ones. So thus easily are East and West reconciled, the best that is in them both brought to mutual appreciation.

It is in this conflict of East and West that some critics have seen the novel's greatest value.¹²⁰ The conflict is concretized, of course, in the troubled courtship of Molly and her hero. After Judge Henry has overcome her scruples about lynching, Molly and the Virginian are engaged. At this point he writes to her mother of his humble (but thoroughly Anglo-Saxon) origins and informs her that he has "never killed for pleasure or profit."¹²¹ But the mother never replies, for much of the East has forgotten its primitive inheritance, now mirrored in the pristine virtues of a new land and people. Only the best of the East is capable of learning the Western lesson. While Molly is teaching him Shakespeare, her lover is teaching her the virtues that come from life lived in nature. Through his eyes she learns to see through the shams of certain of civilization's customs, to recall the primitive nobility of her Revolutionary War-hero forefathers. When East and West meet in these pages it is to prove that the Eastern aristocrat, the infinitely refined product of society's selectivity, and the Western aristocrat, produced by an equally rigorous process of natural selection, are perfect mates.

But before a fruitful union can occur the old, wild West must have its final assertion. The Virginian must have his

¹²⁰Ernest E. Leisy, The American Historical Novel (Norman, Oklahoma, 1950), pp. 207-08.

¹²¹The Virginian, p. 372.

walkdown, in which Evil is obliterated from the face of the earth—and must have it on his wedding day at that. Trampas, the villain, is faceless throughout the book. We know nothing of his motivations, nothing even of his personality and speech beyond an occasional snarl. In the childish oversimplified moral values of this novel, he is Evil Incarnate, and Good must destroy him. After receiving the blessing of Wyoming's bishop (a ritualistic necessity for the knight going to joust), the Virginian goes forth to duty. "It had come," writes Wister, "to that point where there is no way out, save only that ancient, eternal way between man and man. It is only the great mediocrity that goes to law in these personal matters."¹²² Thus did Wister establish for posterity the final stone in that ridiculous edifice, the romantic code of the West. The ritual of the walkdown, Southern chivalry transferred to cowpunchers, the strong and silent gun god on horseback—all of these trace to The Virginian.

Molly's Eastern sensibility manages to encompass murder as handily as it swallowed lynching, and hero and heroine are married. But marriage presented new problems for the novelist. What happens to nature's nobleman in that blessed state? Again Cooper had pointed the way. He had brought Jasper Western back to the East, into society, and made him a successful businessman. Enough had changed in American values (Cooper had been able to go no higher than a sergeant's daughter as a romantic heroine for his

¹²²The Virginian, p. 463.

natural nobleman; Wister could give his the best that society had) so that Wister need not follow his predecessor literally, but the pattern of his solution is the same. After a trip to the East, where he wins the admiration of those rare souls possessed of enough nobility themselves to recognize it in others, the Virginian and his bride return to Wyoming and prosperity.

Judge Henry at Sunk Creek had his wedding present ready. His growing affairs in Wyoming needed his presence in many places distant from his ranch, and he made the Virginian his partner. When the thieves prevailed at length, as they did, forcing cattle owners to leave the country or be ruined, the Virginian had forestalled this crash. The herds were driven away to Montana. Then, in 1892, came the cattle war, when, after putting their men in office, and coming to own some of the newspapers, the thieves brought ruin on themselves as well. For in a broken country there is nothing left to steal.

But the railroad came, and built a branch to that land of the Virginian's where the coal was. By that time he was an important man, with a strong grip on many various enterprises, and able to give his wife all and more than she asked or desired.¹²³

So the Virginian becomes a part of that prosperous, settled society in which East and West are indistinguishable. Mody Boatright, in one of the most perceptive studies yet written of Wister, has pointed out that The Virginian thereby answers to one further version of the American dream, "the myth of the faithful apprentice, the Horatio Alger story."¹²⁴

It is in this solution of its problem that Wister's novel founders on the same rocks that split Cooper's fragile hulls.

¹²³The Virginian, p. 505.

¹²⁴"The American Myth Rides the Range: Owen Wister's *Man on Horseback*," Southwest Review, XXXVI (Summer, 1951), 159.

The hero is good because he exists outside society, he is noble because nature made him so. But if he is to enter that state of respectability implied by marriage in a genteel novel he must come into society and accept its values. The Virginian may have taught his lady something about lynch law and natural inequality, but hers is the ultimate victory; her Shakespeare and spelling and Eastern tailors end by transforming him into a successful businessman, cut off from his youthful freedom in a state of nature, indistinguishable from all his brothers in commerce. Incapable of achieving an imaginative synthesis of his two regions, Wister concludes by making his West a replica of the East--of that lost and desired East before the advent of Jews and steel trusts, when commerce belonged to the right sort of people and everyone knew his proper place.

DeVoto, as an historian, scored The Virginian for its indisputable distortion of the Johnson County War, assigning this distortion to Wister's association with the big gentleman-ranchers and the hours he spent at the Cheyenne Club.¹²⁵ Yet these were only surface symptoms. Wister had indicated uncritical acceptance of the theory of societal aristocracy in Philosophy 4 and elsewhere before he wrote The Virginian, and he did so again in Lady Baltimore, two years later. He could not help it. Everything in him cried out against those changes in American life which seemed to be sweeping away the order his class had represented

¹²⁵Harper's Magazine, CCXI, 13.

and to be leaving America in chaos. The West and Cooper and Parkman gave him the notion of a natural aristocracy to add to his belief in a societal one. Rousseau and Spencer combined in Wister's pages to produce the *Virginian*. If we ignore the question of whether these beliefs were intellectually tenable, there can yet be no doubt that the attempt to merge them in fiction was a mistake artistically. If The Virginian is Wister's most ambitious work on the West it is also his most complete failure.

It is to Wister's credit that he never returned to the themes and conventions of The Virginian. Gone were the code of the gentleman cowboy, the figure of the natural nobleman, the elaborate ritual of the walkdown, and the subjugation of raw West to cultivated East. When violence flares in these later pages, and it does so infrequently, it is a matter of a difference of opinion, not of Good vanquishing Evil from the world. Wister returned in his final books to the short story form, thus having no further need of the well-bred hero and heroine and the other trappings of the genteel novel. His subjects once again are a general mixture of interesting facets of Western life before and after the turn of the century. His characters are cowboys, Indians and Indian agents, and army people—without a single natural nobleman-hero among them.

The nearest thing to a hero in the collection of short stories which Wister called Members of the Family (1911) is the often-married Scipio Le Moyne, a nomad so far from being a totally innocent product of nature that once, in a moment of

desperation, he became a road agent. And Scipio will not have a proper moral drawn from his story; he enjoyed his ill-won gains and prospered, never regretting his moment of crime. Wister had progressed far enough beyond the rigid code of the West that he himself had in part erected to suggest there might be gradations of moral evil in the world.

Once again these are simple stories, full of the West and its people. In one of them an enterprising Eastern novice, backed by an influence-peddling Senator, undertakes to capture the Indian trade on a reservation. But on the day his lavish store opens, prodded by the more knowing Scipio, the greedy young merchant provides a bit of theatrical entertainment for his customers by running through his repertoire of parlor tricks, thereby driving the superstitious Indians forever away from his emporium. In another, two old trappers return to town and lose their winter's trapping because they can no longer put off settlement of a bedevilling argument about the location of Washington, D.C.; one holds that it is in Maryland, while the other is equally strong for Virginia. One story here is again in the tall tale tradition of Ward and Twain, while in another an army post has its moment of revenge against a blathering Secretary of War and all his vapid promises. In a story called "The Gift Horse" the narrator learns that lynch law may not be so certain an instrument of justice as the lynching episode in The Virginian had suggested it was. This story also proposes that a horse thief may not be wholly evil. Wister, in his later stories, was loosing the tight bonds of the

code of the West which he had helped to tie.

Wister's next book on the West was also his last. Published in 1928, When West Was West is once more a collection of short stories. And again they are tales without heroes, tales of an army captain who fights Apaches but wins a greater battle on the domestic front against his wife's disapproval of the tobacco habit; of a Shoshone Indian who becomes a victim of admiring tourists just as his people had been victims of white fur hunters and settlers--one more casualty of change in the West; of the reign of terror of a quack medicine woman in Flanagan County, Texas, and her eventual defeat by the forces of law and order and medical sanity; and a tale, inspired by Leonard Wood, who is the obvious model for Doc Leonard in several of Wister's stories, of a contract chaplain at Fort Chiricahua who believes that Apaches are descendants of the ten lost tribes of Israel. The latter story makes it evident that Wister never lost his anti-Semitism:

"Can I persuade you that the Indians are the ten lost tribes of Israel?" Lloyd now inquired.

"Our American Indians? Jews? You cannot."

"I cannot persuade myself. Do you know why? If they were, we'd be confined to the reservations and they'd go to Harvard and have offices in Wall Street and spend their summers in Paris."¹²⁶

Two stories here deserve special mention, for they are the best that Wister ever wrote and they represent most completely what he had to say, finally, about the West. "The Right Honorable the Strawberries" is a restrained, convincing study of a disgraced

¹²⁶When West Was West (New York, 1928), pp. 267-68.

British younger son in the West. He has come to Drybone, Wyoming, because he had to go somewhere. Drybone, so often for Wister the symbol of that West which rioted itself into oblivion, is a lawless patch of government property which waits stolidly from month to month to take away the cowboy's wages with its women, its faro games, and its raw liquor, subsiding patiently, when the cowboy's spree is over, until next time. Occupying the abandoned military quarters of one era, it provides the delights of another era to men who live in yet a third. In its few acres of Wyoming landscape Drybone has transcended space and time, become an oasis of carousing history left behind to harbor those infrequent outlaws who have not accompanied the West in its transition to a new age. Drybone will ask a disgraced peer no questions about his past; it can afford no prejudices against remittance men.

The cowboys from the neighboring ranches accept the Britisher readily. Unable to fathom the intricacies of the peerage system, they reduce his six inches of name to their own version of his family crest and call him "Strawberries." They are fascinated by his talk and wit, admire his skill with a shotgun, and grow to like him. They devise as many excuses as possible to visit the old quartermaster office which he has transformed into an English gentleman's flat in miniature, complete with hunting crops, sporting trophies, mementoes of Oxford. The cowboys welcome Strawberries, in turn, to the wild exuberance and simple joys of their way of life. One of them, a puncher called

Chalkeye, becomes the Englishman's stout defender against all detractors. It is a fresh life in a new land that Chalkeye and his friends offer Strawberries. Cries Chalkeye:

"When I look at that"—he swept his arm toward the splendid plains and the hills glowing in the sun—"well, I want to swallow it, and I want to jump on a horse and dive into it." He drew in a huge breath and became lyric. "It makes a man feel like he could live the whole of himself at wunst. I'd like to have ten fights, and ten girls, and ten drinks, and I'd come pretty near enjoying sudden death."¹²⁷

This can be enough for a while, but it does not make up to Strawberries for England and all he has lost. Even a thousand years of breeding cannot save him from spiritual demolition in exile. He is sustained for a time by the hope that exile is not permanent and manages to keep up the illusion of the past in hunting, in coursing greyhounds, in steeplechasing with army officers eager for any break in their pattern of constant boredom. Only occasionally does he lapse into physical and mental lethargy and spend days lying abed at the Cheyenne Club.

But when word comes that England will never relent he quickly reverts to the cause of his original disgrace—cheating at cards. Finally he stoops to cheating his friends and even Drybone's patience is exhausted. Strawberries has to flee and Chalkeye is killed (without benefit of walkdown) in protecting his escape. Others report seeing the Englishman occasionally over the years, clerking in a store and being discharged, pounding a piano

¹²⁷When West Was West, p. 178.

in a honkeytonk for a roomful of drunken men and women.

The final glimpse of the disgraced British younger son comes to the narrator when the West—Wister's West—is all over, when it has changed so much that one can drive to Drybone in a Ford.

My last news was in 1910, when I ran up the river from Cheyenne in a flivver. Two railroads had come. There was a new town called Casper. Drybone had been wholly abandoned. There were oil claims. Along the river where the sagebrush had grown and the cattle had been rounded up were fields and fruit and fences: not everywhere: but it was gone, the true, real thing was gone. The scenery was there, but the play was over....We came to some high sagebrush along a bottom...and one of those sudden cravings for days bygone rushed over me—to hunt, to camp, to revel in young joys; I longed to speak some magic word and evoke the golden years....Then we reached what had been Drybone....

I walked through weeds, and splinters of sheds, and rusted objects. Three boards of the hotel were standing. Part of the post-office was there. The cabin of luxury was fairly whole, and all around it gleamed empty tin cans. There was a door; and when I saw that, I walked up and opened it.

He was lying in bed, reading a paper.

"Oh, there you are!" he said.

So he had come back, actually summoned by that same Past which we had shared for a while, the Past where his real friends had been! I liked this remnant of the man better than ever I had liked the man.

"Thank God somebody has come to lunch," said he. "Now I'll have to get up and cook something."

This he did; and for an hour we talked about anything to keep off the one thing in our minds. The photographs were there....And now he lay in bed and ate tinned food, unless company happened by.

The young, green chauffeur came to see what had become of me, and as I was walking away, Strawberries stood in his door.

"It all used to be very jolly," he said.

I nodded and walked on.

"I say," he called.

I turned. There he stood, and into his face came a something that recalled the old smile like a pressed flower.

"Chalkeye was a good fellow, you know."

"Yes."

"I liked Chalkeye."

"Yes."

"I suppose you're thinking he was a better fellow than me?"

"Yes."

"Right."¹²⁸

Indeed Wister did think that Chalkeye and the Doughgy and their fellows were better than the things which destroyed and replaced them, whether railroads or fences or such consummate products of civilization's process as disgraced younger sons. In this story he accomplished most convincingly the aim he had professed in the very beginning, the study of the effect of the West upon character. For in the slow and unspectacular deterioration of Strawberries there is a quiet inevitability, the inevitability of a man's destruction when cut off from his cultural and moral sources in an older society.

Yet the story is much more than this. All men in Drybone, in the early West, were cut off from their sources, were living in a magic moment of time which had escaped history. To them comes Strawberries, bringing with him both the graces and the evils of civilization. He is at once the destroyer and the

¹²⁸When West Was West, pp. 209-11.

destroyed, the agent of Chalkeye's destruction as well as his own. And in Chalkeye's death is symbolized the passing of Drybone, for oblivion was Drybone's inevitable fate. Here were concretized all the changes that Wister had chronicled in the West, concretized in the death of that phase which he had shared. Drybone's passage to oblivion summed up all the Wests which lived on borrowed time in the oasis Drybone provided and portended oblivion for that West which briefly survived it. Loyalty, friendship, joyousness, the easy tolerance that made room for any man of good will, a wild holiday of freedom—all these the early West had, but they were not enough for its survival. Wister's mind knew that history must overtake and obliterate that bright time, but his heart could not cheer progress.

The early West, he had written in 1911, had in its very air the "promise of a democracy which the East had missed"—a democracy where all men were kings. This time was that "bright brave ripple" beneath which "moved the ground-swell of tragedy." Strawberries's return to Drybone is the search of all men who had known the West when it was young for the good time of their shared past. The return is Strawberries's mark of grace, his realization that the world which he had helped destroy was the more valuable. American progress demanded, Wister was sure, that the simple yield to the complex, but it was fitting for those who had lived on into the new time to return and pay homage to the better thing which had died. For him, the best that America promised had shared in that death.

The story which Wister chose to close his final volume on the West again explores his favorite theme of nostalgia. "At the Sign of the Last Chance" takes its title from the Western custom of using a double sign for hotels and saloons. As the cowboy rode into town with jingling pockets the den of delight greeted him with the terse notice that this was his "First Chance." As he rode out in the morning with pockets empty the other side of the sign proclaimed that it was the "Last Chance" for many weary miles. To Drybone's hotel of this name comes the narrator, Wister, after an absence of six years, to find several old friends sitting at a quiet game of poker.

I had begun to see those beards long before they were gray; when no wire fence mutilated the freedom of the range; when fourteen mess-wagons would be at the spring round-up; when cattle wandered and pastured, dotting the endless wilderness; when roping them brought the college graduate and the boy who had never learned to read into a lusty equality of youth and skill; when songs rose by the camp-fire; and the dim form of the night herder leaned on his saddle horn as under the stars he circled slowly around the recumbent thousands; when two hundred miles stretched between all this and the whistle of the nearest locomotive.

And all this was over. It had begun to end a long while ago. It had ebbed slowly away from these now playing their nightly game as they had once played it at flood-tide. The turn of the tide had come even when the beards were still brown, or red, or golden....And here in this place, at the poker table, the ghost still clung to the world of the sage-brush, where it had lived its headlong joys.

I watched the graybeards going on with this game that had outlived many a player....They played without zest, winning or losing little, with now and then a friendly word to me.

They had learned to tolerate me when I had come among them first; not because I ever grew skilled in what they did, either in the saddle or with a gun, but because they knew that I liked them and the life they led, and always had come back to lead it with them, in my tenderfoot way.¹²⁹

The poker game is a ritual at which these quiet men gather because their days are empty and because it maintains a link with the past. At the back of the room a man is reading an article about sign-boards from an old magazine, telling the rest of the company when he comes upon an interesting sign and its history. One of the group has a fiddle, and now and then, as he watches the desultory game, he plays "some fragment of tune, like a man whispering memories to himself."¹³⁰ Old Man Clarke, a solitary prospector for longer than anyone can remember but this year forced by the others to come to town for the winter, completes the party.

The narrator's arrival and his questions serve to remind the card players how much things have changed at Drybone and at the Last Chance.

"Why, where's your clock, Henry?" I asked.

Henry scratched his head. "Why," he meditated—"why, I guess it was last January."

"Did she get shot up again?"

Henry slowly shook his head. "This town is not what it was. I guess you saw the last shooting-up she got. She just quit on me one day. Yes; January. Winding of her up didn't do nothing to her. It was Lee noticed she had quit. So I didn't get a new one...."

¹²⁹ When West Was West, pp. 414-15.

¹³⁰ When West Was West, p. 414.

"Where's your Chink tonight?" I inquired. Lee was another old acquaintance; he had cooked many meals and made my bed often, season after season, when I had lodged here for the night.

"I let Lee go—let's see—I guess that must have been last April. Business is not what it used to be."

"Then you do everything yourself, now?"

"Why, yes; when there's anything to do."

"Boys don't seem as lively as they used to be," said Work.

"There are no boys," said Henry. "Just people."

This is what Henry had to say. It was said by the bullet holes in the wall, landmarks patterning the shape of the clock which had hung there till it stopped going last January. It was said by the empty shelves beneath the clock and behind the bar. It was said by the empty bottles which Henry had not yet thrown out. These occupied half one shelf. Two or three full bottles stood in the middle of the lowest shelf, looking lonely. In one of them the cork had been drawn, and could be pulled out by the fingers again, should anyone call for a drink.¹³¹

But with the stimulation of the narrator's questions and presence also come happy memories. For a little while these lonely cast-offs of history emerge from their lethargy. The conversation becomes animated as they relive the past. What they remember has nothing to do with gunfights or lynchings or wild heroics but what cowboy told the tallest tales or who was the best rider; or the time that Toothpick Kid, dead drunk, got Doc Barker out of bed at two in the morning for some dental work and fled in panic when Barker, a physician not a dentist, lined up his surgical knives and saws. They recall good friends who are

¹³¹When West Was West, pp. 419-20.

dead, high times when every day had its share of joy and good jokes and no man could have believed it wouldn't last forever. As the stories flow their eyes glisten and their hands thump the table in laughter, just as if it all happened yesterday and tomorrow would have something just as good.

From time to time, his thoughts catching at some item in the talk and then slipping away again, Old Man Clarke interrupts them, his remarks forming a counterpoint to their own. In his wandering mind past and present are inextricably confused. He remembers his long-dead Indian wife ("She was a buck-skin son-of-a-bitch....And she could look as pretty as a bride.")¹³² and takes an old man's inconsequent pride in being longer in the country than anyone who is left ("Rutherford B. Hayes was President when I came into this country. But Samuel J. Tilden was elected. Yes, sir.")¹³³ To the old man's inattentive mind, filled with the shifting images of so many lost El Dorados, the dances and the hunts and the mines of long ago are as present as this morning.

Occasionally, from the back of the room, the magazine reader calls out the signs that sum up other civilizations that belong now to history; "Goat and Compasses," he tells the others, was a sign in England that came from "God encompasseth us." So also, reflects Wister, with "First Chance-Last Chance," for more "of

¹³² When West Was West, pp. 425, 428.

¹³³ When West Was West, p. 433.

the frontier life could hardly be told in four words. They were quite as revealing of the spirit of an age and people as Goat and Compasses."¹³⁴

Thus once again Wister sets up his favorite counterpoint of multiple moments of time, coalescing the all-time of history into the now-time of the story to mark the passing of the West and the meaning of that passing. While the middle-aged cronies revel in their memories of days that will not come again the cracked voice of Old Man Clarke recalls an earlier West that passed to make room for theirs. And from the back of the room the man with the magazine tolls off the brave signs erected by hopeful men of other ages when the world seemed young and full of promise. And all, of course, in Drybone, that mute record of so many moments in history that met there and jostled for space, and in a room where the clock has stopped.

The interlude ends when the magazine reader comes upon the record of an old custom.

"It says...that many a flourishing inn which had been prosperous for two or three hundred years would go down for one reason or another, till no travelers patronized it any more. It says this happened to the old places where the coaches changed horses or stopped for meals going north and south every day, and along other important routes as well. These routes were given up after the railroads began to spread.

"The railroad finally killed the coaches. So unless an inn was in some place that continued to be important, like a town where the railroads brought strangers same as the coaches used to,

¹³⁴ When West Was West, pp. 418-19.

why, the inn's business would dry up. And that's where the custom comes in. When some inn had outlived its time and it was known that trade had left it for good, they would take down the sign of that inn and bury it. It says that right here." He touched the page.¹³⁵

Quickly the conjured youth of the card players evaporates and the flow of stories stops. Quietly, with the constraint of men who know that their solemnity stands just one step short of farce but who share a deep momentary need for ceremony, they take down the sign of the Last Chance. As they stand by the grave in the night air that already bears the thin edge of winter—the winter that will close forever the long golden summer of the West—the fiddler plays "The Cowboy's Lament," more familiar to us as "The Streets of Laredo," with its somber march for the dead. And Old Man Clarke, puzzled and uneasy, goes from one to another mumbling, "Boys, what's up with ye? Who's dead?" "That's all, I guess," remarks Henry when it is over,

"Thank you, Jed. Thank you, boys. I guess we can go home now."

Yes, now we could go home. The requiem of the golden beards, their romance, their departed West, too good to live for ever, was finished.

As we returned slowly in the stillness of the cold starlight, the voice of Old Man Clarke, shrill and withered, disembodied as an echo, startled me by its sudden outbreak.

"None of you knowed her, boys. She was a buck-skin son-of-a-bitch. All at the bottom of Lake Champlain."¹³⁶

¹³⁵ When West Was West, pp. 443-44.

¹³⁶ When West Was West, p. 447.

No one contradicts the old man. Perhaps, just as they had not known his buck-skin bride, they had not known his greater bride, the West. Perhaps no one had known her since the first white man came and brought with him the seeds of inevitable change. They could only be sure that what they remembered was good, and that it was irretrievably at the bottom of Lake Champlain. In burying it according to ancient ritual they made their pact with continuity. Wister's people now held their rightful place in history, in the long line of players who had filled the stage with their simple joys and sorrows and then moved off into the quiet wings to make way for new faces. There might be other frontiers, but Wister, sixty-eight when this last book was published, could not look forward to them. With quiet acceptance he had consigned his West to history, to its place in that row of joyous epochs when man and the land he lived in had both been young. He had nothing more to say about the West.

The narrow view of history that led Wister to see Jefferson, Bryan, and La Follette as essentially un-American blinded him to much of the meaning of the West. His understanding of America and Americans was too shallow, too circumscribed, to admit the complexity of America's experience in the region. His uncritical acceptance of societal aristocracy effectively denied him the meaning of the Johnson County War and the wagons of the emigrants. His notion that every young cowboy worth his salt should grow up

to be a gentleman rancher was just as sophisticated as the economics of Horatio Alger and no more so. Though he grasped momentarily at a fundamental conflict between order and freedom in American life, he never brought this conflict to fruitful exploration in his fiction. He preferred, on the whole, to sing of men and times untroubled by such difficulties. Only occasionally do his tales suggest something of the complexity by which people learned to live in an untamed and arid land. It was a new thing in the American experience, not at all prepared for by settlement of the humid lands behind the 98th meridian, but Wister was not the man to master it.

His attempt to view the West in the light of the East came to ponderous failure, to the artistic absurdity of merging societal and natural aristocracy, to the intellectual impossibility of marrying Spencer to Rousseau. In a way he must have recognized this, for in his later work he cast his lot fully with the West, choosing Chalkeye over Strawberries without reservations.

Most fundamentally, perhaps, his books lack the sense of moral tension that we expect in significant literature. Wister's idealized West had room for no moral peril. The motiveless Trampas is simply a more restrained version of the grotesque villains to be found wholesale in the dime novel. The people who inhabit his books, though the species may produce an occasional sport in the biological sense of the term, were the manly men and womanly women of Roosevelt's childish desire. Their moral problems are either preposterously over-simplified or

non-existent. As was the case with so many others who came to the region, Wister was betrayed by desire; the West was the place to escape the complexities of civilization, not to see them in wider perspective.

He was betrayed also by the education and training that led him to his narrow racial views. He could take no real account of the diverse ethnic strains that contributed to the West. One would never learn from reading Wister's books that people of Spanish descent had erected a civilization of great status in the Southwest—an area he wrote about often—or that some of the cowboys punching Texas cattle were Negroes. His West had room only for people of irreproachably Anglo-Saxon blood lines. It is to this narrowness, this lack of vision as an artist and breadth of sympathy as a human being, that the most telling criticisms of his books must finally return.

Yet literary history has not dealt him his due. If he tells us but little of how the West of his time lived, the mechanics of raising and marketing cattle, he worked hard and earnestly at capturing the spirit by which it lived—its humor, its idiom, its merriment and joy. To succeed in this he had to graduate from some of the conventions that had long plagued the West in fiction. He had to leave behind Cooper's natural nobleman and transcend the device of action as a substitute for character and meaning left behind by the dime novelists and their inheritors. The West was never so simple as he made it, so filled with manly men and innocent joys and uncomplicated exhilaration. But he

did learn to forego the Hollywood heroics of The Virginian and to try for something more significant, more universal. Fiction of the West is richer because he did. His unpretentious stories and quiet elegies, though often they more accurately describe an American dream of the West than the actuality, have a dignity of their own. It was, Wister's best stories propose, a good dream, one not unworthy of men of good heart and high humor. His books form a modest accomplishment, but one that history, in justice and charity, should credit him with.

Chapter Seven

The Limitations of Western Egalitarianism: Eugene Rhodes

In nearly every sense, Eugene Manlove Rhodes's books on the West are a direct contradiction of Owen Wister's. In all the things that give substance and definition to the human mind, these two men differed markedly. They held opposing class sympathies, widely divergent views of history, contrary concepts of America and Americans. Most of all, perhaps, they disagreed about the West and its role in American life. It followed that their literary purposes were in marked opposition.

The differences began in background, for more than distance separated Philadelphia's Main Line from wind-blown shacks huddled on the Nebraska and Kansas plains. At the boyhood age when Wister was returning from a European tour to the concerns of adolescent life in an exclusive Eastern preparatory school, Rhodes was a working ranch hand, denying himself even the cowboy's pleasures in order to send home his pay. At the age when Wister was ready for college Rhodes had already served on an army expedition against Geronimo. Instead of Wister's Harvard and Hasty Pudding theatricals, Rhodes could afford only two years at an obscure college that Harvard would not have heard of and had to exist on a subsistence diet while he was there. Wister had been born to a tradition of settled existence, class consciousness, and tasteful appreciation of such civilized institutions as Stuart's portraits and

Moore's melodies. Rhodes belonged instead to the migratory tradition of those whom economics and hope pushed steadily westward, to the Jacksonian democracy of the dirt farmer, and to a world of biblical prints on parlor walls and border ballads that had made their way from eighteenth century Scotland to the cattle range of the Southwest.

The contrast between the two men is somewhat mitigated by the fact that the West broadened Wister. To the extent that he was able to escape the traditions of his Eastern background and look at the West through eyes not veiled by the preconceptions of his class, he became receptive to the Western experience for itself. In the nostalgia of his final pages on the region, the West takes on a melancholy dignity that has nothing to do with the genteel values Wister brought with him from the East.

Rhodes had no such barriers of class narrowness to prevent his understanding America's Western experience; his problems as a writer were quite otherwise. Environment and training had given him sympathies almost too broad. His problem was not that of accepting the West but of seeing it in perspective, with the discriminating habit of mind that makes for significant literary effort. Though he did not fully achieve this, he contradicted every convention that had crystallized in The Virginian, and he opened a new direction for fiction of the West.

Eugene Manlove Rhodes was born in a log house in Tecumseh,

Nebraska, in 1869, the son of a farmer who had been the colonel of an Illinois volunteer regiment in the Civil War. Prairie fires, cyclones, and grasshoppers soon pushed the family south to Cherokee, Kansas, where Colonel Rhodes operated a general merchandise store. Here his son Gene became a wonder to the townspeople by reading his way, while still a child, through the entire Bible, an influence reflected in the biblical allusions that pervade his books. Less openly, as he confessed to his mother years later, the boy also read his way through stacks of dime novels.¹

Still seeking fairer prospects, the Colonel moved on in 1881 to New Mexico and ranching, his family following two years later. Here Rhodes finally settled, but young Gene was never to forget that his people had been part of the Great Trek that settled the West. Colonel Rhodes became Indian Agent of the Mescalero Apaches, providing his son with a courageous example of the little people's struggle against the "interests" by fighting to keep the cattle barons from making the reservations their private province.² This too was a lesson never forgotten. Young Rhodes himself achieved a measure of local fame among the Indians by throwing a rock and killing a bull that was attacking an Apache boy. For this the Indians dubbed him "Ox-Killer."³

¹May Davison Rhodes, The Hired Man on Horseback: My Story of Eugene Manlove Rhodes (Boston, 1938), pp. 15-19.

²William Aloysius Keleher, The Fabulous Frontier (Santa Fe, 1945), p. 138.

³May Rhodes, The Hired Man, p. 21.

At the age of thirteen or fourteen (opinions vary), Gene Rhodes, small and shabby, afflicted with a speech impediment that older men found humorous,⁴ riding a saddle he had bought by saving soap coupons, went to work as a horse wrangler on a ranch at the edge of that forbidding land lying between the San Andres Mountains and the Rio Grande which the Spanish had named Jornada del Muerto.⁵ At seventeen he was experienced enough to serve as guide for an army detachment hunting Geronimo, though his group never got close to the Apache chief.⁶

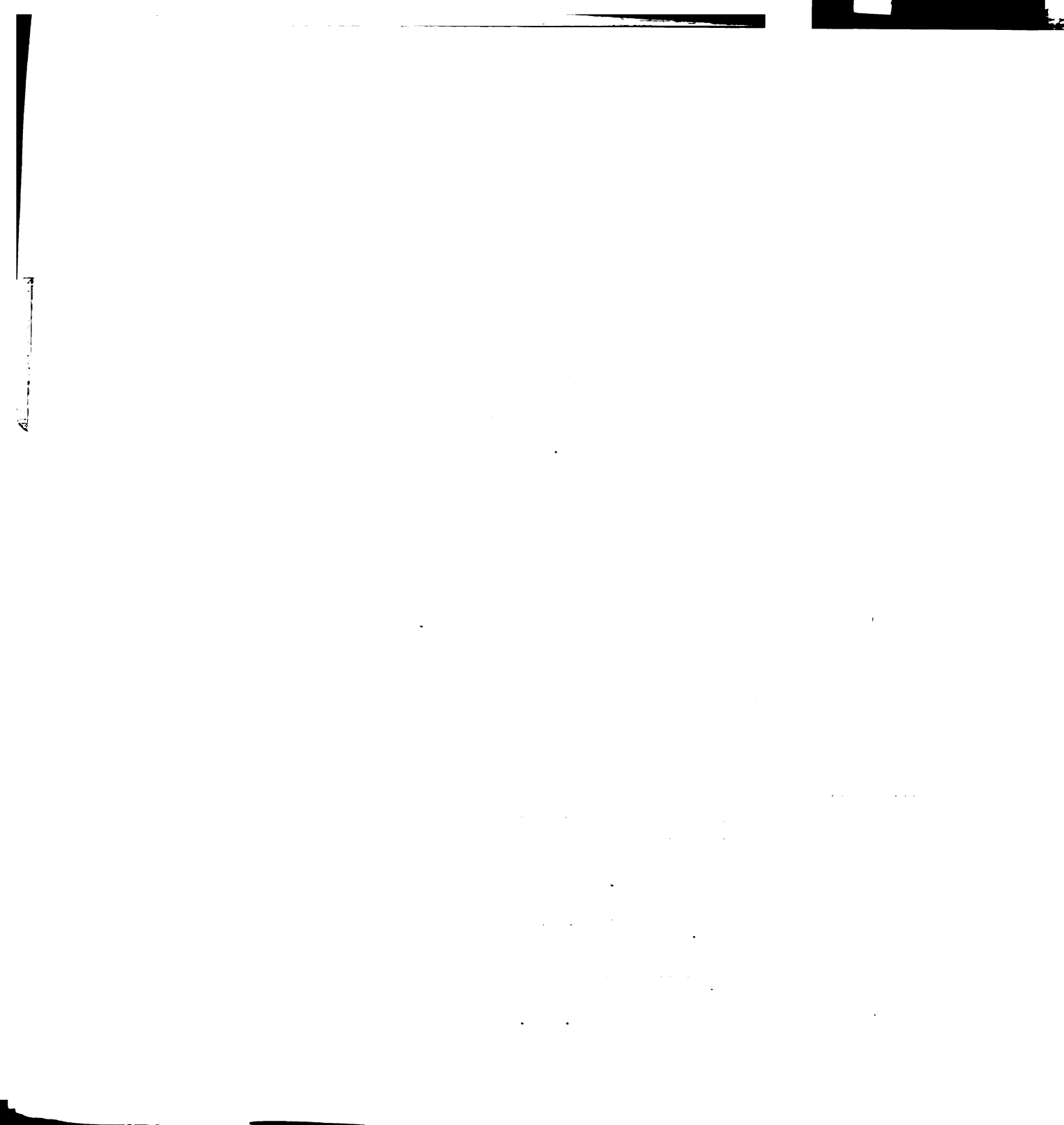
His schooling during these years was scanty and haphazard, consisting of a few years in the grade schools of the area. Always, however, he read omnivorously; and one winter he managed to attend a course of lectures on English literature at New Mexico's nearby College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts.⁷ In 1889 he borrowed fifty dollars from his father and set off for college at San Jose, California. Rhodes had read so widely that he was able to meet the entrance requirements despite his meager schooling. Here he lived with two other students in one crowded

⁴Keleher, The Fabulous Frontier, p. 139. Rhodes could not pronounce the letters g and r, which of course gave him difficulty even with his own name. He may have been making an ironic comment on himself in his character Lithpin Sam, who has a like disability and is a tinhorn gambler.

⁵Eddy Orcutt, "Passed By Here," Saturday Evening Post, CCXI (August 20, 1938), 20.

⁶Frank Marion King, Pioneer Western Empire Builders (Pasadena, 1946), p. 242.

⁷Keleher, The Fabulous Frontier, p. 139.



room so close to the railroad tracks that everything shook when the trains went by. Working as a janitor to support himself, he managed to exist on a diet consisting principally of oatmeal, the cheapest food he could find. After two years, his money exhausted, he had to return to New Mexico and cowpunching.⁸

The picture we have of him in those years immediately after his return from California presents strange contrasts. He quickly achieved a reputation for wildness even in a region which placed a liberal interpretation on proper behavior. For a year he dodged a county sheriff on a grand jury indictment for resisting arrest and drawing a deadly weapon. He finally submitted voluntarily to the law, and the charge was eventually dismissed.⁹ He was known throughout the Jornada district for his willingness to ride any wild horse and his equal willingness, despite the fact that he was small and slender, to box or wrestle any man he met. "He was not a trouble-maker," remembered the foreman Rhodes worked for in those days, "far from it, but no one stepped on his toesI never knew any man to throw Gene in a wrestling match. He feared no bad man or bad horse."¹⁰ It was during these years, said one writer, that Rhodes "rose to his own picturesque version of man's estate, and attained his fame as bronc twister, fighter,

⁸May Rhodes, The Hired Man, p. 24.

⁹Keleher, The Fabulous Frontier, pp. 224-25.

¹⁰J. Frank Dobie, Introduction to Eugene Manlove Rhodes, The Little World Waddies (Chico, California, 1946), p. xiii.

and poker player."¹¹ One day, for the sport of it, he boxed and beat six picked men one after the other.¹²

He also had a good deal of contact with those outside the law. The ranch which he stake-claimed in the San Andres Mountains, a ranch "invitingly situated for anyone who wished to remain incognito, was sanctuary, and sanctuary never betrayed."¹³ "For years," Rhodes said later, "I was the only settler in a country larger than the state of Delaware."¹⁴ To this lonely avenue to Old Mexico came those whom the law wanted—Sam Ketchum, Bill Doolin, two of the Dalton gang. Rhodes, asking no questions, put them to work until they were ready to move on. In his maturity he was able to use these men in his fiction, to see in them part of the message he wanted to convey about man in the West, but at this time he was dangerously close to joining their ranks himself. In his old age he confessed to his wife that, but for meeting her, he probably would have been a criminal, for in his search for adventure he was drifting that way.¹⁵

But there was another side to this young cowhand just back from college. If he was notorious for his fighting and gambling and riding wild horses, he was at least equally notorious as the

¹¹Orcutt, Saturday Evening Post, CCXI, 21.

¹²May Rhodes, The Hired Man, p. 51.

¹³Henry Herbert Knibbs, Introduction to Eugene Manlove Rhodes, The Proud Sheriff (Boston, 1935), p. iv.

¹⁴May Rhodes, The Hired Man, p. 27.

¹⁵May Rhodes, pp. 28, 253.

"reading cowboy." "They used to say jokingly," recalled the foreman of the ranch where Rhodes worked, "that young Rhodes carried a book instead of a gun. I never knew him to carry a pistol. I believe he liked to herd the saddle horses because that work gave him more time for reading."¹⁶ "I want to contribute," wrote Frank Dobie,

to a fund for erecting a bronze figure of Eugene Manlove Rhodes, at whatever may be the most appropriate spot in New Mexico. I want the figure to be of Gene reading a book on a gentle cow horse manifestly in harmony with the philosophy of his rider.¹⁷

There are many stories of Rhodes's obliviousness to the world and his work while he rode and read, but perhaps the best-known concerns the day he was thrown and rather badly hurt; his only complaint, when men ran to pick him up, was that the horse had made him lose his place in the book.¹⁸

It was at this time, also, while working on a ranch owned by a man named Graham, that he began to write, an occupation that combined with his reading to lessen his usefulness as a cowhand. Mrs. Graham served as critic. Rhodes, writing at night and wrangling horses by day, would shout out to her at any hour to come hear what he had written. "He wore me out so while he was writing those stories," she told an interviewer, "that I never

¹⁶Dobie, Introduction to Rhodes, The Little World, p. xiv.

¹⁷Dobie, p. xvi.

¹⁸Knibbs, Introduction to Rhodes, The Proud Sheriff, pp. iii-iv.

did want to read them after they were printed."¹⁹ Writing at night and reading at work during the day made Rhodes so absent-minded about his duties that Graham's recollections are even less flattering.

Meanwhile a young widow lay ill with diphtheria in Apalachin, New York. To cheer her, her sister read to her some poems published in out-of-the-way magazines by a young New Mexico cowboy. Liking the verse, the widow wrote the author. After three months (Rhodes had been out on roundup when May Davison's letter arrived) she received a twenty-page reply signed, "With love, Jean."²⁰ Romance by mail flowered quickly from this improbable beginning. Even in love letters Rhodes could not refrain from that wry humor that was later to be characteristic of his books. He wrote the young widow that his place had a large lawn, "but it was somewhat neglected."²¹ When she finally saw the ranch she found that the "lawn" stretched for sixty miles to the San Andres-- and hadn't a spear of grass in it. After two years of letters, in July of 1899, battered and bruised from a fight with a train brakeman, Rhodes arrived in Apalachin. He brought as gifts a pearl-handled revolver and a book of Kipling's poems.²² The couple were married in August and Rhodes returned to New Mexico and

¹⁹Keleher, The Fabulous Frontier, p. 140.

²⁰May Rhodes, The Hired Man, pp. 1-2.

²¹May Rhodes, p. 43.

²²Orcutt, Saturday Evening Post, CCXI, 21.

his work, Mrs. Rhodes following with one of her two sons the next June. For the next few years Rhodes and his wife divided their time between the small town of Tularosa and their lonely ranch in the San Andres, where they were twenty-five miles from their nearest neighbor.²³

These were lean years in the cattle country. Rhodes's only income was from his few steers, and prices were low. Often he was without money and had to buy food on credit. To ease matters he took the necessary examinations and received certification to teach in elementary school, but his reputation for wildness still plagued him and he was refused a position because his "moral conduct" was not such as to warrant it.²⁴ In desperation he turned back to writing. He had published a couple of stories in Out West, a magazine which did not pay for its material. Sometime in 1904 or 1905 he wrote to Agnes Morley Cleaveland, a lady who in his eyes had achieved the pinnacle of success by publishing one story on the West and receiving forty dollars for it, and asked her how one came to write for pay. She replied that he should get in touch with Bob Davis, editor of Munsey Publications, and herself wrote to Davis about her enthusiasm for the Rhodes stories she had seen.

Bob Davis promptly wrote to Gene and invited him to submit a story. Although Davis rejected the story, this was the turning-point in Gene's career. However, with that overgenerosity in

²³May Rhodes, The Hired Man, pp. 9-11, 37-40.

²⁴May Rhodes, p. 78.

giving credit so characteristic of him, he always insisted that his letter to me was the turning-point, that it was a toss of a coin: if I deigned to answer, he would turn from cow punching to literature; if from my barren heights of the "arrived" I did not answer, he would take it as a sign that he must stick to what he could do--ride a horse....

That Davis accepted my stories and not Gene's was proof of his discernment, for Munsey was using mere yarns, and Gene was writing literature.²⁵

Despite this encouragement it is doubtful that Rhodes, harassed by the necessity of paying grocery bills and performing the endless chores of a small ranch, would have found time for so long-range a project as becoming a selling author if it had not been for a sharp turn of events. In 1903, Mrs. Rhodes, taking with her the son born two years earlier, returned for a visit to her parents in Apalachin and found that she must remain and take care of them. Rhodes sold off the stock from the ranch in the San Andres. For a time he worked on construction jobs and ranches, still writing, and then, very suddenly one day in 1906, he followed his wife to New York.²⁶ He fled New Mexico as a fugitive from the law with at least one posse in close pursuit, but there is disagreement about the nature of his offense. One local faction believed that a bank holdup in the town of Belen, an incident that Rhodes later used in one of his best stories, was the explanation of his flight.²⁷ Far more likely

²⁵ Agnes Morley Cleaveland, No Life for a Lady (Boston, 1941), p. 280.

²⁶ May Rhodes, The Hired Man, pp. 84-86.

²⁷ Orcutt, Saturday Evening Post, CCXI, 48.

is the account Rhodes himself gave many years later when, in 1928, Governor R. C. Dillon of New Mexico issued an amusing pardon for whatever youthful indiscretions Rhodes may have committed. In a letter back to the governor Rhodes told his story.

I ran across a young fellow—one of the Hargis family of Kentucky feudists. He was broke, hungry, ragged and lousy. I bought him boots and clothes and a saddle, also deloused him, and killed the fatted calf for him. Unfortunately, that calf—not to go into unnecessary details, there was a clerical error connected with that calf. Now, one of my neighbors was a purist, and he had a steady offer of \$500 reward for correction of such errors. So what does Hargis do but wander over to White Oaks and confide my goodness to John Owens, the sheriff of Lincoln County?

These oldtimers are clannish. A man who had never liked me—and whom I had never liked—rode some hundred and fifty miles to Las Cruces, just to bring the good news.

So I went to White Oaks unostentatiously, no man seeing me—and persuaded this willing witness to leave the territory. I did not have to use my persuader, but I escorted him to the Texas line, and spoke to him severely at parting.²⁸

This may not have been the specific incident that occasioned Rhodes's departure, but the best evidence is that the charge against him when he left was intimidating a witness for the Territory. In his haste he had to leave behind what little fortune he had accumulated, a herd of seven hundred saddle horses.

"Gene reached my home," wrote his wife, "the twenty-third of April, 1906. He had my guitar, a rug of which I was very fond, and three dollars. I welcomed him with joy."²⁹ Rhodes remained in Apalachin for twenty years. He farmed with Mrs. Rhodes's

²⁸ May Rhodes, The Hired Man, p. 195.

²⁹ May Rhodes, p. 89.

father and, for the first time, found time to work fairly steadily at his writing. Soon after he arrived, he collaborated with Harry Wallace Phillips for six weeks. The results of this collaboration, three stories, were published in the Saturday Evening Post.³⁰ At last Eugene Rhodes was a selling author.

Even as he began to succeed as a writer sorrow came to him and his wife. In 1910, their second child, a little girl of two, fell ill and died. Rhodes, who had adored the child, nearly lost his mind with grief. In one of those almost incredibly sentimental acts that abound in his books he "wrote a little letter to God, telling Him her favorite games, that she liked to help, and would He put her in care of some very motherly angel....Then Gene placed the letter in her tiny hand, shrouded with smilax and rosebuds."³¹

Yet these were perhaps the best years for the young couple. In addition to his farming and writing, Rhodes, as always, read voraciously. It would be useful to know what constituted his reading list, but Mrs. Rhodes apparently did not follow her husband's intellectual growth closely, for her biography is chary with titles and authors. We do know, however, that Kipling, Stevenson, and Rostand's Cyrano de Bergerac were among his favorites, all of them lasting influences. He apparently had almost total recall of everything he read, for his talk was always

³⁰ May Rhodes, p. 91.

³¹ May Rhodes, p. 108.

filled with quotations. His love of physical contact sports was transferred by now almost entirely to baseball, which he played with passion. According to Mrs. Rhodes's testimony he did almost no writing from beginning to end of the baseball season. The war was also an interruption. Rhodes, with a stepson in uniform, felt the war strongly, could take little interest in his writing, and produced only one story during its course. In 1918 he gave up writing altogether for a time and went to Hollywood to try to sell some of his stories to the film producers, without success.³²

At best Rhodes was never a prolific or facile writer. In an interview he explained that he mulled over each story or book for weeks or months in his mind. Every incident of plot, character, and setting, he felt, had to be clear in his mind before he could begin putting it on paper. During this time he pasted a prodigious amount of notes about the walls of his workroom, using different colored paper to indicate the draft number. Often his work went through twelve drafts, and his best writing speed never rose above twelve hundred words for a nine-hour day. His novels, which were not long ones, each required eight months of such labor.³³

Nevertheless, by the time Mrs. Rhodes was free to return to New Mexico with her husband, he had written seven novels and

³²May Rhodes, pp. 94-95, 122-23, 129-30.

³³May Rhodes, pp. 158-59.

many short stories. Always his subject matter had been the West, which he missed desperately and dreamed of almost nightly. Among other things, Apalachin was somewhat too class conscious for this egalitarian from the West. Disguising it as Abingdon, he said of it in one of his books: "A most desirable neighborhood: the only traces of democracy on the river road are the schoolhouse and the cemetery."³⁴ He expressed his loyalty to New Mexico over the early years of his exile by working assiduously for its statehood. Passages from one article in support of the cause were read into the Congressional Record.³⁵

In 1926 Rhodes and his wife moved back to the West, settling first in Santa Fe before Rhodes's longing for his own part of New Mexico sent them south to Alamogordo. As always, there was not much money, partly due to Rhodes's lifelong passion for poker. "He said he didn't care for money," wrote Mrs. Rhodes. "I can well believe it. We were always up to our necks in debt."³⁶ In addition there was sickness. The dust of New Mexico roundups had combined with the dust of New York threshings to produce a tormenting bronchitis and a constant, racking cough. Two years after their return to the West, while his wife was back in the East on a brief visit, Rhodes had a near-fatal heart attack which left that organ terribly enlarged.³⁷

³⁴Copper Streak Trail (New York, 1922), p. 151.

³⁵May Rhodes, The Hired Man, p. 111.

³⁶May Rhodes, p. 147.

³⁷May Rhodes, p. 174.

Yet for a moment there was respite. Rhodes was at work on a project very dear to him, a history of New Mexico. Utterly ignoring doctors' orders he stumped the state gathering information and reminiscences from old settlers. The traveling seemed to revive him, and by the summer of 1929 he was writing and selling stories once more. But in 1930 bronchitis drove him to try the California climate, and the next year he and Mrs. Rhodes returned to the coast to stay.³⁸

The brief images of those final years are sad ones. Soon after their arrival in California Rhodes wrote to one of his best friends: "Sir--this is a charming place. But it does not satisfy the soul."³⁹ And Mrs. Rhodes: "The fledglings were grown. They were gone. There were only a very lonely man and a very lonely woman, long, weary miles from the special lands we loved."⁴⁰ As always, too, there was the matter of money. All his life Rhodes had loaned people money which they didn't repay, money which would have made old age more than comfortable for him. Now poverty was at hand. "Not all the California sunshine," wrote Mrs. Rhodes,

could brighten the knowledge that we were old and broken and practically penniless....

It had reached the point where the question was no longer how many stories could he write, but

³⁸ May Rhodes, pp. 175-78, 212, 220.

³⁹ Keleher, The Fabulous Frontier, p. 146.

⁴⁰ May Rhodes, The Hired Man, p. 225.

could he write any? He was too sick to concentrate, to study out the elaborate plots that made his stories.

Was it only a matter of time, how soon would we be dependents, objects of charity?⁴¹

For a moment, in 1932, there was a glittering hope. A uniform edition of Rhodes's books had been projected, but as he anticipated they might, the publishing plans fell through because of the depression.⁴²

Indignities of the spirit also awaited the old and poor in an alien land. An eagerly-planned and long-awaited trip to visit friends was ruined by a bullying traffic policeman when Rhodes inadvertently ran a red light. Old and sick and shabby, he had to sit nursing a protesting heart in his rattletrap car and listen to an irate officer invite him to step out and defend himself.⁴³ Perhaps there could be no greater pain for Happy Warrior Gene Rhodes, a man who had made fighting the bullies of the world his life's work, and who one day would have leaped so joyously to battle, perhaps first inviting the officer to bring five friends.

Dying day by day, he yet had to go on working, for there were bills.

Gene was so very weak and ill by now, and would often work all night on eight or ten pages, only to destroy them in the morning. Beyond the

⁴¹May Rhodes, p. 240.

⁴²Keleher, The Fabulous Frontier, p. 146.

⁴³May Rhodes, The Hired Man, pp. 242-43.

Desert progressed but slowly. He was working with all his might to get the story done, which would pay off our debts and give us a slight balance. At last it was finished. He sent it off without return postage, because he didn't have it. We had exactly forty-eight cents in the world.⁴⁴

After much haggling the Saturday Evening Post accepted the story, even sending the hundred dollar advance that Rhodes had been forced to request. So ill now that he often had to sit up all night to ease the pain in his heart, he barely got the proofs of this last work corrected before the end came. Early one June morning in 1934, after a series of heart spasms, he died in his wife's arms. True to a promise made long before, Mrs. Rhodes took the body to a place high in New Mexico's San Andres Mountains, where the grave looked out on that country which Eugene Rhodes had loved so well and which had been denied to him for so much of his life.⁴⁵

Such a bare account of Rhodes's life, based primarily on May Rhodes's somewhat rambling and anecdotal biography of her husband, suggests little of the man. For despite the precedence that action seems to take in any account of his reckless riding, his fighting and ranching and fleeing from sheriffs, Rhodes was a man of thought. From the migratory tradition of his people,

⁴⁴May Rhodes, p. 245.

⁴⁵May Rhodes, pp. 254-55.

from life lived by the labor of his hands in the still unsettled Territory of New Mexico, and from the imaginative flight of his mind in the books he read so eagerly, came a view of history and man's place in it just as surely as a view of these matters came from Harvard and Europe and Philadelphia's Main Line for Owen Wister. Yet it would be difficult to find two Americans, separated in age by only nine years, who held such opposing convictions about the region they both chose to explore in fiction. Wister's heritage made him an instinctive aristocrat; Rhodes's heritage made him a militant democrat. The differences are instructive, for they define Rhodes more sharply, not simply as a man and a writer, but as a writer giving new direction to the use of the West in literature. Rhodes wrote about the West because it was the section of America that he knew and loved best. But on another level he wrote about the West because there, more than anywhere else, had been expressed for him the real meaning of history and of America.

Wister, when he looked back at history, saw the appalling disappearance of class aristocracy, the frightening inundation of immigrants from foreign shores, and the disturbing rise of a traditionless and un-American nouveau riche. Rhodes saw the past quite otherwise. The lesson of history was the emerging triumph of democracy over societal aristocracy and all the other tyrannies of the past. The immigrant, far from being a menace, shared a central place in the American experience with the pioneer. Together, in their search for food and land, they had built America.

Francis Parkman, from the lofty position of a Brahmin off on a vacation search for Indians, had been contemptuous of the agricultural emigrants he saw moving West. Wister, himself a latter-day Brahmin in search of cowboys and local color, echoed Parkman's scorn. But to Rhodes, whose people had been part of the Great Trek, the migrants were not the shiftless dispossessed but venturesome Vikings. He would not have them seen from the disparaging perspective of soft-palmed gentility.

There are two sorts of people--those who point with pride and those who view with alarm. They are quite right. The world will not soon forget Parkman "of Ours." Here was a man of learning, common sense, judgment and wide sympathies. Yet once he stumbled: the paregorical imperative, which impels each of us to utter ignominious nonsense, urged Francis Parkman to the like unhappiness, drove him to father and put forth this void and singular statement.

"I have often perplexed myself to divine the various motives that give impulse to this strange migration; but whatever they may be, whether an insane hope of a better condition of life, or a desire of shaking off the restraints of law and society, or mere restlessness, certain it is that multitudes bitterly repent the journey."

....We, wise after the event, now point with pride to that strange migration of our fathers. The Great Trek has lasted three hundred years. To-day we dimly perceive that the history of America is the history of the pioneer; that on our shifting frontiers the race has been hammered and tempered to a cutting edge.

That insane hope of better things--the same which beckoned on the Israelites and the Pilgrim Fathers; restraints of law and society, which in Egypt made the Israelite a slave, in England gave the Puritan to the pillory and the stocks, and in this western world of ours took the form of a hollow squire, founder by letters patent of a

landed oligarchy--so that the bold and venturesome sought homes in the unsquired wilderness; and restlessness, that quality which marks the most notable differences between man and the sandstone....

That which perplexed Parkman looked upon, disapproving, was the settlement of America--the greatest upbuilding of recorded time; and the prime motive of that great migration was the motive of all migrations--the search for food and land. They went west for food. What they did there was to work; if you require a monument--take a good look!⁴⁶

Rhodes called those who did the migrating and thereby built America the "little people." They had led no armies, only fought the battles; they had captained no far-sailing galleys, only plied the oars. The history books, by neglecting them, had missed the meaning both of history and America. Wister had divided the world into two camps: those Anglo-Saxons who belonged to a societal or natural aristocracy, and other inferior creatures. Rhodes, too, saw a divided world, but his divisions crossed the lines of race and nationality. He saw the history of mankind as a pitched battle between the decent and downtrodden and the rich, powerful oppressors who had robbed and gulled them for so long. The beginning of one of his poems provides us with Rhodes's equivalent of that "we" Wister had used to describe the exclusiveness of his Harvard club:

We are the little people who never have won to fame
We who tamed the grass to wheat, gave the stars a name,
We who made the wolf our friend, sharing woe or weal,
Yoked the ox and backed the horse, shaped the wedge and wheel,
With our strong hands magical.⁴⁷

⁴⁶Eugene Manlove Rhodes, Stepsons of Light (Boston, 1921), pp. 9-11.

⁴⁷"The Little People," Saturday Evening Post, CCII (December 19, 1929), 137.

The writers of history books, directing their attention to the politicians and generals, had left these people nameless and unsung. They had immigrated and emigrated in their search for food and land, always building America, and Americans did not know their story. Of the version of history taught to schoolchildren in Apalachin he wrote:

For the rich and unmatched history of their own land, they have but a patter of that; no guess at its high meaning, no hint of a possible destiny apart from glory and greed and war....The history of America is the story of the pioneer and the story of the immigrant. The students are taught nothing of the one or the other--except for the case of certain immigrant pioneers, enskied and sainted, who never left the hearing of the sea; a sturdy and stout-hearted folk enough, but something press-agented.⁴⁸

It was to the cause of the anonymous ordinary people who had done the world's work without benefit of press-agentry that Eugene Rhodes devoted himself as a writer. He attacked the prejudices by which they had so long been maligned, celebrated their virtues, paid honor to their neglected champions of the past. And everywhere, in his articles and his fiction, he tried hard to suggest that there was indeed a destiny for man and America apart from glory and greed and war.

His battles in defense of his chosen people carried Rhodes into many arenas. It was characteristic of him to expend his energy with equal profligacy on causes important and relatively trivial. Injustice anywhere was his enemy. He wrote in

⁴⁸Copper Streak Trail, pp. 149-50.

defense of Pat Garrett, the sheriff who killed Billy the Kid, because Garrett had been maligned in a biographical attempt to make a Robin Hood of Bonney.⁴⁹ He took up the cudgels to preserve the name of a New Mexican town named after a local pioneer when there was a proposal afoot to court favor with a vice president of the Santa Fe Railroad by re-naming the town after him.⁵⁰ One of the first things he published was a strident poem attacking America's subjugation of the little people of the Philippines.⁵¹

Yet there was reason behind the shotgun nature of Rhodes's attack. Barriers of caste, provincialisms of region, snobbery in language, jingoism on a national level—these were related matters, all a part of the gargantuan lie by which those who had made the world's destiny a matter of glory and greed continued to blind and divide the little people. Thus "Say Now Shibboleth," one of Rhodes's more important blows against those barriers by which Wister had separated his "we" and "they" of the world, finds a direct relationship between linguistic snobbery and the provincialism in history which had distorted the American story by debasing the pioneer. It begins:

While yet a small boy I was persuaded to earnest and painstaking study of language by hearing a report of a memorable examination. Some of you may have seen it:

⁴⁹"In Defense of Pat Garrett," Sunset Magazine, LIX (September, 1927), 26-27, 85-91.

⁵⁰May Rhodes, The Hired Man, p. 180.

⁵¹"Te Deum Laudamus" in The Little World Waddies, p. 196.

"And the Gileadites took the passages of Jordan before the Ephraimites; and it was so, that when those Ephraimites which were escaped said, Let me go over; that the men of Gilead said unto him, art thou an Ephraimite? If he said, Nay: Then they said unto him, Say now Shibboleth; and he said Sibboleth; for he could not frame to pronounce it right. Then they took him, and slew him at the passages of Jordan."⁵²

Rhodes's discussion centers upon three books by three modern Gileadites. All three authors are scholars; their books, one on English, one on word usage, and a biography of Lincoln, are all marred by a hateful intolerance and narrowness of comprehension. The book on English proposes that the

metaphorical use of the phrases "to cross swords" and "to parry a thrust" are elegant, reminiscent of the days when homicide was a fashionable recreation. But the metaphorical use of "bedrock," "rolling hitch," "cinch" and "balance" carry with them low suggestions—of work.

The Lincoln biography is similarly intolerant.

Its usefulness is heavily discounted by the opening pages, which are given to indiscriminating attack upon the threefold nature of the early settlers of Illinois and Indiana. The author imputes to them the lowest motives....

That the pioneers built log huts before building palaces is a shameful thing; the forest was their personal misdemeanor....Decency, cleanliness, morality, truthfulness, honor, common honesty, the author denies to them....Indeed, of all possible virtues he grants them only two: "an ignoble physical courage" and "a sort of bastard contempt for hardship." These are his prudent words....

What sticks in his gizzard most, however, is that these men were migratory. He doesn't approve of that....He intimates pretty strongly that they

⁵²The Best Novels and Stories of Eugene Manlove Rhodes, ed. Frank V. Dearing (Boston, 1949), pp. 531-33.

"moved on" to avoid paying their debts. He does not explain how they could have settled the West if they had stayed at home.

....I have done the man an injustice. He does credit these people with another virtue, a notable one. He says: "Finding life hard, they helped each other with a general kindness which is impracticable among the complexities of elaborate social organization."

We have noticed that. Our sort of objects seldom receive help or kindness from really cultured people—or politeness, either. They invite us to say Shibboleth, generally. Then they slay us.⁵³

It was a result of such provincialism in history and biography that those rare champions of the common people's cause had been forgotten. When Wister wrote biography he chose as his subjects Grant and Washington, men of great prominence, and made of them heroes and aristocrats. But Rhodes's imagination was fired by different stories. When he turned to biography it was to a man neglected by the press—agents of the past, a man born to riches and nobility who nevertheless struck the first blow for democracy and freedom in his part of the new world.

Don Diego Dionisio de Peñalosa was born to wealth and high position in Lima in 1624. A brilliant soldier and skillful administrator when Albuquerque was Viceroy of New Spain, he rose to receive his commission as Governor and Captain-General of New Mexico in 1660. An able and just governor, Peñalosa was also an explorer and made one of those almost unbelievable expeditions into the wilderness in search of mythical Quivira, reaching the

⁵³The Best Novels, pp. 542-43.

point on the Missouri now occupied by Omaha before turning back to Santa Fe.⁵⁴

None of these accomplishments would have made him important in Rhodes's view of history. He gained that importance on the day he defied the powers of the Inquisition. Two factors were dominant in Peñalosa's personality: tolerance toward the conquered Indians and an arrogant pride with those of his own status. Both qualities came into play the day the Commissary General of the Inquisition in New Mexico caught a native boy worshipping the sun in the manner of his ancestors. The Inquisition officer wanted the child lashed as a heretic. Peñalosa, who did not believe in the lash for subject peoples and children, refused, and imprisoned the officer to prevent the act. For this, when he returned to Mexico in 1665, he was arrested, imprisoned, and stripped of his wealth; no one defied the Inquisition with impunity.⁵⁵

The rest of Peñalosa's life was a long, fanatic struggle against the unjust powers he had earlier served. For years he pleaded and intrigued throughout the capitals of the world for someone to contest the power of Spain in America. Finally, in France, he was able to promote La Salle's expedition of 1684 to Louisiana. Though La Salle's force missed the mark and received no support from home, France had been made aware of the Louisiana

⁵⁴The Best Novels, pp. 516-18.

⁵⁵The Best Novels, pp. 519-25.

area, and boundary to Spain's oppressive empire was on the way. When the tribes of New Mexico rose up and slaughtered the Spanish in 1680 the boy Peñalosa had rescued from the whip was at their head; he remembered the Captain-General's kindness by sparing the bastard daughter he had left behind. Concluded Rhodes:

On this troubled planet perhaps there has been no man, missing greatness, who came so near that frantic blame and praise which men call Fame, and prize so strangely, as this baffled Peñalosa. He set a bound to the empire of Spain, that dim adventurer; his dream became Louisiana; his hand was first in America to strike a blow for freedom, first to dare the Inquisition; be that his epitaph. Our Bancroft terms him imposter, perhaps because the Inquisition indicted him as "embustero." I prefer the testimony of Popé the Tegua [the boy Peñalosa rescued], who knew the man and spared his love-child.⁵⁶

Peñalosa's story recommended itself to Rhodes as more than a blow for freedom, however. Rhodes's democratic faith had two principal components: belief in cooperation among the little people and belief in almost infinite possibilities for individual action. It was a compound of the spirit of community barn raisings and the rugged individualism of the pioneer left to his own resources in the wilderness. Peñalosa's singlehanded struggle against one of the world's most powerful empires answered admirably to the individualistic aspect of Rhodes's faith. Here indeed was that spirit ready to charge hell with a bucket of water, the spirit of Cyrano going forth to meet the swords of a hundred

⁵⁶The Best Novels, p. 528.

ambushers, "alone as Lucifer at war with heaven." In his last years Rhodes wrote, in a letter to his good friend Dana Johnson of the Santa Fe New Mexican,

I have always disliked the Puritans, just because none of them had enough presence of mind, at the witch hanging time, to load up a blunderbuss with scrap iron and declare a referendum. That was the time to shoot the moon. One page of thoroughly dead magistrates would have stopped that foolishness. And it would have been the brightest page of history.⁵⁷

Once the issue was brought before the little people you could depend upon the referendum, but for that to happen someone had to dare the power of the oppressors and take a stand with a blunderbuss. The romantic defiance of a Cyrano was a necessary prelude to the neighborly cooperation of the husking bee. Both themes were a part of Rhodes's frontier heritage, and he celebrated them equally.

It was romantic individualism, with its inherent distrust of "system," that kept Rhodes from promulgating any very specific political or economic creed. His voice was the voice of protest, but it offered no elaborate programs, no panaceas. His faith remained in grass roots democracy, in simple cooperation of the ordinary people against the "interests" that would rob them. He spoke out often, for the little people must have their gad-fly Cyrano to goad them into setting things right by referendum. His function was to set them thinking.

⁵⁷Keleher, The Fabulous Frontier, p. 145.

Is this not, indeed, a most beautiful world, and ours the land of opportunity, progress, education? Let our faces, then, be ever glad and shining. Let us tune ourselves with the Infinite....Let us then, be up and Doing.—Doing certainly, but why not think a little too?

Why is thinking in such disfavor? Why is thinking, about subjects and things, the one crime never forgiven by respectability? We have given away our resources, what should have been our common wealth; we have squandered our land, wasted our forests. "Such trifles are not my business," interrupts History, rather feverish of manner; "my duty to record and magnify the affairs of the great." Allow me, madam; we have given away our coal, the wealth of the past; our oil, the wealth of today; except we do presently think to some purpose, we shall give away our stored electricity, the wealth of the future—our water power which should, which must, remain ours and our children's. "Socialist!" shrieks History.⁵⁸

As the rioting twenties faded into the bleak dawn of the depression Rhodes struck out more stridently than ever (though his poems did not improve), for the little people were suffering under the complacent Hoover administration. Adopting the manner of his admired Kipling, he set forth a blistering account of the situation.

Nineteen Thirty-One

"We have the situation well in hand."

—Mayor's Report

"What are them farmers kneelin' for?" said Files-on-Parade.

"They're thankin' God, they're thankin' God," the Color Sergeant said.

"Concernin' what? Concernin' what?" said Files-on-Parade.

"The bloomin' moratorium," the Color Sergeant said.

"We scaled the blessed war debt down to less than half we lent,

Paid now and then in sixty years—a-barrin' accident—

⁵⁸ Copper Streak Trail, pp. 148-49.

But the farmer 'e pays on the dot with use at eight
per cent,
Or 'e'll interview the sheriff in the Mornin'."

This is followed by several stanzas describing an America run by bootleggers and racketeers, with no one representing the interests of the honest working citizens. The poem ends:

"Then why not tidy up a bit?" said Files-on-Parade.
"We're tryin' 'ard, we're tryin' 'ard," the Color Sergeant said.
"Beginnin' when? Beginnin' where?" says Files-on-Parade.
"We're takin' steps, we're takin' steps," the Color Sergeant said.
"We are sendin' back the same old bunch to steer us through the fog,
The lawyer and the banker and the wordsmith and the 'og--
For the workin' man in office is a lousy demagogue,
And you'll find that in the papers in the mornin'."59

For all the strength of his sentiments, for all his dislike of such symbols of oppression as the banker and lawyer and the wordsmith who carried their lies to the people, Rhodes could never have brought himself to support a coherent left wing political creed. The discontent that he expressed was a native product deeply rooted in American political tradition. Further, it was regional in origin, for Rhodes had been profoundly conditioned by his native West. His protest was against the traditional symbols of plunder in the Midwest and West, the usurious banker, the wily lawyer, the ever-hated railroad; his creed was that of a Populist or Wisconsin Progressive transferred to the cattle range. He recognized no conflict between individualism and collectivism, envisioned no circumscription of freedom by a

⁵⁹The Best Novels, p. 217.

proletarian dictatorship. Certainly his traditional democratic faith held no common ground with so alien an importation as Marxism. For all his dislike of the Puritans, he once said, "When it comes to a choice between the ethics of Plymouth Rock and those of a Rhode Island Red, I string along with the Puritans."⁶⁰

Unfortunately, we know little of Rhodes's reaction to the social planners of the early New Deal years. The depression, though it meant bitter hardship for the common people, paradoxically held great hope for a new justice and decency among men. Adversity, Rhodes believed, was a far more effective spur to set men thinking of their common bonds than his books and articles could ever be. Remarked one of his characters of the ordinary people: "We're not such a poor lot after all—not when we stop to think or when we're forced to see. In fire or flood, or sickness, we're all eager to bear a hand—for we see, then. Our purses and our hearts are open to any great disaster."⁶¹ In California, impoverished and dying, Rhodes drew hope from this new calamity which had befallen the people. "I am loath," he said, "to quit living for a while, being intensely curious. Hard times—but for the first time in my life I see ground for a thinking man to hope for a decent world—in time. I recommend this planet as a good place to spend a lifetime."⁶²

⁶⁰ Keleher, The Fabulous Frontier, p. 145.

⁶¹ Copper Streak Trail, p. 265.

⁶² May Rhodes, The Hired Man, p. 233.

If his political and social principles remained somewhat diffuse and disorganized, Rhodes nevertheless redeemed them by that most persuasive of testimonials, personal action, often at considerable cost. His second short story, "Loved I Not Honor More," published in Out West in 1903, dealt with the refusal of ranchers in southeastern New Mexico to sell horses to the British army for use in the Boer War.⁶³ Rhodes, who saw the British cause as that of the big bully against the little people, was using an incident from his own life. As a struggling young rancher he made a windfall sale of a large number of saddle horses at a good price. Just as he was about to accept the money he learned that the buyer was an agent for the British, purchasing horses for use against the Boers. Without hesitation, though he needed the money desperately, Rhodes opened the corral gate and drove the horses out, saying simply, "I'm on the other side of that war." Again, poor as he was, he threw away a glittering cash offer in Hollywood because "the Script Department insisted upon a band of cowboys raiding an immigrant train and stealing the immigrant girls."⁶⁴ Cowboys and immigrants were among his favorite little people; he would not have them used so.

He never lost his readiness to engage the enemy or his sympathy with the underdog. Even when poverty-stricken and near death he managed to arouse a newspaper campaign against corrupt

⁶³Keleher, The Fabulous Frontier, p. 141.

⁶⁴Cleaveland, No Life for a Lady, p. 287.

politicians who were grabbing off welfare funds intended for the poor. In those years too he engaged in a futile and embarrassing controversy over the prohibition question, taking his stand, in an area where prohibition was extremely unpopular, against those who broke the law. His lifelong and seemingly incongruous hatred of liquor sprang from his belief that it debased the people and robbed them of their innate decency and kindness, and that it had been primarily responsible for the gunfighting and killing which had besmirched the history of his beloved West. Liquor was one more weapon in the arsenal of the oppressors who deflected the little people from their true ends. "I was never a prohibitionist," he said. "They are too mild for me. I want to abolish the damn stuff. To forbid it does no good. I want to have it stopped and forgotten--put away with cannibalism."⁶⁵

Even when he was too old and ill to conduct any more campaigns the spirit of combat did not flag. Unable to answer letters, he made up a mimeographed form of amusing excuses and answers to cover communications of every sort—from those of well-wishers to those of bill collectors. But even then the reformer had to have the final word in a last fighting postscript: "Let me add, as one biped to another, that poor men's homes are sold for taxes, while rich men have made tax evasion an exact science. Are you satisfied? I am not."⁶⁶

⁶⁵Keleher, The Fabulous Frontier, p. 147.

⁶⁶Knibbs, Introduction to Rhodes, The Proud Sheriff, p. xvi.

Beneath Rhodes's view of history lay a view of man and, more particularly, of man in the West. Wister had hoped to find—and for a time believed he had found—in the West a natural aristocracy which was disappearing in the East. Rhodes believed in no aristocracies, natural or otherwise. If anyone in his pages lays claim to rule by right of being the strongest it means that he is a villain, and the reader can be sure that the little people will humble him in the end. Of natural selection Rhodes wrote:

Underfed and overworked for generations, starved from birth, starved before birth, we drive and harry and crush them, the weakling and his weaker sons; we exploit them, gull them, poison them, lie to them, filch from them. We crowd them into our money mills; we deny them youth; we deny them hope, or any hope of hope; and we provide for age—the poorhouse....Meantime we prate comfortable blasphemies, scientific or other; natural selection or the inscrutable decrees of God....Or we invent a fire-new science, known as Eugenics, to treat the disease by new naming of symptoms; and prattle of the well born, when we mean well fed; or the degenerate, when we might more truly say the disinherited.⁶⁷

For Wister the West had been the proper place for an aristocracy in nature because it was the last refuge of the Anglo-Saxon, the land where noble blood, uncorrupted by the alien elements of the foreigner-ridden East, might once more come into its own. But Rhodes would accept no cult of blood. The West had always been the haven of the immigrant; its strength lay in the diversity of its national strains and the democracy that made room

⁶⁷ Copper Streak Trail, pp. 183-85.

for them all. Of his beloved Jornada region he wrote:

Doniphan passed this way; Kit Carson rode here; the Texans journeyed north along that old road in '62—to return no more.

These were but passers-by. The history of the Jornada, of in-dwellers named and known, begins with six Americans, as follows: Sandoval, a Mexican; Toussaint, a Frenchman; Fest, a German; Martin, a German; Roullier, a Swiss; and Teagarden, a Welshman.⁶⁸

The Mexican, whom Wister had seen as small, dirty, and inferior, was a particular object for Rhodes's defense:

Since the days of the Invincible Armada, the English have been drilled, from the cradle on, to hate and fear and despise the Spanish. In the English novel, the Spaniard is the villain *ex officio*....

In this country, the Mexican has fallen heir to this race prejudice. The Mexican in our novels is a man of straw: not only a scoundrel, but a stupid and feckless scoundrel, sure to be outwitted, outfought, and foiled by any blond in the book....The people who write this tosh know nothing about Mexicans....The Mexican has his faults, like the people in forty-seven of our own states: but, generally speaking, he is hospitable, courteous, frugal, hardy, proud, uninventive, generous, gay-hearted, unthrifty, unindustrious, liberty-loving, cheerful, patient, and brave.⁶⁹

Rhodes rejected other aspects of the body of thought Wister represented besides its narrow racism. Beneath Wister's original admiration for cowboys (though he was to grow beyond this to a more mature understanding) had lain the idea that the Anglo-Saxon in nature reverted to a state of healthy animal innocence. His

⁶⁸The Best Novels, p. 318.

⁶⁹May Rhodes, The Hired Man, pp. 163-64.

vices were the natural ones (quite different from the societal variety) and his sins most often the mischievous results of high spirits. To Rhodes, who in his early days had known intimately some of the West's criminal class, natural innocence was as false as natural selection. Every man was a symbol in little of the forces that had rocked the world through history: the spirit of cooperation with others that had characterized the uphill struggle of the common man; and the flaming potential for individual action which might lead with equal facility to individual aggrandizement or to a stand with a blunderbuss and the declaration of a referendum in the cause of righteousness. "There has never," cries the tormented heroine of Rhodes's final story,

"been anything but wrong and hate here, outrage and revenge....It is enough to make one believe in the truth of original sin and total depravity!"

"No truth at all!" cried Maxwell warmly. "Original sin is just merely a fact—no truth at a'! Folks are aye graspin' at some puir halflin fact and settin' it up to be the truth. It takes at least three trees to make a row, and it needs at least three facts to make a truth. Mankind is blind, foolish and desperately wicked—yes, take it from me, that am an old ruffian. But mankind is also eencurably good—wise and strong and splendid and kindly and brave—in your time of sorrow you will find it so—and there's another glaring fact for you! With endless rain earth would drown, wi' endless sun it would be a cinder: look about you now, see what sun and rain and evil and good have wrought together, grass and flower and bud and fruit, the bonny world and the bonny race o' men! World and man, the machine Works! And there's a third fact for you, lassie, and the weightiest fact. We are a Going Concern: we pay a profit to our Owner!"⁷⁰

⁷⁰The Best Novels, pp. 462-63.

"For my part," Rhodes said near the end of his life, "I am interested in the wandering foot, the empty belly, the shaping hand, the generous heart and the vague and fumbling mind."⁷¹

The funeral oration preached over one of his heroes might serve to characterize them all:

He was a simple and kindly man. He brought a good courage to living, he was all help and laughter, he joyed in the sting and relish of rushing life.... You know his faults. He was given to hasty wrath, to stubbornness and violence....It was never his way to walk blameless. He did many things amiss; he took wrong turnings. But he was never too proud to turn back, to admit a mistake or to right a wrongdoing. He paid for what he broke.⁷²

This was the situation of man as Rhodes saw it. Often blind, always fumbling, occasionally taking up his blunderbuss against insuperable odds (the individualistic half of Rhodes's democratic creed demanded this), he stumbled along his wayward path with a good heart, turning aside to help when he was made to see the need, paying so well for what he broke that the world was left with something on the credit side when the bills were settled. Rhodes would never have called his people sons of light, only Stepsons of Light. But the end would be better than the beginning. Man would little by little recognize the ties that bound him to his fellows; democracy would replace the tyrannies that had held him chained to a destiny of greed and war. Those were the lessons of history.

⁷¹Keleher, The Fabulous Frontier, p. 145.

⁷²Stepsons of Light, pp. 314-15.

His view of man closely conditioned Rhodes's literary theory. He had no patience whatever with deterministic naturalism, for it denied one half of man's nature: "They write very long books in which they set down the evil on the one side--and nothing on the other. That is 'realism.'"⁷³ Such a desolate view of human nature took no account of the potentialities for individual action, the latent Cyrano, that lay in every man. "There is a great distinction," he said, "between realism and reality: It is the business of a realist to preach how man is mastered by circumstances; it is the business of man to prove that he will be damned first."⁷⁴ Naturalism, he believed, had so constricted the boundaries of literary expression that no room was left for life.

No splendid folly or violent sin--much less impracticable idealisms, such as kindness, generosity, faith, forgiveness, courage, honor, friendship, love; no charm or joy or beauty, no ardors that flame and glow. They show forth a world of beastliness and bankruptcy; they picture life as a purposeless hell.⁷⁵

This bleak literary philosophy had come to encompass the West as well, distorting the image of the region and its people.

Plainly, if these books tell the truth, then any and all of my stories are shameless lies. And yet, and yet....

What I remember is generosity, laughter, courage, and kindness. Kindness most of all; kindness from evil men and worthless men, as well as from good men. Therefore this humble star is dear. And I

⁷³Stepsons of Light, p. 66.

⁷⁴Stepsons of Light, p. 67.

⁷⁵Stepsons of Light, p. 70.

have never had reason to believe that this our world is greatly loved by the highly civilized.⁷⁶

Naturalism thus incurred Rhodes's dislike on two counts. It violated his view of the human situation, holding out no vision that could possibly uplift the common people or point the way toward human betterment. It was a literary philosophy repugnant to the reformer in Rhodes. But it also had a quality of apartness, of non-involvement in the common lot, that he despised. The militant democrat could tolerate no literary theory that allowed the writer calmly to anatomize the common people as if they were insects on a slide. Such passionless assumption of aesthetic distance hinted at the esoteric; it suggested that literature, though it remorselessly set forth the dreary circumstances of the common man, was somehow above him. By picturing the little people in all their unexciting tawdriness, naturalism, he felt, made itself the tool of class consciousness, parading in its caricatures a crew of hapless sideshow freaks for the detached amusement of the world's highly civilized.

Rejecting naturalism, Rhodes nevertheless based his own literary theory first of all on factual realism, stressing always that a writer must know his material intimately. He told a friend that he used one actual person in each story "like a tuning-fork --to chord the rest of the story." His preference for Stepsons of Light over his other novels is significant: "I have a wistful feeling toward that book that I have not for the others,

⁷⁶The Trusty Knaves (New York, 1933), pp. viii-ix.

probably because it owes little to fancy, being nearer to history than to fiction or auto-biography."⁷⁷ This novel was realistic enough to earn Rhodes the lasting enmity of a fellow New Mexican whose name and unsavory activities appeared there in unchanged detail. Such authenticity in factual detail was demanded, Rhodes believed, by his audience. "Every line I write," he told his publisher, "is written for two audiences—the casual and highly hypothetical reader, and the oldtimers, the eye-witnesses, who instantly detect the slightest divergence from the facts."⁷⁸

But there was another half of Rhodes's literary theory. If his stories were grounded in the explicit facts of work-a-day life among the little people, illustrating the homely virtues and common kindnesses by which men lived together and helped each other, they also had to accord with the other component of his democratic creed: romantic individualism. His literary theory must provide room for the Cyrano latent in all the stumbling and sinful stepsons of light of the world. This did not mean the conventional strong man on horseback, who would have been preposterous to Rhodes the democrat, but man in the West as Rhodes knew him, a man with

a joyous and loving heart, a decent respect for others and for himself, and courage enough to master fear. No more than that: and what I tell you of these unforgotten friends is true telling and no lie. Not the detailed adventures, but the arms that mocked at weariness, and the feet that trod on fear.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ May Rhodes, The Hired Man, pp. 161-62.

⁷⁸ May Rhodes, p. 167.

⁷⁹ The Trusty Knaves, p. xviii.

Thus the two halves of Rhodes's political creed led to a literary theory that included both realistic and romantic elements. His characters and settings were the ordinary people in everyday circumstances that Howells had proposed as the proper material for realism. His method of treating their physical surroundings was meticulous fidelity to fact; the work habits and artifacts of a number of occupations in the West around the turn of the century could be accurately recreated solely from his books. But his belief in the possibilities for individual action, in the indomitability of the human spirit--these partake of the view of life that we call romantic.

It was undeniably the romantic half of his literary theory that governed Rhodes's use of women in fiction. Romantic love had no important place in his message, and women exist almost solely as preposterous symbols in his books. He was thoroughly prudish about sex in literature, particularly in Western writing, for it offended the romantic code of feminine purity he had inherited from his native region. Personally he found great difficulty in writing about women, admitting candidly that his feminine creations "always squeaked when they walked."⁸⁰ The present-day reader is likely to feel that such criticism is too indulgent, for every romantic heroine in Rhodes's pages is a near disaster. The West, as he saw it, was a man's world; women existed in it, as DeVoto remarked, "merely to stimulate the hero to precariously gallant

⁸⁰ May Rhodes, The Hired Man, p. 217.

behavior, usually on occasions when good sense in a woman would have made it impossible, and to reward him when the complications have been worked out."⁸¹

If the quality and direction of Rhodes's thought are borne in mind it becomes clear why, in twenty years of exile from the West, he should never have been tempted to use some other region as material for his fiction. It was in the West, as Rhodes saw it, that the full meaning of America's experience was being enacted. Here was the latest battleground in an unending warfare, and here, too, the way to victory could be glimpsed. This was a province plundered by all the symbols of wealth and oppression; and here the little people staunchly fought back. The West was a region misunderstood, misinterpreted, and yet emblematic of the meaning of America and all history. It was a society in that particular stage of democratic development where all hung in the balance. Rhodes's duty was to record and interpret, to carry the high meaning of his native land to a world that badly needed the message.

He began in indignation. He resented the image of the West being retailed to the East in the burlesques of Alfred Henry Lewis and others.⁸² He resented the provincialism that kept those who were trying to tell part of the West's story from receiving a

⁸¹ Bernard DeVoto, Introduction to May Rhodes, The Hired Man, p. xxix.

⁸² May Rhodes, p. 157.

hearing; he gave time and effort to defending the work of such men as Charlie Siringo and Emerson Hough. "Oh yes," he wrote to his publisher, "writers of Westerns are supposed to turn out trash anyhow; s'matter of fact, they have as much conscience and pride of work as writers of Metropolitan or Parisian stories, 'Eastern' or Asia Minorican stories. Depends on the story and the writer—not on latitude or longitude."⁸³

The cowboy had been particularly maligned. Said Rhodes, in an interview with the Los Angeles Times: "The...oldtime cowboy was not a murderer, thief, drunkard, gambler, wastrel or weakling—but a man who would rank as good at any time. Men like Will Rogers, Charlie Russell, Will James, Ed Borein, Andy Adams were not the exception. They were the rule."⁸⁴

In Rhodes's pages the cowboy is neither a gun-toting vagrant nor an Arcadian innocent nor the strong man on horseback. Instead he was America's final contribution to the proudest American tradition of all. He was the forerunner of civilization, the pioneer. His knotted and calloused hands were carving life out of the wilderness, exemplifying for all Americans that efficiency and self-reliance which had been our greatest heritage. In the lonesome land between the Rio Grande and the San Andres,

Each man had to be cook, housekeeper, hunter,
laundryman, shoemaker, blacksmith, bookkeeper....

A man who could do these things well enough to
make them work might be illiterate, but he

⁸³May Rhodes, p. 138.

⁸⁴May Rhodes, p. 32.

couldn't be ignorant, not on a bet. He knew too much. He had to do his own thinking. There was no one else to do it for him.⁸⁵

Rhodes's cowboys are neither ignorant nor illiterate.

"What manner of cowboy was this," muses the Eastern heroine, "from whose tongue a learned scientific term tripped spontaneously in so stressful a moment—who quoted scraps of the litany unaware?"⁸⁶ It was, as Frank Dobie has remarked, the Eugene Rhodes manner of cowboy.⁸⁷ With his usual fidelity to fact, Rhodes had models for his literate cowhands; he had known some, and one who quoted Shakespeare endlessly. He also had an explanation for the habit his characters have of quoting the classics on the range:

We hear much of Mr. Andrew Carnegie and His Libraries, the Hall of Fame, the Little Red Schoolhouse, the Five-Foot Shelf, and the World's Best Books. A singular thing is that the most effective bit of philanthropy along these lines has gone unrecorded of a thankless world. This shall no longer be.

Know, then, that once upon a time a certain soulless corporation, rather in the tobacco trade, placed in each package of tobacco a coupon, each coupon redeemable by one paper-bound book....There were three hundred and three volumes on that list, mostly—but not altogether—fiction. And each one was a classic. Classics are cheap. They are not copyrighted....

Cowboys all smoked: and the most deepseated instinct of the human race is to get something for nothing. They got those books. In due course of time they read those books. Some were slow to take to it; but when you stay at lonely ranches, when you are left afoot until the waterholes dry up, so you may catch a horse in the waterpen—why, you must do something. The books were read. Then,

⁸⁵Stepsons of Light, p. 73.

⁸⁶The Best Novels, p. 112.

⁸⁷Introduction to Rhodes, The Little World Waddies, p. xv.

having acquired the habit, they bought more books. Since the three hundred and three were all real books, and since the cowboys had previously been uncorrupted of predigested or sterilized fiction, or by "gift," "uplift" and "helpful" books, their composite taste had become surprisingly good, and they bought with discriminating care. Nay, more. A bookcase follows books; a bookcase demands a house; a house needs a keeper; a housekeeper needs everything. Hence alfalfa--houseplants--slotless tables--bankbooks. The chain which began with yellow coupons ends with Christmas trees. In some proudest niche in the Hall of Fame a grateful nation will yet honor that hitherto unrecognized educator, Front de Boeuf.[Bull Durham]⁸⁸

What particularly endeared the cowboy to Rhodes was his position as the latest in a long line of rebels. Wister, seeking aristocratic lineage for his heroes of the range, had seen the cowboy as the Anglo-Saxon knight reincarnated, Cornwall transplanted to Wyoming. Not so Rhodes. He found for his people an older tradition. They traced back to all the elder migrants of the past, to that honored crew of explorers who had graced the pages of history. The cowboys in his fiction are descended from Esau and Ishmael; they are rebels against all forms of tyranny, brothers in spirit of all the migrants who ever pressed westward in search of food and land. Their business was to build a civilization. It was hard and dangerous work. They knew little of comfort and security or the banker's spirit of safe investment, nothing of the lawyer's tricks, nothing of the merchant's tidy balance of credit and loss. For theirs was the spirit of hazard and exploration; they were America's last members of that proud

⁸⁸The Best Novels, pp. 126-27.

and ragged crew who had carried civilization westward across an ocean and a continent.

The land these range riders inhabit in Rhodes's books is a frontier society, militantly egalitarian, deeply committed to the twin virtues that made up his democratic creed.

It is easy to be hospitable, kindly and free-hearted in a thinly settled country; it is your turn next, you know generosity from both sides....So they were pleasant and friendly people. They learned cooperation by making wagon roads together, by making dams and big irrigation ditches, and from the roundups.⁸⁹

Cooperation meant more than building community roads and ditches, however. It meant little men of good will banding together against the omnipresent oppressors. The West, Rhodes believed, had exhibited this spirit of protest for all the world to see:

For sheer skillful engineering, New Mexican railroads know no rivals. Neglecting fractions, spurs and feeders, consider only the trunklines. Four of them were built from border to border without touching a town.

Ill-natured people speak of townsites and hogsties in this connection. They say--these malicious ones--that when the many-millioned railroads came begging, as is the custom, for gifts of land and cash, those hardheaded and benighted Southwestern towns cordially declined, mentioning terms of barter and sale. Nor could any high-salaried press agent manufacture enthusiasm, charm he never so wisely. The New Mexican's mind was, and is sometimes to this day, a primitive affair. But, as it has never been misused as a storehouse for odds and ends,...he uses his mind,...such as it is, to do his thinking with....

⁸⁹ Stepsons of Light, p. 74.

So far from an offering of yards on a lordly dish, garnished with bonus and bonds, the railroads faced the astounding and insulting proposition that they should buy what they needed, just as you or I have to do.

Hence new townsites were hatched in an incubator, handraised, coddled and taught to gobble the unearned increment. New Mexico is a land of twin cities....

Not one of these recalcitrant old cities got a station within her borders--and not one weakened. They had been wont to freight from Independence by ox team; their unit of distance was twenty-five miles, and a little jaunt to the station held no terrors for them. They were hardy old towns and they foraged for themselves a goodly share of the increment they had earned by a few centuries of hardship.⁹⁰

The stories and novels Rhodes wrote of this land and these people form, as DeVoto has said, a primitive literature.

They deal with such simplicities as courage, endurance, steadiness of nerve and purpose, loyalty, honesty, and honor--the necessary survival virtues of the [cattle] kingdom. There is a primitive separation between such virtues and their opposites which permits no half-lights and no psychological subtleties--and that too follows from the conditions of a life lived out of reach of the restraints of society, a life which had to recognize its evil at sight and get its villains identified and out of the way just as promptly.⁹¹

The West that Rhodes portrays is a land insatiably addicted to civilization. Its goal, in his fiction, is that of building a decent and orderly society. Circumstances were against these people. They lived in a harsh and arid land, never more than one step away from a disastrous drouth. Their plunderers were many.

⁹⁰The Best Novels, p. 404.

⁹¹Bernard DeVoto, "Horizon Land," Saturday Review, XIV (October 17, 1936), 8.

The common man's way of life stood always at the perilous mercy of such huge collections of power and wealth as railroads, banks, and the corporations that owned mines and range lands and water rights. Too often these vested interests could buy and control the machinery—the law officers and the courts—which was supposed to guarantee justice to the little people. The weapons of the ordinary citizen were only two: loyal cooperation among themselves in a common effort of survival, and a spirit of defiance that held that they would be damned before they were mastered by circumstances.

Only two, but these two were enough. Here, Rhodes was sure, was not a people cowed and beaten by their fate, ready material for the degrading hand of the naturalistic novelist, but a people busy building that new and egalitarian society he envisioned for all men. In the West man was being given a fresh chance. This quality of newness, of man disengaged from the prejudices and inequities of older societies and living in a pristine land, is everywhere in Rhodes's books.

In his work (which shows little change from first to last except in technique) Rhodes thus had two primary aims. He wanted to embody his lesson of the little people beating the interests and establishing a good society based on the cooperation of its ordinary citizens—a society with a decent respect for the rights of the individual, with a tolerance that transcended provincialism, with a spirit of classless democracy that assessed every man for his true worth and accepted none of the specious distinctions of

the past, with a profound respect for brains and clear thinking and an equally profound distrust of professional intellectuals who proposed to do the common man's thinking for him. In the course of this he also wanted to capture the spirit of his people, their virtues and weaknesses, their wit and talk, their code and character.

His books deal with both parts of this message largely on the level of externals. Usually his plots take the form of an elaborate detective story, a legacy from the dime novels which had intermixed the detective and cowboy story forms for years. In the beginning there is injustice. A railroad is squeezing small ranchers in order to buy up their land and herds cheaply. For the same purpose, a bank is refusing to loan money to credit-starved cowmen. A community has become the lawless paradise of crooked politicians operating through their bought and paid-for tools in the form of marshalls, sheriffs, and judges. The problem set up by the novel is therefore that of identifying and overcoming this moral evil in physical form.

Accomplishing these ends naturally involves cooperation among the little people. When the smart lawyers, whose business Rhodes defined as "living' on the unlucky,"⁹² combine with the big merchants and bankers to buy up all the cattle feed in time of drouth, planning thereby to grab off herds at a low price, the small ranchers fight back by moving their cattle into the

⁹²The Trusty Knaves, p. 32.

mountains, where there is water but no grass, and chopping sotol to feed them.

"One for all and all for one—that sort of blitherin' junk," said Mason cheerfully. "Men and brothers, fellow citizens, gentlemen and boys—you ought to have seen that work. In two months we didn't rope a cow or trot a horse. We never moved a cow one foot in the wrong direction. We moved 'em late in the evenin', on into the night, early in the morning; we spoke to 'em politely and we held sunshades over 'em all day. We never slept, and we ate beans, flies, dust, patent food and salt pork. I ate through four miles of sidemeat and never struck a shoulder or a ham."⁹³

"We made a pact, I tell you," says another. "Combined all our resources. Them that had brains, they put in brains, and those that didn't, they put in what they had."⁹⁴

These, as Rhodes saw it, were the survival virtues on the frontier—self-reliance, the spirit of common cause, an ingenuity born of desperation, defiance in the face of adversity, a shrewd observance of people and of things. The men who lived by these virtues were "the tie-fast men." The Texan, unlike the California brand of cowboy, had his rope tied to the saddle horn when he roped a cow: "There ain't going to be any half-way measures. What he drops his loop over is his, or he's its."⁹⁵ Such men tie together in the same way.

To lead them there must be the romantic individualists, those gay and carefree men who are willing to set all at hazard

⁹³The Little World Waddies, p. 83.

⁹⁴The Little World Waddies, p. 84.

⁹⁵The Little World Waddies, p. 15.

for the sake of a straw. They are distinguished from their fellows not by a superior morality but by a greater disdain for consequences and rules. It is not that they are better men but that they are greater knaves. "What I don't see," remarks Johnny Pardee ,

"is why the good men don't get together and clean up Gridiron so it will be fit to live in."

"Really good men, they never do much of anything--not when it's risky," said Pres. "Always fussing about the rules, stopping for Sunday and the advice of counsel. Then, they foster a brutal prejudice against guessing, good men do. Worst of all, they wonder does it pay. That's fatal--that last. What you want is a few trusty knaves."⁹⁶

Such useful citizens have nothing in common with the conventional handsome hero on a white horse. Any Rhodes initiate would correctly expect, when he came upon the following passage, that Mundy would prove to be the villain and MacGregor the hero--to the extent that Rhodes has heroes:

They made a strange contrast: Mundy, smooth, slender and graceful, black of hair and eye, poised, lithe and tense, a man to turn and look after; MacGregor, stiff, unwieldy, awkward, gross, unkempt, battered, year-bitten.⁹⁷

It was just such tattered and shirtsleeved warriors as MacGregor, Rhodes believed, who had done the world's work and fought the battles of the little people through history. Often they were outlaws. As he thought back to the desperadoes he had known in his early years, Rhodes came to see in them a part of

⁹⁶The Trusty Knaves, p. 110.

⁹⁷The Best Novels, p. 456.

his message. In a land that stood always on the perilous edge of disaster the niceties of the law could not be too important. In a society where the law and its enforcers so often failed to express the wishes of the people, where the trusty knaves who fought the interests were themselves such unstable compounds of good and evil, outlawry could itself be a form of rebellion against injustice.

In Rhodes's pages those who break the rules are judged less by the letter of the law than by the survival virtues—steadfastness, loyalty, courage, resourcefulness, sympathy with the common man. Together these virtues form a code that transcends the hired deviousness of lawyers and courts, a code far more expressive of the mores and values of the people than anything on the statute books. It went, Rhodes was sure, to the bone of society in the West, because it was necessary to man's existence there. The independent-thinking Westerner was unlikely to place more reliance on words that could be twisted about by hairsplitting lawyers than upon his own evaluation of circumstances.

This does not mean that Rhodes's Westerners take the law into their own hands. There are no lynchings in his books. His people sin in the opposite direction. They practice a democratic tolerance that extends beyond what the law allows. Part of it is a feeling that everyone deserves a fresh chance in this new Western world, including the man who has run afoul of the law in the next territory. (The West was always fond of the sardonic little song that began, "What was your name in the States?")

Thus outlaws are often allowed to escape with the open connivance of law-abiding citizens. Primarily it is a feeling that the survival virtues are the most important tests of character, so that a sheriff must admire bank robbers who drop the money to go back and rescue their fallen comrade. Remarks the sheriff:

A bank robber is a thief and a bank robber is a murderer. It's a dirty, black, shameful business. What these men need is a funeral and I sure hope to see it. All the same--men that stuck like that--if I go to that funeral, I'm going with my hat in my hand!⁹⁸

Almost as important, however, their dislike of the law represents the people's realization that their own folkways incorporate a rather comfortable version of honesty.

"What we really need," declared Mitchell, "is an army--enough absolutely trustworthy and reliable men to overmatch any interference."

"The largest number of honest men that was ever got together in one bunch," said Pete, "was just an even eleven. Judas Iscariot was the twelfth. That's the record. For that reason I've always stuck it out that we ought to have only ten men on a jury, instead of twelve. It seems more modest, somehow. But suppose we found ten honest men somewhere. It might be done. I know where there's two right here in Arizona, and I've got my suspicions about a third--honest about portable property, that is. With cattle and the like, they don't have any hard-and-fast rule; just consider each case on its individual merits. How the case of automobiles would strike them elder ethics is one dubious problem. Standing still or bein' towed, so it might be considered as a wagon, a car would be safe enough; but proceedin' from hither to yon under its own power--I dunno."⁹⁹

⁹⁸The Little World Waddies, p. 105.

⁹⁹Copper Streak Trail, p. 76.

These easy-going citizens can work up no great amount of righteous indignation in the cause of the symbols of great wealth, for "nobody ever grieved themselves into the grave on account of pilfering from a railroad, or any kind of company or corporation, or the good old Government."¹⁰⁰ This is a plundered province, and these people fight back.

Much of the humor that flashes in Rhodes's books has its origin in this comradeship of easy morality that expresses itself in defiance.

"Mr. Early, did you ever notice how much better other people's beef tastes than your own?"

"Why no," said Eddie, hesitating. "No—I never noticed that." He paused, reflecting. "I never ate any of my own beef."¹⁰¹

Says Lithpin Sam, a tinhorn gambler, "Mither Early, that ith the firth dethent thing I've done thinth I robbed a lawyer."¹⁰²

Behind this defiance of the interests lies a spirit of community that knows no bounds of race or nationality or province. These people will tolerate no talk of "greasers." In this classless democracy men are judged only in terms of a code that rises above prejudice. "Well," remarks a sheriff, reflecting on his mixed constituency, "Texans ain't mostly what you might call real tolerant about Mexicans. But if you ask anybody to say who's the best man we got, half of 'em will tell you Frank Borjorquez, and the rest will say Ancheta."¹⁰³ Cautions the outlaw Bill Doolin:

¹⁰⁰The Trusty Knaves, p. 30.

¹⁰¹The Best Novels, p. 483.

¹⁰²The Best Novels, p. 487.

¹⁰³The Proud Sheriff, p. 77.

"When you ride up to that camp, you ride a-whistlin', real loud and pleasant. That Charlie Bird, he's half Cherokee and half white, and them's two bad breeds."¹⁰⁴ Nor do boundaries of region count for anything against the bonds that tie the little people of the world together. Andy Hinkle has been traveling, to New York and elsewhere:

"Have a good time? Like the people?"

"Fine time. Fine people. Just like here. Nine decent men for every skunk. Nine that hate treachery and lies and hoggishness and dirt. Nine that love kindness and an honest piece of work and friendly folks....Nice people. All the same, this country is too big. They got different ways. Nine or ten complete sets of ways, all different from the rest."

"But you think our ways are best?"

"I would never say so. I think our ways are different."¹⁰⁵

These things make up the social message of Rhodes's books. Women, having little place in this message, are romantically idealized creatures who stand beyond human description.

We will attempt no clear description of Miss Ellinor Hoffman. Dusky-beautiful she was; crisp, fresh and sparkling; tall, vigorous, active, strong. Yet she was more than merely beautiful--warm and frank and young; brave and kind and true....Earth was sweet to her, sweeter for her.¹⁰⁶

For the sake of these improbable symbols of the divine, the hero becomes as romantically gallant as any knight of old. (Fortunately, Rhodes has few stories involving women.) Jeff Bransford,

¹⁰⁴The Trusty Knaves, p. 155.

¹⁰⁵The Proud Sheriff, p. 42.

¹⁰⁶The Best Novels, p. 108.

for instance, has been accused of robbing a bank but has a perfect alibi: he had been kissing a young lady in the garden at the time.

A word from Miss Hoffman would set him free. If she gave that word at once it would be unpleasant for her: but if she gave it later, as a last resort, it would be more than unpleasant. And in that same hurried moment Jeff knew that he could not call upon her for that word....He decided with lovable folly to trust to chance, to his wits and to his friends.¹⁰⁷

Females who permit this sort of nonsense in their behalf obviously have little chance of becoming believable human beings. Rhodes treated them all with that same unabashed sentimentality that had expressed itself in a note to God when his little daughter lay dead. And like his daughter, they all have the mental capacity of a child. In those rare moments when a woman becomes any more than a symbol in Rhodes's pages she talks and acts precisely like a man.

Rhodes's villains suffer from the same romanticism. The evils in his books are the forces of arrogance and wealth and privilege. He had great difficulty in giving these matters physical embodiment. His villains are either reduced to wooden abstractions of evil, or, if sufficiently realized to have life, become wayward citizens who have momentarily forsaken the code but whose hearts are ultimately in the right place. Rhodes was sure that railroads and banks and corporations were very evil indeed, but it was difficult for him to imagine that evil could

¹⁰⁷The Best Novels, pp. 157-58.

run very deep in flesh and blood men.

The process of outwitting the agents of power and wealth often involves Rhodes's little people in extremely intricate detective work. They are prepared for this by the circumstances of life on the frontier, for, remarks one would-be criminal, "they are none so unobserving a people, south of the Gila, where 't is fair life and death to them to note betweenwhiles all manner of small things--the set of a pack, the tongue of a buckle, the cleat of a mine ladder."¹⁰⁸ It is difficult in such a country to conceal the truth. Such men as these are more than a match for their oppressors; they have been thinking for themselves and observing the way of the world all their lives.

Rhodes's heroes of the common man are scarcely programmatic reformers. They have no philosophical basis for their efforts in human betterment beyond simple helpfulness. Romantic individualism does not permit them to meet their problems with anything resembling a systematic political program. Even unions, though they are obviously necessary and good, smack a bit too much of "system" to this individualistic citizenry. These people can protect imported labor from exploitation by rapacious mine owners without resorting to such artificial means. The virtues of the code, fair play and common decency, implemented when necessary by the Cyrano individualist and supported by the referendum, are the only political principles necessary to solve social problems

¹⁰⁸ Copper Streak Trail, pp. 92-93.

in Rhodes's version of the West. In this expansive and justice-loving country everything is possible to the individual of the generous heart and shaping hands.

Since the nature of Rhodes's message remained the same throughout his writing career it is unnecessary to take chronology into account when selecting examples for analysis. Perhaps the most successful embodiment of his major themes came in the long short story, "Pasó por Aquí," usually taken to be his best. In the beginning it is narrated by Monte Marquez, a Mexican gambler, to Jay Hollister, an Eastern nurse working in Alamogordo for a year and heartily sick of this sunbaked, arid land and its strange people. The story Monte tells her concerns a robbery of Don Numa Frenger's bank and general store at Belen by a red-headed man named Ross McEwen. McEwen robbed Frenger with a shotgun from Frenger's own stock. Politely he asked the good Don to accompany him to the ford of the Rio Grande at the edge of town, chatting pleasantly all the way. Once there, he courteously bade his victim good day and rode off to the river, tossing the shotgun in the bushes as he went. "But when Numa Frenger sees thees, he run quickly, although he ees a ver' fat man, an' not young; he grab thees gun, he point heem, he pull the triggle—Nozzing! O cabal-leros y concuidadamos!"¹⁰⁹ It is part of the code, of course, that, though a man may be driven to robbery, he must not endanger the life of his victim.

¹⁰⁹The Best Novels, p. 9.

Outdistanced by telegraph wires, McEwen was nearly trapped by a posse. He saved himself by one of those daring acts that, for Rhodes, demonstrated human resourcefulness at its height in emergencies. Riding high on a ridge for all to see, he scattered the stolen money in the wind, which bounced the bills along the ground and into the bushes. While the posse recovered the money, he escaped--for the moment.

At this point the story shifts from Monte to McEwen and his flight. This, for Rhodes, was always a test of human resources. Thirst, dust, heat, mountains, desert, the frontier cunning of his pursuers--these were the problems of the outlaw, all of them operating on a gigantic stage accurate in every detail:

He could see distinctly, and in one eye-flight every feature of a country larger than all England. He could look north to beyond Albuquerque, past the long range of Manzano, Montoso, Sandia, Oscuro; southward, between his horse's ears, the northern end of the San Andres was high and startling before him, blue black with cedar brake and pinon, except for the granite-gold top of Salinas Peak, the great valley of the Jornada del Muerto.¹¹⁰

McEwen meets his challenge. In a series of tests that call for the last ounce of mental ingenuity and physical endurance he gets by the posse and reaches a lonely ranch that stands beyond even the telegraph. The way to Mexico and freedom is clear.

Stumbling, bruised and outworn, McEwen came to that low dark door. He heard a choking cough, a child's wailing cry. His foot was on the threshold.

¹¹⁰The Best Novels, p. 12.

"What's wrong? Que es?" he called.

A cracked and feeble voice made an answer he could not hear. Then a man appeared at the inner door; an old man, a Mexican, clutching at the wall for support.

"El garrotillo," said the cracked voice. "The strangler--diphtheria."

"I am here to help you," said McEwen.¹¹¹

Forgetting all thought of escape, the outlaw falls to work, swabbing membrane-encrusted throats, concocting medicine, inventing therapies, never sleeping, struggling to keep life in the bodies of his patients. A signal fire finally brings Sheriff Pat Garrett and his deputy from a pass in the mountains where they had been watching for the outlaw. Sending his deputy off to Alamogordo for a doctor and nurses, Garrett pitches in to help McEwen, giving a false name so that the robber cannot know he is the sheriff. Observes the doctor when it is all over:

"That young man who nursed them through--why, Mr. Garrett, no one could have done better, considering what he had to do with. Nothing, practically, but his two hands."

"You're all wrong there, doc. He had a backbone all the way from his neck to the seat of his pants. That man," said Garrett, "will do to take along."¹¹²

McEwen has lived up to the code that transcends law. He had won through to freedom against overwhelming odds, and then abandoned freedom without hesitation to help little people in trouble. Garrett will ride beside him now into town as a friend to see that no one notices that red head and asks questions.

¹¹¹The Best Novels, p. 28.

¹¹²The Best Novels, p. 38.

Monte has come to the ranch because the old man is his uncle, and Jay Hollister has come as a nurse. As Garrett and McEwen ride off Monte explains to the Easterner how it is in this western land.

Long ago, before any of Miss Jay's people had crossed the Atlantic, his people had gone up and down this country, even to the Pacific shore. As they passed by Zuni they saw the great rock, El Morro, the one now called Inscription Rock. Here, to stamp their identity upon the wilderness and to say goodbye to the known world, these early nomads carved the inscription "Passed by Here," and their names and the year. So few of them, so far from Spain, making a record of their passing.

McEwen too has passed this way. What he has done here has been good, but before that, Monte is sure, he was the man who robbed the bank at Belen. Garrett is resolved to know nothing. He will ride to Tularosa with McEwen, where the boy plans to take a train.

"And him the sheriff!" said Jay. "Why, they could impeach him for that. They could throw him out of office."

He looked up, smiling. "But who weel tell?" said Monte. His outspread hands were triumphant. "We are all decent people."¹¹³

Both in theme and technique this story illustrates what Rhodes was about. Everything in "Pasó por Aquí" was based on fact. Each character had a model. Rhodes changed only the

¹¹³The Best Novels, p. 44.

names—not even that for Pat Garrett. Rhodes himself had fled before a posse, and he had also nursed a family through diphtheria. Every detail of McEwen's flight was firmly based on local topography. The ranches and the waterholes and the passes that Rhodes wrote of were where he said they were. This was the absolute fidelity to fact that he always felt his material demanded.

But out of the facts comes what Rhodes took to be the spirit of his people. We are told nothing of McEwen's motivation for the robbery. Rhodes was not interested in probing the war of good and evil in the individual mind. What he was after was a community of spirit that reached out in its breadth to include all the little people of the world. So here we have the code of uncomplicated survival virtues which stood beyond law and which a region lived by, a code enacted by a thief and a killer (Garrett was the man who shot Billy the Kid) for the benefit of a family of Mexican peasants, and put in the mouth of a Mexican gambler. Stepsons of light one and all, stumbling, wayward, full of faults, rich only in human kindness and decency and helpfulness. Basic virtues, these, but the only credentials of identity recognized in this society. The highest praise so fiercely classless a people could bestow was expressed in the democratic encomium of fellowship, "He'll do to take along." These were the errant and trusty knaves who were building a civilization. When they were gone the world, like Inscription Rock, would bear the notice that they had passed by here. And when it cast up its eternal balance, the world would find that it had something left on the credit side.

It would find that its Ross McEwens, when they turned aside in simple human helpfulness to nurse an isolated family of the little people through a siege of diphtheria, when they put Emerson's self-reliance to the ultimate test and dug deep into the human spirit to find unknown reserves of resourcefulness and ingenuity and endurance, more than wiped the slate clean. With the words, "I am here to help you," McEwen, like all Rhodes's people, paid in full for what he broke in life.

Rhodes's grave, high in the San Andres and overlooking the pass named for him, still shows his message to the casual passer-by. "A bronze plaque on a great boulder," relates a man who made the pilgrimage, "bears the epitaph of supreme fitness

Pasó por aquí
EUGENE MANLOVE RHODES
Jan. 19, 1869 - June 27, 1934¹¹⁴

It appears likely now that Rhodes's books will in the future be of interest chiefly to the literary historian. DeVoto was right in calling this fiction a primitive literature. As such it has certain difficulties in reaching across to another period; to some extent it is the stuff of history. Rhodes knew that he was writing the history of a time that would not return. "You don't appreciate your opportunities, Frank John," one of his Westerners tells a Calvert from Maryland by way of Ann Arbor.

¹¹⁴Dobie, Introduction to Rhodes, The Little World, p. xxi.

You have a fine inquiring mind; and you want to remember that in a thousand years, or some such, historians will publicly offer their right eye to know what you can see now, at first hand; just as they puzzle and stew and guess about Harold the Saxon nowadays....Well, you take warning by that, and keep your eyes open. Here you are, living in the ancient days and springtime of the world, with a priceless chance to get the lowdown on how we scramble through with a certain cheerfulness and something not far removed from decency.¹¹⁵

Rhodes believed that his own book of history, The Silent Past, would be his great achievement. Illness, poverty, the necessity of grinding out fiction for pay, these things kept him from ever finishing the book. The few pages we do have of it suggest that the West thereby lost a valuable contribution in social history.¹¹⁶ It was to be the "half history" of half a century of life in New Mexico, a chronicle covering the many occupations that had built up the West: "The miners have a story of their own, the freighters, the railroaders, the sheepmen, the soldiers; the farmers have their own tragedy. The story of the surveyors; the forest service; a hundred others."¹¹⁷ Such a quotation illustrates the breadth that is the great virtue of Rhodes's approach to the West. He was never the partisan of any particular group, as Wister had been. The three "heroes" of one of his novels--all fast friends--are a farmer, a miner, and a cowhand. Rhodes sought an ethic and spirit that cut across all occupational and class boundaries.

¹¹⁵The Trusty Knaves, pp. 115-16.

¹¹⁶May Rhodes, The Hired Man, pp. 199-211.

¹¹⁷Keleher, The Fabulous Frontier, p. 145.

But this strength was also a weakness. Breadth of approach could also mean shallowness and lack of discrimination. His books must be judged on their social message, the ethic they advance for the common man and the exposition they offer of his spirit, for that is their central point. Though he never finished The Silent Past, he did write the final sentences. They sum up the spirit of Eugene Rhodes, indicating both the nature of his achievement and the limitations of his aims:

Such is our half-history; with much omitted, condoned, extenuated: nothing set down in malice. We have seen much shame and evil and storm; but these things are remembered only with effort. The memories that throng unbidden are of pleasant campfires and the kindly sun, and goodly fellowship of the House of Lacking—gay, kind, and fearless. To them, the living and the gallant ghosts—farewell!¹¹⁸

These words could be said of his fiction as well. There, too, things were omitted, condoned, extenuated; there, too, we find a half-history. Searching so avidly for the universals of his region, he often failed to discriminate among its particulars. Cattle wars, conflict between sheepmen and cattlemen, strife between homesteaders and those who hated the fence, the problems of industrialism brought to the grazing country by the big mines with their company towns and imported workers—surely these were a part of the social matrix, but Rhodes does not explore them. When a range war enters his pages it is not so much explained as explained away.

¹¹⁸ May Rhodes, The Hired Man, p. 199.

"And the herdsmen of Gerar did strive with Isaac's herdsmen, saying, The water is ours."

That was at the well Esek. The patriarchs were always quarreling with their neighbors or with each other over wells, pasturage and other things—mavericks, maybe. Abraham, Laban, Lot, Isaac, Jacob—they led a stirring life, following the best grass....

It is entirely probable that Terah went forth from Ur of the Chaldees either because the grass was short or because he had no friends on the grand jury.

Cattlemen have not changed much since then. They still swing a big loop; it is as risky as ever to let the stock out on shares: and we still have wars wherever there is free range, because of the spirit so justly expressed by Farmer Jones: "He said he wasn't no land-hog—all he wants is what joins his'n."¹¹⁹

This was the extent of Rhodes's literary interest in the problem. It is a small piece in a pattern of avoidance that runs through his books. Those things which tended to divide the little people he studiously ignored; he lifted his gaze above such matters to that community of spirit which united men of good will everywhere. The result is often uncritical blandness.

Equally serious, his vision of society was so thoroughly confined to frontier conditions that it loses force in a later age. In many respects Rhodes's books are a perfect fictional representation of Frederick Jackson Turner's thesis on the frontier. All the elements of classless democracy, freedom, independence, self-reliance, and release from the pressures of older, stratified societies that Turner found on the frontier appear in Rhodes's

¹¹⁹The Best Novels, pp. 458-59.

books. But, like Turner, he could not envision what was to sustain these values once the frontier was exhausted. The little people of his books are the agents of civilization. They are busy conquering a wilderness, subduing a hard country into "smiling farms." This is what gives them their hardihood and resourcefulness, their democracy and equality, their cheerfulness and defiance. These were the qualities Rhodes admired in his people and he could not be at all sure they would endure in a more complex age. That is why he wrote essentially the same story again and again. That is also why he said, toward the end of his life, "I have lived in exactly that place and time I would have chosen from all recorded history."¹²⁰ His democratic faith demanded optimism; he was sure this was the century of the common people, now that they had dreamed down slavery and kings. But he could not be sure that the easy egalitarianism he loved would persist in an age of industrialism. So he confined his work to the frontier period. If he could not foresee a better future with certainty, he had at least been in at the good beginning.

Rhodes's understanding of the West was limited, finally, by the agrarian image of the region that had behind it such a long history. He wrote about the empire West, but he did so within the pattern of values that had come down through the agrarian tradition, and he could not see beyond them. Once the little people had beaten the railroads and the banks, the good life would

¹²⁰ May Rhodes, The Hired Man, p. 189.

be at hand, human problems would be solved. The most serious limitation of this analysis is that it prevented Rhodes from exploring human character on a significant level in the West. Nearly all his heroes are the same hero, and the problems they face are never really problems of character or moral decision. Those internal problems have already been anticipated in the external code. The Ross McEwens in Rhodes's books never really have to decide between freedom and human responsibility to people in trouble; the issue is not truly in doubt. Rhodes can tell us a good deal of how people lived in the West around the turn of the century; he can tell us virtually nothing of how they lived inside themselves.

In smaller matters, the literary allusions made by Rhodes's characters are sometimes obtrusive, and their talk is often glib and superficial. Its wit and cleverness have not always proved to be timeless. This also Rhodes recognized. When he was near death he wrote to a friend in praise of an article published by Clem Hightower, his collaborator on The Silent Past: "His article was absolutely right. Neither over literary like my own stuff--nor the other extreme like Siringo's."¹²¹

Nevertheless, Rhodes served as a literary pioneer, breaking new ground and preparing the way for others. He took the West out of the realm of pageantry and made it a place where people lived. His books tore down the absurd literary superstructure

¹²¹ Keleher, The Fabulous Frontier, p. 147.

of the strong man on horseback, the natural nobleman, and the image of the West as a land outside society. In their place he offered the simple people of the House of Lacking and a land trying to build its own society under difficult circumstances. It was a country without an intricate and formalized social plan; the forces that conditioned life here had not yet settled into a fixed pattern. Thus it was a pragmatic country which prized resourcefulness and the ability to meet each problem as it arose. Pragmatically again, it accepted those social beliefs and folk myths which made this approach to life possible.

This is social history, the record of Americans coming to terms with a part of America and learning to live there. Rhodes was the first to bring one part of that record of adjustment to literary significance. Social history is the burden of his books, existing there on many levels. He is careful to explain the function of each item in the cowboy's strange costume and accouterments, careful to note what pace a horse could maintain through a day of flight and still be a live horse in the evening, careful to point out that old New Mexican towns have spacious central plazas not for the sake of aesthetics but because twenty-horse ore wagons needed a place to turn around and unload. These are the lowly facts of social history. There are other levels. The code of behavior he set forth for his people, the values and morality he ascribed to them, these too are a part of the social history of the region, a meaningful and enduring part.

It is important that we understand that even the failures in his art are a part of this effort. His West, addicted to civilization and without many civilizing influences, needed its symbols of female purity, just as it needed its light ladies of a Saturday night in town. In its struggle against the instruments of plunder it had to have its disembodied villains to represent the foci of avarice and greed, just as it had to have its workaday realization that morality was relative and pragmatic. Rhodes took a part of the social history and belief of his province, matters which had existed only in raw material form in Siringo and Adams, and raised them to the level of a minor fiction. His work was not enough to draw the cowboy out of the conventions and melodrama of The Virginian, but it was a step toward fiction of the West that was based upon the facts of life there.

Chapter Eight

The Historian as Novelist: Bernard DeVoto

Essentially, Owen Wister's best fiction of the West had recorded a land of broken promise in moving evocations that came when the dream was over, when the region's clock had stopped at last and "winding of her up didn't do nothing to her." It recorded an adolescent dream of freedom and could make no comment to the present beyond the communication of nostalgia. Eugene Rhodes, with a different image of the West, passed over the complexities of adjustment and conflict to seek the spirit of his region, but without the perspective to explore it deeply in fiction.

When he turned to novel writing, Bernard DeVoto was well prepared by training to avoid these pitfalls. He possessed the advantages of both Rhodes's native background in the West and Wister's Harvard. He knew the culture of the West intimately and extensively, but he had the practicing historian's familiarity with other cultures as well. He probably knew as much about the fiction produced by the West as anyone, but he saw that fiction in the light of long experience with other literatures. He was trained in still other fields: Philosophy, psychology, a variant of sociology. When he wrote about the West he did so from a knowledge broader than Rhodes's, a perspective far more profound than Wister's.

Such tools as DeVoto possessed are more obviously those of

the cultural historian than the novelist, and it is as a historian that he will be remembered. Not all his contemporaries would agree with this estimate, however, for his words ranged widely and stirred up enmity nearly everywhere they touched. His varied activities set some of the literati to sniffing at him as the Sears-Roebuck of the literary scene. His opinions about other men's books and ideas provoked Edmund Wilson into demanding that this young man stand up and be counted on either the side of the Right or the Left. They infuriated Sinclair Lewis into slapping his "frog-like face" in what was perhaps the most virulent personal vilification ever to appear in The Saturday Review. J. Edgar Hoover issued harsh statements to the press about him. A Congressman from Pennsylvania inserted passages in the Congressional Record in a thinly-veiled charge that he was communism's willing tool. America Firsters charged from the Right while Marxists hurled epithets from the Left. And writers and intellectuals flailed away from every direction.

Clearly these people had their reasons. Partly it was a difficulty of classification. Here was a historian who, as a practicing journalist, often dealt harshly with historical theory; a teacher of English who often ridiculed the teaching of English and spoke of "literary critic" as an epithet that should be accompanied by a smile; a serious novelist who unabashedly wrote for the slicks and treated any talk of "selling out" as nonsense and spent more time telling other writers what art could not do than what it could. He was quite capable of reading a paper to the

Modern Language Association and then of treating the organization with high irreverence in the public press. A Westerner, he subjected his native state to a withering analysis of its spiritual and intellectual squalor. A teacher, he used the university that supplied his paycheck as exhibit number one in making caustic commentaries on the state of higher education. Before he was finished a good many people were convinced that Bernard DeVete had fouled whatever nest it was that spawned him.

There were other reasons for enmity. He was an intemperate man. He never chose the moderate word when the inflammatory one would do as well. He never criticized an idea abstractly when it could be conveniently tied to a personality. He respected the sanctity of no idea or institution, accepted no theories because of their sources or popularity, held no gods to be inviolable. And when he turned to the attack his object seemed more often to be to demolish than to correct.

Most important of all, however, this was a man forever and maddeningly out of step. He took up Marx before that was a popular avocation. By the time the other intellectuals and literati were looking to the millennium in the form of the Great Experiment, DeVete was writing about an obscure Italian who, he blandly informed them, completely superseded Marx. One of the earliest literary Freudians, he used a good deal of newsprint to tell latecomers what it was that they didn't know about Freud. He was patriotic when other writers were fleeing to the Left Bank in the 1920's. When the expatriates came home in the '30's to

take up the cause of the proletariat, DeVeto was obligingly on hand to pick apart their social theories and publicly lament their ignorance of American historical processes. And when, in the threes of World War II, writers and intellectuals rediscovered America, he didn't hesitate to point out that others (himself included) had known about it all along. As the converts to communism in due time became apostates, he treated their experience as a case history in religious delusion rather than a drama of intellectual dilemma, and he was skeptical of the notion that conversion and apostasy were the proper training for a political analyst.

He was a contentious man, certainly. Perhaps those who remember him as a historian would prefer to forget his excursions into contemporary controversy. Perhaps those who recall his serious novels with respect would like to ignore the fact that he wrote thrillers under pseudonyms, published regularly for years in The Saturday Evening Post, and even, under another pseudonym, wrote a column for Woman's Day. To do so, however, would be fundamentally to misunderstand the nature of DeVeto's mind. His attacks on Senator McCarthy, the F.B.I., Congressional investigating committees, Marxists, "rational" planners, the Watch and Ward Society, and the conservation policies of a Republican Congress, were not the indiscriminate irritations of a perverse nature but contemporary illustrations of principles that underlay his histories. His light fiction drew upon one aspect of his literary theory just as surely as his serious novels drew upon another. His mind, whatever its variety of interest, had its

own wholeness.

Fundamental to the formation of that mind were the American West and the study of its history. The West was where life began for DeVeto, and its history, its social structure, its very physical environment conditioned his thought from first to last. He drew upon it constantly for illustrations which would illuminate other aspects of man's experience; when he undertook to explain the fundamental principles by which his mind operated he did so in terms of images and metaphors drawn from the West; he spent most of his life studying and writing about the region.

The books and articles thus produced were primarily history. What he thought about history serves now to define the potentialities of his mind; in large part it also serves to define his mind's limitations. From his study of history, as well, came his novels of the West.

Bernard DeVeto was born in Ogden, Utah, in 1897. His paternal grandfather, an Italian cavalry officer, married the daughter of a Roman aristocrat and fled to America to avoid family hostility.¹ DeVeto's father taught mathematics for some years at his alma mater, Notre Dame, and held an impressive total of five degrees. He settled in Ogden about 1880, during the mining boom,

¹Garrett Mattingly, Bernard DeVeto: A Preliminary Appraisal (Boston, 1938), p. 7.

the town's first college graduate.²

On the maternal side the family was more typically Western. In one of the best short studies ever written of an individual Mormon immigrant, DeVeto chronicled the career of his grandfather. Jonathan Dyer was a mechanic in Hertford, England, when he was converted to the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-Day Saints in 1852. In response to the westward movement of his faith, he sailed to America with his bride four years later. On the eastern seaboard, Jonathan weathered the recession of the late 1850's, invented better pistons and valves for his employer's mills, and was promoted to manager of a Brooklyn branch, a position of comfort and prosperity. Then the Church called him West. By the summer of 1862 Jonathan Dyer, an English mechanic with no training whatever for agriculture, was farming forty-odd acres of alkali land eight miles north of Ogden.³

Somehow he survived and prospered and made the land sweet. He raised a son and six daughters. A cabin followed the first dugout, lean-tos were added, and after many years he was able to build a farmhouse. When she was nine, his eldest daughter got her first pair of shoes, but with or without shoes the children somehow went to school. Because he was preoccupied with survival, the waves of history passed over Jonathan without his notice.

²Bernard DeVeto, "A Sagebrush Bookshelf," Harper's Magazine, CLXXV (October, 1937), 489.

³Bernard DeVeto, Ferays and Rebuttals (Boston, 1936), pp. 3-8.

One of the more interesting of the internecine Mormon wars came to its final battle just across the narrow Weber River from his fields, but it received less space in his journal than a day's entry about the crops. He was creating life in a dead land and had no time for such things.

Water flowed in his ditches, stock grazed his pastures, instead of desolation there were fields and orchards. The children came in at nightfall to a house built from his lumber. They ate bread made of his wheat, cheese from his milk, preserved fruit from his orchards. There had been nothing at all, and here were peaches, and he had come eight thousand miles. That is the point of the frontier.⁴

Disintegration, when it came, came swiftly. Jonathan had carved his patch of life out of alkali and sagebrush, had preserved it in misery and want against grasshoppers and accident and the coming of the Union Pacific. But new forces were abroad after the turn of the century. Of his seven children, not one stayed on the land, not one married a native of Utah, not one even stayed in the Mormon church that had drawn their parents these eight thousand miles. When their strength was spent, Jonathan and his wife moved into Ogden to live with a daughter, and the farm was sold.⁵ This, too, was a point of the frontier, and one that DeVeto never forget. His books of history study the forces that opened up and conquered the West. But the history that a central character in his Western novels is writing,

⁴Ferays and Rebuttals, p. 21.

⁵Ferays and Rebuttals, p. 23.

a history that runs as a major theme through the books, is called The Diaspora.

DeVeto rejected both his father's Catholicism and his mother's tradition of Mormonism, but he nevertheless learned much from Rome and Deseret. Catholicism's teaching that man was necessarily imperfect but might expect God's mercy had to be seen against the Saints' conviction that they were on the high road to early perfection and the godhead. DeVeto's schooling was begun in a parochial school, but by the time he reached college age his reflections on Catholic training as it had expressed itself in his father made him refuse the parental request to attend Notre Dame. Outside the home, Mormonism was dominant, spicing daily life with miracle.

In few societies are angels as common as policemen and heaven rather more familiar than a city park: I have had a lifelong tenderness for the world's delusions because I grew up amid prophecy and the glories of the Lord.⁶

The evidence of prophecy and millennialism as powerful forces in the lives of the Saints helped to prepare DeVeto for his later conviction that any adequate theory of history must take into account the non-logical and irrational, "the logic of sentiment" in man's experience.

DeVeto's father was a cultivated man, a linguist, deeply read within certain traditional boundaries. His college training, however,

⁶Forays and Rebuttals, p. 34.

had made him indifferent to anything later than the texts he had studied....Up to his death he was rejecting modern physics with postulates he had learned in the 'Seventies, and he assumed that there was no modern literature. An exact date could be set: literature stopped short with Lord Byron....But his admiration was reserved for the Italian renaissance and the Greek and Latin classics.⁷

Within these limits, nevertheless, Florian DeVoto was a good schoolmaster. He taught his son to read from Pope's Iliad and put him on a rigorous schedule that, by the time the boy was ten, had taken him through Dante, Tasso, and the rest of the Italians, plus much else. DeVoto read the Italians again in Barrett Wendell's course at Harvard, but in later life he found he went back regularly only to Dante and that the Greeks to him meant only the dramatists--whom his father had not urged him to read. Through the nature of his father's library, however, he "came naturally by the feeling that literature is history which most students work hard for and many never get."⁸

DeVoto's mother made up for the father's dislike of fiction by adding the novels of such stalwarts as Bulwer-Lytton and F. Marion Crawford to the family library. Her principal gift to her son's literary development, however, was the host of frontier stories she provided, for he could remember nothing of the novels. Formal training at school was least productive of all. He learned some English grammar from the nuns, some Latin grammar from a high school teacher, and nothing else.⁹

⁷ DeVoto, Harper's Magazine, CLXXV, 490.

⁸ Harper's Magazine, CLXXIV, 491.

⁹ Harper's Magazine, CLXXV, 491-92.

Life outside of school was meanwhile vastly educational. Ogden, during DeVoto's adolescence, was a town resting at mid-point between the frontier and industrial stages of society in the West, no longer quite the crossroads village of the one, not yet quite the city of the other. It was the same societal condition that DeVoto later reconstructed for Hannibal during Twain's boyhood, and in both cases he saw it as a rich inheritance. The frontier's exigencies no longer lay upon Ogden, but the old social unrest of the frontier remained to mix with the new radicalism of the I.W.W. and produce a political atmosphere seething with currents and ideas.

My political inheritance was the populism of Middle-western farmers and Western silver miners; the back alcoves of my mind hold the shouting, dust clouds, and oratory of mass meetings that the seaboard was still calling anarchy, the organ voice of Bryan.... The town was heavily unionized and old-fashioned Fabians had me read dialectical pamphlets early in my boyhood, and treatises on Marx and Engels, and the endless literature of the Socialist Party. There were many of the more revolutionary type too, so that the ferment attending the rise of the Western Federation of Miners and the I.W.W. was commonplace to me.¹⁰

With this there was the Utopian strain contributed by the Mormons. Embers of the various Mormon experiments in communism "still showed red when the wind rose, and one of the first novels I ever read was a little blue-bound Looking Backward."¹¹ As a high-school sophomore in 1912, arrogantly conscious of himself as a budding intellectual, DeVoto debated the class struggle according

¹⁰ Harper's Magazine, CLXIV, 489.

¹¹ Harper's Magazine, CLXIV, 489.

to Marx and Engels with those classmates who also had pretensions to learning.

The role adopted by the town's adult intellectuals and writers in this ferment of activity enduringly impressed him. There were few Ogden residents who were fitted by education to be leaders of local thought or to make an intelligent interpretation of their society. None of them ever dreamed of such a course. DeVeto's father remained quietly immersed in an outmoded science and the Italian Renaissance. An intellectual physician with literary ambitions worked endlessly at writing a classical epic, while a literary mining promoter labored arduously at realizing his lifelong ambition of writing tales like Poe's. Others followed similarly anachronistic paths.¹² None of them would have considered collecting and exploring the rich historical resources immediately at hand. It is fair to surmise that DeVeto's sense of commitment to political and social causes derived in part from the sterile role played by intellectuals in Ogden.

He graduated from Ogden High School in 1914 and that fall entered the University of Utah, his interests apparently divided between literature and the class struggle. He preached his copy of Das Kapital, championed the I.W.W., and immediately helped to organize a chapter of the Intercollegiate Socialist Society which apoplectic officials just as promptly banished from the campus.¹³

¹²Harper's Magazine, CLXXV, 493.

¹³Mattingly, Bernard DeVeto, pp. 8-9.

In the spring a campus war over free speech broke out. The University had assembled a faculty of some distinction. "Five of them," DeVote wrote, "were fired for disseminating ideas. Fifteen others left in disgust."¹⁴ Equally disgusted, DeVote left with them, moving on to Harvard.

His major interests at Harvard were three: logic and metaphysics, psychopathology, and American history—the last considered at this time only an avocation. He eagerly pursued abstruses in the study of comparative religions and wrote a thesis on Kant for his degree, thereby learning an enduring distrust of metaphysics and of logic which divorced itself from fact and experience. Psychopathology had meanwhile become his primary interest, and for a time he thought of a career in psychiatry. He translated Freud's Traumdeutung in 1916 and began to prepare himself for medical school, a project which the war interrupted. After the war, which he spent as a small arms instructor in the South, he returned to Harvard to take his degree in 1920, "both too old and too broke to go to medical school."¹⁵

While at college he had written and destroyed two novels and much other material. Upon graduation, he was offered jobs by a New York newspaper and a liberal weekly, but he turned them down to go West. He thought of teaching, but an injudicious speech suggesting that, with the war over, socialists and conscientious

¹⁴"Utah," American Mercury, VII (March, 1926), 322.

¹⁵DeVote, Ferays and Rebuttals, p. 173.

objecters should be released from jail, struck terror into patriotic hearts, and Ogden schools wanted no dangerous red. The next year all was forgotten, and he taught for a winter in junior high school to support himself while he studied Western history for the trilogy of novels in which he planned to treat the development of his region from the Civil War to 1920.¹⁶

He was working for his board on an Idaho ranch when he received the offer of an instructorship in English at Northwestern University in 1922. He remained there five years. Apparently he was an exciting teacher, and certainly he was an outspoken radical in an extremely conservative school. With his teaching, he continued to write. His first novel, The Crooked Mile, appeared in 1924; his second, two years later. Mencken was accepting articles on Western history for the American Mercury, and Harper's teek articles and a short story. By 1927 DeVeto was confident enough of survival as a professional to resign his assistant professorship and devote his full time to writing.¹⁷

The state of higher education at the time contributed to his decision to abandon it. Soon after leaving Northwestern he published a series of articles setting forth the sources of his dissatisfaction. There was, for instance, the University president who thought George Moore and Oscar Wilde were the names of students and solemnly explained to young instructors that the University

¹⁶Mattingly, Bernard DeVeto, pp. 10-11.

¹⁷Mattingly, pp. 12-13, 17-18.

should not have a press because it was a known fact that university presses did not make money.¹⁸ More important were the conformity, conservatism, and intellectual degradation that had entered the colleges with mass education. He called his period on the faculty, "the era of expansion, business tie-up, and large-scale advertising in the American colleges," a time of "noisome ballyhoo and a planned degradation of intellectual standards."¹⁹

As a writer DeVoto was free after his resignation to move where he wished. Characteristically, while other writers were seeking the less stifling air of Europe, he chose Cambridge, Massachusetts. There was, of course, the Harvard Library. But on a deeper level DeVoto was finding his ultimate direction. His studies in Western history were beginning to crystallize in the concept of America and its people that would govern everything he was to do. New England represented a refuge, a vantage point for perspective on America. It seemed at the time to be the backwash of America's race toward bigness and profits, and from its adversity had come a sense of peace and self-reliance that the rest of the country had forgotten.²⁰ Going back, for a Westerner, was a return to the sources of the race. In the West the dream was fraying out that had begun here, with the first frontier. Here one might learn to understand that beginning, for here the

¹⁸ DeVoto, Forays and Rebuttals, pp. 278-79.

¹⁹ Forays and Rebuttals, pp. viii-ix.

²⁰ Forays and Rebuttals, pp. 142 ff.

• *Staphylococcus aureus* (Staph aureus) is a common cause of skin infections, such as abscesses, boils, and impetigo. It is also a leading cause of hospital-acquired infections, including pneumonia, bloodstream infections, and surgical site infections.

• *Streptococcus pyogenes* (Strep pyogenes) is a common cause of skin infections, such as cellulitis, erysipelas, and necrotizing fasciitis. It is also a leading cause of hospital-acquired infections, including pneumonia, bloodstream infections, and surgical site infections.

• *Streptococcus pneumoniae* (Strep pneumoniae) is a common cause of pneumonia, meningitis, and bloodstream infections. It is also a leading cause of hospital-acquired infections, including pneumonia, bloodstream infections, and surgical site infections.

• *Escherichia coli* (E. coli) is a common cause of urinary tract infections, pneumonia, and bloodstream infections. It is also a leading cause of hospital-acquired infections, including pneumonia, bloodstream infections, and surgical site infections.

• *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* (Pseudomonas) is a common cause of pneumonia, meningitis, and bloodstream infections. It is also a leading cause of hospital-acquired infections, including pneumonia, bloodstream infections, and surgical site infections.

• *Klebsiella pneumoniae* (Klebsiella) is a common cause of pneumonia, meningitis, and bloodstream infections. It is also a leading cause of hospital-acquired infections, including pneumonia, bloodstream infections, and surgical site infections.

• *Acinetobacter baumannii* (Acinetobacter) is a common cause of pneumonia, meningitis, and bloodstream infections. It is also a leading cause of hospital-acquired infections, including pneumonia, bloodstream infections, and surgical site infections.

• *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* (Mycobacterium) is a common cause of tuberculosis, which is a leading cause of death worldwide. It is also a leading cause of hospital-acquired infections, including pneumonia, bloodstream infections, and surgical site infections.

• *Candida albicans* (Candida) is a common cause of fungal infections, such as thrush, vaginal yeast infections, and invasive candidiasis. It is also a leading cause of hospital-acquired infections, including pneumonia, bloodstream infections, and surgical site infections.

• *Aspergillus fumigatus* (Aspergillus) is a common cause of fungal infections, such as aspergillosis, which is a leading cause of death in immunocompromised patients. It is also a leading cause of hospital-acquired infections, including pneumonia, bloodstream infections, and surgical site infections.

• *Cryptococcus neoformans* (Cryptococcus) is a common cause of fungal infections, such as cryptococcosis, which is a leading cause of death in immunocompromised patients. It is also a leading cause of hospital-acquired infections, including pneumonia, bloodstream infections, and surgical site infections.

• *Legionella pneumophila* (Legionella) is a common cause of Legionnaires' disease, which is a severe form of pneumonia. It is also a leading cause of hospital-acquired infections, including pneumonia, bloodstream infections, and surgical site infections.

• *Legionella pneumophila* (Legionella) is a common cause of Legionnaires' disease, which is a severe form of pneumonia. It is also a leading cause of hospital-acquired infections, including pneumonia, bloodstream infections, and surgical site infections.

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Diaspora had begun.

He could not return to the West. Soon after he first came to Harvard a professor's wife had expressed surprise that anyone could indeed live in such a place as Utah. In an article written at Northwestern (and which moved the outraged president of the University of Utah to write to the president of Northwestern that DeVoto should be suppressed or dismissed),²¹ he undertook to provide an answer. Life in Utah had always been conditioned by the Mormons. From the beginning, he said, the Mormons "were staid peasants whose only distinguishing characteristics were their servility to their leaders and their belief in a low-comedy God."²² But while they had warred against the Gentiles and the environment these people at least had color and hardihood and a firm grasp on the basic realities. Now, however, the frontier had passed and Gentile and Mormon have settled down to live in "equity and Rotary." The gentry who have arisen as the social and intellectual leaders of Ogden and Salt Lake City "lead the most swinish life now discernible in the United States....Even in Chicago there are a few who rank Mozart, Beethoven, and Brahms above Our Lord Calvin Coolidge....Even in Richmond disgruntled folk deny that Hoover is greater than Caesar....But not in Utah. There people talk only of the Prophet, hogs, and Fords."²³ This was the

²¹Ferays and Rebuttals, p. 279.

²²DeVoto, American Mercury, VII, 319.

²³DeVoto, American Mercury, VII, 323.

social conformity, the intellectual impoverishment, and the spiritual squalor to which the ideal of freedom on the frontier had withered in its last days, the result of the marching Conestogas and handcarts. It was no place for a young man who proposed to use his mind. Though he traveled there extensively, DeVeto did not return to the West to live.

In Cambridge he rapidly took on varied activities. In 1928 he published his third novel, meanwhile keeping up a steady output of articles and stories. The next year he returned to teaching, at Harvard, full-time for a year and then part-time for six more.²⁴ In 1930 he became the editor of the staid, dull Harvard Graduates' Magazine. In the first number he attacked the Watch and Ward Society for its attempt to prosecute a Cambridge bookseller, and in the second he proposed that Harvard build a Thoreau House and thus open the college to those of little means.²⁵ His incessant blasts at snobbery and privilege continued to raise alumni blood pressure during the two years of his editorship. "DeVeto," a friend wrote of this time, "likes to think of himself as a hard-boiled realist, without the slightest tendency to evangelize. But in practice he appears to act on the belief that those truths which are unpleasant to hear are the ones which do the hearers the most good."²⁶ In 1932 his first book on Mark Twain

²⁴Bernard DeVeto, Minority Report (Boston, 1940), p. 163.

²⁵"Literary Censorship in Cambridge," The Harvard Graduates' Magazine, XXXIX (September, 1930), 30-42; "From a Graduate's Window," The Harvard Graduates' Magazine, XXXIX (December, 1930), 337-48.

²⁶Mattingly, Bernard DeVeto, p. 23.

appeared, to be followed by his fourth novel two years later.

In 1935 he became editor of "The Easy Chair," an editorial feature in Harper's Magazine made famous by William Dean Howells and a forum which DeVoto held until his death.

At this point the pattern of his work and of his life had been established. In literary criticism he had progressed from the early book reviews, through articles, to the first of his Twain studies. For all his disparagement of criticism, it would thenceforth occupy a share of his time. Four of his five serious novels had appeared. The market for the light fiction which supported his family was well established. The study of Western history, the most enduring interest of his life, was finding its way into a steady succession of articles and would culminate in a trilogy of histories among the most distinguished ever written on the West. "The Easy Chair," though it printed much that was transitory and inconsequential in his twenty years of occupancy, provided a forum from which he could work at correcting the world's errors. Much of the material thus produced was important journalism, particularly the series of articles on conservation policies. And, finally, Cambridge was established as the home to which he would return from his lecture tours and his travels in the West to study the region's topography and history. He left it only once, for a two-year stint (1936-38) of editing The Saturday Review of Literature in New York. He abandoned Boston and Harvard with misgivings, and he fled New York at the end of his term with great relief. By 1935, then, the pattern of

DeVoto's work was clear.²⁷

The direction of his work first became clear in his early writing on the West. Those articles written for Mencken's American Mercury in the 1920's were preliminary excursions into Western history, the first fruits of DeVoto's early researches for his novels. From them emerge attitudes that were to become dominant.

His study of the fur trade and the mountain men brought him to two conclusions. He was deeply impressed, first of all, by the technique of survival that the mountain men had quickly learned and ably practiced. They were firstcomers, traveling alone or in small groups over unmapped country and among dangerous natives. Of necessity they learned and used the physical resources of the country. They had to be as individually self-sufficient as it is possible for men to be and yet able to subordinate individualism to a common effort of survival in time of danger. They were apt students, learning rapidly to accept the conditions of this new environment and adopting the best techniques of the culture that had preceded them, that of the Indians.²⁸ Failure to follow their example brought many of the later pioneers to ruin. The wagon trains that followed Marcus Whitman over the Oregon

²⁷ DeVoto, Minority Report, pp. 45, 53-55.

²⁸ Bernard DeVoto, "The Mountain Men," American Mercury, IX (December, 1926), 474.

Trail succeeded in getting through or fell apart in dissension and disaster according to the amount of group discipline they were able to impose and the amount of survival technique they were able to master.

The second conclusion offered by the mountain men was that technique was not enough. The West had another lesson to learn. Cooperation must extend beyond immediate danger to long range use of resources. The physical environment imposed immediate cooperation for survival, but the West had always attacked its resources on the level of individualism. Such a course, from the fur traders on down, had been an anachronism. The East had the powerful weapon of corporate finance, and neither the mountain men nor Henry Comstock could stand against it. Refusing to cooperate for ultimate survival, Westerners quickly found themselves the victims of financial exploitation.

Wealth from the West's natural resources was swiftly funneled to the East. In the Washoe diggings, for instance, individual mining claims "were rapidly consolidated as the financiers, the archangels of progress, took them over....In the brave days of California, men had sometimes made fortunes with pick and cradle, but even in that anarchic time wealth tended to gravitate less to the miner...than to the sheepkeeper who had followed him." By the time of the Nevada strikes the bankers and manipulators were well prepared to move upon the Comstock and prevent "unseemly

distribution of wealth."²⁹ The result of this process had made the West "a plundered province," denied the immense wealth of its own resources. To survive, it had to learn cooperation and thereby fight the mine companies, land companies, water companies, railroads, banks, speculators, and other instruments of exploitation.³⁰ This was a lesson as applicable to 1955 as 1855, and DeVeto never stopped preaching it.

The pioneers who had most obviously learned the lessons of technique and cooperation were the Mormons. Once Joseph Smith was dead at Carthage and the Saints were delivered from the rapid delusions of the martyr into the competent hands of Brigham Young, "the student perceives a consciousness of what it was doing and what it intended to do that Mormonism had never had before. Essentially, Smith did not know: he was moving only toward glory. Young knew: he was moving toward survival on this earth and power which would protect Israel from attack."³¹ Discipline and technique carried the Saints with a minimum of mishaps from Council Bluffs to the slope of the Wasatch. Discipline and technique, the ability to control the environment through common effort, colonized the desert and made it fruitful. And when the time came, Young fought the Eastern capitalists with weapons as good as those they sent; he learned the lesson of corporate finance and the

²⁹ Bernard DeVeto, "Brave Days in Washoe," American Mercury, XVII (June, 1929), 230.

³⁰ Bernard DeVeto, "The West: A Plundered Province," Harper's Magazine, CLXII (August, 1934), 358-59.

³¹ DeVeto, Forays and Rebuttals, p. 109.

Saints were not exploited. Here were examples of those survival skills DeVoto had learned to admire as a boy along the Weber River.

But Mormonism had another lesson. This was not the usual pioneer society but a study in Utopia—and dictatorship. Out of all the efforts to achieve the millennium in America—from Brook Farm and New Harmony and Fruitlands to the Shaker experiments in communism—this was the one that survived and prospered. "Philosophically," said DeVoto, "it is a solution of a problem which American thought has grappled with for three hundred years: how to identify spiritual grace with the making of money."³² What, then, are the conditions of Utopia in America?

The first conclusion⁶ that not Brook Farm but Mormonism is Utopia, that not Charles Fourier but Joseph Smith brings it about, that not the highest level but the lowest level is its absolute condition....The Mormon ideology springs from dogmas not only preposterous but revolting to the intelligence. In order to share the common effort of Utopia you must accept as holy books some of the most squalid creations of human thought....You must dedicate yourself to an organized body of damned nonsense so beyond-conceiving idiotic that a mind emancipated enough to embrace the dogmas of the Holy Rollers is forever immune to it....Utopia is not dedication to the humanitarian vision of George Ripley; it is dedication to the hallucinations of Joseph Smith....

And if Utopia is a rigid selection of the inferior it is also a ruthless destruction of the individual....

This implies that the culture of Utopia, though it be vigorous, must be conformable and mediocre.

³²Forays and Rebuttals, p. 129.

What has Israel produced? Business men, politicians, bankers and men gifted in the elaboration and propagation of idiocies....Its scholars, scientists, artists, thinkers...it plows back into the Kingdom. In Utopia the fate of the superior person is tragic. Consider an anthropologist set to vindicating The Book of Mormon,...a sociologist who must rationalize polygamy, a poet whose lyrics must idealize the Word of Wisdom's prohibition of hot tea. In Utopia talent must string along or it must get out.³³

Experience taught that this was the millennium that came through. DeVoto had learned in Harvard classrooms to be skeptical of the pursuit of absolutes, to distrust the exercise of reason divorced from experience. More and more he was making history, the record of experience, the guide for his thinking. He saw no reason to believe that any new plan for the perfect society would be able to avoid the ruthless subjugation of the individual practiced by the Mormons, no reason to feel that Utopia could escape reduction to the lowest common denominator. This was the vantage point from which DeVoto criticized the social plans of the 1930's.

These early articles make it clear that his approach to the past was still forming. At this point in his career DeVoto could deal with man's delusions only by denouncing them as aberrations from a rational norm of behavior. Growing in his mind, however, was the conviction that studying the past in terms of its political forms and economic mechanisms was inadequate. Jonathan Dyer's abandonment of a carpeted home in Brooklyn to follow the call of

³³Forays and Rebuttals, p. 135.

the prophet to a dugout along the Weber could not be explained in economic terms. How to account for the power of manifest destiny if you view man as a rational being? DeVoto welcomed the new movement in historiography of the early 1930's toward social history. This method, he felt, substituted a complex analysis for the simpler ones of political and economic history, taking into account man's social beliefs and the sentiments and prejudices which condition his behavior.³⁴

He found confirmation in the work of an Italian sociologist for his belief that the irrational and illogical must be regarded as important forces within the social order. Sometime in the later 1920's he began studying Vilfredo Pareto's Traité de Sociologie Générale, persisted in and broadened his inquiry over a number of years, and became instrumental in introducing Pareto to the attention of American intellectuals. Pareto, a mathematician and engineer, had been for a time a mathematical economist. Becoming increasingly dissatisfied with economics as an instrument of social analysis, he determined to discover different tools and to study the basic structure of society rather than the changing forms that occupied the attention of conventional sociology. He sought the continuities beneath these changing forms, if such continuities did indeed exist.³⁵

³⁴Bernard DeVoto, "The Reckling Chair in History and Criticism," Forum, LXXIX (February, 1933), 104-105.

³⁵Bernard DeVoto, "A Primer for Intellectuals," Saturday Review of Literature, IX (April 22, 1933), 545.

Looking back to earlier social investigators, DeVoto found that Comte, Marx, and Spencer had thought of society in biological terms, as an organism; thus they were evolutionists and, to some degree at least, teleologists. Pareto, however, shifted the conceptual scheme surrounding society from biology to mechanics, picturing the social structure as a complex relationship of mechanical forces that stood in precarious equilibrium at any moment and could be measured mathematically. Since his method abjured any preconception of man as a rational or economic being, it was able to take account of the non-rational and non-logical simply as existent forces with functional relationships to all other forces in the social structure.³⁶

Pareto's search for continuities in social phenomena produced a number of constant sentiments which he called "Residues" and grouped into genera. The "explanation" of a Residue—the reasons offered by the conscious mind for the existence of a particular social phenomenon—Pareto called a Derivation. Derivations changed constantly, Residues very slowly. That is why both the individual and society continually contradict themselves, through changing manifestations of basic sentiments. "Again," wrote DeVoto, "a single Residue may give rise to many Derivations, and an attempt to operate on any one of them, or on any group, would fail of its purpose since the Residue itself is not dependent on the Derivations. This, in fact, is the common mistake of

³⁶DeVoto, Saturday Review of Literature, IX, 546.

reformers."³⁷

DeVeto's early articles, evincing the enthusiasm of a young man who has a stranglehold on "truth," claim more for Pareto than he was ever to do again. There is no suggestion in his later work that he believed social phenomena could be measured mathematically for "energy" or that the complex variables existing in mutual dependence in the social order were really subject to a sociological variety of vector analysis. What DeVeto did find in Pareto was confirmation for part of his own thought. Study of the West had convinced him that social analysis must view the irrational and illogical not as aberrations from a rational norm but as constant factors in conditioning human behavior. Nothing else would explain Western history. At the same time his study of Utopia in Deseret had convinced him that those who looked to the millennium through social planning were not aware of the variables involved, that they could not predict the behavior of the social forces with which they were tinkering. Pareto's notion of Derivations existing in mutual dependence and equilibrium, the whole depending upon non-rational sentiments or Residues, seemed admirable support for his own belief that historiography must broaden the bases of its inquiry into the past. Here seemed to be a method of discerning underlying constants in shifting social processes.

This trend of thought quickly set DeVeto apart from his fellow writers and intellectuals of the 1930's. Deeply troubled by

³⁷"Sentiment and the Social Order," Harper's Magazine, CLXVII (October, 1933), 578.

the depression, many intellectuals were busily exploring the means of relieving economic distress. Usually this meant commitment to programmatic reform, sometimes even conversion to Marxism. It was unpleasant for these people to be told that their plans for social and economic reform were "exactly equivalent to the belief of a Baptist parson in 1920 that the Eighteenth Amendment would have the simple effect of regenerating American society in the direction of sweetness and light."³⁸

Nor was it pleasant to be subjected to intemperate abuse because they hadn't read an obscure Italian sociologist. Critics were quick to retaliate by pointing out that Pareto, in rejecting the fictitious economic man, had established the equally false "non-logical man" in his place. His emphasis on human irrationality led, it was suggested, to a totalitarian political ideology: if man was a creature of impulse guided by irrational motives, then proper Derivations should be provided for his sentiments and he should be held in strict control. Pareto, in short, was providing a rationale for fascism.³⁹

To this charge DeVeto, while admitting that Mussolini had been converted from socialism to fascism by hearing Pareto's lectures, replied, rather naively, that Pareto's social investigations were without ideological overtones of any sort. "Pareto," he said, "doesn't stand anywhere. His intention is not hortatory, it is

³⁸ DeVeto, Saturday Review of Literature, IX, 545.

³⁹ George E. Novack, "Vilfredo Pareto, the Marx of the Middle Classes," New Republic, LXXIV (July 19, 1933), 259.

only descriptive. A bacteriologist has no desire to convert microbes to a belief in progress."⁴⁰ For DeVoto, Pareto offered a method of investigation rather than an ideological guide.

Through such controversies DeVoto came to occupy an ambiguous place among the liberals of the depression years. Soon after he became editor of The Saturday Review of Literature, he was called to account by Edmund Wilson. Adopting a moderate tone, Wilson offered a preliminary estimate of the man and asked for further information. Nowhere else on the literary scene, he noted, could one find a critic who approached reviewing with DeVoto's thoroughness, one "who dealt regularly from a distinct point of view with subjects of serious interest."⁴¹ DeVoto obviously studied his authors carefully, he held independent and vigorous opinions, and his work had given the Review a new importance for America's intellectual life. But this young man indulged in such abundant indignation at other people's errors that he neglected to state his own assumptions.

One gathers that he is definitely opposed to certain tendencies which he regards as prevalent and which he characterizes variously as "progressive," "Utopian," or "religious." These tendencies evidently have to do with the desire to see the economic system modified in such a way as to safeguard human society against... social inequalities, depressions, and wars....

Let him stand and unfold himself....If he does not believe in the improvement of society, how does he expect than that things will work out?—and what have

⁴⁰ Saturday Review of Literature, IX, 546.

⁴¹ "Complaints: II. Bernard DeVoto," New Republic, LXXXIX (February 3, 1937), 405.

the values of literature got to do with it? Let him not merely refer us to Pareto.⁴²

The answer which DeVoto gave to Wilson's call for a declaration, though it certainly did not satisfy many of his critics, is a full, if somewhat arrogant, statement of his position.

What sets of ideas do I champion?...What theory of the world, what metaphysics, what structure of abstractions? The answer is brief: None. I have no such system and I profoundly disbelieve in such systems.

For, you see, this is a demand for gospel, and I have been acquainted with it since my earliest daysI was surrounded by a revealed religion founded by a prophet of God, composed of people on the way to perfection, and possessed of an everlasting gospel. I early acquired a notion that all gospels were false and all my experience since then has confirmed it. All my life people around me have been seeing a Light that...I have been unable to see. At first astonishing contradictions in the reports they gave me troubled my mind but...I came to conclude that absolutes were a mirage. And in my desert country mirages are a commonplace.

I distrust absolutes. Rather, I long ago passed from distrust of them to opposition. And with them let me include prophecy, simplification, generalization, abstract logic, and especially the habit of mind which consults theory first and experience only afterwards....People who do not recognize that the behavior of the human race cannot be accommodated to a syllogism. People who ask that the race be logical about illogical matters and rational about irrational ones—and who slump in despair and the lust for dictatorship because it refuses to be....

I am, if you must have words, a pluralist, a relativist, an empiricist. I am at home with the concrete inquiries of historians and scientists, and uneasy among the abstractions of critics and metaphysicians. I confine myself to limited questions; I try to use methods that can be controlled by fact and experience....I rest ultimately on experience

⁴²New Republic, LXXXIX, 408.

and, where that fails, on common sense. No one need tell me how incomplete and imperfect they are, how misinterpretation and falsification betray them, how tentative, fragile, and unsatisfactory the conclusions we base on them must be. I know: but they are more dependable than anything else. They are, especially, more dependable than gospels.⁴³

His quarrel with the reformers was not with their reforms but with their theories. According to Marxist theory, for instance, energies once resident in the bourgeoisie have already passed to the proletariat, a necessary prelude to the revolution, and "the democratic forms are played out. But to a historian, to me, that is just one more prophecy...that the world will end in 1843 or 1893....I hear the voice of lamentation but it is past noon and no fire has come."⁴⁴ Above all, he emphasized a hundred times, we must not be trapped into the logical fallacy of subjugating facts and experience to an ideal: "Idealism, whether moral or metaphysical or literary, may be defined as a cross-lots path to the psychopathic ward, Berchtesgarden, and St. Bartholomew's Eve. Absolutes mean absolutism—not logically but empirically."⁴⁵

Those who thought that such convictions were driving DeVeto into a paralysis from which no effort at social change seemed either advisable or possible were wrong. Reform, change, the amelioration of social conditions, these were an integral part of the American experience, to be supported militantly by America's

⁴³Minority Report, pp. 164-65.

⁴⁴Minority Report, p. 169.

⁴⁵Minority Report, p. 184.

liberals. But everything depended upon the philosophical assumptions from which reform was undertaken. A wide gulf separated the pragmatic, limited programs of the Populists whose fervor had enlivened his Ogden boyhood and the utopian absolutes of Joseph Smith which had worked themselves out in dreary Mormon dictatorship.

It was as an empiricist that DeVoto undertook his own efforts in reform, without conviction that reform would lead men toward the godhead and with full recognition that, in seeking to alter the delicate balance of forces that make up the social structure, reformers could never entirely predict what shift in the equilibrium would occur to meet the force introduced. His beliefs could be summed up, in a sense, in the two quotations that appear most often in his writings. One was John Dickinson's warning to the Constitutional Convention: "Experience must be our only guide. Reason may mislead us." The other was Twain's favorite characterization of mankind as "the damned human race."

Granted these conditions, DeVoto was ready to attack social ills with a Westerner's directness, though his brand of liberalism still set him apart from the crowd. He worked to raise funds for the defense of Sacco and Vanzetti, but he characteristically failed to share in the conviction that the foundations of society tottered when the anarchists were executed. History had seen judicial murders before. No society had ever succeeded in eliminating such outrages, and with the damned human

what it was he was doubtful that one ever would.⁴⁶ He gave time and money to the cause of the Spanish Loyalists, but he refused to attend the National Congress of American Writers because he felt they had substituted Marxist formula for free inquiry into social problems.⁴⁷ He carefully demonstrated to the American Medical Association that it was blindly following an outworn professional mythology which prevented its understanding that experience pointed toward some workable plan of social medicine.⁴⁸ But he took obvious delight in the discomfiture of New Deal planners who tried to move some New Hampshire villagers from sub-marginal lands and ran straight into a different set of social myths, those of self-determination and independence.⁴⁹ This was the logic of sentiment in action, irrational force arising within the equilibrium to meet the rational force imposed from without.

From the first his reform efforts (with the exception of his work on conservation, which must be treated separately) were directed toward defending and extending what he considered to be the basic principle to be derived from man's societal experience: freedom. In the name of freedom he pronounced that the time for reasoning with such public nuisances as censorship organizations was past. These people sought to suppress opinion; henceforth

⁴⁶Ferays and Rebuttals, pp. 139-40.

⁴⁷Minority Report, pp. 273-75.

⁴⁸Bernard DeVoto, The Easy Chair (Boston, 1955), pp. 85 ff.

⁴⁹Bernard DeVoto, "Solidarity at Alexandria," Harper's Magazine, CLXXI (November, 1935), 765-68.

they should be subjected to ridicule in the press and lawsuits and injunctions in the courts.⁵⁰ From the same principle he struck out at those who were telling America in the 1930's that it must choose between fascism and communism, for both were a denial of freedom and American experience.⁵¹ If he was merciless in his ridicule of the reactionaries who evaded the lessons of history, he was no less harsh on those liberals whose heads he believed to be filled with catch phrases and unexamined assumptions. But the gravest enemy was always absolutism, in any form.

Though such attacks proceeded from a consistent point of view, they had a surface diversity which made him an alien to all camps of opinion. Wrote his good friend Garrett Mattingly of his reputation in the 1930's:

To the Levites of the Third International he was a reactionary fascist, probably the kingpin of the whole movement. A ribald suggestion dropped in the midst of a communist cocktail party in the winter of 1935 rebounded months later in the solemn assurance that, with the blessing of Wall Street, DeVeto was drilling blue shirted legionnaires on New England village commons and Armageddon was at hand. Meanwhile, to right thinking deans and to such conservative business men as ever looked at high-brow magazines, DeVeto was distinguishable from Granville Hicks and Joseph Freeman only by a more corrosive wit and a surer knowledge of the tender spots in their hides.⁵²

As the primary point of his attack in the late 1930's had been the America First movement, from the 1940's on his reform

⁵⁰ Minority Report, pp. 304 ff.

⁵¹ Minority Report, p. 39.

⁵² Bernard DeVeto, p. 4.

spirit was most often aroused by the erosion of civil rights. He subjected a Congressional committee investigating pornography in literature to the treatment he had earlier accorded to the Watch and Ward and the Society for the Suppression of Vice. He was more inflamed than ever: What had previously been reserved to private idiocy was now given over to governmental policy.⁵³ He attacked the Veterans of Foreign Wars for its private espionage campaign among the citizens of Norwalk, Connecticut,⁵⁴ and the Federal Bureau of Investigation for its use of informers and unevaluated information, announcing that hereafter he would give no information about anyone except under subpoena in court, where he could be confronted by the defendant and his attorney.⁵⁵ And when a Pennsylvania Congressman, stung by the journalist's words, struck back by inserting allegations about him in the Congressional Record, DeVoto publicized that, too.⁵⁶ Perhaps his most furious abuse was directed at Congressman Reece's investigation of the foundations.⁵⁷ The greatest peril of all, as DeVoto saw it, was that craven officials might push a fear-ridden people into repudiating experience and learning and free inquiry. That would be to lose everything.

⁵³ The Easy Chair, pp. 199 ff.

⁵⁴ The Easy Chair, pp. 212 ff.

⁵⁵ The Easy Chair, pp. 176 ff.

⁵⁶ The Easy Chair, pp. 208-09.

⁵⁷ The Easy Chair, pp. 221 ff.

1. The first part of the paper is devoted to the study of the properties of the function $f(x)$ defined by the equation

$$f(x) = \int_0^x \frac{1}{1+t^2} dt$$

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$$J(x) = \int_0^x \frac{1}{1+t^2} dt$$

Above all, however, he avoided the announcement of Armageddon, continuing to regard the cries of doom from fellow intellectuals in the same spirit with which he looked back upon the Millerites. One of the convictions he took from studying history was that America had known crises before:

The dynamic equilibrium of a society is unstable. It is forever moving from one phase to another. Its internal forces are always altering in relation to one another and so threatening to destroy it....The vigor of our democratic system and the size and richness of our continental empire have enabled American society to contain the internal stresses and, always belatedly but always in time too, to master and redirect their alignment.⁵⁸

The principles that DeVoto brought to bear in his reform efforts and his criticism of the contemporary scene were the ones he took from his study of history. Here, too, the West was the major influence. Before the first of his full-length studies of the West appeared, he had written widely on the Western experience in articles, prefaces, and introductions. These, with his books, were finally to cover nearly every phase of Western exploration and development, from Cabeza de Vaca to the cattle kingdom, from Lewis and Clark to the policies of the Forest Service under the Eisenhower administration.

His trilogy of histories is social history, demonstrating that breadth of approach which he had welcomed in historiography

⁵⁸The Easy Chair, p. 20.

in the early 1930's. The political actions of Presidents and Congresses and the military campaigns of generals appear in these books when they are part of the material he is treating. But the burden of DeVoto's attention is upon the people, some of them very ordinary people whose only importance to history is that they went West and that their diaries and journals typify an American experience, who traveled in the fur traders' caravans to Santa Fe, or in a wagon train to the Willamette, or around the Horn with the Argonauts to California. His concentration is upon their daily existence and the artifacts which they employed to make existence possible, their fears and dreams and discouragements, their thoughts and prejudices and myths, the neuroses which the deserts or the mountains impelled them to commit to their diaries and which the strains of the trail sometimes exacerbated into psychoses. His object was to understand the people who came West and what that coming did to them, and, for the larger perspective, to understand them within that framework of forces which pulled the nation inexorably westward.

In these books appear again, but in far greater complexity, those themes of experience, of technique, of discipline, of man learning to use and control his environment which had preoccupied DeVoto almost from boyhood. But perhaps most important of all was the sustained exploration of those motives and notions which stood outside logic and reason and yet had drawn men across a continent. "It is desirable," he had said, "for social investigators to think about everything as objectively and accurately

as possible, but it is also desirable to recognize that the non-rational is nonrational and that it is socially important."⁵⁹ Nowhere was this approach more imperative than in studying the West, a province shrouded from the first in mystery, misconception, and outright fantasy. Here, if anywhere in human experience, the logic of sentiment had conditioned man's behavior.

The first of DeVoto's histories, The Year of Decision: 1846 (1943), employs the somewhat artificial but nonetheless useful device of singling out one year as the point in time at which men and forces met to determine fundamental questions of the future. This enabled him to bring a number of separate stories of that year into a pattern. Kearny and Doniphan were abroad in the West in 1846 in the cause of President Polk's war. That doom-ridden group of emigrants who have come down to us as the Donner Party set out from Independence to cross the continent and eventually to leave the record of an experience that still makes as harrowing reading as can be found in our history. The first detachment of the Saints went West that year also, as did a great historian, Francis Parkman. While young John Frémont played his dashing role in a California drama that had about it much of the comic opera, a pioneer named Jesse Applegate found a cut-off between the Humboldt and the Willamette Valley that would spare future Oregon emigrants the necessity of choosing between the Columbia Dalles and the Cascade Mountains. As much as any year, more than most, 1846 gave America its West.

⁵⁹Minority Report, p. 127.

DeVeto's purpose in telling the story of these people was to "realize the far western experience, which is part of our cultural inheritance, as personal experience. But 1846 is chosen rather than other years because 1846 best dramatizes personal experience as national experience."⁶⁰ This meant two things really: that the stories of individuals might be merged in a flowing whole which would become a panorama of national movement; and that the fundamental forces shaping national character, belief, and consciousness might be seen forming here in the experiences of individuals.

Part of DeVeto's thesis was to be that pushing national boundaries out to their continental limits meant continental integrity forever. The past would not win the Civil War; the concept of union and nationality, won by the people who made New Mexico and California and Oregon American, no matter what strains were put upon it, would henceforth dominate the people's consciousness. The question of sectionalism had been answered in winning the West. Said DeVeto of the pioneer:

He had reached the new country--and had brought with him the core of American belief and habit, differentiated in two and a quarter centuries from the belief and habit of Europe that accompanied the first of his predecessors when they began the westering which he had now brought to its farthest bound....Stripped to little more than his skin,...he would now make a new home in the West. It would be his old home modified not only by the new conditions but by the experience of his crossing....He had given the nation its continent and perforce something continental

⁶⁰The Year of Decision: 1846 (Boston, 1943), p. 4.

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formed the margins of his mind. It was a centrifugal, a nation-breaking force that sent him out, but in the end it was a centripetal, a nation-making force he was changed into...; he was more a nationalist, less a sectionalist already and from now on.⁶¹

In the simultaneous flow of the book's several narratives we see again, though in greatly expanded form, those other lessons DeVoto had found in the West many years earlier. There is, for instance, the Donner Party. Organized without proper understanding of discipline, ignorant of the necessity for cohesion and mutual dependence, they were broken by the hardships and strains of the trail into snarling, irascible knots of people who fragmented and regrouped incessantly. Fist fights and knife fights between peaceable and intelligent men, intolerance springing up between friends and growing into hatred. Cultural heritage was dumped along the trail with the heavy bedstead and cherished cookstove. Layers of stability were peeled off when a child was buried (under rocks, against the wolves), to leave the raw nerves at the surface of personality. Dissension became disintegration, and disintegration became atomization; and finally we have the spectacle of James Reed, an intelligent and civilized man, killing a companion in a senseless quarrel and barely escaping the noose that dangled from a propped-up wagon tongue.⁶² (Social history: this was the mechanism of dispensing trail justice in the treeless desert.) The Donners were only a caravan of emigrants, but here, in the

⁶¹The Year of Decision, p. 403.

⁶²The Year of Decision, p. 348.

bestiality of Lewis Keseberg and the staunchness of Tamsen Donner and the incredible courage of William Eddy, were distilled enduring examples of what happened to some Americans when they were subjected to the intolerable pressures of the passage to the West.

And on the other side, of course, the Mormons. The genius of Brigham Young welded a fractious people into an instrument that could move across the continent, meet its perils, and survive. And there is also the familiar lesson in Utopia: "Deseret began in July, 1847, and has gone on up to now, and Deseret is seen to be...what happens when Brook Farm comes into the hands of those fit to build Brook Farm."⁶³

The major contributions of DeVoto's book are two. The first is the sweeping approach that brings many disparate elements into relationship and perspective, giving the reader a sense of the simultaneity of events and forces. Most of the individual parts of his story have been studied more completely, but The Year of Decision brings the major themes of this crucial moment into a pattern that had not been clear before. The second contribution is the book's attempt to assess the irrational factors in the nation's westering: the lure of the unknown, belief in the big rock candy mountain, the logic of geography, the Residue behind "those Congressmen who talked so gloriously about stretching the eagle's wing across the setting sun."⁶⁴ DeVoto's book, in part,

⁶³The Year of Decision, p. 469.

⁶⁴The Year of Decision, p. 49.

is the study of the West as mythology, the examination of how such geographic misconceptions as the Great American Desert and the Garden of Eden formed a pattern of belief and sentiment that governed behavior. This has proved a fruitful direction for the historian of the West.

Across the Wide Missouri (1947), which won the Pulitzer Prize, is again social history, this time of the fur trade in the Far West in the crucial years 1833-1838. In these years the trappers and traders came to their moment of climax and passed into decline. DeVoto's purpose was to describe how these men lived, and once more we see the familiar themes of discipline and control, together with the limitations of these virtues. By any standards of measurement the mountain men practiced the most perilous trade that America has seen. Catching beaver and curing the pelts involved a great deal of woods wisdom and physical hardihood. But the mountain man's real skill lay in mastering the wilderness and living in it without fixed habitation or base of supply and in the midst of dangerous enemies. In terms of sheer skill—the organization of muscular, nervous, and psychological responses to meet varying conditions—he surpassed all other pioneers. Two thousand miles beyond help or supply, he so mastered his environment that the tiniest observed circumstance held instant meaning and automatically took its place in a pattern that might hold a thousand variables. It was acquired competence so developed that it became virtually instinctual. Wrote DeVoto: "He had only skill. A skill so effective that, living in an

Indian country, he made a more successful adaptation to it than the Indian--and this without reference to his superior material equipment. There was no craft and no skill at which the mountain men did not come to excel the Indian."⁶⁵

How these men worked and played, what they ate and wore, what they drank and how much they drank, the prices they paid at rendezvous for blankets and fish hooks and Indian wives, these things are DeVoto's subject matter. The standard full-scale history of the fur trade, General Chittenden's volumes, had missed much of this social history and many facts had not been available at that time. DeVoto's book, commanding thousands upon thousands of lowly facts and marshaling them into orderly pattern, rectified a deficiency.

The fur trade, however, was a business as well as a way of life. Here it was that the mountain man's skills proved inadequate. The journals and memoirs record a cutthroat competition seldom matched, even in the West. Kenneth McKenzie, "the King of the Missouri," head of the Upper Missouri division of the American Fur Company, had very simple orders from St. Louis: his job was "écraser toute opposition."⁶⁶ In ruthless competition, the first major resource of the West would be destroyed.

As was to happen so often, the logic of sentiment operated against the interests of the West. The long experience of the

⁶⁵ Across the Wide Missouri (Boston, 1947), p. 160.

⁶⁶ Across the Wide Missouri, p. 24.

French and the English in the fur trade indicated that the most efficient, least wasteful instrument for the trade was the government-regulated monopoly of the Hudson's Bay Company type. An instrument of this sort meant a consistent operating policy, at least nominal controls upon exploitation of the natives (Hudson's Bay stood staunchly against the use of rum in the trade), and some conservation of wildlife in the interest of continued profits. But the establishment of such an organization in the United States would have been inconceivable; it ran counter to all the Residues that lay behind specific belief and principle. So, in this country, "Bribery, the corruption of government agents, the debauch of red Americans, murder, theft, piracy, hijacking, the liquor traffic, private war, the employment of public force in private war, and other criminal practices characterized the Western fur trade."⁶⁷ It was the first of many enterprises in the plundered province that bore the seeds of their own destruction. The economic individualism of the West, here and always afterward, was the handy opening wedge of Eastern corporate finance. The profits of the fur trade went East. Beaver gave way to the previously scorned "cearse fur" of the buffalo, and soon the fur-bearing animals had been virtually exterminated. It is a testimonial of thoroughness that they have never come back.

The mountain men had meanwhile opened the West. Whoever traveled there after them would depend on what they had learned.

⁶⁷ Across the Wide Missouri, p. 300.

On July 4, 1836, the annual pack train of the American Fur Company, commanded by expert mountain man Tom Fitzpatrick, crossed the Continental Divide at South Pass. With it traveled a missionary party, and accompanying their missionary husbands were Eliza Spalding and the beautiful young Narcissa Whitman, white women traveling in Oregon territory.⁶⁸ No less revolutionary was the light wagon that Marcus Whitman somehow pushed and dragged up the gulches and through the river quicksands. When an axle broke beyond Fort Hall he had to cut the wagon down to a cart, and at Fort Boise he left even the cart behind, but wheels had never come so far into the West before. Soon they would go to the Columbia. The future belonged to the emigrants.

The final volume of DeVoto's trilogy, The Course of Empire (1952), deals with an earlier period. Beginning with the first explorers to touch the land-mass that has since become the United States, it traces discovery of the American West up through Lewis and Clark. Thus it covers the filling out of the map, the dispelling of geographical error with tediously-won geographical facts. But The Course of Empire is totally unlike such a book as, say, Brebner's The Explorers of North America, which covers the same period and figures. As before, DeVoto was interested in how the West shaped experience and attitudes. His book deals with man's relationship to the geography of the land, his misconceptions of that geography, the forces that tugged him toward the

⁶⁸ Across the Wide Missouri, pp. 244-47.

West, his exploration of the paths that would take him there, and his relationship to the neolithic culture which inhabited the land before him. From these things again emerge the themes of man learning discipline of himself and control of his environment, learning to substitute accurate knowledge of his country for the mirages that grew from desire, learning from his interaction with the land characteristics and attitudes that made his mind identifiably American. This, in DeVote's view, was the seedtime of that organism which became the "continental mind." The Course of Empire traces the first shaping of that consciousness.

In the beginning there were dream and error. Later periods in Western history often saw theory handily divorced from experience through desire. Lansford Hastings's cut-off from the California Trail was perfect, in theory. So was Major Gilpin's expansionist plan for a railroad across the Bering Strait to tap the wealth of the Orient. But these were the puny theories of earthbound minds when compared with the grandiose dreams that these firstcomers brought to their work.

These were men mesmerized. When Cabeza de Vaca stumbled into Culiacan from his incredible wilderness journey, no one asked for a realistic appraisal of the country he had seen and what might be done with it; his audience wanted to know about gold and emeralds—and what, by the way, had he heard about Cibola and Quivira? Imagination need never flag when fed by such desire. Coronado marched off to find the Seven Cities of Cibola—and found them, too. The dream had said fabulous cities and piles

of gold nine feet high, but reality proved to be only New Mexico and some Zuñi pueblos.⁶⁹ And Quivira, a land to which the Spaniards must travel with light packs so that the horses might carry out more gold, unhappily turned out a Wichita village of grass huts above the Great Bend of the Arkansas on the Kansas plain.⁷⁰

If these men were betrayed by the myths and delusions that seethed in their minds, they were no less betrayed by the real experience they brought with them. It was a strange country and the mind only slowly learned to understand and use it. Coronado turned back because his supply of corn was low and he feared starvation for his horses and army. The horses were at that moment trampling down buffalo grass, the best fodder to be found in North America, and the army rode through herds of buffalo, "the most complete single feed that mankind has ever known."⁷¹ Bringing the land within experience would take time.

The pattern was long repeated. The nature of the myths changed with time, but the non-rational still powerfully conditioned human behavior in respect to the West. Lacking knowledge of the region, men filled the vacuum with a "geography of fantasy" compounded from fable, theory, and desire. Slowly the myths were dispelled with fact, until at last Lewis and Clark stood at

⁶⁹ The Course of Empire (Boston, 1952), pp. 34-38.

⁷⁰ The Course of Empire, pp. 40-45.

⁷¹ The Course of Empire, p. 45.

the edge of the Pacific and the "darkness into which the sentries peered till dawn was only night, not the mystery through which for three centuries the mind of western man had groped toward the horizon lands."⁷²

With The Course of Empire DeVoto completed the scheme of his trilogy. He had studied that portion of American experience which had given America its continent and identified forever territorial integrity with political nationalism in mind and sentiment. He had explored the West as a mythology that found expression in sentiment and conditioned character. He had told the social history of a people coming to live in a strange land, gradually discarding assumptions as they gained in knowledge, and being changed by their experience into a different people. It was a major accomplishment.

One part of DeVoto's journalism grew directly from his work in history: his studies of present-day uses of resources in the West. He had studied man in his environment in order to understand the past, believing that the physical conditions under which men lived shaped their minds and societies. In the contemporary West he saw men rejecting the hard-won lessons of experience to govern their actions instead by old sentiments that threatened the very existence of the region. Residues changed

⁷²The Course of Empire, p. 553.

but slowly and the psychology of the past had laid its dead hand upon the present, but DeVoto must do what he could to make his fellow Westerners aware of their common experience. He became an important voice in conservation, publishing articles on the topic frequently over the last twenty years of his life. Their depth and importance made him, in Senator Richard Neuberger's description, "the most illustrious conservationist who has lived in modern times."⁷³ After DeVoto's death Neuberger proposed in Congress that the Clearwater National Forest be renamed in his honor, while others sounded a call for a DeVoto Memorial Battalion to enlist common citizens across the land in a militant program for protection of natural resources.⁷⁴

The significance of DeVoto's conservation articles for the record of his thought is that they expressed a theme which had become increasingly important in his histories and all he wrote: the relationship of men to the land they inhabit. It was to this major theme that all the lessons about discipline and control, about assumption and experience, and about cooperation and individualism finally led. Learning to live in the American West had come hard to the damned human race; DeVoto saw no reason to believe, in his last years, that the adventure had yet proved successful.

⁷³John Fischer, "Remembrance in a High Valley," Harper's Magazine, CCXII (May, 1956), 12.

⁷⁴Fischer, Harper's Magazine, CCXII, 12, 15.

The key to the situation was the old conflict between co-operation and individualism in Western psychology. It was in the physical nature of the region that, if people were to be sustained there permanently, they must plan cooperatively the use and conservation of those resources which made life possible. The alternative would be liquidation, providing an empire to be exploited and abandoned rather than a region to be developed and settled. The alternative, an economy of liquidation, was what the West got. Economic individualism gave the fur trade into the hands of absentee owners whose operating philosophy was simple: "Get the money out."⁷⁵ Mining companies, owned by Eastern money, operated to liquidate the minerals, stripping off the topsoil and destroying watersheds in the process; and operated, of course, with the full blessing of individualistic Westerners, for "no rights, privileges, or usurpations are so vociferously defended by the West--against itself--as the miners'. The miners' right to exploit transcends all other rights whatsoever."⁷⁶ The exploitation of oil and natural gas, though less destructive, followed the pattern of the mines.

One of the worst offenders in terms of long-range despoliation was the cattle industry. It had never owned even a full one per cent of the land it grazed--the rest being national domain--but it had systematically sought to overgraze that land into

⁷⁵The Easy Chair, p. 231.

⁷⁶The Easy Chair, p. 233.

extinction. Topsoil had been washed into the Yellowstone and the Musselshell and the Big Horn and the Powder until the Missouri, as it passed Kansas City, was a river of soup—and flowed on to deposit Wyoming in the Gulf of Mexico. If the national government had not interceded, the cattle and lumber industries would have destroyed the watersheds so thoroughly that millions of square miles of the West would have been made uninhabitable for man in this geologic age.⁷⁷ Yet in all of this the financial powers of the East had been powerfully abetted by Western psychology: "The West does not want to be liberated from the system of exploitation that it has always violently resented. It only wants to buy into it."⁷⁸

The New Deal meant a new chance for the plundered province, for with it came reclamation, public power, better credit, and rural electrification. "The West," wrote DeVoto, "greeted these measures characteristically: demanding more and more of them, demanding further government help in taking advantage of them, furiously denouncing the government for paternalism, and trying to avoid all regulation. But the measures began to make possible what had not been possible before," because, for the first time, "the West had a chance to seize control over its own destiny."⁷⁹ The war accelerated the process, bringing manufacturing, heavy

⁷⁷The Easy Chair, pp. 235-36.

⁷⁸The Easy Chair, p. 234.

⁷⁹The Easy Chair, p. 240.

industry, and skilled labor into the region. The possibility brightened that the West could throw off the old mercantilism that had made it a source of raw materials and a market for goods manufactured elsewhere. It began to think of an economy which would enrich the province and support a people in prosperity.

But these were a people trapped by their historic sentiments into working toward their own worst ends. Federal intervention had saved the last of their resources from obliteration and federal help with power development had given the province a new chance. Now a reactionary Western press damned public lands and public power as communism, the grazing lebbies worked to remove the national forests from Forest Service control, and the lumbering interests eagerly awaited an opportunity to log off the national parks and forests when federal control should have been broken and given over to the states. This, of course, would mean the destruction of the last fundamental watersheds and, very soon thereafter, a wasted and blasted land. "So," wrote DeVeto, "at the very moment when the West is blueprinting an economy which must be based on the sustained, permanent use of its natural resources, it is also conducting an assault on those resources with the simple objective of liquidating them."⁸⁰ Here indeed was all the proof Pareto's doctrine had ever needed, for here non-rational Residues out of the past governed human behavior in defiance of all experience.

⁸⁰The Easy Chair, p. 245.

A few groups of Western interests...are hellbent on destroying the West. They are stronger than they would otherwise be because they are skilfully manipulating in their support sentiments that have always been powerful in the West—the home rule which means basically that we want federal help without federal regulation, the "individualism" that has always made the small Western operator a handy tool of the big one, and the wild myth that stockgrowers constitute an aristocracy in which all Westerners somehow share.⁸¹

A few hours before he died of a heart attack on November 13, 1955, DeVoto appeared on a television program about the West. On this afternoon he was helping to tell the story of some Pueblo Indians who inhabited the Mesa Verde region of southwestern Colorado in the thirteenth century and whose society was destroyed by drouth. At the end of the program DeVoto warned that man still had not learned to discipline himself in relation to his natural resources, still had not learned to live in the land in such a way as to make sure that human existence would always be possible there.⁸² These were his last public words, his last message to his fellow citizens about the country he loved so deeply. In accordance with his wish, his ashes were scattered along the Lochsa River in the Bitterroot Mountains, in that stretch of country where Lewis and Clark, stumbling and near disaster, found the Lolo Trail which took them west and brought America to its Pacific border.

⁸¹The Easy Chair, p. 254.

⁸²The New York Times (November 14, 1945), p. 1.

The sturdy relativism bequeathed to him by his native West and the empiricism he took from history determined the nature of DeVoto's thought on literary criticism and theory. From early in his career he engaged in controversies about these matters that now often seem to be ill-tempered and sometimes even foolish. But from them can be drawn DeVoto's view of what literature can and should accomplish.

In many literary critics DeVoto thought he saw the same manner of thinking for which he chided the liberals: the refusal, in blind adherence to theory, to take all the evidence into account. He first disagreed with them for their condemnation of America as anathema to the artistic temperament. It had become fashionable earlier in the decade, he noted in 1927, "to denounce American life as dull and contemptible,...materialistic, money-grubbing, standardized, unrefined"; and the sensitive had therefore concluded "that things must be otherwise in France."⁸³ The books in which the young intellectuals had vented their despair with America, he later told the Harvard alumni, "were phenomena of insufficient sophistication, of optimism betrayed, of religious fervor pitifully wrecked on fact."⁸⁴

Too often, he believed, literary theorists were, like the Marxists, "incorrigible monists." Operating on the logic of sentiment, seeking unity in all they touched, they distorted experience

⁸³Forays and Rebuttals, p. 156.

⁸⁴Forays and Rebuttals, p. 227.

and disdained the literature we have in the name of the literature we should have had, "forever hearing the fiddles tuning for a symphony which somehow is never played."⁸⁵ "God send the Republic," he wrote, "someone who knows how the Americans live and can give the theories of the literary some basis in things as they actually are."⁸⁶

Looking back on the 'twenties in The Literary Fallacy (1944), a badly disorganized and terribly sententious book, DeVoto held that literary thinkers too often assumed "that a culture may be understood and judged solely by means of its literature, that literature embodies truly and completely both the values and content of a culture, that literature is the measure of life, and finally that life is subordinate to literature."⁸⁷ Thus if the books said that the decade of the 'twenties was the age of philistines and Americans an affront to artistic sensibilities, then that must be the truth. In this fashion literary people made the step that separated their thinking from experience, from the

⁸⁵Forays and Rebuttals, p. 161.

⁸⁶Minority Report, p. 150.

⁸⁷The Literary Fallacy (Boston, 1944), p. 43. It was this book which occasioned Sinclair Lewis's blast, "Fools, Liars, and Mr. DeVoto," Saturday Review of Literature, XXVII (April 15, 1944), 9-12. For defenses of DeVoto, see Henry Seidel Canby, "Mr. Bernard DeVoto," Saturday Review of Literature, XXVII (May 6, 1944), 16; and Theodore Morrison, "Mr. Lewis, Mr. DeVoto, and 'The Literary Fallacy'," Saturday Review of Literature, XXVII (May 6, 1944), 17. The book, undeniably a bad one, has stayed in the minds of later critics, who use it as if it were the only criticism that DeVoto ever wrote. See, for instance, Stanley Edgar Hyman, The Armed Vision (New York, 1948), pp. 117-18; and Philip Rahv, Image and Idea (Norfolk, Connecticut, 1949), pp. 161-64.

reality of life as it was lived by their countrymen. Writers then became as irrelevant to their society as the literary mining promoter who wrote tales like Poe's had been to Ogden: "Cut the umbilical cord and what dies is not society but literature."⁸⁸

What certain writers of the 1920's had committed themselves to was a denial of the dignity and worth of man. The best summation lay in "The Waste Land," for here "an entire literary movement makes a final judgment. Literature looks at human beings and says that this is what their experience amounts to."⁸⁹ And thus literature dissociated itself from its wellsprings, for all experience—all history—taught a far different lesson: "Life has sanctity....The experience of men has a fundamental worth which neither other men, nor God, nor a hostile fate can destroyMan is the measure of things. Man's experience is the measure of reality. Man's spirit is the measure of fate."⁹⁰

One version of the literary fallacy prompted DeVoto's first book of criticism, Mark Twain's America (1932), an "essay in the correction of ideas" laid down about the frontier and its effect upon Twain by Van Wyck Brooks.⁹¹ Brooks had decided in The Ordeal of Mark Twain that the frontier, with its coarseness, its materialism, its sterile drabness, had frustrated the artist in Twain.

⁸⁸The Literary Fallacy, p. 174.

⁸⁹The Literary Fallacy, p. 109.

⁹⁰The Literary Fallacy, pp. 118-19.

⁹¹Mark Twain's America (Boston, 1932), p. ix.

To DeVoto this was a literary theory, "a form of metaphysical autobiography. It permits its contriver to reconstruct facts in harmony with his prepossessions."⁹² He met the literary simplification of the frontier with a historical sketch of the frontier's diversity, proving that, whatever else it might have been, it was far from drab and sterile. The Mississippi that flowed through Hannibal's dooryard carried the kaleidoscopic variety of a marching nation. Twain was a product of this frontier and took from it those qualities which have made his books endure. The Washoe diggings, in turn, far from blighting a sensitive spirit, offered Twain excitement, opportunity, and growth. He entered enthusiastically into the spirit of the Comstock and made his first experiments in those literary forms that were to see his best work. The rest would be development.

This first study of Twain was a social history of the artist's early life, and it was social history that DeVoto most admired in Twain's fiction. In a later volume he decided that Twain had in fact achieved two kinds of social history: the recreation of a notable part of American mythology in Tom Sawyer, and the recreation of an entire civilization in Huckleberry Finn:

There is a type of mind, and the lovers of Huckleberry Finn belong to it, which prefers experience to metaphysical abstractions and the thing to its symbol. Such minds think of Huckleberry Finn as the greatest work of nineteenth century fiction in America precisely because it is not a voyage in pursuit of a white whale but a voyage among feudists, mobbists, thieves, rogues,

⁹²Mark Twain's America, p. 28.

nigger-hunters, and murderers, precisely because Huck never encounters a symbol but always some actual human being working out an actual destiny.⁹³

DeVoto viewed any literary attempt to transform experience into metaphysics or abstractions with the same distrust he had for the liberals' flights into theory. At its best literature is "a fundamental expression of the human spirit, one of the activities of man which dignify his estate, illuminate his experience, work toward truth, pass judgment on life, and try to plumb the mysteries of fate."⁹⁴ But those judgments must be based on experience, those plumbings must be held to perceptible reality. The integrity of the artist consisted in his holding himself to the perceived truth and his unwillingness to offer more than his perception justified. "For good or ill it may be," DeVoto told a lecture audience,

but in so far as our own time has courage, it is the courage not of hope but of realism, the knowledge that the conditions of life are infinitely difficult and the armies of evil infinitely strong. And that is the judgment passed in these sunny and leisurely pages where a shrewd boy is drifting down the great river on a raft, looking with undeluded eyes on the strange and various spectacle of the human race.⁹⁵

This courage of realism, DeVoto told Edmund Wilson, could not be tied to social planning, for human needs go far deeper than economic analysis can follow them.⁹⁶ The rational planners

⁹³ Mark Twain at Work (Cambridge, Mass., 1942), p. 100.

⁹⁴ The Literary Fallacy, p. 16.

⁹⁵ Forays and Rebuttals, p. 371.

⁹⁶ Minerity Report, p. 167.

who, ignoring the non-rational in society, believed that man's difficulties would be solved in Utopia, were the modern equivalent of those nineteenth century voices of enlightenment who had believed that the truth about himself would make man free. In psychology, too, whatever courage man could have must be the courage of realism. Havelock Ellis, in studying the psychology of sex, had shared the inability of his time to recognize man's limitations: "To learn, to know, to declare, to let the light and air in would be enough! The fetid mass of irrationality which he uncovered would yield to reason; turn it over often enough in open air and the spores of fear and failure must be killed." But then Freud gave man back his limitations:

The world which Freud opened up was far more desperate than any Ellis had ventured into, and the race proved to be far more limited, far more beset by forces beyond its control....The goal of freedom in which Ellis believed was apocalyptic: freedom as power in itself, freedom as invincible. Freud's was a humbler, sterner, sadder freedom: freedom for man to grapple with reality liberated from unconscious forces within himself. Ellis's was a freedom of hope; Freud's of ferocity. Ellis turned Prospero alone and unconquerable toward the stars. Freud merely gave Prospero weapons which he might use against the Caliban with whom he must live forever on his sea-girt isle.⁹⁷

This was the realism that DeVoto found in Twain and sought everywhere in literature: the realization that all man's victories must be partial victories, that the demons were never exercised but only given dimension, that Caliban was never slain but only understood, accepted and—sometimes—controlled. It was a

⁹⁷Minority Report, pp. 85-86.

literature that dealt neither in apocalypse nor Armageddon. Basing itself on experience, it never promised more than experience justified.

It was from these convictions that DeVoto wrote his best book of literary criticism, The World of Fiction (1950). Here, without the irritating quarrelsomeness that detracts from so many of his articles and without dragging in the irrelevant evidence that fills The Literary Fallacy, DeVoto examined the many different human needs that fiction may meet, from the simple needs that slick fiction satisfies to the transformation of man's deepest needs that only great literature achieves. Here, in far more reasoned form, DeVoto argues that the best literature, like Freud in another realm, offers man always a limited victory, the courage of realism, Caliban still vigorous and dangerous but given perspective and made easier to live with because he has been momentarily shared. Vicariously in fine fiction, perhaps for that moment only, the reader may sever the bonds that bind him to his personal monster and be whole. It is a triumph of magic and one not to be found elsewhere.⁹⁸

DeVoto's first novel, The Crooked Mile (1924), begins his fictional exploration of the idea of the Western frontier. Chronologically it is the third part of his projected trilogy,

⁹⁸The World of Fiction (Boston, 1950), p. 44.

the first two having been written but destroyed. The novel's period is 1890 to 1920, opening at that moment when, in the conventions of American historiography, the frontier ceased to exist. Windsor, which resembles the Ogden of DeVoto's angry articles, has passed from frontier crossroads to industrial city. Its people have settled down in the shadow of the mountains to live complacently under the power of the copper trust that owns the mills and smelters and holds the city's destiny negligently in its bankers' hands.

Windsor is the fraying out of the energy and dream that once carried America westward. James Abbey, Southern aristocrat, had come West in 1865 to build another ante-bellum South, a plantation where his sons and daughters might ride in from the hounds to the punchbowl. He had sought freedom in the land, hoping, as his grandson remarks long afterwards, to found "a feudal barony with the Abbey overlord aloof from the inferior race."⁹⁹ This Abbey had tried to escape the new forces of Windsor's spreading industrial cancer by ignoring the city's existence and putting his money and energy into inaccessible desert land, looking to irrigation and isolation for his new Eden. He appears in this novel as an old man sitting in the sun, his knees covered by a laprobe, remembering the dream that had drawn him West and telling his grandson of mirages that he has seen, not recognizing that dream and mirage were one.

⁹⁹The Crooked Mile (New York, 1924), p. 328.

James's son, Pemberton, had seen different mirages from those that filled his father's memory. In him the Abbey energy was directed toward conquering the forces that James tried to escape. The Abbey process for extracting copper from low-grade ore had rocked the West and transformed Windsor into an industrial city. For one moment Pemberton Abbey had held a state by the throat, demanding of it, since it could not have the daring to match his dreams, subservience. And then he too went down—before the cowardice of Windsor and the power of Eastern capital. One more rich resource of the West had passed to the calculating hands of the East.

Gordon Abbey, third of his house, is the product of these visions and failures. As a child on his grandfather's farm at Blaine he too sees mirages, sees his grandfather's promised land inverted in the sky. And each night before he sleeps he waits for the passing train that comes from Pemberton's world of mines and smelters, for he has inherited the worlds bequeathed to him by both father and grandfather.

For a time, Gordon is allowed to paint his world in the colors of his dreams, just as the elder Abbeys had done in their different mirages. But then an aunt, representing the forces of Windsor that have always triumphed over the Abbeys in the end, destroys the boy's drawing books to humble his pride. From then on Gordon looks at his world with the clear eyes of the observer, not as the painter who will transform it in accordance with the image in his mind. Though long thereafter Gordon seeks meaning

in the symbols of James's and Pemberton's worlds, he is essentially cut off from both, a new generation with the intelligence to see but without the will to act. The elder Abbeys had pursued apocalyptic visions of freedom, one thinking to find it in the proud isolation of the independent landowner, the other in the industrial power that wrests riches from mountains and dominates the lives of other men. Gordon Abbey grows up to see the futility of their visions and to doubt the very existence of the freedom they sought.

This doubt is nourished by Pemberton's friend John Gale, under whose tutelage the orphaned Gordon is reared. Gale is a heretic New Englander sent West to watch over family investments, an activity he soon abandoned to devote his life to writing the history of the frontier. His historical thesis is reminiscent of Frederick Jackson Turner, if one inverted Turner and found that the conclusion was not faith in continued renewal of democracy in the search for free land but the certainty of decay and corruption as the energy of the race is inevitably dispersed and dissipated. The central books in Gale's bibliography are the four volumes of The Diaspora. Quotations from them are headnotes to DeVoto's novel, caustic commentaries on that westering experience of which Windsor is a product; their doctrines run like a dirge beneath the activities of Windsor's people.

To Gale, the freedom and individualism which American mythology had attached to the frontier simply never existed. Instead of the imagination that could visualize a new freedom and

fulfillment beyond the mountains, the firstcomers had only debts and neuroses.

At the hands of poets, professors, and Presidents, two myths have developed, the Pioneer and the Frontier. The Pioneer has become...a demi-god combining grandeur, statecraft, and prophecy in equal measure and following the inspiration of God in a conscious effort to magnify the glory of his race. The Frontier has become a transitory but already hallowed utopia where, uniquely in human history, individualism was supreme and freedom a universal endowment...The pioneer, in his earlier phase, was a fugitive from justice and in his latest only a hellridden calvinist forced out by his economic helplessness and searching not for something lost behind the ranges but for free land....Freedom was conditioned by the inheritance of the race, a heritage not wholly devoid of injustice, mediocrity, tyranny, and fear. And the true individualist on the frontier is to be found at one end of a rope whose other end is in the hands of a group of vigilantes.¹⁰⁰

What visions had lurked in the recesses of the pioneer's mind, what poetry had he found in the mountains and deserts?

Eighty-seven years after Padre Rubio another man attempted the desert. Joshua Wheeden knew that hell was purely a matter of inheritance and saw no devils by day or night on the Plain of the Fiery Vision. He renamed it Dead Mule Flat. The peaks on the horizon which Rubio had called the Blue Mountains of the Mist of the Throne of God, he disposed of as Bitch Wolf Range....Only the red and waterless hills of the last fortnight's journey, the Canyon of the Curse of God and the Naked Mountain of the Crucifixion, left their mark on him and struck a minute poetry from his heart. His name for them, the Heartbreak Range, has survived the migration he was leading. He came to the end of them, crawled down the farther side of Crucifixion, lost two men in the trackless basin, and three weeks later stood on top of the peak which Rubio had only gazed at and had called the Mountain of the Hundred Years' Temptation. He named it Wheeden's Peak. He was the Angle-Saxon, in the vanguard, civilizing his continent.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ The Crooked Mile, p. 23.

¹⁰¹ The Crooked Mile, p. 287.

Windsor, the product of all the westering, is a blight, a wasteland inhabited by several varieties of automatons with fat souls. The well-born (a relative description in Windsor) form a clan as sharply defined as Hemingway's herd. They live under the tyranny of copper without the courage to rebel or the intelligence to question. Their talk consists of a few bright, empty negations; their marriages are without love, their flirtations unredeemed by desire; even their money-making is timorous. Their symbols are the country club, a plush-lined substitute for the heartier saloons and brothels of their fathers, and automobiles, machines that are perpetually moving and yet take them nowhere.

Gordon Abbey returns to Windsor from Exeter and Harvard (John Gale's inheritance) as a soul-sick young man who searches his world for meaning without great hope of finding it. His pilgrimage takes him over a long and intricately crooked mile, one that provides a remarkably complex analysis of Windsor.

The species produces certain biological sports. There is, for instance, Louis Farrand, who buys the daily Herald and becomes a prophet of antisepsis and uplift. Once the streetcar franchise is investigated and there are drinking fountains on every corner, then Windsor streets will be paved with gold and all the buildings will be alabaster. From those ninety thousand faceless robots who fill Windsor factories will come a new vitality to shatter the spiritless respectability of the clan. But at the state Democratic convention, working to nominate the grandson of Windsor's great Populist—of whom, of course, only the golden

voice remains in his descendant—Louis finds that copper always exacts its price, even of the Herald idea. He may elect Allen Bryce if he must, but only at the expense of suppressing evidence of copper's corruption. Even the prophet of uplift in Windsor must become an illustration of the biblical motto for Gordon's Golden Book of Windsor, the book he will never write: "Nineveh, that great city; wherein are more than six score thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; and also much cattle."¹⁰²

Gale's daughter, Hope, companion of Gordon's childhood, also stands apart from the clan. For a long time her books, her father's talk, and the music she composes but refuses to have taken seriously, are enough to sustain her. Then she can marry Louis, build a house which stands symbolically high on a hill above Windsor, and provide a quiet haven for the plumed knight she doesn't quite believe in. When Louis is killed in World War I, a conflict which to him is America doing for the world what the Herald idea was doing for Windsor and the state, she rejoins Gordon in his pilgrimage.

Beth Gordon and Hope are trying to think their way into sanity. Their curse is an inability to unite mind and feeling, to find in human experience something to which they can commit themselves. John Gale has destroyed all the historical frontiers, and they cannot find a new one. Gordon's course takes him through

¹⁰²The Creeked Mile, p. 245.

all the levels of Windsor society, through immersion in the clan and withdrawal from it, through an abortive love affair, a degrading adultery, a term of work in the railroad yards. And there are interludes: a stint on a liberal Boston weekly, another in uniform in the war, both of them meaningless. But always there is the return to Windsor, ostensibly because Gale and Hope are there, but really because all the frontiers began there for the Abbeyes.

As he ages, Gale becomes increasingly dissatisfied with what his ideas have created. Neither Hope's fastidious withdrawal from life nor Gordon's emerging doctrine that to be comfortable is the highest happiness can please a peevish old man who has come to doubt the wisdom of his own books. For Gale too has divorced mind and feeling. The historian knows the meaning of all Windsor's frontiers. Hi-Yi Windsor, wandering prospector and windy promoter, had found that the hot springs allayed the ills of the body and set up a trading post and saloon for freighters on the Overland Trail. Then came the gold fields, and Windsor was a supply station. When that passed and the harlots and gamblers departed, the railroad and homesteaders came, "bringing a double slavery; for what the railroad did not possess, the banks that followed in its wake soon took over."¹⁰³ The homesteaders, under Windsor's great Populist, Henry Clay Bryce, fought that tyranny. Then came Pemberton Abbey and his copper:

¹⁰³The Crooked Mile, p. 309.

"Here was the one chance that Windsor had ever had to break free. And Windsor, obeying the instinct of the Gadarene swine, had stampeded into the sea."¹⁰⁴

The mind of John Gale knows that Windsor could not have done otherwise; the frontier had always responded not to a prophet's call for freedom but to a shopkeeper's cautious balance of profit and loss. The new tyranny could be broken by a new frontier, but the result would be a new variety of Windsor. All this Gale's mind accepts. But, as he comes to recognize too late and never admits in life, his dissection of illusions has always spared one saving illusion. For John Gale, friend of Pemberton Abbey, the Abbeys have always stood outside historical process. The Abbeys mean rebellion, constant renewal of the dream of freedom that the frontier never had and couldn't understand. In the long catalogue of Gale's historical inevitabilities, the Abbeys are an omnipresent deus ex machina, the potential for hope and rebirth that Louis Farrand had seen in sanitation and the downtrodden masses. There is always the possibility that rebellion will sometime succeed, the dream be made flesh. Though Gale's mind knows that in Gorden Abbey the fire has died out to leave the dead ashes of passivity and acceptance, his emotions cannot accept the fact.

The extent of Gale's commitment to the saving illusion becomes clear after his death. In the last months of his life he

¹⁰⁴The Crooked Mile, p. 310.

invested the Gale fortune in the Grouse Creek Railroad, property of Augustus Stein. Year after year Stein is inching a thin line of rusty rails up the hills, over the divide, over rivers, canyons, across sinks, through the Canyon of the Curse of God, till his rails shall find "a pass on Wheedon's peak, the Mountain of a Hundred Years' Temptation," and slide "downhill into ten thousand square miles of parched wilderness known as Grouse Creek Basin."¹⁰⁵ The dry sands of the Basin had once drunk up the money and sweat of Jim Abbey, who thought to build there another South, blooming under irrigation, safe from Windsor and the post-Civil War world. In the dying mind of John Gale, seeking a final affirmation, Grouse Creek means homesteaders, a new frontier to break the grip of Windsor, one last wilful hope that the end may be different if there is one more West. It is his legacy to his daughter and his ward.

For a long time they cannot accept the inheritance. Gordon, in a final denial of the city, moves to Blaine, the farm where his crooked mile began, finding security in trim orchards and anodyne enough for the mind in the day's work and the evening's agricultural journals. All the books, the charts for life that were never worth the writing, can be reduced now to elaborate charts of the daily weather. One last illusion is necessary: Blaine can shut out Windsor. And after a time, though knowing that Windsor can never be shut out, Hope too comes to Blaine—

¹⁰⁵The Crooked Mile, p. 411.

to that marriage so long delayed while the corruscating intelligence denied any union of mind and feeling. But in the end Windsor, the symbol of the new age, reaches out its tentacles and denies even Blaine to Gordon. Windsor is the world, and the world permits no one to escape his inheritance. Gordon goes to Stein at last.

God has whispered no message of freedom in the ear of Augustus Stein, twisted and misshapen Munich Jew. The new prophet of something beyond the ranges no longer believes that God speaks to nations and leads them forth to the millennium. Stein, who does not read books because he does not understand them, has taken his own measurement of John Gale's frontier: Pemberton Abbey did not fall before a process of history; he failed "because he did not know money."¹⁰⁶ Creature of cities, Stein sees new Windsors in Grouse Creek Basin, to be served by a railroad that he will own. The railroad is a seeming idiocy, with one chance in ten thousand of success. But Stein is no dreamer. Manager of finance that he is, he can "save his rusty rails and worthless waterfalls from all the bankers....And that was all. No forlorn hopes, no dying on the spears, would ever fit his fat and twisted figure."¹⁰⁷ He needs someone who can manage men, someone who can hate Windsor enough to help him break its power and build a new one. He needs the Abbey tradition of rebellion.

¹⁰⁶The Crooked Mile, p. 396.

¹⁰⁷The Crooked Mile, p. 412.

This is the pioneer in a later age, no seven-foot demi-god striding forth to conquer the earth but a fat little man who wants to open a new frontier and make himself very rich. This, finally, is what all the frontiers have come to. John Gale had died in a last bitter hope that there must be an invisible frontier beneath all the veils of illusion his books had torn away, that man might sometime break forth from the charnel house he has made of all his Wests into something resembling freedom and a decent life. This is an illusion Gordon Abbey accepts, with full recognition that it is an illusion. He will unite the symbols of James's and Pemberton's worlds, free land and the railroad, together with the illusion that John Gale had left over when The Diaspora had classified and catalogued all the others, and he will push his rails through the valley of the Hundred Years' Temptation that beckons men toward the promised land, always. The promised land remains an illusion, the railroad an idiocy, but they may bring insomnia to Windsor, may cause copper's heart to falter and miss a beat, may remind the clan that the ghosts of Henry Clay Bryce and Pemberton Abbey cannot be laid forever. And that will be achievement. The apocalypse of freedom which haunted the elder Abbeys has descended to Gordon as a sterner, sadder freedom: the freedom to rebel. At the end of one crooked mile and the beginning of a new one, he can nod pleasantly at the reappearance of a mirage over the hill at Blaine to remind him of the ghosts of his fathers—this partner of Augustus Stein.

The Crooked Mile explores the frontier idea from many

other perspectives. Always, in DeVoto's novels, history is an envelope which surrounds the present, defining its possibilities. Sometimes it simply makes an ironic comment; at others it points a limited lesson. But never does it allow the present the luxury of thinking itself tragic. If there is one thing that the history of the West has to say in DeVoto's novels it is that man's realm lies somewhere beneath tragedy. Behind all the voices crying to God for wisdom and union with Him there is history. And history knows that God has always spoken to man with peculiar lack of equivocation in the West.

The Diaspora will tell you how God walked on the frontier, and how one man saw him as an Indian chief and another as clouds above the Pinons or the Sawtooths, while some held converse with him across the prostrate body of the devil in graveyards at midnight, and others, the Mormons among these, were given to see only his hinder parts. You have read there murders that God ordered, the pockets of gold he revealed, the days of resurrection he foretold and the tabernacles that were erected as depots for those days.¹⁰⁸

But in this late day the hand of the divine in this world is difficult to perceive. Harvey Maleoth, up from Windsor's shanty Irish, has inherited the editorship of Louis Farrand's Herald, that voice crying for millennium. Harvey knows that God still walks the frontier in many guises, but Harvey is running a newspaper, not whooping for causes, and his newspaper will have a new plant with floors strong enough so that the presses no longer fall through once a week. That is the kind of uplift the Herald now is after.

¹⁰⁸The Crooked Mile, pp. 387-88.

The courage open to man in DeVoto's books is only human courage, stripped of its pride and placed in perspective by the record of experience, unsupported by gospel. If the invisible frontier is of the spirit, it is nevertheless unrelated to those spiritual frontiers that were the stock in trade of all the prophets who have ridden the West in Gale's histories. If the white-tops are to roll westward again, they will follow no pillars of cloud and fire, but only Augustus Stein. And Stein, untouched by the hand of God, does not read—reads neither John Gale's books nor words engraved on golden plates. For a partner Stein has Gerdon Abbey, a man of limited commitment who has read all the records of Windsor—of the West—and has denied the courage of hope to accept the courage of realism.

Not until his third novel, The House of Sun-Goes-Down (1928), did DeVoto return to the story of the Abbeys and Windsor. Here the two earlier volumes of the trilogy have been reduced to one, and the novel shows the effect of this compression. Nevertheless, The House of Sun-Goes-Down illuminates the genesis of the house of Abbey and the city of Windsor and establishes those themes explored in The Crooked Mile.

When he left the South, James Abbey felt he was throwing off its shackles forever. He had fought the South's war and had come home to find a land still living a lie. In his Mississippi town a boy shell-shocked into simple-mindedness parades the streets tooting Dixie on his flute while the respected graybeards stand about hating the Yankee invader in unison and

assuring each other that even now the forces are massing below the Rio Grande that will sweep across Texas and drive the conquerors before the Bonnie Blue Flag. If the South had been dying, Abbey would not have deserted it, but the South was clinging to a dead lie, recognizing no time after the day before yesterday.

So James sells his half of the family plantation, accepts the curses of his mother and family, and prepares to go West—to the future. Though he believes that he is escaping the South, Abbey is in fact carrying it with him. Not for him is the easy fellowship of common men on the trail, the mutual dependence that could mean survival. His train breaks up in factionalism, tries cut-offs that should be there but aren't, and nearly ends in disaster. Abbey finally breaks away completely to go it alone. He stumbles at last into Hi-Yi Windsor's Boiling Pot Springs, his outfit nearly demolished by the desert and most of his oxen dead, his wife lying in the jolting wagon in pain that has passed beyond screaming with an almost dead child at her slack breast.

Windsor is thus trail's end for the Abbeys. Here James Abbey, once master of Velden's broad acres, will create from the alkali, sage-covered hillsides a new Velden. The land against which he battles in an agony of the will becomes a metaphor: an apocalyptic vision of freedom. But Abbey is not one to understand both terms of the metaphor. A man who wishes his neighbors were forelocks that they might pull in his presence cannot accept the cooperation necessary to survival in this country. From his experience he has taken just one lesson: the land means freedom,

and freedom exists only in complete independence from all other men. Like Coronado, he has brought with him and imposed on the land a theory to which the land does not conform.

For a time he survives and prospers. Gradually he routs the sagebrush and brings water to his land. Gradually his acres become a tame oasis in the arid Ophir Valley. But Ophir Valley is not big enough to ensure Abbey independence forever. So he opens a new war, this time against the terrible desert and lava of Grouse Creek Basin. Year after year he pits against the desert his great energy and every dollar the Ophir farm can produce, a man obsessed by his vision. Grouse Creek is the place where the new plantation manor shall rise, its drive bordered by tall elms and walnuts. Here, in a world apart from all other men, the Abbey soul will at last be free. But the desert has its own way. Ten thousand square miles of desolation are not to be beaten by one man, and the Abbey mirage has no place for common effort. Finally, the banks must foreclose even mortgages held on a vision. With his wife dead of smallpox and his son a rebel against the land, Abbey must at last accept defeat.

During these years Windsor has gone its own way, passing, under Abbey's scornful eyes, through a succession of frontiers: the goldfields, the railroad, the homesteaders. Those first-comers who will be remembered as Builders and have schools and streets named after them in a later day have seen their first schemes prosper. They follow no visions of freedom. The land and its resources are there to be promoted and exploited, until

the exploiters shall become worthy of notice by the forces of Eastern finance. This early Windsor has learned from its past only a psychology of exploitation, exploitation of the bases of its own existence. The chief change apparent in Tom Whittaker as he passes from the green baize table in McNamara's saloon to the carpeted office of a bank presidency is the loss of his gambler's courage. His gambles are timid now. But he and Windsor's other great will continue to swindle each other until they are ripe for the East to swindle them all, and then Windsor and the state will be just one more Eastern-owned mercantile empire in the West.

Pemberton Abbey, named by James for another man who had been called a traitor to the South, understands the new age that his father tried so hard to ignore. Trained under his father's harsh hand, he inherits the Abbey strength and energy and obsession. He rejects the land for the rock, but like his father before him, he makes a false metaphor of the reality—the rock—in answer to his vision. In copper lies freedom, and freedom for Pemberton is power over other men: what he does not understand is that he is chained by his own vision.

Pemberton's journey to freedom takes him through all the mines of the West, to work in assay offices, to books on metallurgy and chemistry and geology, to Henry Clay Bryce (not yet Windsor's Populist) to wrestle with mathematics, finally to a robber baron assault on Mordecai Krug's Sunrise Queen, the richest silver mine in the West. Pemberton has found a flaw in the surveys, an

error in triangulation that leaves unclaimed the patch of mountain which covers the central shaft. He need only hold his claim with an army of toughs against Krug's forces for thirty-six hours, until Bryce can ride up bearing a federal injunction and open a lyric poem of mining law that will bring Pemberton a millien-dollar settlement.

But copper is the future, not silver. In a shack behind the cottage he has built next to John Gale's house, Pemberton drives his hired chemists and metallurgists, stubbornly drives his own mind through experiments he cannot fully comprehend, seeking the Abbey process for extracting copper from low-grade ore, while a battalion of desert-rat prospectors scours the hills for him. For a time he ignores his father's early advice and tries to draw Windsor into his vision, but Windsor cannot answer the call. There is water to be had for irrigation. With canals and tunnels the Great Western could open millions of acres to farming and fasten itself on the state like a net. But canals and tunnels would cost five million dollars, enough to scare Herman Kleinfeld and Tom Whittaker into early graves. James Abbey had damned the great of Windsor for being thieves; Pemberton damns them for being petty thieves, and goes back to his rocks.

For John Gale, Pemberton is a natural force—change, motion, irresistible desire. Most of all, to the historian in Gale, Pemberton is the frontier that had never been except in him. It is no accident that Gale has begun his histories with a book on the Goisute Indians, those lowly Diggers whose sheer inferiority

reduced them to a root and berry culture and sent them fleeing before all other men; Windsor reminds him of them. But Pemberton is bigger than Windsor; he is getting something done. Gale cannot say whether he is building or destroying, sometimes cannot even be sure that it matters. For Pemberton's will matches his desire; he is the free man. Even the Mugwump mind that has repudiated Back Bay should be appalled before a force that recognizes no laws or rights beyond its own desire, but Gale is watching a drama he doesn't fully comprehend. Though he knows that Pemberton is chained to the symbol of his freedom, he also knows that to be free as Pemberton is free is either to be God or a monster. Gale is betting on God.

By the time the Abbey process is at last achieved, Pemberton has found his mine—a mountain of copper.

A single mountain heaved itself up and seemed to lean forward like an overbalanced world. In all that mass hardly an armful of shrubbery had found root. It stood naked in its own immensity...a mountain that oppressed the nerves....

"That's it," Pemberton said. "Oh, it's not worth a damn, John. Three-four-five per cent at its best—tenth of a per cent at its worst. A copper man would howl you out of his house.... And it could buy out the government at Washington."¹⁰⁹

To attack his mountain Pemberton must have all the weapons of corporate finance. There must be dozens of steam shovels, pine shacks by the gross, smelters, railroads, bucket lines that run for miles, thousands of men crawling on the face of the mountain like ants. Most of all there must be a bank—his own bank—

¹⁰⁹The House of Sun-Goes-Down (New York, 1928), pp. 264-65.

for adequate credit. It is no longer Pemberton against Windsor; now it is Pemberton against all the forces of finance in America.

"Copper. It's past Windsor, now, John, and it's past the State. To run my mine I've gone East for money. Well, they ain't boys. Mine ain't all the copper in the world. If they could rob me there'd be a trust, a copper trust. If they can't maybe someday I'll be the trust. If I can stand 'em off four—three years....If I don't—she's gone over to the East, John, copper and all the rest."¹¹⁰

For a time he holds his own. The mine comes to be. He has seen his desire embodied in a steel world that nibbles at a mountain, gouging out two tons of rock every third minute and sending it careening in giant buckets over chasms, to disappear in the shriek of his smelter, which stands at his railhead. The human will has created itself. Pemberton Abbey has achieved his function. He is making copper, and he needs only a little time to make him solvent, to make him free forever. Like Machiavelli's Prince, he has assessed and mastered the known forces of his world, but also like the Prince, he has had to leave one force out of his reckonings: the dedicated, unaccountable man who loves principle more than profit. Worse, he has even created the man; he has imported a banker from the East and then taken the banker's sister as mistress. Pemberton has always damned the man who put his feelings before his head; he has always assumed that any man but a fool can be bought. Away at his mine, he is sold out to the copper trust by a banker who puts a quaint notion of family honor above a share in ruling a world. Windsor is not

¹¹⁰

The House of Sun-Goes-Down, p. 344.

only enslaved now, but enslaved to the foreign East.

These novels dramatizing two phases of Western history never really escape the bounds of their historical thesis. They should be seen, indeed, as early statements of those themes DeVoto would use again and again in his later histories. They portray a West against itself, a land that demanded men of vision and got instead a race of pygmies. Clinging stubbornly to the myth of individualism so strong in the logic of sentiment, Windsor blindly exploits its resources, refusing to recognize a day after tomorrow, refusing to recognize also that in matters of exploitation it is no match for the forces of the East.

Nor do the elder Abbeys mean deliverance. John Gale's question about Pemberton is finally academic. Whether God or a monster, Pemberton seeks a freedom that is an absolute, and absolutes, as DeVoto was to say so many times, mean absolutism. Pemberton is Ahab demanding of men allegiance to his vision, damning them for lacking the courage to be free as God is free. Ahab's white whale meant death for men. Pemberton's mountain of power means enslavement.

Only for Gordon Abbey, inheritor of these visions, is a limited commitment possible. He has sat at Gale's feet too long to believe that Windsor can follow a banner of freedom, whether held by Pemberton Abbey or Henry Clay Bryce. But he also knows a lesson that appears neither in The Diaspora nor in Gale's sardonic biography of the Great Populist: it may be possible to redeem Windsor in the name of something less than absolute freedom.

James and Pemberton and Bryce, each in his own way, had demanded the union of man with God; failing, they were figures of tragedy. But Gordon knows that history has a way of making the tragic and comic indistinguishable. The Abbeyes and Bryce were prophets talking to God, and God has long talked familiarly with man on the frontier, on matters of importance ranging from plural marriage to drinking tea. Like all prophets, these three have ignored experience for the sake of the message. James, thinking he was rejecting the past, had in fact tried to impose the old South on the new West. To Bryce the past was a record of slavery, fetters that a new colossus called The People would shake off now that God has ordained rebates for farmers. Pemberton saw in the past only folly and weakness; he has read only one record from it, Gulliver's Travels, written by a man who knew his Windsor. Gordon, who also knows the history of Windsor, has accepted the burden of the past and the consequent knowledge that the goal of his rebellion—this last attempt to break the hold of the past by opening one more West—may prove as illusory as all the others; and he has talked not to God but only to John Gale and Augustus Stein.

The thesis rides these novels closely. The Abbeyes, and even John Gale, seem at times to be little more than symbolic representations of forces in the West. Since theirs is a lonely battle, largely independent of such ordinary influences as family relationships, their wives have a habit, having produced a child to embody the struggle anew in the next generation, of dying with

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incontinent haste. Such relationships as do appear between men and women in these books are often awkward. Because they exist constantly on the stretch, the characters are much of the time perilously close to melodrama. The trilogy plan was perhaps in itself artificial. The House of Sun-Goes-Down, reducing two planned volumes to one, is often so compressed that form becomes skeletal. James's passage to the West, for instance, is more nearly the historian's comment than the artist's creation. These are failures to embody idea dramatically.

DeVoto's second novel, The Chariot of Fire (1926), is less open to these objections. It is perhaps the best study we have had in fiction of the thaumaturge on the frontier. Since the rise of the new prophet occurs on the western edge of Illinois, and since his adherents flee across the Mississippi after his martyrdom, there are implied parallels with the Mormons, but they are no more than implied. Here DeVoto is examining the genesis of religion as so much of the West would come to know it. Though its setting is Illinois in the time of Jackson's first election, The Chariot of Fire explores forces that would, in DeVoto's opinion, have much to do with man's history beyond the hundredth meridian.

Elam in 1828 is a drab crossroads village lying dormant in the August fever season. The events that occur there are seen through the perspective of four minds. Thomas Chadbourne was once a respected member of the bar and Philadelphia society. Driven West by some nameless scandal, he has been lawyer, judge,

and land agent. Elam dislikes him as a Whig, distrusts him as an intellectual, and despises him as an agnostic. Usually, Elam provides sufficient amusement for the ironic mind, but when Elam fails, Chadbourne still has his books and his peach brandy.

Roger Steele, Chadbourne's nephew, has come to Illinois to learn the law and politics, for on the frontier one can see the rise of those forces which will sweep oppression before them and bring democracy to its fruition. For Roger, once Adams is out of the White House and Jackson is in, Utopia will come to Illinois.

Rose Brashear, the girl Roger wants to marry, is the daughter of a frontiersman who is a seeker, desperately afraid that God will come in the Last Day and find him in the wrong church. The crowning torment of his life is that his daughter Rose has stubbornly resisted that paroxysm of tears and repentance which means one is saved.

Ohio Boggs (the name suggests a historical novelist's grim joke: Missouri's Lilburn Boggs, arch villain in Mormon annals, was not without responsibility for giving the West a religion that marched in the strength of martyrdom) is to become the prophet of a new faith. He too is a seeker, having tried the Methodists, Baptists, Shakers, Free Immersionists, and every other variety that has come his way.

To Elam at this juncture come two others, Lias Whipple, a frontier pilgrim who knows that Christ has come again and has heard that He is now in Elam, and Jacob Tanner, Methodist revivalist who comes to hold a week-long camp meeting.

All week the people of Elam roll and shout in the ecstasy of union with God. Roger is there to look on, dismayed to see rolling in the mud the electorate he hopes to lead by the clear light of reason. Chadbourne is there also, amused by the spectacle, yet fearing such release of irresponsible power. Ohio becomes Tanner's prime convert. For three hours he leaps with jerks, adequate testimony to the strength of his salvation. Thereafter he is an irresistible force, converting sinners by the dozen. Only Rose resists his exhortations. For a week, day and night, she is screamed at, wept at, prayed over. Her conversion comes on the final night of the meeting. Within a huge circle of bonfires, striding amidst the dancing shadows and leaping sparks, Tanner lashes the passions of sinner and saved alike.

Into Tanner's voice crept the tension of a bent spring, as he waded through the corpses of Doomsday, and then the tension snapped in one clear shuddering scream of accusation. At once, everywhere in the clearing, men and women were plunging forward like stunned calves, dozens of them, scores of them, while all the rest were roaring a universal praise of the God whose loving kindness was made manifest before them.¹¹¹

Rose pitches forward at Ohio's feet in tears, her legs paralyzed.

Ohio Boggs has cast the devil out of Rose Brashear at last.

Having discovered his new power, Ohio concludes that God does not reside in the Methodist church after all. He, Ohio Boggs, is the true prophet. The Boggsites will found the Church of God. In his growing monomania, Ohio curses those of Elam who resist

¹¹¹The Chariot of Fire (New York, 1926), pp. 55-56.

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conversion, those who refuse their lives and goods to the true church, until he and his followers are driven out. Elam, its senses affronted and its faith insulted, would like to martyr Boggs on the spot. Chadbourne will not have it. To kill him would be to create a thousand Boggsites tomorrow, ten thousand within a year. Besides, to Chadbourne, to the man so rebellious in the name of man that he could not endure even the moderate rule of his family's gentlemanly Episcopalian God, Ohio has performed the salutary function of outraging the Baptists, Methodists, Adventists, Seekers, and New Covenanters "by declaring that God has seceded from their control."¹¹²

Ohio must have a miracle. He finds it in Rose Brashear. No frontier remedy has cured her paralysis, no traveling medicine man has restored life to those nerveless legs. Finally the prophet himself comes to her. With the fireplace flames dancing among the shadows in the cabin as flames danced on that other night, Rose, hearing again the voice that sent her into shock, rises at Ohio's command and walks to him. Thaumaturgy is proof; Ohio's church has its sign.

To escape the wrath of Elam, Ohio leads his flock out on the prairie and builds the holy city of Lo-Ruhamah. There, in those traumas that send Ohio racing headlong about about the prairie, God orders many things: pillages against the granaries of the ungodly, a comely mistress for Ohio, finally even the murder

¹¹²The Chariot of Fire, p. 72.

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of Ohio's shrewish wife. By spring, Ohio understands that he is no mere prophet: he has reached his own apotheosis and has become God.

With the coming of open roads, Elam marches upon the holy city to put it to the sword. Cries Tanner: "God himself has been mocked." Replies Chadbourne: "It is only the Methodist God."¹¹³ To Roger, not uninfluenced by the opportunity to rescue Rose from a madman, Elam's anger is the crusades all over again, the people rising in the cause of truth.

The mob kills Ohio despite Chadbourne's protests, thereby making sure that the Church of God will survive. The prophet is buried on a hillside above his city, with poor, bewildered Fiddler Gray to preach his eulogy: "He was God's prophet....And God dwelt in him. You and me knew him....And one day he'll come down to lead us again, and there'll never be parting from him."¹¹⁴ Farther down the hill, the soldiers of Roger's triumphant democracy of righteousness contrive a parody by burying a log and chanting obscenities over it; while in the valley itself other Elamites, their various gods unchallenged now, put to the torch that holy city of "jasper and sardonyx and chrysolite,"¹¹⁵ those rude, thatched shacks that are the pitiful embodiment of Ohio's brand of millennium. Off on the prairie the wagons of the Church of

¹¹³The Chariot of Fire, p. 265.

¹¹⁴The Chariot of Fire, p. 354.

¹¹⁵The Chariot of Fire, p. 356.

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God march toward the Mississippi and the West, symbolically shadowed by the smoke of their burning city, marching toward all the Windsors where men will destroy the land and themselves in the names of many absolutes, will ignore experience for the sake of theories born in desire, will see God walking the West in many guises.

These three novels make up DeVoto's contribution to the emerging examination of the West in fiction. His best novel, which incidentally deserves but has not received its place among the better novels of the 1930's, concerns another phase of his thought: the return to the sources of the race in New England.¹¹⁶ A later novel, though part of it is set in the West, draws little upon the West or life there for its themes.¹¹⁷ What he had to say about the region after The House of Sun-Goes-Down he would say in his articles and books of history.

The themes that appear in these early novels are the ones that would become familiar in his historical writing: men learning—or, more often, disdaining to learn—to live in accordance with the conditions imposed by the region itself, the techniques of survival; men discarding experience for the sake of theory, dream, and desire, seeing not the landscape but the shimmering mirages that their hopes have brought to be; the influence of the irrational, the logic of sentiment, in conditioning

¹¹⁶ We Accept with Pleasure (Boston, 1934).

¹¹⁷ Mountain Time (Boston, 1947).

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behavior in the West. In the American dream the West symbolized freedom, the new Adam, release from the past. But the land itself taught different lessons. If it demanded the highest level of self-reliant individualism for immediate survival, it also demanded a high level of human cooperation for ultimate survival. For the American who would live in the West, freedom must come in new terms: in a resolution of individualism and cooperation which is neither the total independence of the mountain men nor the enforced conformity of the Mormons.

The West was new in American experience. It asked of men-- in both DeVoto's novels and histories--pragmatism, relativism, the fashioning of a code of life that met the reality of the land and man's experience there. It taught that the logic of sentiment gave men false and perhaps disastrous assumptions about the West; that the idealist's absolute, rampant always in the region, was a straight path to death or madness. Required instead was Gordon's empiricism, his crooked mile. James and Pemberton had asked to be free as God is free, and loutish, ignorant Ohio Boggs attained their desire: he became God--and a madman. The West demanded instead the experienced courage of Henry Clay Bryce in his last days, the people's freedom no longer an apotheosis, launching a last lance against corruption-- not to bring God's justice to earth but to try to save the forests from the robber barons. Or it demanded Augustus Stein, who looks to see not holy cities but other Windsors at the end of his rails in Grouse Creek Basin, while Gordon Abbey will be

there to prevent, if he can, the rails from leading either to holy cities or to more Windsors.

These early DeVoto novels will not survive except as the material of literary history. They represent, in many ways, the failure of the historian to dramatize his themes. Their characters are often simply creatures of idea whose loves and losses have little imaginative force. The historian's intellectual analysis of the past and the artist's imaginative recreation of it did not meet in an organic whole in these books.

The novels do, however, have importance for the history of the West in fiction, for they represent a new stage in the reinterpretation of the region. By DeVoto's time the old images of the West had lost their force and had given way to new methods of analysis. Slowly the West had come into new perspective. The old assumptions, many of them attached to the West since Cooper's time, the weary stereotypes and conventions, the holiday of freedom that was Wister's nostalgic dream, the simplicity of an egalitarian society that was Rhodes's fervent hope—all these had given way to a new complexity in intellectual and fictional exploration of the region.

DeVoto, though he cannot be given a place among the best writers of fiction that the West has produced, represents the region's new freedom from the outworn fantasies and simplicities. The fiction that followed would similarly recognize the complexities of adjustment in America's least known province. The

West was free at last from all the masks it had worn in literature,
ready for explanation in intelligent fiction.

Chapter Nine

A New Fiction of the West:

Edwin Corle, Harvey Fergusson, H. L. Davis,
A. B. Guthrie, Walter Van Tilburg Clark

Freeing fiction of the West from the stereotypes and conventions, from the puerile image that dominated the minds of generations of readers, had taken a long time. A century before DeVoto's novels, creating a West that answered to his own political, social, and aesthetic desires, Cooper had fastened upon a region a formula so enduring that almost a hundred years later Jim Bridger would appear in Emerson Hough's The Covered Wagon as a natural nobleman, blood brother to Natty Bumppo.

In their turn had appeared the inadvertent innovations of Mayne Reid, the endless melodrama of the dime novels, and finally the slow struggle to some sort of reality in Siringo, Adams, Wister, and Rhodes. Even then the West, in the years after the turn of the century, seemed to belong largely to Zane Grey, that New York dentist who put novels together like recipes in an indescribable mixture of racism, primitivism, school-boy morality, and romance that sped from incident to blood-curdling incident with lightning rapidity. "The whole effect," of his novels, one critic has said in a happy sentence, "is that of a brass band rushing without pause from The Star-Spangled Banner to Dixie, to Yankee Doodle, to Silver Threads among the Gold."¹ It is

¹Douglas Branch, The Cowboy and His Interpreters (New York, 1926), p. 253.

instructive for one who would understand the impact of the romanticized West on the American mind to know that more than thirteen million copies of Grey's books were published and sold.

Nevertheless, a beginning had been made. By the time of DeVoto's early novels, though the novels themselves are only partially successful as art, the West had taken on new complexity. History had made the old image of the West ridiculous; now it was fiction's turn to help prove the point. From the 1920's on, the image of the West in fiction changed, and changed rapidly. Writers, many of them part-time historians, began to subject their region and its past to new scrutiny and to discover there literary potentiality.

It is possible now to read intelligent novels about the Navajos in Arizona, the mountain man at fandango in Santa Fe or trapping on the Seeds-kee-dee Agie, emigrants on the Oregon Trail, river towns on the Columbia, lynch law in Nevada, Mormons at the Mountain Meadow Massacre or colonizing the desert, even about the cattle kingdom. The writers of these books are still not easily heard above the clatter of Hollywood six-guns or easily distinguished among the horse opera paperbacks that crowd drugstore shelves. Yet, together, they have given us something we didn't have before: they have recreated in imagination a part of our American heritage that was lost to fiction.

1. Edwin Corle

Though born in New Jersey in 1906, Edwin Corle has become one of the Western writers to attempt this fictional reassessment of his adopted region. After graduation from the University of California and two years of graduate work in English at Yale, he turned in the early 1930's to professional writing as his career. Corle's special fascination is the arid country of the Southwest: the sun-baked land Coronado called arida zona, New Mexico, Utah, Nevada, and the California desert area. His factual studies range widely over this land and its history, indicating long and intense study of this corner of America.

His first book of history, Desert Country (1941), though it is marred at times by that curiously adolescent style that seems to plague the volumes of the American Folkways series (perhaps resulting from the attempt to popularize rather difficult material), is essentially competent description of the arid lands of the region, "a kind of survey course in the study of the desert,"² Corle called it. It is a general history of defined areas and periods: Death Valley, the Painted Desert, the Mojave, the Indians who inhabited the area first, the pioneers, the Mormons, the boom towns that are now ghost towns and the newspapers once published in them, and the legends that grew up everywhere in this country of mirages.

²Desert Country (New York, 1941), p. 348.

Listen, Bright Angel (1946) is a compelling history of the Grand Canyon, both of its geological evolution and the record of its exploration by men, from that first advance guard of Coronado's party who came and looked and went away to John Wesley Powell, the intrepid scientist who lost an arm at Shiloh and later was the first to traverse the Colorado throughout the Canyon by boat. It is from Powell that Corle's book takes its title. Having passed and named the muddy waters of the Dirty Devil River where it flows into the Colorado, he came upon a better portent: the mouth of the sparkling blue stream that he gratefully called Bright Angel. With his expedition in short supply and near despair, the time was proper for the student of nature to raise a prayer to nature's gods: "And if this expedition has any right to success or survival, then listen to a scientist's prayer, O Bright Angel of Immortality."³

Powell was followed by other explorers, by a man who thought to build a railroad at water level through the Canyon in the best tradition of grandiose dreams in the West; and even, in the course of time, by a group of pranksters who attempted the terrible river with a party that included a dog, a tame bear, and a Harvard English major who carried a copy of E. A. Robinson's poems as suitable reading for a beating lark. Though it focuses on the Grand Canyon, Corle's book actually relates much of the exploratory history of this part of the Southwest.

³Listen, Bright Angel (New York, 1946), p. 121.

Also among his factual studies are a biography of John Studebaker,⁴ of wagon and automobile fame, who made the long journey from South Bend to California's Hangtown in 1852 and thereby enduringly learned, as Corle sees it, the importance wheels were to have in settling the West, and an excellent historical study of the Gila for the Rivers of America series.⁵

In the latter volume, he returned to his favorite device of using a particular natural object as the focus for extended forays into the past and present of his chosen region. As well as any volume The Gila illustrates Corle's predilection for writing history that combines military campaigns and official explorations (Kearny and Frémont here, for instance) with the wanderings of unofficial pathfinders and the natural and social history of the area.

These volumes are significant Americana, and they outweigh, thus far, Corle's work in fiction. One reason is an odd one. Appended to certain of his factual studies is a curious strain of not very thoroughly realized philosophy, a combination of science and mysticism which has ostensibly little to do with his historical materials.⁶ In certain instances this has become an intrusive and unintegrated element in his fiction. Ray B. West, Jr., as made this point about Coarse Geld (1942), one of the better novels

⁴John Studebaker (New York, 1948).

⁵The Gila, River of the Southwest (New York, 1951).

⁶This is particularly true of the last pages of Desert Country.

we have had thus far of the mining towns, pointing out that the "novel is, perhaps, too much of a philosophic treatise in the guise of fiction."⁷ The problem has been a persistent one for Corle, often submerging his fictional creations in a murky science-philosophy.

His fiction of the West began with Mojave (1934), a collection of stories about the desert country that has always been his particular province. Though they are firmly grounded in the physical and social conditions of the region, these stories are clearly the work of a young and unsure writer and obviously experimental in technique, particularly point of view. Perhaps their chief value lies in the sketches they provide of life in the little dusty desert towns that sometimes have lurid pasts but always have drab presents and unprepossessing futures. As stories, they depend too often on an unsubtle use of irony to establish themes that are too obvious.

Burro Alley (1938), a novel of Santa Fe, is a far more mature effort. Here, in one night of seething activity, Corle brings into symbolic analysis the intricate social relationships that exist among the Westerners, Easterners, Mexicans, and Indians who have come together in one of the oldest cities in the West. In such a society the past and present stand in constant juxtaposition. As his central symbol of this condition Corle uses the concept of time, and we see all characters in relation to it.

⁷Rocky Mountain Reader (New York, 1946), p. 17.

They range from an utterly deculturized and degraded Mexican peasant to whom time has become only alcohol and oblivion, to an enervated female tourist who so fears life, which must be lived within the confines of time, that she makes time an error created by the mind, something which one must escape in pure thought. She will be a tourist wherever she goes. There are many variations of this theme. For the opportunist, present time is a thing to be manipulated to control the future; for the sensualist time is measured as Falstaff measured it, in sensation; for those whom cultural revolution has displaced time exists only as history.

Behind all these people is the city with its own history, its own burden of past and present time. For his unifying character Corle uses a wanderer who walks through time without believing in it as other men do, a man who thinks of time as three-dimensional, with the past and future existing within the present. As in the case of Coarse Gold, this central philosophy is an obtrusive and unintegrated element. It is not dramatically embodied; it is only talked about. Burro Alley has fine vignettes of cultural clash and presents suggestive symbolic overtones of the relationship of past and present in a part of the West that is both very old and very new; it is nevertheless dramatically impaired by a cloudy mysticism which, by suggesting that time is an absolute, conflicts with the novel's own historical use of time.

The publishing date of Corle's latest novel, Billy the Kid (1953), is, fortunately, misleading; the book was drafted in 1935

and then put aside.⁸ Here Corle made the mistake that has plagued many writers of the West from Siringo's time on: the notion that an almost one-dimensional psychopath can be given human significance outside a clinician's report. This book, indeed, is so carefully researched and so thoroughly based on the factual evidence that, as fiction, it is permitted few liberties. Although students of the West might be hard to convince that another book on the subject was needed, this record of Bonney's personality and exploits is careful, factual, and restrained, mercifully avoiding any attempt to make a Robin Hood of the outlaw; but as a novel it is insignificant.

As evidence that Corle's development as a novelist has not been consistent, his best work in fiction thus far is a study of the Navajos which appeared early in his career. People on the Earth (1937) reaches beyond the limitations of its own substantial ethnology to make a mature fictional analysis of one variety of Westerner coming to live under new forces. For the Navajo, beyond the problems of social and economic disruption, lies the problem of identity. Red Wind's Son, taken as a child from his dying family by a white missionary during an influenza epidemic, cannot return as a young man to the identity that accompanies his Indian name, but neither can he be the Walter Stratton created by the government schools. To live red is to attach oneself to a small, slowly eroding core of culture and belief that has become the

⁸Billy the Kid (New York, 1953), p. 290.

province of the medicine men who are its jealous preservers. The ordinary Navajo is so divorced from his tradition that he can sit by complacently while the fire dance is perverted into slapstick for the tourists at Gallup. To live white, on the other hand, is to endure social restrictions that end by denying personality. One course accepts only the past; the other ignores the past completely but finds no wholeness in the present.

Walter can accept neither position. The Navajos, a proud tribe, call themselves "the people on the earth," implying awareness of their own sources in the land as well as naive dismissal of other cultural groups. For a time, trying alternately to live in the red and white worlds and finding no place in either, Walter dreams only of being in an airplane, far above all the peoples on the earth. He would be free as a bird is free. What he accepts, finally, is a harsher, sterner freedom. He returns at last to the reservation, but he returns as Dawn Boy, the new man who will live neither red nor white, not as Red Wind's Son. At school he had liked history best of all his subjects, and it is history that he finally comes to accept, the present with its burden of the past, taking from both worlds the materials to fashion a new identity. The Navajos speak of themselves as the people, but out of cultural conflict and dissolution, history tells Dawn Boy, must come reintegration, a new people.

Such a summation by no means suggests the depth of the novel's penetration of its central problem. There are many variations of Walter's attempt to impose order upon chaos, of man's attempt to

define himself anew as a human being in a new West. In this novel Corle was able to find the proper characters to concretize the themes that appear elsewhere in his novels in almost disembodied fashion. Here the patterns of time and change, cultural dissolution and reintegration, the loss and finding of identity work out as a coherent whole in the lives of human beings. Certainly Corle's is one of the best books we have had on this phase of Indian life in the Southwest.⁹

Corle's books of history have indicated a wide comprehension of the West and its past. Thus far his fiction, partly because he has subjected man's historical experience in the West to a speculative philosophy which does not clearly grow out of that experience, has not consistently indicated the control of material necessary to whape the Western experience into good fiction. Burre Alley and People on the Earth are two of the better novels produced by the new fiction of the West. Whether Corle can go beyond them remains uncertain.

⁹Mabel Major, W. Rebecca Smith, and T. M. Pearce, Southwest Heritage: A Literary History with Bibliography (Albuquerque, 1938), p. 115.

2. Harvey Fergusson

Harvey Fergusson has also made the Southwest the major subject of his fiction, although he has dealt with aspects different from those found in Corle's books and has achieved greater stature as a writer. The range and scope of his books, indeed, make Fergusson's work the best written on this part of the West thus far.

Fergusson's personal roots in the region are deep ones. In his autobiography he makes it clear that his inquiry into his own origins has the larger purpose of illuminating a period and a place. New Mexico, where he was born in 1890, has always been for him the center of the American West. His maternal grandfather, a freighter on the Santa Fe Trail, fought Comanches with greater courage than skill and, more naturalist than entrepreneur, kept a careful journal recording his personal experiences and observations which Fergusson has since found useful. Fergusson's father, emigrating after college from the Reconstruction South, lived one winter in a cabin at White Oaks, New Mexico, with a writer named Emerson Hough, and became in time the last delegate to Congress from the Territory and then a Congressman from the new state. A fervent follower of Bryan in a Republican state, he campaigned with speeches that his son remembers as an unvarying political drama in which the Trusts and Wall Street played the villain's role and the Democratic Party rode as a knight on a white charger.¹⁰ The huge adobe house into which Fergusson was born

¹⁰ Harvey Fergusson, Home in the West (New York, 1945), p. 73.

in Albuquerque's Old Town had been standing before the American conquest.

The house would not have mattered much, for as a boy Fergusson lived out of doors as perhaps few men have in this century. It is no accident that Walden was the greatest reading event of his youth.¹¹ He carried this early sense of relationship to the natural environment with him through college (inevitably Washington and Lee, where his father had once admired the old general cantering about on Traveler), law study in Washington, newspaper reporting there and elsewhere, and finally into his work as a professional writer. Extended to include the social environment, this relationship has become a major theme in his fiction.

Among Fergusson's books of non-fiction are two of primary importance for understanding the major intellectual assumptions that are embodied in his fiction. The first of these, Modern Man: His Belief and Behavior (1936), sets forth and documents certain philosophical and psychological views. Characteristically, however, Fergusson arrives at his conclusions by way of anthropology and history. Any summary of his argument must remove it from the context upon which it rests and thereby greatly reduce its force. Briefly, however, Fergusson's view of man and his behavior in the world takes the following course.

Evolution, in Fergusson's view, may be defined as the growth of human consciousness. Primitive man is to be distinguished by

¹¹Home in the West, p. 173.

his lack of consciousness as an individual. His actions were governed by outer necessities--by tribal rules, traditions, taboos. No split between belief and behavior was possible: a homogeneous societal organization included swift mechanisms for dealing with dissenters. Guilt, man's explanation of faulty behavior, was also projected outward. When a man sinned an evil spirit had entered his body and must be exorcised. No questioning of basic assumptions could occur under such a system. If the Pueblos' prayers for rain were unavailing, they could conclude either that their prayers were inadequate or that the rain god was angry. They did not conclude that praying for rain does not produce rain. The rain god, like all good and evil spirits, remained an absolute which was anterior to man. Since the forces governing behavior existed outside the individual personality in the tribal rules and tribal gods, man at this stage of his growth of consciousness could experience no conflict between his inner and outer necessities.

Christianity in its turn (and Fergusson is using Christianity only as representative of religions which answered a new stage in man's consciousness) recognized the growing split between the inner necessities of the individual personality and the outer necessities of the social environment, but it still projected the struggle in terms of absolutes, giving man a good and an evil angel and drawing up its rules as deadly sins. At its best, in Roman Catholicism, it provides a mechanism for the resolution of conflict in the process of sin, expiation, and absolution. But Christianity

nevertheless condones and even encourages a fatal division of consciousness, a split between belief and behavior.

This is true, Fergusson believes, because Christianity imposes philosophical absolutes upon the entirely relative world of human experience. The growing consciousness must continually question its own assumptions. If man is to regain his sense of wholeness, he must find a new synthesis of belief and behavior, tradition and change, inner and outer necessity. To do so he must reject all philosophical absolutes and must accept a relative morality developed empirically. Empiricism must be his only guide, for only this can give him the flexibility to unite belief and behavior in constantly changing conditions and a growing consciousness, the flexibility to prevent wasteful frustration in the individual who must live in a heterogeneous society.

The tragedy of modern man is less the tragedy of death than of frustration. His hope is that logic and inquiry will dissolve the bonds that bind him to his primitive and religious past. His faith can rest only in the widening light of his own awareness, and the only transcendent whole that can contain his spirit is the unified whole of conscious human being.¹²

Such a summation is unfair to Fergusson's intricate argument, which rests on evidence drawn widely from anthropology, psychology, history, and literature--this last as man's imaginative expression of his basic dilemmas. His conclusions, in fact, cannot be separated from his method. Whether or not these conclusions are original (curiously, Fergusson anticipated by fourteen years many

¹² Modern Man: His Belief and Behavior (New York, 1936), p. 324.

of the doctrines now popularly associated with the name of David Riesman), they are important to understanding the pattern of his fiction, a pattern which traces the growth of selected types of consciousness in the West.

In People and Power (1947) Fergusson extended his philosophical and psychological conclusions to a study of political behavior in America. Here too he found conflict between the traditions of the past and the pragmatic necessities of the present. Fergusson concludes that an empirical resolution of environmental forces in politics and economics, leading to a consciously planned economy, is a necessary counterpart to the resolution of primitive and modern forces in man himself. Although man has always been far more pragmatic in his thinking about his environment than in his thinking about himself, here too he is plagued by fixed beliefs and unexamined assumptions which he has inherited from the past. What is true of man psychologically is equally true of his social environment: in both there must be a new resolution of conflict between "established patterns of thought and behavior"¹³ and new necessities.

The second book which is fundamental to understanding Fergusson's thought was published three years earlier than Modern Man. Rio Grande (1933) indicates many of the sources of his philosophical, psychological, political, and economic conclusions. It is a distinguished history of his native region. More important, it illustrates the range of his historical, anthropological

¹³People and Power (New York, 1947), p. 240.

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and sociological investigations of the Southwest. Much of this country, unwatered and mountainous, has successfully resisted change down to the present day. It records as much of survival as of progress. This is true of its people as well, for here primitive peoples have stubbornly endured in their remote fastnesses. Here, if anywhere, Fergusson believes, one can achieve a

feeling of continuity in our experience as a people, a sense of the past as a living reality conditioning the present....It is to many a place of romantic escape and they seem to look for the exotic rather than the significant. It has never seemed either strange or a place of escape to me....I think it is more intimately integrated with the whole of American experience than most Americans know.¹⁴

Fergusson has, quite literally, used his native region as a microcosm for studying man's experience in the West and, in extension, in all of America. What he has had to say about the relationship of the primitive to the civilized, of man to his environment, of the past to the present, has its roots in his study of man in the Southwest.

Fergusson's fiction, which began with magazine stories he wrote while still a reporter and abandoned as an inadequate outlet for serious work when he was twenty-seven,¹⁵ has not shown consistent development. The best critic his work has had thus far presents Fergusson as an artist who stands perpetually at a crossroads and sometimes takes the wrong turn. The crossroads,

¹⁴Rio Grande (New York, 1933), pp. 286-87.

¹⁵Charles C. Baldwin, The Men Who Make Our Novels (New York, 1924), p. 163.

as this critic sees it, represents "the strife between individualism impelling toward devastation and a communalism striving for survival....It has not always been clear to Fergusson that there is, of course, but one side on which the artist can operate and survive."¹⁶ Although this is an undue reduction of Fergusson's themes, and, it would seem, of the artistic process as a whole, it remains true that a number of Fergusson's novels stand apart from the main line of his development.

Capitol Hill (1923), written after he gave up newspaper work in Washington and returned to New Mexico, is a study of the amoral opportunist moving up amidst the chicanery, greed, and press agency of capital politics. Into it, Fergusson said later, "I poured all my disgust with Washington."¹⁷ The book is a detailed and effective diatribe, indicating the range of Fergusson's Washington experience through his Congressman father and his own newspaper work, but it is not important as a novel.

Footloose McGarnigal (1930) is similarly undeveloped. Here Fergusson explodes the old dream of finding freedom and reality in the West. McGarnigal, a pioneer in a late day, comes west from New York seeking the meaning that his uncle once found on the frontier. After exploring with some disdain the artist colony at Taos and working alone in the mountains as a forest ranger, he concludes that neither the worship of Indian primitivism nor

¹⁶ Lorene Pearson, "Harvey Fergusson and the Crossroads," New Mexico Quarterly Review, XXI (Autumn, 1951), 335.

¹⁷ Baldwin, The Men Who Make Our Novels, p. 164.

immersion in nature offers an approach to reality for modern man. For this he must return to the cities of the East. They are the new reality; all else is nostalgia. This rejection of the rural for the urban, of agrarianism for industrialism, of the West for the East, argues Lorene Pearson, was symptomatic of Fergusson's own dilemma. For the moment, it had come to seem to him that neither the contemporary West nor those who used it as material for fiction had anything of importance to say to present-day America. It was this logic, she reasons, that impelled Fergusson, for the next few years, to abandon fiction for history, philosophy, and political analysis, to seek the truth about man in analytic investigation rather than in the synthesis of art.¹⁸ Whatever the biographical accuracy of this contention, McGarnigal is less an exploration of the West for its meaning than an out-of-hand rejection of the region for its meaninglessness. Its greatest importance is its demonstration of Fergusson's view of the New Mexico art colonies.

As one would expect, he found the artistic assumptions of D. H. Lawrence and the other Taos primitivists essentially regressive and puerile. He has set forth his objections in detail in half a dozen places. In an article which appeared in the same year as the novel he traced what he called "the cult of the Indian" in America from Cooper and his followers, and concluded that modern primitivism springs from the same motives: "the

¹⁸New Mexico Quarterly Review, XXI, 347.

inevitable revolt of the sensitive mind against the harsh discipline and the materialism of civilized life."¹⁹ Strengthened by a new psychology which documents the power of forces which lie below the conscious level, some modern artists have again sought psychological and cultural renewal in the worship of aborigines, particularly Indians of the Southwest. This course, Fergusson believes, denies the growth of individual consciousness which the history of art records.²⁰ Man will be made whole, if at all, by bringing his assumptions and motives to the level of consciousness and achieving a new, empirical integration, not by seeking fulfillment in a neolithic culture.

A crossroads which more accurately characterizes Fergusson's work than the polarities individualism-communalism could be constructed from his own description of man and human behavior. In all of his novels a protagonist seeks resolution of his inner necessities and the outer necessities of the physical and social environment. In Fergusson's best books this environment is the Southwest, with its own peculiar heritage of historical and contemporary assumptions and patterns of behavior. Such a theme, since it must hold firmly to both historical context and individual personality, requires a delicate balance. Once that balance is lost, the result too easily becomes environmental determinism. The young opportunist of Capitol Hill, for instance, becomes a

¹⁹"The Cult of the Indian," Scribner's Magazine, LXXXVIII (August, 1930), 131.

²⁰Scribner's Magazine, LXXXVIII, 131.

human chameleon who takes entirely the color of his setting. Individual consciousness is virtually lost in such circumstances. In Fergusson's terms man has then regressed to primitivism; he has abandoned the requirements of his individual personality to accept without question values and assumptions imposed from outside. The result, psychologically, is passivity that becomes inanition. Any struggle involved in this attrition is without human significance because its conclusion is foregone.

The Life of Riley (1937) is another novel which fails on this basis, though it employs the theme more fully. Growing up in a town which is obviously Albuquerque, Morgan Riley inherits skills which are no longer important to his world. He has a talent for action and is an expert hunter, but in a city of boosters acutely conscious of their new country club and measuring success in shrewd real estate deals, these skills are without value. Riley, having no inner direction, neither conquers the town nor effectively resists it; his only weapon is a lethargic refusal of acquiescence that ends in psychological immolation. The Old West would have had a use for Morgan Riley; in the new one he is an anachronism, and Fergusson, far from seeing significance in this situation, views his character's feeble and easily defeated struggle for self-realization with the detachment of a sociologist explaining a case history.

Though the theme of conflict between the individual consciousness and the physical and social environment could thus lead Fergusson to novels governed by abstract determinism, it has

nevertheless, when held in proper balance, issued in rich explorations of life in the Southwest. Indeed, it is the key to Fergusson's understanding of the history of his native region. In his best books he examines the forces which supplanted one culture with another in New Mexico and the meaning this process had for America, "the past as a living reality conditioning the present." His analysis is less concerned with economics than with cultural forces and their determination of personality, the assumptions and traditions that governed human behavior in the West, man's struggle to bring his comprehension of his environment and himself into full consciousness. Though he studies the clash of modern and primitive consciousness, Fergusson is seeking not an escape into primitivism but an awareness of American heritage in the Southwest.

The beginning of this major theme may be seen in his first novel, The Blood of the Conquerors (1921). Ramon Delcasar is descended from a Spanish soldier who distinguished himself fighting Navajos and Apaches in the eighteenth century for his king and received a thousand square miles of land for his reward. For generations the Delcasars ruled with absolute authority over their domain, worked their peons in the field in the summer, went east to the great plains for buffalo in the fall, and traveled south to trade in Sonora and Chihuahua in the winter. Gradually the Spanish influence withered and the Delcasars and the other great Dons became a new race of feudal lords, with their own traditions, assumptions, and patterns of behavior. Many of them fled south

when military forces from the States took possession of New Mexico in 1845, but life for those who remained continued much as before. The Civil War formally freed the peons and Indian slaves, but debt to their former masters soon made them as dependent as ever and left the social system unchanged.

Change came abruptly, however, with the railroad that reached the Rio Grande Valley in the early 1880's. A mile from Albuquerque's cluster of adobe buildings grew up one of those new towns which, to Eugene Rhodes, would be symbols of the little people's defiance of railroad land grabs. To its half-painted shacks flocked the gringos, intent on business and change. Swiftly the Dons went into decline: "Business seemed to them a conspiracy to take their lands and their goods..., a remarkably successful conspiracy. Debt and mortgage and speculation were the names of its weapons."²¹ The Delcasars, by Ramon's time, have nearly completed the process of economic loss and social decline. An uncle owns some mountain grazing lands to the north and a few strategic sections in the upper Valley, and Ramon has an old house in town. After graduation from law school he is the first Delcasar in centuries to face life without family position, and he is the last hope of his family against the invaders.

The tedious path of a young lawyer laboring amidst dusty books holds no appeal for a Delcasar in whom the old will to dominate runs strong. He wants power, position, and most of all

²¹The Blood of the Conquerors (New York, 1921), p. 21.

a pretty, well-born tourist with whom he is infatuated. His struggle against the new capitalists from the East becomes, by extension, the struggle of his people. The conflict centers now on the upper Rio Grande, in the little mountain valleys that will be opened by the railroad when it links Albuquerque and Denver.

Ramon is well fitted for his battle against MacDougall, the Yankee entrepreneur. He has intelligence to pit against MacDougall's shrewdness, cunning to escape the financier's tricks, passion to resist the exploiter's relentless purpose. More than this, he has a natural advantage with the people, the little Mexican landowners whose holdings checkerboard the upper Valley and hold the key to all development. Ramon, descended from many generations of feudal lords, must reclaim his heritage. To do so he must recapture the past and use it to control the present. A Delcasar, member of the gente de razon for centuries, must now manage by persuasion the loyalty his ancestors held by force. From the ricos to the lowliest pelados he must weld the Mexicans together against MacDougall and his money. He must match the power of his native civilization against that of the invaders.

Abandoning his town clothes and law office, Delcasar rides among the little adobe towns that skirt the slopes of the lower mountains where live the peasants on their few tillable acres and the patrones who own the stores and dominate the villages. Here he finds a society that has changed little since the Mexican War. In this remote land grain is threshed as it was before the Bible was written. Here the barbaric, sadistic penitentes hermanos, a

sect combining Christianity, pagan ritual, and peasant political resistance to the big landowners, still worships in secret before an altar that bears a skull and crossbones. On Good Friday, as they have for centuries, they march in procession to Calvary, the men whipping their backs into bloody tatters with braided lashes and pulling a cart in which sits an angel of death with a drawn bow, while a sacrificial victim at the rear staggers under a huge cross. As a concession to changed times the flagellants no longer crucify their victim but only bind him to his cross with ropes.

Delcasar joins the penitentes, charms the sheepherders, influences the patrones, and persuades them all not to sell their land to MacDougall. For the first time in his life he is fired by strong purpose and high aspiration. He is winning against the gringos. The purpose is lost, however, when the girl he wants is hustled off to New York and Europe by a family outraged to find her infatuated with a Mexican. She was to have been the symbol of his triumph "over that civilization, alien to him in race and temper, which antagonized and yet fascinated him, with which he was forced to grapple for his life....In his heart, he felt that the gringos had beaten one more Delcasar."²²

Slowly, after his loss, he sinks back into lethargy. His plans fall away and his law office remains closed for long periods while he roams the country with a horse and shotgun.

²²The Blood of the Conquerors, p. 197.

Finally he sells out to MacDougall, buys a ranch once owned by one of his ancestors, and fits his existence into the narrow, comfortable confines of the small Mexican landholder. The blood of the conquerors had given him a great cultural heritage: spontaneity, intelligence, leadership, a capacity for decisive action. But, in a subtle fashion, it had unfitted him for this new struggle that involved not conquest by force and daring but by patient and tireless reliance on economics. He can unite belief and behavior toward clear purpose through passion and for a short time; the new capitalist, bred in a different environment, can achieve a like dedication in the emotionless name of the dollar.

Delcasar's failure is finally a failure of the individual consciousness to surmount environmental influences, to resolve inner and outer necessities. Though it is manifested in his individual personality, the failure is cultural, a crisis for his people under the changes that came to New Mexico in the wake of the railroads. Delcasar had to abandon one part of himself when he knelt before the penitentes and asked the sangredor to slice his back with the cuts that would mark him as a member of the order, and another part of himself when he asked his Albuquerque tailor to copy the clothes worn by fashionable tourists. He could no longer accept the absolutes of faith, sin, and absolution that resolved the conflicts of the peasants, nor could he wholly escape them. His personal awareness carried him beyond the ties that bound him to his culture—a culture which, for all its complexity of ritual and form, was essentially primitive in taking its values

from family traditions and religious absolutes rather than from changing necessities. But his awareness was not strong enough to break those ties. Enmeshed in conflicting needs, he could disrupt old patterns of belief and behavior; he could not attain that state of emancipation required to create a new synthesis from his own necessities. His final position is a half-way mark in the growth of individual consciousness. His ultimate compromise, though it achieves a personal resolution which allows him to live, also represents cultural failure to adapt to new exigencies.

In later books Fergusson has explored this theme with increasing complexity, finding compressed in a few decades of the Southwest's history a record of human experience that illuminates much of man's long struggle to understand himself in relation to his physical and social environment.

In Grant of Kingdom (1950), based in part on the actual history of a Spanish royal land grant in New Mexico, he creates a microcosm of the past in the Southwest. Jean Ballard was a mountain man in the region in the 1840's, during the last years of the fur trade. Unlike many of his companions, however, Ballard was, by temperament, more creator than exploiter. He was not so much running from civilization as seeking a new one fitted to his talents. Trapping and trading furs had been half speculative business and half wild spree, but Ballard's central drive is a passion for order.

He explores one version of order by marrying into a Taos

family of Mexican ricos, something few mountain men ever accomplished. The Coronels, an ancient family, have surrounded themselves with forms and traditions as intricate as those with which Henry James's Bellegardes fend off life. Here, in the years before the railroad, existence is organized, protected, safe, unchanging. To marry a Coronel is to submerge individual consciousness in the concept of family, and to become in this sense a primitive man. But Ballard is of a different civilization. His need for order bears a corollary necessity for challenge. The centrifugal force that had thrown him into the wilderness for eight months of every year and the centripetal force that brought him back to the towns had created the violent rhythm of his existence, a rhythm which tame life in Taos as the Don's son-in-law cannot satisfy.

Saving his good valley lands for his sons, the Don gives Ballard as dowry the title to a royal grant of land far to the north. Here, beyond the mountains in the country of the Ute Indians, lie a thousand square miles of wilderness that an eighteenth-century Spanish king granted to the Coronels. The Don has never seen his possession, though he has had his title validated by both the Mexican and American governments in their turn. His civilization is of the town and the valleys.

To Ballard the grant is a challenge, an opportunity to create his own order and to make it endure. He knows the Moache Utes, driven from the lowlands by the ravages of Mexican smallpox and American whiskey. He traded with them fairly in the past. Now

he can offer them protection, a buffer against the white civilization pouring over the Santa Fe Trail from the East. Slowly Ballard claims and controls his kingdom, saving his cattle and sheep from mountain lions and Arapahoes, dominating his world by the power of his leadership. In time he becomes a benevolent autocrat, ruling with justice an oasis of order in the wilderness. To him flock other men, Mexicans and whites, some to work for him, some to open ranches in country he has made safe. Any traveler is welcome at the long tables of the great Ballard mansion, and any who wish to settle may have credit at his store, but all must accept the law and order he has established. Here no Texan will prey upon the Mexicans, no white will sell alcohol to the Utes. For more than twenty years the Ballard Grant is a self-contained empire, rich, hospitable, and above all orderly.

Inevitably Ballard is broken by the new powers of Eastern finance in the West. The Civil War had poured money into his empire, but Ballard had no respect for money. Incurably ill when the panics of the 1870's arrive, he learns that his creditors in St. Louis have respect for nothing else. Just before his death he is forced to sell to a syndicate from Denver.

Ballard had conquered his part of the West in a time of free wealth. He knew furs, beef, wool, and men, but nothing of money. Major Arnold Blore, his successor on the Grant, is the agent of money—of the world of fences, titles, mortgages, and monopolies. Ballard had believed in personal power, in his own knowledge and dominance of men, and had built his civilization

on this base. Blore believes in corporate power. The power that Ballard had created Blore had "bargained for, dreamed of, coveted."²³ Behind him stands an organization of money with tentacles that reach all the way to Washington, where a false survey, properly registered and certified, can double the size of the Grant.

Without Ballard's gift of dominating men, Blore must have an agent to handle the ranchers his survey is dispossessing and the Mexicans his rule is exploiting. Clay Tighe, in his youth a Kansas Jayhawker, later a buffalo hunter, and still later deputy marshal of Dodge City, is that agent. Tighe is a gunman, but he is not a killer. All his life he has sought the justice among men that his father once used to dispense as a judge in Illinois. Ballard had created law; Tighe has used his no less remarkable talents to enforce the law created by others. His skill with a gun, retained with the constant training of a champion athlete, has given him an authority that he need seldom test. But it has also isolated him from all other men. When he comes to police Blore's empire, Tighe is past his prime. Chained to his deadly skill for too many years, he has become its creature, happy only when distance separates him from all other men.

Blore's money and schemes quickly exploit the Grant, and Tighe's gun enforces the new law. But what Ballard created died with him. Within two years the Grant is sold at an enormous profit

²³Grant of Kingdom (New York, 1950), p. 148.

to a group of British capitalists, and then soon to another syndicate. Blore, the power-hungry egoist, goes on to greater financial conquests. Tighe tries unsuccessfully to retire to ranching, but his reputation clings to him and carries him finally to an ambusher's bullet. The railroad, arbiter of so many destinies in the West, passes by the Grant and builds no spur, so even Ballard's flourishing town, by the end of the century, has become "a sleepy little cowtown at the end of a bad dirt road."²⁴

The one real survivor of the Ballard Grant is Daniel Laird, who came to the region soon after Ballard and remained to preach to its people and build its houses. For a long time Laird thought of Ballard's benevolent autocracy, so much an order from the past created anew in the wilderness, as the ideal human community. Here there was peace, and no man need beg or steal. A peacemaker who carried no weapon, Laird could live here "insulated from most of the shocks of human contact, from the muddle of lust and anger in which most men live."²⁵ It is internal order that Laird needs most of all, and this he finds in isolation, in aloofness from the human struggle. In the loose social structure of the Grant a man may achieve human contact or avoid it with equal ease. Laird's role had given him a power over other men and yet kept him aloof from their turmoil.

Ballard's death and the advent of Blore change all this. Laird, a man to whom inner peace has always been the most valuable

²⁴Grant of Kingdom, p. 310.

²⁵Grant of Kingdom, p. 249.

human possession, suddenly finds reflected in himself the anger and the violence that are sweeping the Grant. For a time he seeks his lost peace in the old isolation that the mountain men had known, then in the primitive existence of the Mexican peasants in a mountain village. He finds his destiny, at last, in none of these relics of the past but in the present and in the world of men. In the years before the turn of the century Laird has become the most radical member of the Colorado legislature, first as a Populist and then as a follower of Bryan, but always "thundering in his mighty voice against the trusts and Wall Street, predicting the day when humble men who worked with their hands would rise in their organized power and smite the mighty."²⁶ He is still a prophet, but his vision now is of the present and future, not of the past. His new texts are taken not from the Bible but from man's historical experience. He has learned from the history of the Grant the limitations of order resting upon personal domination and of despotism imposed by force. He is a "radical" now, accepting change as the only possible basis for human order.

Grant of Kingdom thus projects four varieties of human consciousness operating within the historical context of the Southwest from the middle of the nineteenth century until the beginning of the twentieth. A major strength of the book is its exploration of the geneses of these individual consciousnesses—the forces

²⁶Grant of Kingdom, p. 302.

that produced the benevolent autocrat, the power-craving egoist, the frontier warrior with a passion for order and the means to enforce it but without the questioning intelligence to discover its limitations, the idealist who seeks at first only to preserve his own integrity but learns through experience to raise his great voice for an experimental pragmatism that can adapt itself to changing conditions. Each of these men sought to impose order upon experience, to direct human destiny in the West toward intelligible ends. Each acted upon his own necessities, pushed his awareness of himself in relation to his environment to its logical end.

In three cases the limitations of individual awareness become cultural failures to adapt to new environmental conditions. Ballard produced no son and sat out the last months of his life on the porch of his mansion making his peace with the past, accepting the relativity of goals he once thought absolute. Blore, who never married, ends his life isolated in his big Denver house, his small body withered to the size of a child's by diabetes, alive only in the eyes that stare always into the past. Tighe, of course, could never escape the past, could never hang up the guns with which he once brought order among men. Only Laird produced sons, evolved a viable tradition to pass on to the future, learned from man's experience in this isolated bit of the West an approach to life that could serve men in a changed world. Together these four represent forces that gave the West part of its history. This history is extended beyond the West through the book's reporter,

a young lawyer and amateur historian from the East. Once Ballard's lawyer in the 1870's, he returns in 1906 to write a history of the Grant and the forces that once shaped human destinies there. He will put the lessons of this lost and isolated empire into a book, for in Fergusson's view the past of the West has something to say to men everywhere.

In his latest novel, The Conquest of Don Pedro (1954), Fergusson again explores a part of his major theme, this time within the context of a quiet Mexican village in southern New Mexico in the years following the Civil War. In these days, with the railroad soon to arrive, New Mexico stood on the verge of great change, poised between the old and the new. The Conquest of Don Pedro is another chapter in Fergusson's long account of the human consciousness operating under the impact of changing forces and within the historical context of the Southwest in the nineteenth century.

When he comes to the tiny cluster of adobe buildings called Don Pedro, Leo Mendes has already undergone disruptive changes in his personal life. Born a Jew in New York's lower East Side, he fled to the Southwest to escape the tuberculosis which had killed his parents and threatened his own life. He was a strange pioneer. Fearful of a West that he knew only through the lurid accounts of the dime novels and possessing none of the lust for adventure that often characterized emigrants, he nevertheless abandoned the familiar and sought a new life in the unknown. In time, leaving the past and moving against his own fear was to

become the recurrent motif of his existence.

In Santa Fe he quickly found his way into the humble lives of the poor Mexicans, learned the language, and looked about for work that he could do. Almost inevitably he became a peddler, feeling instinctively that he must walk his way to health in the sun and open air. For five years he wandered with his burro deep into the valley of the Rio Grande below Santa Fe.

Mendes was an extraordinary peddler for the time and region. He soon discovered that his temperament was suited to the village life of the Mexicans he served. In his family the avenging God of the Old Testament had long since been diluted by Spinoza's pantheism into a gentle doctrine that his father taught him as a child. In time this dwindled in his own mind to a quiet reverence for life and a complete distrust of violence as a means of settling human differences. As a Jew he was born to a tradition of oppression that gave him an immediate sympathy with the Mexican peasantry. Slowly he penetrated the simple life of the villages, always scrupulous in his observance of the conventions and traditions of this unchanging civilization, tolerant of beliefs that to him could only be primitive and irrational but which nevertheless expressed admirable human values. Though he carried no gun and would not learn to shoot one he walked unmolested through a wilderness where thieves and Apaches roamed and no other peddler ventured. Escaping marauding Indians was a matter of good fortune, but the Mexican bandits left him alone because they knew he was poor himself, lived entirely among the

poor, and dealt honestly with them. The occasional plaza de ladrones (town of thieves) along his route, Mendes learned, was an integral part of the social structure--the vengeance of the poor upon the rich. Though the rich knew nothing of Mendes's existence, in every village for more than one hundred and fifty miles he was merchant, newspaper, druggist, and part-time physician to the poor.

This nomadic life, Mendes came in time to realize, was, in terms of his own psychology, an evasion of responsibility. As a peddler he occupied "the fortunate lot of one who serves the needs of men and escapes their envy, for to all of these people he was a homeless wanderer, whom they could pity as well as patronize."²⁷ The pattern of weeks or months on the trail followed by the return to Santa Fe for supplies had become the unchanging rhythm of an existence without ties or obligations. The life he had undertaken to regain his health was now an end in itself. As he had once feared the West and later the wilderness, he now feared the bonds that entangle settled men. Once again he moved against his fear, moved to resolve the growing split between his belief and behavior. He decided to invade Don Pedro as a storekeeper.

The village itself is a challenge. In the towns of the upper valley where he is known Mendes could settle without danger and with assurance of success into life as a small merchant.

²⁷The Conquest of Don Pedro (New York, 1954), p. 52.

But Don Pedro, three hundred miles south of Santa Fe, is a civilization from the past preserved by isolation in a new time. It is a feudal town, the private province of the ancient and wealthy Vierra family, who rule it within a power system that has deep roots in the assumptions of the people. Yet Mendes is sure that Don Pedro belongs to the present and the future. Lying on the eastern edge of the Rio Grande Valley, a day's ride from El Paso and the border, it is a natural supply point for prospectors on the Gila and Mimbres, for trading parties from Sonora and Chihuahua, and for the Mexicans who come from the entire region to the nearby dry lake of natural salt.

Mendes is a conquistador without guns or army, as remarkable a storekeeper as he was a peddler. The sign of his Tienda Barata (literally, "cheap store") means to the poor people "a place where they could get what they wanted for less than their lords and masters would charge. It was a defiant sign, a challenge to old and established customs."²⁸ Mendes, almost despite himself, is an agent of change in his part of New Mexico—bringing new economic relationships which will replace the old despotism of the Vierras. He is in no way an exploiter. His instinct is always to preserve the past rather than to destroy it. He sees much of value in the ancient customs which give form to life in Don Pedro, but he is nevertheless a man whom experience has taught to question assumptions, to move against his own fear of change by a pattern of unending compulsion.

²⁸The Conquest of Don Pedro, p. 34.

As a man of enterprise he inevitably rises above the peasants who have always been his customers and friends. Soon he is a rico, cut off from the life he had known as a peddler, accepted—though grudgingly—even by the Vierras. Within a few years he has earned a high place in an ancient order, a position of seeming permanence within the constant change of the Southwest in the 1870's. His life now is quiet and contained, its boundaries carefully marked. It is an existence held over from the past, but it is nonetheless seductive.

Padre Orlando, the only villager in whom Mendes can find intellectual stimulation, has succumbed to the charm of this past. Like Mendes an emigrant who fled the white plague, Orlando, for an exciting period of his young manhood, worked closely with Archbishop Lamy of Santa Fe in a long and fervent campaign to rid the Church of corruption. With reform long since accomplished, he has settled back into the comfortable life of Don Pedro. An epicure and lover of beauty, he has created a little Eden in his garden and made his table a marvel to all the country. For twenty years he has been writing a history of the seven golden cities of Cibola. Gradually Mendes comes to understand that the book exists only in fragments and will never be finished. It is Orlando's excuse for escaping into the past and for his willingness to bury in Don Pedro talents which his Church could use elsewhere.

The familiar need to resolve inner and outer necessity drives Mendes out of this comfortably circumscribed existence as it has always driven him to accept the challenge of the unknown.

The force this time is symbolized in a personal relationship. A niece of the Vierras had come often as a child to his store for companionship and to tell him her childhood troubles. Mendes taught her to read and brought her books from El Paso, sympathized with her rebellion against the strictures placed upon Mexican girls of good family, and in time transmitted to her his own belief in human freedom. Gradually she becomes his creation, another consciousness at least partially liberated from the inhibitions and assumptions of its culture. When she returns from school in Santa Fe they are married—outside the Church, for Orlando cannot pretend that his friend could worship anything more definite than life itself.

In his marriage Mendes is both husband and father, for the woman who is his wife must trace the origin of her awareness back to him. Maturity and full emancipation for her mean at last a new relationship, one in which she can be wholly wife. She falls in love with a Texan who came to Don Pedro as a rapacious representative of the new economic exploitation but has been gradually civilized by Mendes's patient guidance. For both the girl and the Texan their affair is a triumph over the past: for her, overcoming a hatred of Tejanos that goes back to the Alamo and the Texan invasion of New Mexico; for him, emancipation from chauvinistic dislike of Mexicans as "greasers."

Their love is the final test of Mendes's growth as a civilized man. Marital infidelity is not uncommon among that class of Mexicans to which he now belongs; indeed, it is often the

woman's expression of rebellion against the conventions which restrict her life, a sin which can be resolved in the process of expiation and absolution provided in her religion. Mendes, like any wronged Don, could fill his house with servants who are also concubines. Or he could shoot the Texan, which would be the gringo's way. He does neither. Instead he accepts the consequence of the freedom he has created and the responsibility of his foster parenthood. His desire is to direct life toward intelligent and fruitful ends, not to destroy it. To act in accordance with his belief, Mendes must go away, having added one more dimension to his understanding of human experience.

To the north lies the railhead town of Las Vegas (New Mexico) in the center of a vast region newly opened by the rails that have been pushed across Raton Pass. Here have been created the forces which will shape New Mexico's future, and here Mendes inevitably must go. He is the new man necessary to the new age. Fearing change and always resisting it, he has nevertheless become the pragmatically adaptable man who can meet the challenges of a changing civilization. Within his own lifetime he has led many lives, not as a creature determined by his environment, but as a developing human intelligence which has taken its understanding from experience and yet has escaped the bonds of the past.

In Fergusson's terms Mendes has thus become the truly modern man, the liberated individual consciousness which understands the continuity of history as a force which conditions the present and has accepted the inevitability of change and

adaptation. In the course of his several careers he has learned to examine all the assumptions. As a peddler he discovered that the human consciousness demands responsibility to the human community. As a merchant in Don Pedro, he explored and mastered a culture in which outer necessities still govern human behavior, in which the problems of behavior are yet resolved in terms of absolutes anterior to man. From experience he has learned to achieve a working synthesis of his inner direction and the necessities of the environment. To a great extent he has achieved the uniquely human mission of raising his own comprehension of his environment and himself to the level of consciousness. Out of his own rich heritage, and out of the West and its past, he has derived a psychology, a philosophy, and an ethic which will permit him to live intelligently and without wasteful frustration within a changing historical context. He has succeeded in uniting belief and behavior on a level which can satisfy the developed human intelligence.

Removing Fergusson's themes from context misleadingly suggests that they exist as abstractions. Instead, they derive from the experience which his books portray. A principal concern of his work is to view man within a closely specified area of the West and period of history, to see him actively engaged with the circumstances of his condition. Both Laird and Mendes, two examples of the human consciousness achieving liberation in widely separated spheres of a complex region, reach a limited triumph, but in neither case is this triumph personal. Rather, it

is social and cultural, the liberation of leaders who, in full comprehension of the past and its hold on the people they lead, act within these forces to free their society. Understanding the assumptions that govern the behavior of men, they will do what they can to bring these assumptions into question and thus to bring man to his true freedom: "the unified whole of conscious human being." Created by a West that is constantly changing and passing into history, they point the way to that new symbolic West of liberated consciousness and human responsibility which, in Fergusson's view, man has always been in search of without knowing it.

3. H. L. Davis

If Harvey Fergusson is the best novelist of the Southwest thus far, his counterpart in the Northwest is Harold L. Davis. Indeed, the five novels and a book of short stories which Davis has produced since the 1920's may, in the judgment of time, make him the finest of all interpreters of the West in fiction. Though they have gone almost unnoticed by literary critics, these carefully constructed books have achieved an idiom, a technique, a complexity of organization and maturity of thought and moral insight which literary criticism would do well to notice.

Davis has himself engaged at one time or another in many of the occupations that appear in his novels. Born the son of a country schoolteacher in southwestern Oregon in 1896, he was in time to see the last gasp of the pioneer movement as it expressed itself in the homesteading boom ten years later in eastern Oregon, the section that has always been his special province. He became a printer's devil at nine, a cowhand and shepherd at twelve, and, after high school in a town on the upper Columbia, a deputy sheriff at seventeen. "Later he edited a paper in one of the sagebrush counties and attended Stanford University for a few months. During the first World War he served with the Seventh Cavalry on the Mexican Border."²⁹ Later study has made him a recognized expert on Indian life and Western history.

²⁹Dayton Kohler, "H. L. Davis: Writer in the West," College English, XIV (December, 1952), 133.

His first literary efforts were poems. Some of them, published in Harriet Monroe's Poetry, won the Levinson Prize in 1919.³⁰ In 1928 he sent a few to Mencken at The American Mercury, and in his note of acceptance Mencken suggested that the young poet send prose specimens as well. Davis, singing cowboy songs for a Seattle radio network at the time, began to write short stories under Mencken's exacting tutelage.³¹ In 1932 he received a Guggenheim Fellowship and began work on his first novel, Honey in the Horn, published in 1935, which won the Harper Prize that year and the Pulitzer Prize the next.³² Perhaps as testimony of careful craftsmanship, the four novels which followed have been spread over twenty-two years.

The early stories Davis wrote for The Mercury and other magazines contain, in less developed form, many characteristics of his longer work. The most obvious of these is humor: occasionally the humor of phrasing or word-play, more often the earthy humor of frontier folklore—bawdy, ironic, scornful of pretension, full of commonsense and democratic leveling and yet sophisticated enough, in Davis's books, to recognize the limitations of commonsense and leveling. Perhaps not since Twain has anyone commanded the various forms of frontier humor—the tall

³⁰ Harry R. Warfel, American Novelists of Today (New York, 1951), p. 113.

³¹ H. L. Davis, Team Bells Woke Me (New York, 1953), p. x.

³² David James Harkness, "The Southwest and the West Coast in Literature," The University of Tennessee Newsletter, XXXIII (October, 1954), 46.

tale, the river-roarer boast, the sprawling garrulity of the pointless story, the animal fable, the burlesque—with such ease. The phrasing, indeed, at times recalls Twain. This is Davis's description of the transient steamboat men in an upper Columbia River town which desperately desired respectability:

The steamboat men..., like the freighters before them, did not belong in a quiet, respectable City of Homes. They were tough, loud, roughnecked and quarrelsome. They fought each other in the streets, and regarded murder as merely one of the unlucky episodes of a high old social evening. They were too wild to control, too numerous to whip, and, by a very slim margin, too human to shoot.³³

The elements of humor and folklore in Davis's work have misled nearly all commentators his books have had. The most obvious function of his humor is the creation of a comic perspective, a device for controlling his material through irony which is particularly useful to a writer so thoroughly conscious of human failings in the West throughout its history. Thus Ernest Leisy praises Honey in the Horn as "a folk tale devoted to debunking the pioneers of twentieth century Oregon as a set of stupid rowdies whose only desire was to 'get rich quick' by spoiling the country or each other."³⁴ And Levette Davidson, in support of the thesis that Western fiction must abandon formula for indigenous folklore, commends Winds of Morning (1952) for its use of local legends and its skillful weaving of folkloristic elements into the narrative.³⁵

³³Team Bells Woke Me, p. 184.

³⁴The American Historical Novel (Norman, Oklahoma, 1950), p. 210.

³⁵Review of Winds of Morning, by H. L. Davis, Western Folklore, XI (July, 1952), 225.

Both these comments fall short of describing what these major devices accomplish in Davis's work. His humor achieves effects that go far beyond pointing out human foolishness. For example, Calanthe, the adolescent heroine of Winds of Morning, has been raised in sheep camps and craves the respectability that settled town folk so obviously have. A few devastating anecdotes have already indicated what that respectability amounts to, but this ironic undercutting is not used to negate Calanthe's desire; instead, her yearning becomes a symbol of human aspiration for dignity and meaningful relationships. When her father is trying to blackmail a wealthy, treacherous widow into a courtship that perverts the idea of marriage, Calanthe berates them both to the book's young hero and cries of the woman, "If the alum factory ever burned down, she'd be forty miles up the...."³⁶ On its most superficial level this is the outburst of the child who desires respectability and drops her carefully nurtured primness to recall a bawdy sheep-camp expression when her symbol of respectability, the institution of marriage, is threatened. But this same scene portrays her as a young woman just becoming aware that she is in love. On this level the alum factory is an Ophelia-like obscenity that wells up from the depths of her mind past the barrier of conscious control to convey the reduction of love to sexuality in a perverted world. What is at stake (and what Calanthe is learning) is not the form of marriage but the content of human

³⁶Winds of Morning (New York, 1952), 237.

feeling, and it is through humor that Davis makes his point.

Humor is thus a selective instrument in his work. By mocking the false it adds dimension to the true. By ridiculing the forms of human behavior it explores the contents of human feeling behind them. When human beings achieve dignity and significance in his books it is against a background of human waste and worthlessness. At the end of his latest novel, The Distant Music (1957), old Ranse Mulock has just passed the crisis of a dangerous illness. He has spent his life trying to prove himself in the eyes of the people in his little Columbia River town. When they hear that he is better his fellow citizens flock to his bedside:

Steamboat Sperling, an auctioneer and horse-dealer who boasted when drunk that he had swindled everybody in the county above the age of thirty, and that there was a deeper aesthetic satisfaction in selling stringless pianos and impotent brood-stallions than in all the uncreatively honest bargain-and-sale transactions the country had gathered to its annals since Lewis and Clark; Shad Thrailkell, who used to chase his wife around the block with an axe every Saturday night and tried to horsewhip the newspaper editor for refusing to print his picture with her obituary when she died of overwork and maltreatment;... Mrs. Froney Lutges, who was reputed to have parted with her virtue behind every sagebrush between the riverbreaks and the Indian reservation, and had tried to sue all the town doctors for refusing to supply her with a certificate of virginity to show Mr. Lutges before the wedding; old B. F. Spangler, who had drawn a government pension for years on the strength of a faked limp and manufactured Indian whiskey and trapped skunks on the side because having their pelts strung out on the clothesline kept the neighbors from smelling anything suspicious. There were several dozen more, all of about the same cut, all crowding in and out, jostling and gabbling and laughing with elation to know that old Ranse was out of danger and able to share once more in the life that had held so much

growth and richness of meaning for them all.³⁷

This is burlesque, of course, designed to illustrate the general worthlessness of the people old Mulock has spent his life believing he must live up to. Yet it also reflects, in bizarre form, the struggle of the book's major characters, all of them now old, to reach an affirmation that their own lives have amounted to something more than pain, waste, frustration, and stupidity, that the human lot does have dignity and meaning. And, since the book deals with the emigrant forebears of these major characters, their fathers who came to Oregon in mid-nineteenth century, the scene is reflexive to the pioneer movement itself, an assertion that this restless surge of humanity, for all its human waste and misdirected effort, must come at last to a limited affirmation of significance.

Davis's structural method is always this counterpoint: past and present, age and youth, the dead and the living, Indian and white, the humanly significant and the humanly trivial. Often he accomplishes this through inserted stories--the legends and fables and old wives' tales that make up the folklore of his region. Here again his commentators have misunderstood him. Such folklore functions for a larger purpose in his books than the creation of authentic local color that reviewers have noticed. They are likely to see his narrative as a frame for innumerable stories and anecdotes that are amusing or clever or make a point about

³⁷The Distant Music (New York, 1957), pp. 309-10.

human nature in the tradition of crackerbarrel philosophy but stand essentially unrelated to the book as a whole. In fact, these stories are an artistic device of considerable subtlety. Endlessly woven into his narratives, they have the obvious purposes of revealing the teller's character and of making a comment upon current action. But as they pile up, they go beyond this to form a symbolic texture relative to central moral problems in the book. They become, finally, a structure of symbols of human behavior under various circumstances that should delight the most demanding new critic and that adds moral dimension to the problems of the characters being portrayed.

Thus Grandma Luttrell, a wandering medicine woman at past eighty, tells the story of her early travels to the young heroine of Beulah Land to quiet the girl after the death of her father. The old woman had been kidnapped as a child of ten before the American Revolution by a band of wandering Shawnees in Tennessee. She stayed with them as a slave for four years, escaped one winter during the war to Detroit, and was transported to a landing on Lake Champlain with some other American civilians for prisoner exchange. There the British officer who was to carry them through the American lines demanded that they agree not to engage in any hostile act against the British after their release. Alone of the Americans, Grandma refused. The angry officer took his wagons and left. The other prisoners, abandoned in mid-winter in the wilderness, talked recklessly of hanging the girl who had brought on all their troubles. So she walked south alone—across

New York and Pennsylvania and into Virginia and finally, by emigrant train, back to her settlement in Tennessee.

When we meet her, Grandma is still wandering, after more than seventy years of it. She thinks of it as restlessness; she is keeping the possibility alive that something may happen to her that hasn't already happened. But she knows that she is trying to duplicate the great moment of her life, when she stood in the snow and told an officer of the mighty British army that America was a country and that she would fight for it if she got a chance, and when she knew there was no one else in more than a hundred miles who cared or dared to do so. It was a foolish act of faith and devotion to something still weak and defenseless—the idea of America. But it is her measurement of human dignity and it has defined all her experience since. Nothing—love, marriage, children, wealth or adventure—has come up to it in meaning. It is the thing she has saved from the past, and it is not to be negated by the fact that in her old age she follows camp meetings in the new country selling soapattle to women who find themselves embarrassed by unseasonal pregnancies.

Within the context of the novel the old woman's memory of a moment of irrational glory becomes one definition of human experience to set against many others. Most of the book's characters are part of America's restless surge westward. All of them have good reasons for moving. But each is searching for something as irrational as Grandma's remembered defiance at the edge of an ice-covered lake in the wilderness. The journey that carried her

over half a continent on foot and brought her back, after five years, to a goal she no longer wanted becomes part of a symbolic structure of many journeys. Her story will live on in the mind of the distressed girl she tells it to. In time the girl will bring it to bear on journeys of her own, one that ends in betrayal, one in death, one in separation and disappointment, and one that reaches limited fulfillment. An old lady's rambling, therapeutic anecdote thus reaches out to become part of a major theme: the necessity of making irrational longing somehow accord with rational possibility.

The journey is a major metaphor in all of Davis's novels. As a metaphor it carries many themes, but the central one is the human attempt to place form and order upon experience and thus to discover its meaning. Each traveler in these books is on a journey that has as its true goal a definition of himself. He is, within his lights, in search of human dignity and significance. This involves his relationship to other men (as with Fergusson, all triumphs in Davis's books are social as well as personal), to the past that forms his cultural heritage, and to the natural environment in which he lives. Because these books are Western fiction, it also involves what Dayton Kohler calls the ironic "contrast between illusion and reality in the story of the West."³⁸

In the beginning Davis tended to explore his themes almost as the sociologist analyzes society for its component forces rather

³⁸College English, XIV, 135.

than as the novelist sees and dramatizes truths about human experience from insight into selected figures from the general pattern. In some of these early stories he suggests a wittier and more devastating Sinclair Lewis. Thus "A Town in Eastern Oregon," written in 1930 and in many ways closer to an essay than a short story, traces the long and hilarious history of a town's ideal of betterment that has ended in removing every last natural advantage the community had for survival. Gros Ventre began, indeed, in a burst of idealism and human improvement. The impetus came from the staid pages of the Christian Advocate and Journal and Zion's Herald in 1833 when

an artist signing himself G. P. D. honed his quill and let himself go upon the subject of the Flathead Indians, who, he alleged, yearned for religious instruction.

They were so desperate for a dose of the true doctrine, he proceeded, that it was pitiful, and almost an impediment to travel.³⁹

The Gros Ventre Mission—Davis's ironic comment upon Marcus Whitman and Waiilatpu—discovered in time that the Flatheads were not so eager after all for the Methodist God. Eastern Oregon soon lost its place as the land of apostolic opportunity. But the missionaries had heralded the settlers who passed that way on their journey to the Willamette. Gros Ventre became a garrison town quartering troops to protect the emigrants from the Indians: "With a fort and two companies of infantry, the town once more loped forth upon its career of lofty destiny."⁴⁰

³⁹Team Bells Woke Me, p. 175.

⁴⁰Team Bells Woke Me, p. 178.

Simple control of the hostile tribes could scarcely suit Gros Ventre's ideal of community betterment, however. Since the first army commander seemed unenthusiastic about slaughtering Indians wholesale, the town got Washington to replace him:

Even then the new commander, though he fought Indians willingly enough, didn't tie into them to suit the citizens' notions. He wanted merely to thrash them into good behavior. The business men cared nothing about their behavior, good or bad, but wanted them exterminated. There were controversies about that, and a particularly vicious one about the regulars' objection to killing Indian women; but, in the end, idealism prevailed over squeamishness, the single standard of redskin-slaughter was enforced, and the hostile tribes were thrashed into helpless, starving mobs, and shipped off to distant reservations to die of homesickness....Gros Ventre had made its first Civic Improvement.

The one flaw in the triumph was that pacification had gone farther than it needed to....The town's chief value had been as a refuge, and now there was nothing to take refuge from.⁴¹

The rest of the town's history is a repetition of this pattern. Each Civic Improvement rid Gros Ventre of some objectionable element which conflicted with the town's overwhelming desire for decorum: freighters, steamboat men, saloons, the brothels which once served the surrounding ranch country. Land improvement ended in converting rundown wheat ranches into worthless orchards which could not even be reconverted to wheat except at enormous expense. The community project of building good roads made it possible for the farmers to bypass the town and carry their trade to the city. The citizens of Gros Ventre were doomed to despoil its every

⁴¹Team Bells Woke Me, p. 180.

natural resource by their idealism, their assumptions of what life should be like in the West, by

an instinct for fixing things over; for making their town, not what humanity at that stage of the West needed, but what they themselves could live in most comfortably—something safe, mild and predictable.

They wanted a city for homelovers, in the midst of a country of high-rollers and wild-horse-peelers; and they could only make their town feel as if it belonged to them by making it over. The things they altered might not be any better, but at least they wouldn't feel that they owed them to the wild country in which, after a half-century, they were still actually strangers.⁴²

This is one of Davis's earliest stories. Though it deals with man's relation to his natural environment, a theme that has continued to occupy him in all his work, it does so only superficially. The history of Gros Ventre is instructive and hilarious, but it probes no human motives or emotions. Stories in this same collection that were written later show the change from the witty sociological essayist to the fiction writer who concerns himself with man's plight on a deeper level. They are nearly all stories of Oregon and its people in various stages of their history—a pioneer who has outlived the frontier, horseherders, sheepherders, freighters, homesteaders, harvest crews, trackmen on the railroad. They are all competent stories; some of them are excellent. At their best they portray life in one corner of America on a level of significance it has not attained elsewhere in American fiction.

⁴²Team Bells Woke Me, p. 185.

Something of the sociologist's technique clings to Davis's first novel, Honey in the Horn, which is, unjustly, the most generally known of all his books. In a brief note which prefaces the novel Davis rather ingenuously observes that his original purpose was to include "a representative of every calling that existed in the State of Oregon during the homesteading period—1906–1908." He was dissuaded from this ambition out of concern for his readers' patience, but it would be difficult to think of an occupation that the book omits. "Few areas in American fiction," as Kohler remarked, "have been more carefully examined in their sociological aspects. Sheepherders, cowpunchers, horse-traders, storekeepers, wheat-threshers, homesteaders, gamblers, prostitutes, sheriffs, badmen, Indian bucks and their squaws—all are accurately described and dramatically presented."⁴³ The result is a novel of immense vitality and richness of implication, but sprawling in form. Here, if anywhere in Davis's work, the stories and anecdotes and character types do not always take their place in the symbolic pattern of the whole.

Nevertheless, though his later novels have achieved tighter organization, Honey in the Horn has at its core a moral problem which is consistent in Davis's work and illustrates major aspects of his fictional technique. The central figure of the journey here, as often in his novels, is an adolescent. Clay Calvert, like Huck Finn, is a cultural orphan. (The adolescent and the

⁴³College English, XIV, 134.

metaphor of the journey inevitably suggest comparisons with Twain, however absurd such comparisons inevitably are. In Davis's novels, however, the journey is seldom through a settled civilization; instead, the traveler defines himself against a backdrop of human movement—he is Huck Finn after having made good his plan to "light out for the Territory" and having become a part of the emigrant upheaval.) Clay was born, of uncertain paternity, in some fence corner. Thus he is the boy without heritage or tradition or a stake in the established order, the beginner who must define himself anew.

The process of definition takes Clay through a varied and complex society. Himself a product of human chaos, a fugitive even from society's law after helping a prisoner escape from jail, he searches for order and stability in a world that is restless, discontented, and awash with illusions inherited from the promised-land psychology of its frontier past. No American writer has ever been more aware than Davis of the waste involved in all pioneering—the false assumptions, blasted dreams, and defeated hopes, the erosion of human values inevitable in upheaval. He consistently deals with human beings at that point in their lives when, in his phrase, they have been "starved down" morally and spiritually to their final resources. Only then in his books do they rise, somehow, to the true significance of human being.

Clay is part of a migratory society, part of a flight that is in reality a pursuit of meaning. On his journeys back and forth across the state he encounters violence, treachery, murder,

a lynching, and more varieties of human stupidity than he would have thought possible. The stay-at-homes are worse. Every river crossing produces a promoter who has plotted a mythical townsite that would have delighted Hall Kelley. The planners are all waiting for the boom that will follow the railroad. There can be no doubt of the railroad's coming; each townsite proprietor has talked with E. H. Harriman himself as late as last week. They are bringing civilization to the wilderness, with a certain amount of help from civilization's land laws. "I been leenient with them Siwashes," complains Mr. Pringle, owner and sole resident of Pringleville.

When I first took up my homestid here I'd let 'em come every spring and dig camas root the same as usual, and I didn't charge 'em a cent. And afterwards when I took up my swamp-land claim and my desert-land entry and a quarter-section for a timber-culture and my preemption hundred and twenty acres and the section I bought up on railroad scrip I'd let 'em come and camp on it like they'd always been doin'....But now...it's about time to call a halt. You can't develop a city with them do-nothings lollin' around fightin' and nussin' kids in the middle of the business district. They've got their blamed lodges pitched on ground that's goin' to be the railroad roundhouse and union stock yards, and they're a-peddlin' their blamed wool square on top of the site for the city hall. It gives people a bad impression....You lookin' for a location around here?⁴⁴

True values are hard to come by and difficult to maintain within this chaos of illusions. Every place Clay settles finally drives him away with its waste and stupidity. One night on a wheat ranch a dying old woman leads him on a ghostly tour of the

⁴⁴Honey in the Horn (New York, 1935), p. 260.

four thousand acres she and her husband have given their lives to, telling him what it cost as they go. It is a history of privation, soul-destroying toil, cruelty, greed, chicanery, fraud, murder, and slavery of children. It is the history of an insufficient dream, the illusion that acquiring land leads to the good life—as wasteful of human resources as the town promoters who believe that selling city lots to fools is the acme of human existence.

Most foolish of all, perhaps, are the homesteaders who grab up eastern Oregon just one hundred years after Lewis and Clark. Here, too, Clay makes his way, across the Cascades from the coast, searching for that good human order he has never known. He finds another chapter in man's long story of misuse of natural resources in the West. To plant wheat on arid grazing land is to defy nature and history, a mistake that nature soon corrects by blowing the homesteads away, wheat and all. At the book's end, having experienced every variety of human foolishness the country affords, the boy joins the homesteaders as they move back west again toward work on the railroads.

The moral insight of the novel proceeds on a far deeper level than this summary suggests. Clay's journeys, which have taken him through many varieties of human society, have forced him to explore many levels of the human spirit as well. He has done more than look on at exhibitions of stupidity and failure; he has defined himself and thereby defined something of human destiny. In the end he commits himself to the daughter of a

wandering horse-trader, a girl he has alternately pursued and fled throughout the novel. His final commitment is a moral one, for conflicting moral necessities have made the girl, Luce, the murderer of two men, just as different moral necessities have forced Clay himself into involuntary homicide and responsibility for a lynching. Together they have learned the relativity of human morals in changing circumstances, and learned too that behind the morals are human needs which give the morals, however ludicrous or misapplied, a certain dignity. Both of them began in flight—from the law, from society, from their own origins in human chaos and worthlessness. Both thought to find meaningful existence in an ordered society. What they accept, instead, is the heritage of their time and place: the heritage of a migratory people who, in their congenital restlessness and despite their stupidity and their illusions, are pioneers moving toward a new land and a fresh beginning. Both Clay and Luce have good reason to understand the moral consequences of this moving—the violence and waste and disruption of established patterns of behavior that they have recapitulated and learned to accept in their own lives. They have learned also that beneath the ridiculous forms of human behavior lie the concrete reality of human needs, and behind all the silly illusions of these people lies the dream that fed America's westering. It is by the dream that this undeluded boy and girl have learned to measure the real worth of experience.

Honey in the Horn is thus much more than the one-dimensional debunking of pioneering that Leisy has suggested. Instead it is

man's definition of himself amid historical forces and the upheaval of a people in the West, against the background of a clearly dramatized natural setting. For always beneath the human events in Davis's pages lies the country, its beauty and ugliness and birds and animals. His symbolic pattern thrusts its way out through all these levels--the physical landscape, its fauna, its people--to create the sense of man living and acting in a definite natural and cultural environment. Thus an early-morning scene of a coyote gently nudging a sheep away from the herd in a stately processional of ever-widening circles that ends in undignified death and sickening gluttony reminds Clay of people he has known and recurs to him two years later when he finds himself playing the coyote's role in a human drama. The sheep's death, such a mean and trivial end to the absorbing dawn performance, becomes, in extension, part of his growing awareness of the human need to dignify the end of human life, however mean or trivial the life or its end may have been. He will see a family searching for a graveyard to bury a son whose life amounted to no more than a public nuisance. They must have a graveyard, a symbol of human community, even if all it contains are five soldiers who were shot for ganging up on a lone squaw, a Chinese who tried to build a fire with a stick of dynamite, and a Mormon who converted sheepherder's wives so ardently that the husbands were forced to remove him. For the family, death has imposed human imperatives, and in the context of the novel these imperatives reach back to a sheep and a coyote in a mountain meadow on a cold

morning and forward to other human necessities, with the whole registering in human perception through the mind of a boy.

All of Davis's later novels are less episodic and more tightly organized than his first one. His second book, Harp of a Thousand Strings (1947), is unique in his work because it makes a different use of history from the others and because, though it is based on historical records and actual figures, it creates less a fiction in which men work out their destinies than a fable which recounts some of the human values that found their way into the American West. Thus it disregards probability of coincidence and violates other fundamentals of literary realism to create an almost allegorical pattern of the forces and passions that went into the naming of an obscure Western town.

These forces and passions have their genesis in Tripoli on a night when three young Americans, just escaped from the enemy, take refuge in a warehouse while the American navy bombards the town. There they listen to Jean-Lambert Tallien, once Citizen President of the National Convention but now reduced to a minor consular post under Napoleon, recount the long story of his life. He tells it to them because he sees in each American one phase of his own career: ambition, love, vengeance. In an adjoining room sits a woman he had once thrown to a Paris mob for love of another. The mob's flogging drove her mad, and her insane mutterings form a background to his tale. Near him, but disguised, sits the woman he loved, Thérèse de Fontenay, now the mistress of a commercial traveler.

Tallien succeeded in each of his careers, and the result

has been human loss so devastating that it has left him a cynical, broken, purposeless man. His tale is a warning to the Americans, but one which they cannot heed. When it is finished and he has stepped outside, Thérèse de Fontenay makes an effort to redeem the lost and broken lives that fill her past, to make good the loss of hopes and dreams that it has cost to keep her alive, by passing on symbols of herself to the Americans:

You spoke of having more to make up than you had expected. So have I, much more. That should be something between us. We all have losses to make up....I will remember yours, and that you were not afraid to start, even from a place like this, and after imprisonment, and against dangers. Will you take these little things to help you remember it? There is one for each of you; the crest on them is mine. Some day in your own country, when you have made up your lost ground and accomplished all that you could wish, it may remind you that there was another who started to make up hers when you did. It will be something to think I may be remembered that long, and at such a distance.⁴⁵

Years later the Americans come together again, on the edge of the Osage country west of the Mississippi. They have run their lives out into waste and bitterness by now, have created out of their separate passions of ambition, love, and vengeance their separate destinies: whoremaster, murderer, thief. Together they build a frontier trading post and, since they have lived through the erosion of their own hopes, they name it for the woman who had somehow kept hers:

If their trail had led them back past hopes failed in, there had been enough in Tallien and the insane woman to bring her face to face with a full count of her own.

⁴⁵ Harp of a Thousand Strings (New York, 1947), pp. 380-81.

She had not admitted, even in that place and with that account facing her, that it could end in waste, in forgetfulness, in nothing; she had not even believed it could....Their reasons for giving it her name are moldered away and lost with them, but the name remains, and remains hers: a witness of one seedling torn out by the floods that struck root again after them and lasted on; a witness of some spirit that she held to even through the long night of having her account of death and injury re-ited back to her over the gibberings of the insane woman who had been lost that she might live. Even from those shameful and bitter hours, something lasted and took hold on the earth and in life. If its old meanings are forgotten and new ones risen one after another to replace them, she would not have wanted it otherwise. Things change because they continue to live. It was not of living that she was ever afraid.⁴⁶

Structurally, this is a formidable novel. Its symbolic pattern is based on "a system of triads: the three settings, America, Tripoli, and France; the three Americans, each corresponding to one of the drives in Tallien's career; the three moral choices Tallien must make and their consequences; the three organic divisions in the structure of the novel."⁴⁷ Within this formal pattern appear many other symbols of waste, desolation, loss, and finally, of affirmation. Out of the old sod-and-wattle corral of the original trading post have grown young shoots "protruding clusters of white blossoms out to avoid touching the coarse earth of the wall from which they drew life and beauty."⁴⁸

Thus it is with history in Davis's fable. Through history's

⁴⁶Harp of a Thousand Strings, pp. 434, 438.

⁴⁷Kohler, College English, XIV, 138.

⁴⁸Harp of a Thousand Strings, p. 23.

thousand-stringed harp blow the lives of human beings, each of them, however meaningless or obscure it may seem, producing vibrations that become part of the whole and touch the strings of other lives. Both the French Revolution and the American frontier had meant upheaval and dissolution, loss and waste, blasted lives and withered hopes, but both had been the earth out of which any flower of human dignity and beauty must grow. Whatever had been lost in the changes of history, man's need to define himself against changing backgrounds and to assert always that his life has meaning, that it cannot come to nothing, has remained. If a dusty frontier town on the raw prairie is a poor enough remnant of passions and aspirations that blew themselves out long ago four thousand miles away, it is nevertheless proof that man salvages something from humanity's past, that what seems to be dissolution and death may after all prove to be only growth and change.

Davis's three subsequent novels deal more narrowly and, in the literary sense, more realistically with various phases of America's westward movement and changing frontier society. Their themes are the ones that fill all of his fiction: the relation of past and present in changing human lives; love and its imperatives; moral choice and its consequences; the waste and loss of cultural and physical upheaval, and the resulting journey as a metaphor of spring and renewal; the illusions involved in the westering experience, and the dream which lies beneath the illusions and expresses fundamental human needs—all of them part of

that major theme which is man's continuing definition of himself.

Thus in Beulah Land a half-Indian girl, Ruhama, and a white boy, Askwani, a foundling raised as a Cherokee, journey in stages from North Carolina to Illinois, down the Mississippi to Natchez and back up to Carbondale, west through Missouri and Kansas, south to the Indian Territory, and finally over the trail to Oregon, a trek that carries them through many varieties of American civilization in the late 1850's and the early years of the Civil War. On their way they test themselves against an experience which includes violence, cruelty, betrayal, death, and every variety of human love and folly. They learn what is worth preserving from their combined heritages and what must be thrown away. They discover the loss that the journey entails, and the even greater loss incurred by those who stay at home and thus miss the meaning of a great thing in the American experience. They learn about love, many kinds of it: love of country, the land, humanity, self, the past, the dead; love of glory or reputation or money or freedom; loves that punish or maim; but always loves that give life meaning.

The journey, on its spiritual and moral levels, becomes an exploration of these loves, weaving them out in a symbolic pattern that gradually becomes part of Ruhama's perception of herself and experience. Thus an old man's story of wasted love, told her as he builds hidden springs into faro boxes for river gamblers to cheat their customers with, reaches forward to a scene two years later and a thousand miles farther west when

Ruhama again sees one of his boxes, in a game played against the sister she had lost as a child and who has grown up to become a gambler and a cheat—an object of wasted love and a part of the past that Ruhama must discard.

Askwani's first love is for the man he has made his spiritual father and then lost in death. On the journey to the Indian Territory the boy is a symbolic Moses going confidently about his father's business, following a liturgy of the countryside, the names of springs and trails and river crossings that he heard once from a dying man. In time, because life means change and redefinition, the foundling must go beyond his man-god's teachings and take an unknown road, the trail to Oregon.

The end of the journey, and the end of the novel, is a dying fall—an abrupt shift of tone to the commonplace and pedestrian. It is not reaching the goal that has defined these wanderers, these orphans from all cultures, but the reaching toward it. The journey has led through many varieties of humanity and the human spirit. Properly understood, it leads finally to the Land of Beulah, that place next to the river of death where one rests in peace; it leads to a new definition of humanity. But Beulah is also a new point of dispersion, for Askwani and Ruhama's children must make their own way in man's unending westering, his search for the dream and his fulfillment of himself.

Though similar in technique to Davis's earlier novels, Winds of Morning and The Distant Music offer an extension of his basic themes, for they are concerned with man's lot in the West

after the journey, in its physical sense, is completed. Now that these Americans have reached the land of their desiring and have settled down to live with themselves, fulfillment must come as much in social relationships as in personal ones. Dealing with Oregon from 1850 to the 1920's—and leaving out, this time, the homesteading boom of the early twentieth century—these books center symbolically as much on the towns as upon the countryside, for now man must find dignity and significance within a pattern of settlement rather than movement. As Amos Clarke, the young deputy sheriff of Winds of Morning, muses:

In old Hendricks' younger days, there had been more value set on people. Nature had been the enemy then, and people had to stand together against it. Now all its wickedness and menace had been taken away; the thing to be feared now was people, and nature figured mostly as a safe and reassuring refuge against their underhandedness and skullduggery. It was the great healer: the hydrophobia skunk that had been turned into a household pet....Someday humanity would have to undergo a similar transfiguring operation....There would be hymns written booming vast sweeps of people as restorers of peace and faith to perplexed spirits; God's first temples, if only they would live up to it. Human beings.⁴⁹

Clarke is going to sleep in the foothills of the mountains as he thinks this, his mind half conscious and filled with shifting images. At first people in the images are far off, unobtrusive parts of the landscape. But as they crowd closer they become grotesques of human beings, remembered examples of worthlessness from his deputy work and burlesque stories from his little river town.

⁴⁹ Winds of Morning, p. 272.

—Yes, sir, doctor, I know as well as anybody that you're a mighty busy man and you've got all this big grist of payin' customers a-waitin' for you to cure 'em, but this here business about that husband of mine a-losin' his manhood is life or death....You ain't got any notion how deep a thing like this takes ahold on him. Yes, sir, impotency. Well, the first time we noticed it was along yesterday afternoon, and then a couple of times last night, and again this morning; and it's come to the point now that....

—No, sir, Mr. Sheriff, I don't want to have anything settled with him. I'm a taxpayer here, even if I am a comparatively young woman, and I want that no-account plug-ugly arrested and throwed into jail and sent to the penitentiary; and I want an attachment for damages on whatever he's got in his name.... For damages, yes, sir. He assaulted me and then he damaged me, and he occasioned me financial loss and bodily harm and mental anguish....Over at the dance in the Chicken Springs schoolhouse last Saturday, yes, sir....I was a-leanin' out of the window to git a breath of air between dances...and he come past and made some slighting remark, and then he hauled off and kicked me square in the stride so hard it give me the nosebleed, and I had to go to bed for four days and have a doctor...and besides that, it busted three of the hired man's fingers right in the middle of hayin' when we needed every hand.⁵⁰

These stories became, as Clarke helps old Hendricks push a horse herd up into the mountains, grotesque examples of other, real, human anguish and loss. As the two men travel over the country the burden of the land comes to them: what a homestead cost in lives and hopes, how little the inheritors of land won in anguish have made of the land or of themselves. The foothills, where people can be remembered in the mind's middle distance, take their place in the symbolic pattern of the towns in the valleys, where life so often seems mean and trivial, and the mountains,

⁵⁰ Winds of Morning, pp. 272-74.

where human affairs, through the perspective of distance, take on stature and consequence. The journey, of course, is itself symbolic. Old Hendricks's responsibility to a herd of worthless horses grows to responsibility for all his past and its consequences in his seemingly worthless children, and to commitment to the country he once deserted. For Clarke responsibility means return to the town and to permanent human relationships, both of which he has spent much of his short life escaping. But the journey has defined the honesty and integrity, the human feelings beneath all social relationships, that can give life form and direct it toward truly human ends; and every step of his return carries him farther from the winter that still hangs on the high places and toward the spring that, as he had almost forgotten, comes first to the valleys. By the time of The Distant Music the journey has become entirely symbolic, a journey never taken.

As proof that Davis's novels have shown steady growth, these last two are his best. Though they come at the end of man's physical westering, they are really chronicles of his morning wind rise, of the potential that lies in his relationship to his fellows in a settled society. Out of all the loss and dissolution and stupidity of the past, detailed in those endless, laconic, bizarre, burlesque stories, has come commitment to the present and the future. The dream of the West, once a thing which existed in wild nature beyond the frontier, now must be achieved in the hearts of men. The distant music which Marco Polo

heard on the desert, the siren song which gave Davis the title for his latest book, has, after all, had its existence, like Emily Dickinson's oriole, in the human heart.

These five novels are without question a major achievement in Western fiction. In time they may reach a similar status in American fiction as a whole. Thus far, the surface diffuseness of Davis's form and idiom, the casual impression that the laconic tales and animal fables are amusing interruptions of narrative and that his humor and folklore exist only for caricature, has been against him. Recognition of his quality will require readers who understand that, within the complexity of form and language his books achieve, a casual sentence like "The Oregon country was bigger then than it got to be later" means more than historical contraction from Territory to state, that it means, besides, the contraction of an American dream.

4. A. B. Guthrie, Jr.

In the new fiction of the West, the best novelist of the mountain men of the fur trade and the emigrant on the trail to Oregon has been A. B. Guthrie, Jr. Though historically these have been among the more attractive phases of the Western experience to fiction writers, and are still so, Guthrie's novels attain an imaginative recreation of the country, the time, and the people that has placed them, in the view of most critics, on a level of their own. They have been praised particularly for their authenticity, their sense of grandeur in Western topography, even their "epic" qualities. At their best—and this the critics have not recognized—they have attempted and at least partially achieved something more fundamental to the American experience and to literature itself: the exploration of the human consciousness within a carefully defined area and time of our past—its assumptions, its limitations, its place in the continuum of the American consciousness as a whole. Guthrie's books, historical novels of the West, have suffered the congenital difficulty of Western fiction at the hands of critics: the placid assumption that such fiction, however good, cannot escape the boundaries of history, of region, of nostalgia.

Born in Indiana in 1901, Guthrie is a Westerner by rearing. When he was six months old his parents moved to Choteau, Montana, a small town on the upper Teton River, traveling the last thirty miles by stagecoach from the nearest railhead. There Guthrie's

father served two careers: as the first high school principal in the county and as editor of the local newspaper. Guthrie was graduated in 1923 from the University of Montana, where he spent more of his time reading Western history than on his major courses in journalism. Unable to find newspaper work, he drifted through various jobs, worked for a time for the United States Forest Service, wrote advertising and sold flour for a concern in New York state, and finally, while on a visit in Kentucky, found a place on the Lexington Leader, where he remained for twenty-one years. A Nieman Fellowship took him to Harvard in 1944 to study writing under Theodore Morrison, and three years later Guthrie resigned as executive editor of the Leader to devote himself to writing and to teaching a course in writing at the University of Kentucky.⁵¹

The frontispiece of his latest book lists two previous novels. Actually there have been three. The first, Murders at Moon Dance (1943), the one Guthrie would obviously like to forget, is eloquent testimony to the endurance of formula in Western fiction, proof that the image of the West built around the strong man on horseback is a holdover from the past still capable of corrupting even a good talent. The novel follows the weary pattern of cowboy-detective horse opera, complete with walk-down.

⁵¹"Keeping Posted," Saturday Evening Post, CCXX (August 16, 1947), 10; Harry R. Warfel, American Novelists of Today, p. 189; Eloise Hazard, "First Novelists of 1947," Saturday Review of Literature, XXXI (February 14, 1948), 10.

It is indistinguishable, except for being better written, from a thousand other repetitions of the same meaningless melodrama. Though the Montana setting is carefully realized, the book moves on so superficial a level of experience that it has nothing of consequence to say about the West or the people who have lived there. At the end of this first book Guthrie seemed to be just one more novelist of the Wild West creating a two-dimensional world where men had no social or moral problems which could not be met with Colt revolvers.

The Big Sky (1947) represents a remarkable advance in both craft and theme. This is Guthrie's exploration of the mountain man, the free trapper who followed Lewis and Clark into the wilderness and became, for a few brief years, a new symbol of American freedom. This exploration forms the first part of a larger dramatic scheme which would eventually follow central threads of the Western experience through most of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. Thus The Big Sky initiates themes, symbols, and techniques which Guthrie has extended in later books.

His plan from the first was to write a sequence of four novels on the Western movement—the fur trade, the Oregon emigration, the rise of the cattle industry in Montana, and finally the interior Northwest during the present century. Though his books were thus to be historical novels, Guthrie has little respect for efforts in this genre which are really costume pieces dragging in history in unassimilated chunks. "There is a notion,"

he has said, "that one proves himself a good novelist by proving he knows history. It is the perfect non-sequitur."⁵² His own method is to seek close fidelity to period and place but to avoid using actual historical figures, a proscription he has held to except in incidental cases where the actual figure is used for a brief and specific function and the circumstances of place, time, and character have been clearly established by research.

Thus in a brief scene indicating the pressures put upon Oregon emigrants to turn south on the Raft River and take the trail to California, Guthrie employs old Caleb Greenwood, an actual mountain man. Greenwood, roaming the West since the time of the Astorians, was indeed representing John Sutter at Fort Hall in the summer of 1845, persuading emigrants to California with casual remarks that depicted the terrors of the Snake River fordings and the terrible struggle through the Blue Mountains to the Columbia Dalles, while picturing the California trail as a Sunday jaunt in the country. And all under the approving eye of Captain Grant of the Hudson's Bay Company, an organization not anxious for emigrants in its trapping territory. Greenwood appears only for a moment and serves a function which history has clearly assigned to him.

Guthrie's fidelity to both the facts and spirit of his material has been the quality most remarked upon in his work.

⁵²Harvey Breit, "Talk with A. B. Guthrie, Jr.," New York Times Book Review, October 23, 1949, 39.

"As one follows Mr. Guthrie's stirring story deeper and deeper into the wilderness," a critic has said of The Big Sky, "one realizes with increasing certainty that this is not just another combination of research and adventure, that here is a magical re-creation of a lost world and a rare capacity to convey its essential quality. If that sadly overworked word, epic, had not been so debased by indiscriminate misuse, The Big Sky could be called an epic of the Mountain Man."⁵³ Leisy, whose praise must be mitigated by the fact that his understanding of the novel rests either on sketchy reading or faulty memory (he has Boone Caudill kill his father; Guthrie does not), calls the book "a skillfully planned and finished work, obviously the product of many years' gestation."⁵⁴ "The plains and mountains of it," writes another critic, "are not painted likenesses but are the things themselves....One feels--thus it was."⁵⁵

The sense of authenticity that The Big Sky conveys rests on solid scholarship in the extremely complex events of the fur trade. In addition to his research in the written records of the trade and the trapper's life, as Allen Nevins has noted, Guthrie carefully traversed the whole route of his novel as he wrote it,⁵⁶ a procedure he followed again for his study of Oregon

⁵³Orville Prescott, In My Opinion (Indianapolis, 1952), pp. 141-42.

⁵⁴The American Historical Novel, p. 138.

⁵⁵Paul Jordan-Smith, "The Westward Movement in Fiction--1947," Pacific Spectator, II (Winter, 1948), 112.

⁵⁶Review of The Big Sky, by A. B. Guthrie, Jr., Saturday Review of Literature, XXX (May 3, 1947), 10.

emigration and which accounts for the sense of immediacy he is able to give the landscape. His grasp of the trapper idiom itself is a remarkable achievement. The mountain man's language, as it has been preserved to us in such records as Garrard's Wah-To-Yah, Ruxton's Life in the Far West, Joe Meek's conversations with Frances Victor, and the many other first-hand narratives, is an extremely expressive instrument. Guthrie, without visible strain or any sense of employing esoterica, has fitted this language to his own purposes and created an idiom flexible enough to convey complexities of character and theme.

On the level of narrative, then, The Big Sky is a historically accurate recreation of the free trapper (a term designating the most independent mountain man of all, one who worked for himself rather than on contract to one of the companies) and his existence: his work, talk, adventures, clothes, equipment, skills, the perils of his daily life, the spree at rendezvous in the spring. Behind the struggles and perils of the trappers, always in the background but always forming the context within which the individuals work out their destinies, stand the larger forces of the trade: the American Fur Company, known as the "Company," with its Fort Union at the mouth of the Yellowstone and the fort's bourgeois, McKenzie, erasing all opposition according to his orders; the Rocky Mountain Fur Company, the Company's chief opposition during these years; the Hudson's Bay Company to the west; the smallpox epidemic of 1837 on the upper Missouri that destroyed the deadly Blackfeet and reduced the perils of the

West forever; the emigrants who followed Marcus Whitman to the Columbia after 1835; and, far off in London, a change in men's fashions that began making hats of silk and, eventually, did away with the beaver trade for good. Guthrie's novel covers the years 1830 to 1843, the years in which the mountain trade came to its full glory and blew itself out, leaving behind mountain men like Fitzpatrick and Bridger to play nursemaid to emigrants, sending Wyeth back to Boston to cut ice and Bonneville back to the army. By 1843, the year of the first Great Migration to Oregon, the mountain man's life was over. The West was there still, but it was the farmer, looking forward to corn and wheat and pigs, who now tramped along the streams and through the passes that another kind of man had discovered.

Guthrie's narrative of these thirteen years centers on three men, free trappers all, who live within the lust and fury of this time, working, spreeing, and, in the fullest sense, destroying, as did the fur trade itself, the basis of their own existence. If his book were not more than this it would be good history but inadequate as a novel by his own standard. But The Big Sky is something more: an exploration of three varieties of the human consciousness as they adapt to a special kind of life at a particular time in our past. It is the exploration of the mountain men from the inside, as a nineteenth century American who took something from the past, bequeathed something to the future, and became in time a symbol of a dream that reaches to the bone of American experience.

Guthrie builds his themes around several devices of characterization, some of them simply mechanical, and, on a more significant level, around basic attitudes toward certain aspects of life and experience. Names, which Guthrie sometimes uses with too obvious irony (a roving confidence man in Indiana who asks unsuspecting travelers for the privilege of camping with them and then robs his victims is named Bedwell; a Paoli judge bears the surname Test), are one of the mechanical devices. Eyes, which are used to indicate insight as well as sight, are a less wooden device. Most important of all are the attitudes of major figures toward certain constant abstractions: humanity, civilization, religion, morality, and time. And all these attitudes are gathered up in the embracing metaphor of the landscape, which defines the consciousness of those who move upon it.

Since his concern is with the minds of his figures rather than their adventures, Guthrie's narrative method is to move back and forth among the viewpoints of major characters, perceiving as they perceive, paralleling incidents to indicate differences in perception. On the fringes of his narrative are other kinds of human consciousness--those of men who belong to the settlements and think in terms of money or social standing or manifest destiny or a future full of emigrants and wagons and farms and trade routes from the Orient. The Big Sky, then, concentrating on the mountain man, has as its thematic center, beneath all the events of those crowded years, the varieties of American consciousness that found their way into the West and helped to direct the

region's destiny—and that of all America.

One of these major figures, Dick Summers, is already a seasoned mountain man when we first meet him on the Missouri. He came to the mountains as a boy, and the prime of his life has paralleled that of the fur trade. Both he and the life he leads have passed beyond spring into full summer now. The next few years will bring the final harvest and then, by the time of the Green River rendezvous in 1837—such lean doings after the fat years—Summers will know that the spring which has come to the land as always is only natural renewal, not the personal rebirth after winter that it had seemed to be before. Ahead of him is only a patch of land and a few last years to be spent raising corn and tobacco and looking at the tail of a mule instead of mountains and a sky bigger than you could think.

Already in 1830 Summers is a man of divided consciousness, making him wonder if he is truly a mountain man after all. He had never wanted the things which count with other men—money, power, position; had never wanted to found a family or to give his name to a mountain or a river or a town. He had wanted to be free, free of the things by which other men ran their lives. He had worshipped only the country, the land, not as a thing to nurture and improve and make bear a harvest but as something to enjoy and live off and travel over—the source of his freedom. To be free meant to fight Indians and weather and sometimes hardship and always to live in danger. A man proved himself by his resourcefulness, his independence, his courage. Time, in a life

where death was a constant danger, could be measured only in moments or in seasons. It can be remembered as brief moments of peril within an unending flow that followed a natural course of summer wandering, fall trapping, winter hibernation, and finally spring rendezvous.

But increasingly with the years Summers has found part of his mind looking back to other times and places, to people, even to settlements. His eyes see the country still and note its every detail. But they are turned inward too, looking back in the mind for memories, back to Ashley and his fort at the mouth of the Platte, no trace of it remaining now, back to high times in Taos or starving times along the Yellowstone. The instinct for survival and for freedom is as strong as ever, but no moment contains all the mind any longer. At the instant of killing a Sioux the eye now sees not just an enemy but looks into the pleading eyes of a victim, eyes soft as a begging dog's.

The land also has changed for Summers. It is no longer a thing of newness, of something untouched where he can go first. It has become known land, a record of his youth and of joys now lost forever. It is because he has changed with the land that Summers can understand the inevitability of change in the West. The eyes that probe backward through the memories in his mind have given him an insight into human history. He realizes, as he leaves the mountains, that his life has been an escape from time and that the future belongs to the men in the settlements who measure out their lives in time. He would not have lived his

life differently if he could. He has found, in his last years, that emotional and mental balance which allows him to savor pleasures with his mind as well as his body, and when the fine dream of escape and freedom is over—for himself, of course, but for the West too—he can understand and let it go.

Summers is the best that the fur trade produced. A primitive existence in which violence was almost a daily necessity has never made him cruel or vicious. If he has rejected many of civilization's values, he has not regressed to the mindlessness and animal self-indulgence that engulfed many of his kind. Finding little place in his life for the conventional morality of the settlements, he has nevertheless fashioned a code of resourcefulness, loyalty, and self-reliance which meets his needs and defines him as a human being. From the tension between civilization and the wilderness that exists in himself he has learned to measure life for its freedom and joy, standards not necessarily inferior to those used in the settlements. Disdainful always of material acquisitions, of all the things that society holds dear, he has learned to measure experience for its freshness, to look back at the last and wonder how much living he had got.

The two other major types of mountain men in Guthrie's book, Boone Caudill and Jim Deakins, are Summers's young partners during his last years in the West. Deakins is indeed a little deacon who, although he loves talk and fun and women, always has God on his mind and is uneasy about death for what it will prove about the deity—either way. His eyes watch the country, as any mountain

man's must, but they also look forward to the next rendezvous with its whiskey and squaws and stories, or see God in the lifting peaks and the sky's immensity. God's hand is everywhere in the wilderness, but nowhere more than at night in Colter's Hell, as if here creation had gone untouched since the first day:

The beginning of the world, with the fine singing filling the sky and the boiling water sounding low, and a man wondering how things got started, and was God sitting on one of the stars, looking down and maybe grinning or maybe frowning? A man felt lost if he let his mind run, lost under the sky, lost in the high hills, lost and as good as dead already while time flowed on and on forever....

Jim wished he had a woman. It kept a man's mind close to himself.⁵⁷

Wondering always whether God is grinning or frowning, worried that God may have given him appetites and then fixed it to damn him eternally for indulging them, Deakins is caught in an endless pattern of uncertainty, of acceptance and rejection. Though he is deeply attracted to the wilderness and its freedom, he can never be entirely at home in it. He must constantly reduce it to size, find meanings for it that will fit the mind. At times he must flee to the settlements, where things are of a size that a man can understand.

Time in the mountains for Deakins is always the future, the next rendezvous or frolic at Taos, sometimes even the most ominous future of all—that time when he will know about God at last. He can see and love the beauty and wildness of the land, but more often than not he looks at it for tracks of other human

⁵⁷The Big Sky (New York, 1947), p. 223.

beings, who can dwarf its immensity and shut it away for a moment with their laughter and fun. Summers had come to understand that freedom resided as much in the mind as in the wilderness itself, that it was partly a condition of youth and confidence and a sense that the world was new. Deakins, half a man of the tame settlements and a God-oriented world, is half afraid of freedom and newness, always a little frightened of a world so new that God may not have gotten around to it yet.

If Summers and Deakins are both, though in different ways, only partly committed to the mountains, Boone Caudill is the mountain man with no trace of the settlements remaining. His name, as Vernon Young has pointed out, "is an ambivalent pun, for Caudill suggests caudillo, the leader, and caudal, the tail-end."⁵⁸ He is the prototype of his kind, and yet the last inheritor of that early pioneer for whom he is named, the last to have the untracked wilderness before him.

Caudill's revolt against the settlements is complete. They mean to him only another man's law (a law that hounded him as a boy and let a grown man rob him), rules that he will not live by, values that he cannot accept. In the settlements his mind is always split, half of it directed to the mountains, but in the wilderness his consciousness is bounded completely by the moment. If he looks ahead at all it is only to other hunts, more buffalo or beaver, new country.

⁵⁸"An American Dream and Its Parody," Arizona Quarterly, VI (Summer, 1950), 113.

In many ways he is more animal than man. Thought and action are inseparable parts of the same instinctive process. He wants no more furs than will buy him powder and ball and whiskey for a yearly spree. In him, the mountain man's self-sufficiency and independence have become complete. The intricate skills of his trade have become instinctive, and he is content to be always away from the settlements. The epitome of his kind, he asks nothing more than he has, nothing more than free and open country and his own strength to rely upon.

Time, which for Summers had been mostly past and for Deakins mostly future, is for Caudill only present. Yesterday is already history, an indistinguishable part of a whole that includes present and future as well. When he completed his commitment to the wilderness by taking a Piegan squaw and becoming a Blackfoot himself (the Piegans are a tribe of the Blackfoot nation), his consciousness is entirely in accord with time:

Life went along one day after another as it had for five seasons now, and the days went together and lost themselves in one another. Looking back, it was as if time ran into itself and flowed over, running forward from past times and running back from now so that yesterday and today were the same. Or maybe time didn't flow at all but just stood still while a body moved around in it. A man hunted or fought, and sat smoking and talking at night, and after a while the camp went silent except for the dogs taking a notion to answer the wolves, and so then he went in and lay with his woman, and it was all he could ask, just to be living like this, with his belly satisfied, and his mind peaceful and in his lodge a woman to suit him.⁵⁹

⁵⁹The Big Sky, p. 258.

Since time for Caudill is only present, he must fight to hold off the future, must deny that settlers' plows will ever scar the land where he has trapped and camped. His eyes see the land only as it is, not as it has been or will be. He must always believe in its newness. He is blind to the history of change in the West and in himself that Summers had understood, blind to the future that troubles Deakins, blind to all things outside himself and his relationship to the physical world.

This blindness is symbolized in his child, born blind, and in Caudill's own attempt to see the world as his son will see it:

Boone brought his lids down little by little, screening out the valley below him and the ridge that rose beyond it and at last the sun itself except for the red light that swam through. This was how it was to be blind, not to see the buttes and the mountains against the sky or the wooded line of the river, not to see the coyote trotting far off or the camp in the trees..., not to see even the hand held close before his face but only the red swimming and maybe not even that. Maybe only thick and steady darkness like in a cave or out on the plains at night with the clouds drawn low and not even one star peeking through. A man couldn't find a trail or sight a rifle; he would have to feel his way like a worm and hope someone would bring meat to him. He would have to learn the sun by its feel and the land by the touch of it under his feet and people by the pitch of their voices.⁶⁰

Thus it is Caudill, the man whose eyes never leave the land, whose thoughts never stray to the past or wonder about God and the way of things, who is truly blind. Wanting a world that is big and free, he has created a prison of his own consciousness.

⁶⁰The Big Sky, p. 332.

Through moral blindness he kills Deakins and destroys those relationships which make up the West he loves. When the West is spoiled for him, he returns at last to the settlements for a time. For the first time, on the journey back, he can see and admit change. The Missouri River, his entrance to the West thirteen years before, has shifted its bed so that remembered bars and points and islands are gone now and no man can say exactly where a thing happened or believe that past and present are the same. Change on the banks is even more radical:

The river hunted through the hills and turned sharp as if it had found the way at last and streamed south to the old country of the Mandans and the Rees, past the Knife River, the Heart, the Cannonball. The Mandans were gone now, dead of the smallpox, and the Rees had pulled out before the Sioux, and the villages of both were fallen and rotted....It was only the hills that remained, only the river, and it too busy to remember except sometimes at night when the sky lay quiet in it and a man looking down jerked his eyes away, not wanting to see what was pictured from before.⁶¹

At the last, therefore, Caudill knows the change that has come to the West and understands that he, who had once played God and looked at the free country as his own creation, has destroyed the thing he loved. At Independence in 1843 the wagons are gathering by the hundreds and missionaries are preparing to take their God where the plow is going, but these things are only an aftermath to the despoliation of the open country that Caudill has already accomplished against himself. He begins to understand, at the last, his eyes distant now and fixed on things far away in both space and time, that the wilderness was more than

⁶¹The Big Sky, p. 346.

the landscape it seemed to be. The limitations of his consciousness, blinding him to change and history and any morality beyond a primitive code, had also prevented his seeing the human values of love and friendship without which life in the West, even for him, can be no more than animal existence. Before the emigrants move in to change and thereby destroy the West he has known and loved, Caudill has already destroyed the West he carried in his heart. When he leaves the settlements for the last time, he is escaping only into geography; the freedom and happiness he had sought are already behind him in time, an American dream that has moved back into that past which he has never recognized till now.

Caudill's failure, finally, is the failure of the complete mountain man, both as historical figure and as representative of the human consciousness at a particular stage of its development. Essentially the mountain men wanted only to escape the old order; they had no real direction for the freedom they sought. Culturally, their problem was to redefine old values within a new context or, perhaps, to find new ones to fit their needs. Summers retained some things from civilization and rejected others, evolving an integration of settlement and wilderness that met his needs. Deakins wavered constantly between one and the other. But Caudill's life indicates that escape from the demands of organized society could become an attempt to escape the human condition itself, to retreat to a kind of primitivism that history would only momentarily allow.

Nowhere in fiction has the use of the Western landscape been

more richly evocative than in The Big Sky. This too has its thematic level, conveying the exhilaration of the white man's morning in the West. In this book it is as if the mountains and the rivers and the great plains were being seen for the first time and by men who were born anew in seeing them. The limitless sky itself is the only proper symbol to convey man's early dream of freedom in the open West. Yet the dream, as it expressed itself in the mountain men, quickly faded and the sky closed down. They were despoilers rather than creators, and their dream did not encompass humanity as well as mountains. Too often it made of freedom an apotheosis that negated essential human values.

Guthrie could have chosen from the records of the mountain men minds that were more subtle or better trained or even more motivated by the economic forces of the fur trade than those that appear in The Big Sky. The bourgeois of the company trading posts, the free lance entrepreneur who sought a fast fortune in beaver, the occasional educated and cultured man who went into the wilderness for excitement and adventure—these appear in this novel only for a moment or by implication, perhaps in a brief glimpse of historical figures like McKenzie or the well-educated Owl Russel, or in mention of Jedediah Smith, the parson mountain man. Guthrie's concern instead is with the typical free trapper and such central American traits as practicality, individualism, and self-reliance as they worked themselves out in his mastery of his new environment, in his values, in his consciousness of himself and his world. They are, many of them, the same themes

that had occupied Cooper a century or more earlier, but they reach a level of moral insight in Guthrie's exploration of character that no reader will find in Natty Bumppo.⁶²

Exploration of the human consciousness in The Big Sky had to be limited by the nature of the mountain man himself. In The Way West (1949), the best novel we have had of the emigrant trail to Oregon, Guthrie is able to extend the scope of his recreation of the past in the West.⁶³ Oregon fever struck far more widely than the desire to be a free trapper in the shadow of the Tetons ever had. The mountain men were exiles from society, usually without ties or obligations. The trains that pushed west to the Willamette were made up of settlers, people who carried their civilization with them and looked forward to establishing the familiar way of things the moment the wheels stopped rolling.

On the narrative level, The Way West is the story of a small train that put out from Independence in the spring of 1845 and reached Fort Vancouver in the early fall. Guthrie, deliberately avoiding the melodrama that historically attaches to many emigrant

⁶²Too many novels of the mountain man have tried to dramatize actual historical figures. See, for instance, Bill Gulick, The Mountain Men (New York, 1956), a book of stories involving Carson and others; and Frederick F. Manfred, Lord Grizzly (New York, 1954), based on the legendary exploits of Hugh Glass, with General Ashley, Jim Clyman, and Jim Bridger taking part in the action.

⁶³For comparison with an earlier effort see Emerson Hough's The Covered Wagon (New York, 1922). Perhaps the second-best novel of the Trail is Archie Binns' The Land Is Bright (New York, 1939), thematically less complex than Guthrie's and further limited by its concentration on the experience as it appeared to children.

trains, chose a quiet year for his chronicle, a year when most movers had little trouble beyond the hardships of the trail itself. Except for a bad moment when a boy is caught far away from the train by a small band of Sioux and has to be brought back by the trail guide, there is no Indian trouble in the novel beyond a few thieving Kaws and Shoshones. Nor is there starvation, murder, epidemic sickness, or spectacular accident. Guthrie's concern with the trail experience seeks a deeper level of adventure than melodramatic incident can carry.

Members of the On-to-Oregon outfit represent many levels of society: a gently-bred couple rescuing their child from the fever-ridden bottoms of a Kentucky plantation; an unstable and guilt-ridden sensualist made restless by his disappointing marriage and tormented by the conflict between his desires and the inhibitions he has inherited from fundamentalist Methodism; an important Peoria businessman who plans to rise to greater importance in the new Territory, to governor, maybe, or senator; a taciturn Boston Yankee who has listened to Hall Kelley puffing Oregon so long that he wants to see for himself; a slow Missouri farmer who is going for the sake of patriotism and free land and a dozen other good reasons, but most of all for the excitement of breaking the fences which have surrounded his life; and for the rest, a Methodist preacher carrying doctrine to the savages, a worthless debt jumper, a man who has failed at everything else, an itinerant tinker, and assorted examples of human restlessness. For a guide the train has Dick Summers, who has nothing to hold him in the

settlements now that the woman he married after leaving the mountains is dead.

Because they are settled people and accustomed to order, the emigrants make up elaborate rules about provisions and wagons and especially morals—lashes for fornication and adultery, more lashes for rape, death for murder. As they go, they must define their rules and their mores against a new experience. Some, silly or impractical or inoperative, must be broken or abandoned; sometimes new rules must be made—ranging from a weighty council meeting to decide the propriety of using buffalo chips for fuel (this along the treeless banks of the Platte where no other fuel is, and with the men making the great decision but the children gathering the chips and the women cooking over them), to more fundamental matters of group dynamics that will help them hold together and roll the miles. Against the land, against the dust and thirst and heat of a dry drive from Pacific Springs to the valley of the Bear, against the danger of the Snake, against an expanse of sky and empty space that makes the mind pull in upon itself and hunt for known and certain things, against fear and weariness and irritation and sometimes a green and sheltered valley that can lift the heart—against all these and more the movers must test their values.

Somehow they survive and get through. Somehow they escape the kind of misfortune that could so easily build irascible fractionalism into savage anarchy, as it did in some trains. Gradually they find a working synthesis of individualism and cooperation

that allows them to be members of the group, morally and spiritually as well as physically, so that the death of a child becomes a loss to them all. The weak learn to depend upon the strong, and the strong to accept the dependence. Together they learn that the Peoria man's pushing and efficient leadership, palatable in the settlements perhaps, will not serve for the trail, where convention and custom are stripped away and the raw nerves left at the surface of personality; and they replace him with a different kind of man. Though one wagon turns back early to the settlements and others break away south to California beyond Fort Hall, those that remain have become a well-ordered social organization with its own complex system of relationships and pragmatic rules of existence.

In theme, however, The Way West reaches beyond its examination of a mobile social structure to explore varieties of the human consciousness under the impact of new forces and within a clearly dramatized phase of the Western experience. Again Guthrie creates his symbolic structure around his characters' attitudes toward certain constant abstractions, and again all symbols become part of the metaphor of the land itself. Though this exploration carries through a wide variety of minds, two of them, Dick Summers, representative of the vanishing mountain men, and Lije Evans, the Missouri farmer who eventually becomes captain of the train, can be taken as the novel's thematic center.

Summers, his wife just dead, is going West again in response to old feelings that he buried long before.

He had said goodbye to it once, feeling old and done in. How long ago?...Eight years, but it seemed like forever, so sometimes he wondered if the Seeds-kee-dee ran like always and the mountains lifted blue out of the plain and buffalo bulls made thunder in their rutting time.

He had said goodbye to it and had come back to Missouri to farm...and had counted the old life as something done with except as his mind remembered it--except sometimes as his inside eye saw the sun push up over the edge of the world and make its great sweep and slide in fire behind the mountains....Up the Sweetwater and over the Southern Pass and down the Sandys to the Green he was seeing the wild goats, or antelopes as people were calling them now, and the young ones running with them, light and skittery as thistle bloom....He ought to milk the cow....

Like everything else, feelings got mixed up, so that you could be sad and know that you ought to be sad, and still be kind of lightspirited, too....Down in him, if he didn't watch against it, he felt free again....He felt free, and it was spring, and the mountains stood sharp in his mind, and he could pilot a wagon train to Oregon as well as anybody. He took himself for an old fool, but maybe it didn't hurt to think he could begin fresh, or get back what had made the young years good. He was sad, sure enough, but set up, too....He was glad he didn't have to explain to anyone--to God, for instance--the way it was with him.⁶⁴

As he watches the emigrants on the trail Summers remembers back to the funeral sermon the Methodist missionary preached over his wife. Weatherby, the preacher, had imagined the soul safely into heaven, picturing a quiet refuge from all the strains and torments of living. Watching the movers Summers understands that for the men of the settlements all life is a looking ahead: "They traveled to get some place, as they lived life."⁶⁵ Weatherby is

⁶⁴The Way West (New York, 1949), pp. 26-28, 31.

⁶⁵The Way West, p. 52.

only a logical extension of the others; in him, an old man who has put aside all earthly ambitions except that of saving souls, existence itself is to be savored only as a step upward. Life, for most of the settlers, is a thing to be domesticated and tamed, to be reduced to the full belly of comfort and the dull eye of safety, the earthly equivalent of Weatherby's heaven.

Living with these movers who carry settlement with them, Summers sees the juxtaposition of past and present more complexly than he had in The Big Sky. There he had seen change only as history, as economic development that was bound to displace him and destroy the dream he followed. His understanding of consciousness had been limited to his perception of himself and other mountain men, with the addition of an occasional promoter who wanted not to change things but to profit from them as they were. But on the Trail Summers learns to see change as the development of a new consciousness that goes deeper than economic or social manifestations. Gradually it comes to him how truly godless he and his kind were and are. It is more than the fact that he himself can find no affirmation in death, no transition to something better, nothing but denial and ugliness. It is more, too, than his personal view that God is as much murderer as savior, the awareness of mingled malignancy and benignity in nature that raises a trace of irritation in him when Weatherby expatiates on God's benevolent natural world while standing, without knowing it, beside poison springs.

Summers's irreligion defines his understanding of himself

and the world. Ranking the white man's God with the Indian's medicine, the mountain man had looked ahead to nothing in this life or the next; he wanted only what he had. Watching the emigrants, nearly all of them stout with purpose, Summers understands that this is why he is an anachronism—not only in terms of history but in the development of the human consciousness. He is still able to live in the moment and to submerge self in the country, though his mind is divided now between present and past, and pleasure is tempered by memories of wilder and better times. The movers, ambitious to fulfill the thousand hopes that are taking them to Oregon, will never know the achievement he felt every day when the Rees and the Blackfeet were thick as gnats and a man lived with his hand on his rifle and every sense alert—when every day of life was a victory over death. In his mind he had defined himself against the land, taking the experience it offered as the measurement of life; the emigrants define the land and its experience against themselves and their settled past, measuring its goodness or badness by standards carried with them.

It is this realization that sends Summers, when the train is safe on the Columbia below the Dalles, back to the wilderness. To the free trapper, youth had been the only part of life that was of any use, for it held the strength and the quick eye that kept him alive within the only environment where he could be truly alive. Knowing that he cannot get back youth, knowing that youth is not even necessary in these tamer times, yet wanting at least to feel the heart wrench as known country calls up

remembered joys, Summers goes back to the mountains to wring the last drop from experience in a way that no settler can understand.

Summers is used to demonstrate one extreme in the range of consciousness examined by the book, but The Way West deals most fully with the emigrants themselves and the impact of the journey upon them. It is here, in a varied range of characters, that the novel achieves its thematic complexity. Some settlers are so limited in consciousness that the experience scarcely touches them. The human worthlessness of the poor white debt jumper is not to be redeemed by moving him two thousand miles. Among men who define experience by preconceptions, a certain loss of understanding is inevitable. Weatherby, even when he is overjoyed to be among the Christian Cayuses and away from the Sioux and their heathenish dog dance, can cherish a regret that Spalding and Whitman were not Methodists and that therefore the Cayuses do not have the best possible doctrine. For others, the women especially, the experience is likely to be reflected in personal relationships and to issue in a new understanding of the human beings immediately about them. Since most of these people were products of a provincial culture, their spirit could not always expand to incorporate the freedom and newness of the big land, the potentiality for beginning afresh and building a better society; some want only to cover the miles and set their civilization down again unchanged.

But for certain varieties of the nineteenth century American consciousness, westering was a liberating experience. There are several gradations of this theme, but Lije Evans, the Missouri

farmer, is the fullest example. Back in Independence Evans was a slow, almost stolid man, capable and gentle but without force or direction. When he is thinking of Oregon before deciding to go, he thinks of making it American, of rich soil and good hunting and free land. But beneath these reasons lies the thing that Summers likes and respects in him, the desire to break loose from the old and find a new way of things, to enlarge his life and find greater meaning in the West.

Though Evans is not unique among the movers, it is he more than anyone else on the trail who achieves fruitful interaction between the experience he has had and the experience he is getting, a process that leads to growth. He becomes a leader of his people, the kind of leader that the train and the country demand—pragmatic about rules, more humane about justice than was common in the settlements, imaginatively aware of the kinship of humanity. From the wilderness comes the sense of freedom and newness that Summers understands, but in Evans it is mixed with responsibility in a sort of contained expansiveness.

His consciousness divided, he never sees the country alone but always in conjunction with the train. For Evans the train and the wilderness go together in a pattern of movement and space that promises big things, as if he were part of larger forces that mean potentiality and hope and a better humanity. He wants names for the places where they camp—as the mountain man never did—not, as most settlers do, because he wants to reduce the unknown to the familiar, but because the country for him is a record of

human experience—a child's death from rattlesnake bite, a buffalo stampede when he thought for a moment that the train might be overrun, a place where the eye swept out for miles and the heart ached with the loveliness of America. He has felt no need to wall himself off from the great distances and the sky overhead. The land is a record of the humanity it has born, and he will want to remember every inch of it.

Evans's imagination is fired with the newer dream, the one Summers cannot really understand. These Oregoners are the builders, moving westward in hope and ignorance, pulled by fundamental needs. On the trail, out of disparate individuals they have built a true human community. Once the goal is reached they will disperse, but with something gained from the experience. Evans will remember it all. His eyes will look back in his mind now, back to country and people together, back perhaps to Mrs. Byrd lying in a tent beside the Snake. A drab and colorless woman whom no one would remember, if it hadn't been that she miscarried after being tumbled into the white and angry water. He had stood in the candlelight and looked into her eyes and "saw not Mrs. Byrd or Mrs. Anybody....He saw everybody....He saw the humble, hurtful, anxious, hoping look that was the bone-deep look of man" and knew "that she was kin to him."⁶⁶

It is these things, Evans knows, the hope and love and pain of humanity, that has made the West rich for him, the settler.

⁶⁶The Way West, p. 297.

They are at once the cost and the reward. They define the experience of westering and are inseparable from the wilderness he has crossed. Reaching far deeper in him than 54-40 or the promise of soil so rich that planted nails come up as spikes, they have made both the country and the people who walk upon it somehow larger and more meaningful.

Guthrie's fourth novel did not appear until seven years after The Way West. Compared with its immediate predecessors, These Thousand Hills (1956), the third part of the planned tetralogy, is a striking disappointment. Perhaps this is an indication that the creative process is not easily held to a formal historical scheme. Or perhaps it suggests that Guthrie's talent cannot carry him beyond manifest destiny, for all his understanding of the West and its past. The talent is here still, but the themes are not always fused with character. Sometimes, indeed, varieties of the individual consciousness--though accurate historically for the time and place--are attached to characters who are no more than types.

These Thousand Hills recounts the retreat of manifest destiny eastward from Oregon to Montana and the open cattle country. Lat Evans, grandson of Lije and named for Albert Gallatin, leaves a stunted ranch on the Umatilla for the new lands in Montana in 1880. Behind, there is proof that the Oregon dream of 1845 reached something less than fulfillment. The Way West had prepared for this disillusion. Though the sense of direction and togetherness that they found on the trail would be enough for Lije Evans and

men of his generation, the novel makes it clear that, for the younger generation represented by Evans's son and daughter-in-law, Oregon—not the trail experience itself—would be the goal.

By 1880, Brownie Evans, Lat's father, has known economic failure (the retreat from the Willamette to eastern Oregon) and has reduced his father's broad humanity to rigid respectability and a harsh fundamentalist religion that makes sins of drinking, dancing, and card playing.⁶⁷ (This, too, it should be noted, had been psychologically prepared for in The Way West.) Lat Evans's new life in Montana will form a definition of how this moral rigidity he has inherited must be altered and broadened to make room for different human needs in a growing country and changing times.

Montana, as a cattle region, was changing rapidly after 1880. Open range would soon disappear, irrigation and cultivated hay were on the way, and, after the terrible winter of 1886-87, no one would believe any longer that cattle could be wintered on the range without additional feed. Evans is one of those with the foresight to see and understand these changes. From his first arrival in Fort Benton as a hired hand on a cattle drive from Boise, his purpose is to claim land and get a start as a rancher. On the narrative level These Thousand Hills is the story of his rise from poverty to importance as a prosperous rancher

⁶⁷Guthrie has used a variant of this father image elsewhere. See, for instance, the short story, "Ebbie," Southwest Review, XXVI (Spring, 1951), 85-89.

on the upper Tansy River (another name, historically, for the Teton, and therefore in the area of Guthrie's hometown, Choteau).

Evans rises in more than an economic sense, however. The country is changing socially too—with schools, courts of law, churches, and progress toward statehood. Evans, interested in more than money-making, accepts civic duties and eventually becomes a candidate for senator. With less rigidity and greater tolerance, he is accepting his father's standard of the upright, moral life that commands man's respect and God's approval, accepting part of his heritage from the past and using it to define life in this new country.

But there is another part of the past he must learn to accept as well, relationships established when he first came to Montana and was far from the influence of home and his father's Bible. He had long ago put these relationships (a prostitute he once loved and a cowhand friend who has drifted into general worthlessness) aside as shameful and done with, but now he finds, in the midst of the respectability he has so diligently earned, that they demand the same code of loyalty he once found in them.

Evans's difficulty with his immediate past is extended to the remote past by the appearance of a ghost from the Trail of 1845: the worthless debt jumper who was his mother's father, a member of the family never mentioned in the Oregon home and easily forgotten because he turned off to California, but come now to tell Evans of an old family scandal, to tell him that the very rectitude of his parents against which he has defined himself

is itself a product of corruption and sin.

Demanding rectitude above all, Evans had thought to find it in escaping the consequences of his own early Montana years, in falling back to the standards of his parents, and in living a life respectable in the eyes of his neighbors. If old Lije Evans had represented a time and a stage of the human consciousness that could break away from the past and make a fresh beginning, his grandson is the product of settlement, established tradition, and the concept of family. To impose order upon the present he must accept the full burden of the past, both its good and evil.

Where These Thousand Hills fails thematically is in its extension of Evans's individual consciousness into a symbol of the West's new self-consciousness of its own past. The parallels between individual and region are there all right, but they seem either fortuitous or irrelevant to Evans's internal experience. The drama that Evans represents and the realization that he reaches clearly have human significance, but their connection with the historical period of the West in which he lives is less than convincing.

The book has other faults as well. Too many minor characters give the impression of being flat symbols of various types of man in the West in the 1880's--the merchant who looks ahead to stability and order, schools and churches; the drifting cowhand who cannot grow beyond the code of elemental loyalty he knew on the cattle trail; the Indiana schoolmarm who is appalled by the

raw emptiness of this new land but learns to accept its violent and chaotic past (though the comparison is unfair, her rather shallow gentility recalls Wister's Molly Wood in The Virginian). Perhaps, also, after all the golden-hearted whores fiction has inherited from Bret Harte, it is impossible to make a convincingly sympathetic character of a prostitute.

Despite such faults, the novel is by no means an entire failure. Indeed, its theme, even though not entirely realized in the artistic sense, is significant enough to rank the book above the few competent novels of the cattle kingdom we have had: the best of Rhodes, Richter's The Sea of Grass, Tom Lea's The Wonderful Country. These Thousand Hills, though perhaps less richly evocative of the region than Guthrie's earlier books, nevertheless clearly dramatizes the Montana landscape of the time and disregards all the heroics and formula associated for so long with fiction of the cattle era to seek a level of experience that is both morally and historically significant. Nevertheless, the open range still has not found its first-rate novel.

Perhaps Guthrie's achievement will not go beyond the expansive times of the fur trade and the Oregon emigration. Perhaps his creative gifts will remain less engaged by the inevitable contraction of the Western dream and a new time when the region turned back upon itself in a new self-consciousness. However this may be, his recreations of two stages of the American dream in the West have given us back, in significant fiction, vital parts of our past.

5. Walter Van Tilburg Clark

If any single author symbolizes the emergence at last of Western writing into academic and critical respectability, Walter Van Tilburg Clark is that author, for the appearance of each of his novels has made it increasingly evident that the West has finally become the subject of fiction worth the serious attention of those who study American literature. For whatever reason, Clark's work has attracted far more critical notice than any of the other new fiction of the West.

Though all Clark's novels and all but two or three of his short stories are set in the West, he is not a native of the region, for he was born in Maine in 1909 and lived there for the first few years of his life. In 1917 he moved with his family to Reno, where his father served as president of the University of Nevada. Clark attended the Reno schools, graduated from the University of Nevada, and took a master's degree at the University of Vermont. Thereafter he taught English and coached dramatics and sports for ten years in the public schools of Cazenovia, New York. Since that time he has lived in the West, writing and teaching creative writing at several universities.⁶⁸

Clark's first novel, The Ox-Bow Incident (1940), examines a theme that has proved both popular and durable in fiction of the West: the search for justice in a land where the conventional

⁶⁸ Harry R. Warfel, American Novelists of Today (New York, 1951), p. 90.

machinery of law and order was not always operative and the traditional sanctions involved in "due process" had sometimes to be ignored. Under such circumstances the region, historically, often resorted to expedients: citizens' committees, vigilante groups, extra-legal posses, and lynch law.

In earlier Western fiction the theme led most often to oversimplification of both the moral forces within individual men and the social forces of their environment. Wister's Virginian, exploring this theme in connection with Wyoming's Johnson County War, foundered upon an unassimilated mixture of Rousseauistic primitivism and Darwinian nature, and reduced the struggle for justice to a pallid allegory in which Good vanquishes Evil from the face of the earth and law appears as an unexamined instrument for the preservation of a social hierarchy.

Rhodes, though he wrote from entirely different assumptions, also oversimplified the search for human justice in the West. His stepsons of light, engaged always in the cause of the little people to whom the world has granted neither social position nor economic power, support a pragmatic ethic fitted to the simple problems of a loosely organized society and based upon a sanguine view of human nature. This vision of justice, however, could encompass neither the complexities of organized social relationships nor the psychological subtleties within the individual personality that are the necessary province of literary art. Human evil in Rhodes's books runs no deeper than simple greed. Injustice, in his Populist faith, was never more complex than economic

aggrandizement, and could easily be solved by an equivalent of a town meeting among the little people; for the true law was not that written in the books and statutes but in the compassion and spirit of helpfulness that lay close to the surface of every human heart.

The difficulties that Wister and Rhodes encountered in treating man's attempt to achieve justice in a frontier society are symptomatic of the theme's widespread misuse in Western fiction. From the time of Cooper such fiction had externalized this aspect of man's unending struggle to impose order upon his experience. Those modern descendants of the dime novel, the movie scenario and the drugstore Western paperback, are actually tawdry little morality plays. It is no accident that the hero of this flimsy allegory wears white clothing and rides a white horse. He is the agent of Light, bringing an ideal justice to a child's world.

Considered solely as a historical novel, The Ox-Bow Incident, employing all the commonplaces of the "Western," nevertheless raises to the level of mature dramatization and analysis this familiar theme of man's quest for justice in a society lacking both the tradition of law and the machinery for its enforcement. Set in Nevada in 1885, the novel possesses a full complement of the stock situations of horse opera: tough and tight-lipped cow-pokes, a tense poker game in an ominous atmosphere, a saloon brawl, cattle rustling, an illegal posse, a lynching. Yet in Clark's drama these trite and weary ingredients become integral

parts of a searching analysis of human violence, of justice (and we must remember that the need to find an operative definition of legal guilt and punishment was indeed an important social problem to the frontier society, whatever its abuse in fiction), and of social dynamics. On another level The Ox-Bow Incident is an early chapter in Clark's emerging vision of man in relationship to his fellows, to his natural environment, and to himself.

The physical events of The Ox-Bow Incident are deceptively simple. Acting upon the rumor of a rustling and a murder, a group of cattlemen and cowhands form a posse at Bridger's Wells, track down three men camped in a lonely meadow with some cattle for which they have no bill of sale, and lynch the men on circumstantial evidence. The victims later prove to have been innocent (there had been a rustling, but it was committed by someone else, and the man thought to be murdered was only wounded), but the actions of the posse, since the group involves most of the town's leading citizens, have to be treated by the sheriff and judge as honest errors in judgment. No one is legally prosecuted for the lynching, and Bridger's Wells presumably returns to its normal state.

On this level the novel's narrative tension is built around the conflicts and indecisions involved in forming the posse, the pursuit of the presumed outlaws, and the omnipresent possibility, during the long night in which the victims wait to be hanged, that they may be innocent. Within this terse dramatic structure Clark arranges a cross-section of characters representative of

an isolated Nevada cowtown of the period: the bombastic, cowardly judge; the unctuous, ineffectual minister; the town drunk; the local Negro handyman; a sadistic martinet who was once a cavalry major in the Confederate Army; the town matriarch; and several varieties of bully, follower, and well-meaning cowhand. It is from these people, with some of them opposing it, that the "mob" forms, with each member impelled by his personal motives into the general action.

In its analysis of the forces that weld these individuals into a group and cause them to commit murder, The Ox-Bow Incident is very much a "Western" novel; that is, it finds the forces that condition group behavior largely in the mores and social beliefs of the region. All the factors that, historically in the West, led to violence are present in Bridger's Wells: a long period of cattle rustling that has inflamed tempers, made men suspicious of each other, and led everyone to feel that something must be done; an available group of men without real social ties or obligations who can easily be induced to join a cause, even if only for the excitement; a simple code of behavior that places self-reliance high in its catalogue of virtues, dictates that grievances are to be settled by individual retribution, and easily makes men feel baffled and angry when they encounter the ponderous and unfamiliar institutions by which man has traditionally effected justice in more closely organized societies.

The point of Clark's narrative, however, is not simply to document the indisputable historical fact that Western expedients

for attaining justice sometimes went awry and resulted in terrible injustice, or even to dramatize the broader theme that man's passions and assumptions, without the protective barriers of time, precedent, and orderly institutions, may easily lead him to err in deciding guilt and innocence anywhere—though both these points emerge from the book. The true dramatic tension of the novel is built around a gradually evolving dialogue about the concept of justice; the concept, indeed, is virtually a surrogate central character, a shifting, developing focal point from which we view the human characters. The novel is in no sense a flat allegory, however, with characters representing known and assigned quantities; if the concept of justice is at the center of the book's drama, it takes its definition not from formalized points of view or a catalogue of disembodied virtues and vices, but from the very human context of men and their actions.

The narrative intelligence through which the reader views the action is that of Art Croft, a thoughtful working cowhand who reads books and tries to write stories during his long winter hibernations in line camps. Croft's perception is a consistently limited one; his principal usefulness as a narrative intermediary is a passive indecisiveness that makes him, in his own words, a handy father confessor for all camps of opinion. At the book's opening, Croft and his riding partner, Gil Carter, arrive at Bridger's Wells after spring roundup on another range; though they know most of the inhabitants of the area, they are outsiders and therefore suspect. It is largely fear of being suspected themselves

that sends them along with the lynch party.

The chief spokesman for traditional law and order in the novel is the frail old storeowner Art Davies, whose belief in orderly justice is made inoperative by what he recognizes as his great fault: a tendency to become so absorbed in his ideas that he substitutes garrulity and delay for persuasiveness and action. Seeking an ideal justice, Davies sees all his own arguments turned against him in the real world of relative values and pragmatic experience. He argues as the posse forms that justice can be attained only through implementing the majority opinion of right and wrong; but the victims are lynched by majority vote of the posse. He had proposed that conscience was man's link with the ideal, with God; it was man's evidence that he had a point of contact with something removed from his limited, relative self. Law and orderly process, in their turn, were the expression of the collective human conscience, an embodiment in mechanism of man's highest aspirations. When the collective human conscience is satisfied, man has approached justice as closely as he can hope to do so. But Davies lives to see this conscience apparently satisfied by an illegal lynching.

It is when the external drama is completed--the hanged men found to be innocent and the mob dispersed--that Davies's own internal drama of self-recrimination and -justification reaches its crisis. From the beginning he had tried by argument and exhortation to stop the men: first from making up a posse without the authority of the sheriff and the assurance that anyone captured

would be brought in for trial; then from hanging the victims on circumstantial evidence. All night, as the three condemned men wait for dawn, Davies seeks to convince the most receptive individuals among the lynchers that they must take the accused men in for trial, opposing himself against the mob's quietly sardonic leader, Major Tetley, for Davies the incarnation of bestial amorality and the sadistic lust for cruelty. Tetley, whose rigidity and harshness have driven his own weak and sensitive son Gerald to near madness, remains easily in control of the group. When Tetley brings the verdict to hang the victims to a vote, only four others stand out with Davies against him.

Davies's attempts at self-justification after the murder has been accomplished must therefore begin with the primary fact of failure. With his belief in the collective conscience of mankind, he would like to think that what he felt in his own conscience was the general property of all the men who participated either actively or passively in the lynching--with, of course, the exception of Tetley, who is simply a murderous, unfeeling beast. If Tetley's impetus and direction had not been there, Davies feels, he could have persuaded the others, for they all must have felt that what they were doing was unjust. Therefore his own guilt, his recognition that he knowingly allowed evil to be done, however, difficult for him to bear, would be a collective guilt, something shared with all other men as part of the human condition.

This hope is destroyed by Croft, the nearest thing to a

disciple that Davies has found. He had believed that Croft understood his ideas so thoroughly that the younger man perceived his every thought. But Croft had only felt that the lynching was wrong and that the men had gone so far, at the end, that they could not be turned; Davies had known in his heart that the victims were innocent. Whatever the misgivings of the others, only he had truly understood the injustice being perpetrated.

With this possibility lost to him, Davies must fall back upon Tetley as an enraged animal so crazy to see the men hanged, and to see his son Gerald destroy himself by helping to hang them, that he could not have been stopped except by killing him. But Davies, as he himself fully realizes, had recognized this possibility when he did not take a gun along. Whatever excuses he makes for himself about having gone as the emissary of peace and brotherhood and without carrying the symbol of violence, the fact remains that he had not anticipated bringing the struggle to an issue: that he had not intended to save the men but only hoped that something would do it for him. And, as he tells Croft with self-loathing, when the men stood with ropes about their necks, he had been glad that he didn't have a gun, that he did not have a means to act at the crucial moment.

The final bit of justification which is left to him is that he would have had to kill Tetley to stop him, and that it is not entirely weakness on his own part that he could not have brought himself to murder. Even this shred of righteousness is lost to him when word is brought that Tetley, with his son dead as a

suicide, has fallen upon his sword in the manner of any Roman officer and taken his own life. This, of course, implies conscience and remorse in the man Davies had wanted to believe an animal. Even Tetley had a buried remnant of human morality and might have been prevented from murder. Davies's collapse is then complete; he is reduced to a bundle of gibbering pain and grief.

Before his collapse, Davies's last rational position was that he had betrayed his deepest convictions through lack of physical courage, one of the most elementary human virtues. His confusion of moral purpose is more complex than that, however. As he has assigned to Tetley the role of Evil with a capital letter, thinking him the agent of non-human forces, Davies has assumed to himself the role of Good. Failing in a struggle that he had seen as almost celestial, he takes upon himself the entire load of guilt; in his virtually incoherent tirade of self-condemnation (he is confessing to Croft) can be heard the recurring theme of himself as Christ assuming the load of all human guilt and thus absolving other men—and with this the occasional, partial recognition that this too is a false position in a human world of relative values and passions, that the situation had not called for a Christ; "all it needed was a man."⁶⁹

Even when trying most ardently to engage successfully in human action, Davies had been betrayed by his ideas—or perhaps his ideals, his incorrigible desire to abstract such human

⁶⁹The Ox-Bow Incident (New York, 1942), p. 280.

imperatives as justice from context and to think of them as absolutes. The point of Clark's novel is that the context is all; that is why Davies's arguments about the collective conscience and the majority opinion return to defeat him, why Tetley, though vicious and pitiless certainly, proves to be entirely human. In Tetley the conscience that Davies preached led men toward the light has become so twisted and deformed that it directs him inevitably toward vengeance and death.

Because he is the most articulate character, it is too easy to see Davies as the thematic center of the book, the "hero" in whose consciousness and actions the novel's themes find their fulfillment. This is an error most commentators have made. If it were true that he is the focal point of the themes, then many of the scenes and characters in the book would be there simply for "Western" atmosphere, for they have no direct bearing either on Davies's struggle or the dynamics that impel the pack toward wanton violence. Nor is Davies's growth in the novel sufficient to encompass the full meaning of his terrible twenty-four hours. His career, indeed, scarcely climbs above pathos. He is an old man at the book's opening, and the result of his struggle is less increased awareness than the confirmation and extension of failures that had their genesis in the past.

The novel's themes center less on Davies as an individual, finally, than upon the society of Bridger's Wells in 1885, and it is the young narrator, Art Croft, who at the end most completely understands the story he is telling. Though his terse monosyllables

and ambiguous role are deceptive, Croft grows in the course of the novel to full awareness of the society he is describing.

Bridger's Wells is a society in transition, a bridge between two eras; it "was losing its stage-stop look and beginning to settle into a half-empty village of the kind that hangs on sometimes where all the real work is spread out on the land around it, and most of the places take care of themselves."⁷⁰ It is a community in which man's institutions are likewise unsettled and transitory. One church is boarded-up and abandoned, with half its paint cracked off; the other, presided over by a minister who has no real influence with his people, has removed itself as far as possible from the center of town, as if disclaiming all responsibility. The judge's house is similarly dissociated from its surroundings: "The whole house looked too high and narrow."⁷¹

One phase of Western history has passed through Bridger's Wells, and no new basis of existence and behavior has yet arisen to replace what is gone (the town is located in one of the few isolated areas in the state not yet served by the railroad). This lack of any viable cultural tradition is best illustrated by Canby's saloon, the town meeting place and the only man-made structure that is closely described in the book.

Behind Canby's bar hangs a dark, grimy oil painting in a heavy frame embellished with pastoral symbols and

⁷⁰The Ox-Bow Incident, pp. 4-5.

⁷¹The Ox-Bow Incident, p. 76.

showing a woman who...had a heavy belly and thighs and breasts, stretched out on a couch pretending to play with an ugly bird on her wrist, but really encouraging a man who was sneaking up on her from a background so dark you could see only his little, white face....I'd been around back once, and knew the picture had a little brass plate which said, dryly, Woman with Parrot, but Canby called it "The Bitching Hour."⁷²

On the opposite wall there hangs a large, faded print of a vast reception at Virginia City's Crystal Club (both hotel and city are obvious symbols of Nevada's palmy gold rush days) showing President Grant and a great many other dignitaries in a scene of wealth and splendor—a picture from a gaudy past already so remote and forgotten that each figure bears a number and a list at the bottom provides a matching name. There are, as well, a romanticized portrait of a thoroughly bleached Indian maiden and one of a stagecoach drawn by horses with impossibly rounded bodies and thin little legs that are all in step and none of which touch the ground. For Nevada in 1885 (and Clark has used this time and place symbolically elsewhere) the old romantic dream of a golden West had played itself out, and it was past time for the region to get its feet on the ground once again.

All the characters of the novel are part of this changing society with a lost past and an indefinite future, but Carter, Croft's working partner, will do for an example. The prototype of the cowboy of another era, Carter takes his pleasure in three things: liquor, women, and fighting. But his girl in Bridger's

⁷²The Ox-Bow Incident, p. 6.

Wells, formerly a lady of flexible morals, is respectably married now; and Carter can't even pick a decent fight with her husband, an elegant young man from San Francisco who employs a polished civility and ironic wit instead of fists.

It is within this context of changing customs and values that Croft grows to awareness. He begins, in one sense, as an adolescent; that is, he is unsure of himself in relation to other men and still uncommitted to any clear principles. His code at this time revolves around simple loyalty to his partner and concern that he himself shall appear to fit into the crowd, particularly that his physical courage shall not be questioned. During the time the lynching party is forming, and during much of the subsequent action, Croft's principal concern is how he and Carter appear to other men.

He has, in addition, certain social prejudices which he recognizes as irrational. From working with Texans he has absorbed a tinge of racial superiority toward Negroes. He is able to perceive the quietly dignified humanity of Sparks, the Negro handyman who was formerly a preacher and who goes along to do what he can to prevent the lynching, but just for a moment, talking to him as an equal, Croft resents not being called "sir," a term Sparks uses indiscriminately to impose distance between himself and all whites, including the town bum. But the moment Croft's talk drops back into the unexamined sentiments of the pack, Sparks again interposes the meaningless "sir," and Croft is equally annoyed. To make them equals again he insists that

Sparks take his coat against the cold. Croft's pattern is always this fluctuation between what he feels to be honest behavior and what he thinks is expected of him by others.

In the same way, he is repelled by any divulgence of deep feeling. For a time during the pursuit he rides next to Gerald Tetley, another adolescent, but one without possibility of growing up. Gerald has been so thoroughly cowed by his sadistic father that all his rebellion has been reduced to despising himself for his weakness and despising all other men for the fears that make them suppress any individuality and hunt down their kind in packs. To Croft this self-abnegation has a "womanish" quality which makes him uncomfortable (he feels much the same about Davies's confession), for he thinks always of how this talk would sound to others.

The change begins in Croft when he is wounded by the startled driver of a stage that the posse encounters in the night. He is hit in the left shoulder (a point he is insistent that everyone understand), a wound that leaves his gun hand unaffected and does not incapacitate him for action if he were to choose to act in defense of the condemned men. The wound, as it would be in a Hemingway novel, is a scar derived from experience, a blow that prepares Croft for re-evaluation of himself in relation to events around him. Thereafter he is psychologically removed from the immediate action ("I felt far away, like a picture")⁷³ and prepared for his greater realization as an observer.

⁷³The Ox-Bow Incident, p. 167.

Croft does not vote to save the victims against the majority; he is still too much controlled by the pack psychology. It is only after Davies's confession back in Bridger's Wells that he finally assumes his role as a bridge between the lofty, inoperative principles of Davies and the unthinking passions of the mob. Even then, when Davies is assuming his role as Christ, Croft feels the gulf that yawns between them: "We couldn't bridge the gap; he was all inside, I was all outside."⁷⁴ But in the end Croft has learned to live both inside and outside, to understand Davies's principles and yet to realize that they must be made to operate in the real world. At the book's conclusion Carter can let it all go and blame Tetley for what has happened, but Croft understands better than that now. He has struck, if only by implication, a workable medium between the irresponsibility of those who have made Tetley the scapegoat for the affair and Davies, who has undertaken the full load of human sin and thereby destroyed himself.

Beyond the purely social theme of The Ox-Bow Incident, unobtrusive in the novel yet surrounding the action, is another theme that has assumed increased importance in Clark's later fiction. The best critical statement of this theme appears in an article by John Portz:

To Clark, the essence of man's existence consists of a contention between contrary energies, both within man and outside of him, which lead either toward unity or disunity. Man is the center of rival drives:

⁷⁴The Ox-Bow Incident, p. 280.

love, pushing him toward living growth and oneness; and hate, propelling him toward death and disintegration. Clark's ethical judgments also are derived from this dichotomy of forces; whatever conduces to unity is good; whatever leads to disunity is evil. The effect of this contention is that man, whose inherent nature it is to find meanings and assign values, is obliged to search for a psychological maturity which, to some extent at least, will resolve this conflict....

The background for the life-or-death battle is Nature, the largest symbol, which includes all lesser symbols, the external agent moving impersonally, not benignly or malignantly, through its courses. In this huge hieroglyphic, each man finds his own nature mirrored, and thus his own moral values; and against Nature man proves himself, accepting the circumstances of his existence and proceeding toward unity, or else rebelling and falling the victim of his own obsessive desire to overcome a Nature which he misinterprets as evil in its active intentions toward him.⁷⁵

Man's relationship to nature, a major concern of the later novels and stories, exists only in the background of The Ox-Bow Incident: in the song of the meadow lark that Croft listens for but cannot hear as he rides with the lynchers; in the unseasonal storm the posse must face as men hunt down their fellow men; in the sheltered ox-bow valley, which Croft remembers as a place of peace and beauty, now turned into a chamber of horrors by the actions of men, with the ox-bow itself symbolizing the yoke of error and cruelty that all men wear. Nature, even here, but much more so in Clark's later work, is the external reality against

⁷⁵"Ideal and Symbol in Walter Van Tilburg Clark," Accent, XVII (Spring, 1957), 112. I am indebted to my friend John Portz for a number of major points in the following discussion, particularly his division of Clark's characters into types that express an aspect of the central concept. The idea of union between man and nature in Clark's fiction has been most fully discussed, although he much over-emphasizes its importance, by Arthur Boardman, "The Muted Horn: A Study of the Prose of Walter Van Tilburg Clark" (unpublished Master's thesis, University of Nevada, 1953).

which man projects his inner self, and what the individual perceives there depends upon his own worthiness. For those who are unable to give of themselves to the mountains, observes Tim Hazard of The City of Trembling Leaves (1945), climbing peaks does nothing more than exercise the legs. But at his most worthy, in Clark's novels and stories, man can sometimes achieve a sense of union with the natural world that cannot be duplicated in any other relationship. At that moment all the multiplicity of his ordinarily fragmentary human life is bound up in an instant of transcendent experience which defies verbalization or logical analysis but which carries with it the deepest emotional and intellectual satisfaction.

Such a theme obviously has a kind of mysticism as its base, and it is this quality which distinguishes Clark's later treatment of the unity-disunity theme. It appears in its full implications in Clark's second novel, The City of Trembling Leaves. The following passage relates only one of a number of such moments in the life of the book's hero, Tim Hazard:

It was in this moment that I felt the birth of the world, and the deep, sad kinship of everything in it. I had considered this kinship, of course, innumerable times, but I knew it then, beyond question. It was revelation. It was in me without an idea. All that I had ever considered, argued and doubted about universal kinship, by bones and by atoms, by the seasons of fruiting and of death, by the immortality of generation, by the universes of space and the grain of dust, was in that instant established and yet made a childish tinkering with notions....

The moment endured without losing intensity, and became an illusion of dissolution. I was partitioned among all things, and free of the limits of any of them, or of time or of space. I felt so near the center of what is, the answer, that a little fear, half joy, raised

hair on my neck. I actually felt that if I held out my two hands, the answer would be in them, and I was hungry for it and afraid of it at the same time.⁷⁶

And this is Buck, the adolescent of Clark's novelette, "The Watchful Gods":

He had never before, that he could remember, felt so strong and confident and happy, or so much alive. He experienced one unification after another with the whole dazzling, wonderful world, so that, at moments, he even felt he could launch himself out from the canyon mouth, like a gull, and play with the wind over the surf in great, imaginative curves and swoops, and slow, feathery risings.⁷⁷

To Hal Bridges, the adolescent of The Track of the Cat (1949), similarly come moments when he can approach the center of all meaning:

It's the God of Life against the God of Death, that's what it is, he thought, and for a moment felt that he was almost into the big secret, the secret that was quiet in the middle of everything....He was tremendously hopeful. Everything seemed to be getting more beautiful and more important around him.⁷⁸

The word adolescent is necessary in the above identifications because it is a key word in Clark's work and characterizes one of the three major figures he has used to objectify the opposing forces that impel man toward unity or disunity. Adolescence, in Clark's use of it, denotes less the years between childhood and maturity than that state of consciousness which is still open to wonder, still unresolved into the rigidities of pattern. It is a period of growth and change, the time when the individual is

⁷⁶The City of Trembling Leaves (Garden City, 1946), pp. 108-09.

⁷⁷The Watchful Gods and Other Stories (New York, 1950), p. 221.

⁷⁸The Track of the Cat (New York, 1949), pp. 130-31.

most receptive to that mystical sense of oneness with all things which lends life its greatest meaning. The opening pages of The City of Trembling Leaves make it clear that the principle of adolescence in his view extends beyond the individual to larger social groups and even to nations.

Reno, the city of the title, can be divided into parts that are adolescent and parts that are its opposite, or "moribund." The adolescent sections can be distinguished by the trees that grow in them, for in the sun-drenched, mountainous land of the Great Basin has arisen a race of tree-worshippers, maintaining an "alliance with the eternal, with the Jurassic Swamps and the Green Mansions"⁷⁹ through nurturing living growth from the earth. There is also, in Reno, the moribund region found in any city,

the ersatz jungle, where the human animals, uneasy in the light, dart from cave to cave under steel and neon branches, where the voice of the croupier halloos in the secret glades, and high and far, like light among the top leaves, gleam the names of lawyers and hair-dressers on upstairs windows....Yet there is one important difference between even this region and the truly moribund cities of the world, the difference which makes Reno a city of adolescence, a city of dissonant themes, sawing against each other with a kind of piercing beauty like that of a fourteen-year-old girl or a seventeen-year-old boy, the beauty of everything promised and nothing resolved. Even from the very center of Reno,...and even at night, when restless club lights mask the stars, one can look in any direction and see the infinite shoals of the leaves hovering about the first lone crossing light.⁸⁰

Some cities are entirely moribund (San Francisco, as Clark uses it in The Track of the Cat, is one), and perhaps even some

⁷⁹The City of Trembling Leaves, p. 3.

⁸⁰The City of Trembling Leaves, p. 12.

nations or continents have so given themselves over to the forces of death that the possibility of growth is gone. Toynbee's thesis of decay, for instance, is "the frail and imitative offspring of a moribund European dogma" which cannot be "sufficiently dynamic to become the fusing faith of a new world."⁸¹

In the end the moribund society will reach the social suicide that has preceded the events of the often anthologized story, "The Portable Phonograph." "We are the doddering remnant of a race of mechanical fools," observes one of the four survivors left upon the dead, bomb-scarred earth. "I have saved what I love; the soul of what was good in us here; perhaps the new ones will make a strong enough beginning not to fall behind when they become clever."⁸² He has saved Shakespeare, the Bible, The Divine Comedy, Moby Dick, a few records, and a portable phonograph. But even now, reduced to four individuals, man has not learned that sense of human community that might once have saved him; the owner of these precious testaments from the human past goes to sleep clutching a piece of lead pipe to protect them from his fellows.

The danger of man's falling prey to his own cleverness, to his machinery, appears often in Clark's work. Once it is a man who has escaped the onerous bonds of his business world to play river boatman in a small stream, guiding a leaky, sodden old boat through a shallow rapids as if he were the first pioneer to attempt

⁸¹The Watchful Gods, p. 228.

⁸²The Watchful Gods, p. 182.

the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon. He is called out of his play-acting by a woman's petulant voice yelling that "D.L." wants him back in town right away—back in that "ersatz jungle" where not even names remain to remind men of their individuality.

Perhaps the point is most explicit, however, in the almost parable-like story, "Why Don't You Look Where You're Going?" Here a huge ocean liner—"white as a sainted leviathan, but too huge for even God to have imagined it"⁸³—bears a cargo of passengers who have submitted the direction of their lives to a self-sufficient mechanical creation of men's minds: "The wheel took care of itself, the fuel sped upon quick wires, the warm and supple steel joints rose and fell, self-oiled to perfect limberness. More like a white Utopian city than any earth will ever bear, she parted the subservient waters and proceeded."⁸⁴ In mid-ocean the liner overtakes and almost runs down a small sailboat occupied by a single man. As he scrambles to get his tiny craft out of the way, the man shouts up to the tiers of faces above his head the question which is the title of the story. The passengers, high in their Utopian city, are amused at such colossal impudence. Having traded any moral direction in their own lives for the anodyne of comfort, having removed themselves from any real relationship with nature, they cannot possibly

⁸³The Watchful Gods, p. 113.

⁸⁴The Watchful Gods, p. 114.

understand that it is the man in his tiny sailboat, trusting himself to the ocean and winds of the natural environment, who really knows where he is going.

Such stories are thinly structured parables, sketchy in characterization and having little plot in the conventional sense. They recount, generally, the dilemma of man after the battle for the psychological reconciliation of the opposing forces within him has been lost. Their dramatic focus is more often upon the people riding the luxury liner than upon the individual manning the tiller of his own sailboat. But in his novels Clark has probed what he regards as man's rival drives—love urging him toward life and unity, hate pushing him toward death and fragmentary consciousness—in a much deeper way, making clear both the genesis and scope of his conception.

If the adolescent is at that crucial point of gigantic awareness, that moment of agonizing empathy with all things, it is a transitory state for most men. The following quotation appears in the introductory chapter of the manuscript version of The City of Trembling Leaves (owned by the Library of Congress):

In adolescence all things for the first time accumulate into one great and strange flavor of life, and yet must be examined and tasted singly, every damned one of them. Imagine that delectable, stupendous, agonizing and symphonic concentration upon obtaining a whole and bearable body out of ten million wounded parts. That doesn't happen again, either, except to the rare, continuous adolescents, the poets, artists, composers and broken hearted lovers. After that for most of us comes the defeated acceptance of multiplicity....Don't you ever believe these bony, love-sick for everything youngsters don't know what it's all about. Well, no, they don't, really, But they're closer to it than they ever were

before, or ever will be again. They are, their very selves, unconscious multiplicity in search of a meaning.⁸⁵

Nevertheless, most adults—those who are neither artists nor broken-hearted lovers—must pass beyond the adolescent state of mingled pain and ecstasy to something more durable. Even the twelve-year old boy of "The Watchful Gods," Clark's most complete study of initiation into adulthood by undergoing an emotional experience which destroys forever the childhood world, has already realized, despite his joy in those infrequent moments of unification, that it might be preferable to attain "a steady, happy aliveness that was just comfortably below ecstasy, and sometimes seemed to him even better than ecstasy, because it felt like a state that might become permanent."⁸⁶ The significance of Clark's conception, for his literary work, must be judged by how fully it measures the adult's world, not the child's.⁸⁷

Tim Hazard of The City of Trembling Leaves is Clark's character who most explicitly passes through the various stages of awareness of himself in relation to nature. In a sense this novel is Clark's Mardi, almost, at times, a notebook of ideas about the human intellect and emotions, filled with characters who drop away and are not seen again. It is the most loosely organized piece of Clark's work, and it even has a narrator, seldom present on the scene, called Walt. Nevertheless it is suggestive of the

⁸⁵Portz, Accent, XVII, 117-18.

⁸⁶The Watchful Gods, p. 213.

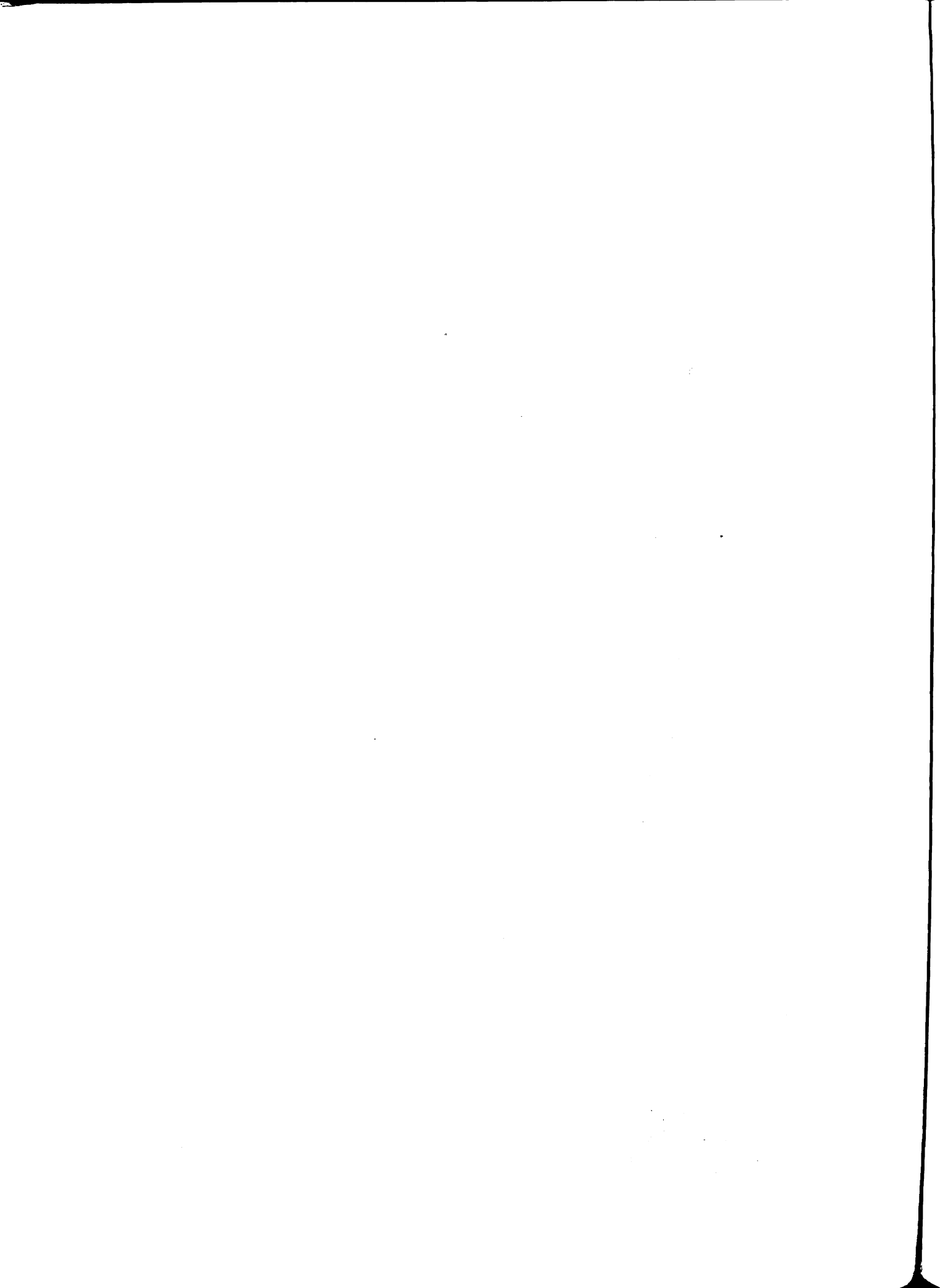
⁸⁷At times Clark's conception, assigning as it does a great deal of meaning to non-human life, has found excellent dramatic

way Clark would later use both his conception and his Western setting.

The first stage of Tim's relationship to nature, when the sense of union of self with the entire natural world comes frequently, he later refers to as his St. Francis period. His approach to nature at this time is essentially religious, and he feels generalized affection for all natural creatures. In his human relationships he is withdrawn and dreamy, having little contact with what passes for reality with his parents and his schoolmates. He is equally remote from that "jungle" near the schoolyard where bolder boys and girls conduct their first experiments with sex and the larger jungle formed by the treeless, steel and concrete center of the city, the moribund region of Reno. His room during this period is a monastic cell, a clean, frugal retreat for the unworldly St. Francis figure.

This stage of his development, so conducive to worship (the child Tim prays many times each day, but never to the single, omnipotent God of traditional theology; his praises are directed to all of nature's gods), leads him quite naturally to idealize girls, particularly Rachel Wells. During most of his school years his whole existence is directed toward this devotion, and Rachel becomes for him the symbol of an ideal purity and contemplation that stand beyond ordinary human possibilities. She is associated

expression in stories where human beings figure either slightly or not at all. This is true of "Hook" (reprinted in The Watchful Gods, pp. 3-30). For an analysis of this story see Herbert Wilner, "Walter Van Tilburg Clark," Western Review, XX (Winter, 1956), 104 ff.



in his mind with Mt. Rose, lofty, timeless, the dwellingplace of the gods. (Not until much later will he realize that she actually lived in the Court House Quarter of Reno, an area of "dark yesterdays"—almost a moribund region.) But Tim is unfitted for his pursuit of the ideal by its very awesomeness. In Rachel's presence he falls always into nervous, uncontrollable garrulity that never allows him to say the things that matter—reminiscent of Davies's difficulty when bringing his ideal of justice into the real world.

His second phase comes upon him after Rachel has left Reno. Here he can be called the "angry man" (the term is John Portz's), the man who is split by his rival drives and finds no moments of wholeness, who is directed by his hatred toward death or dissolution, although in Tim this state does not progress to complete psychological disintegration. During this period he lives in the heart of the downtown jungle, the moribund region; the music for which he lives he is unable to write; and both the outward neatness and inner joy implied by the St. Francis life are lost to him.

His salvation comes, finally, through his recognition that the ideal truly must be unattainable if it is to remain an ideal, that its pursuit leads not to attainment but to self-destruction. Years after their childhood difficulties Rachel returns to Reno and climbs Mt. Rose with him. There at last he understands that, for him, she belongs among the gods of the mountain, and that he must live in the valley below and among men. Thereafter his

development is toward that contained joy—that happiness that is less than ecstasy—that is the best goal for the adolescent who grows up. His development is toward a life lived within human possibilities and responsibilities, toward marriage, a family, and the music that is his work.

It has been necessary to discuss in detail Clark's major philosophical conception and the three characters he has found to illustrate its various parts because both are of central concern in his work on the West. The St. Francis figure, a stage in Tim Hazard's youth here, appears elsewhere as an attitude characteristic of later life, in the mature man who still finds his greatest meaning in private, ineffable moments during which he has a sense of union with the natural world. There are dangers in this attitude. An over-riding one Clark had already shown, in another way, in Davies: the possibility that one may become so enraptured with an ideal world that he loses contact with this one. The angry man figures in the earlier work as well, in each of those individuals whose private hatred (and each of them does have a carefully documented private hatred) drives him toward murder for his victims and his own death as a moral human being. Similarly, Croft is the adolescent who matures to create a bridge between adolescence and the St. Francis world.

All of Clark's work draws its power, however, far less from its central conception than from the dramatic context within which that conception is worked out. And this context is the West: not simply the West as background, but the West as dramatically created context, a region with a past and a present that take on

symbolic impact in his books. Even The City of Trembling Leaves, set in the 1920's and '30's and seeming to rely least of Clark's books upon the Western cultural past, makes dramatic use of its setting. Thus the moment that Tim most closely approaches attainment of his ideal, the one night in all his relationship with Rachel when it seems to him that he may at last possess his vision, occurs at Bowers' Mansion. The Mansion, relic of the Comstock days and now a dancehall, is the mute symbol of an insufficient dream, a fitting "objective correlative" for Tim's own vision. Indeed, the entire pilgrimage that carries Tim toward psychological maturity takes place against a vast Western landscape, stretching from Tonopah to Carmel, and each individual place has its significance within the book's pattern of symbols.

Both these aspects of Clark's writing, the major conception and the use of Western history and place, join most fruitfully in his latest novel, The Track of the Cat. Here, with the setting a Nevada ranch in a lonely valley in 1900 and the action a three-day hunt for a mountain lion by three brothers in turn, Clark brings together what he has had to say thus far about man in the West—psychologically, socially, and historically.

The three major characters of Clark's conception are carefully schematized and subdivided in the Bridges family. Both the father and mother, though in different ways, are parts of the angry man figure. He, over seventy at the time of the novel, had been one of those who roamed the West in search of the big rock candy mountain, wasting the resources of the land and his own potential

as a human being with equal profligacy. What he remembers from the past are the moribund cities chained to their old inadequate dream, Virginia City in the days when it expected new and greater Comstocks, or San Francisco planning "to be the Babylon of the world, the new Jerusalem, the capital of the Pacific, the very shrine of wealth and beauty and fashion." He has worshipped, in all his long life, only money and power without principle. The prophets he recalls are the speculators and plungers who manipulated mining stocks; the creed that he remembers even now comes in the words of President Grant, whom he quotes "with the care and awe of a disciple."⁸⁸ In his old age he has built a private and impenetrable world out of his whiskey bottle, moving outside all human responsibility.

The mother's eyes are always filled with "dancing furies." In her the internal war brought on by hatred is unceasing, the personality held back from the chaos of disintegration only by a supreme effort of will. Her rancor has found expression in religion, in a narrow, bitter creed that takes the Old Testament Jehovah as its source and places its dark emphasis on death and sin, denying life and love.

Arthur Bridges, the oldest son, is the complete St. Francis figure. His real life is composed of those moments when, in an ecstasy of compassion for all things that live and grow, he feels near the center of things. The tiny figures that he whittles

⁸⁸The Track of the Cat, p. 60.

while sitting on Cathedral Rock could form a journal of those moments when he has been truly alive:

The extent of the view was great enough to show the curve of the horizon, and give the feeling that the world was floating in space, and sometimes, under its influence, his mind would sweep together...the many troublesome, fragmentary thoughts of weeks or even months, into the one big answer they had all been looking for, the answer that, like all good answers, was only a beginning of a bigger question....They were a kind of secret diary, those whittlings, a notebook of his private living and all that was important to him....The question that went with the last piece mattered more than those before it, as the piece itself was better cut, simpler and meaning more.⁸⁹

But Arthur, despite his inner satisfaction and his sense of direction, has reached a crucial phase in the development of the St. Francis figure. At forty, he can no longer move so confidently back and forth between the internal and external worlds as he once had. He must continually touch things now to reassure himself of the kind of reality that others accept. Not only is he inoperative in the dynamics of human relationships, living almost completely outside these concerns and placing his trust in the slow passage of time, but his empathy with the world of nature has unfitted him even for self-preservation. At the moment the mountain lion leaps upon him to destroy him he sees the wound a steer's horn has made on its belly, and feels the pain of it in his own side.

Detached from the present as he is, Arthur fills the roles of both historian and prophet. It is he who describes the end

⁸⁹The Track of the Cat, pp. 78-79.

of one kind of westering:

That was a kind of dream too, a big, fat one, and it's over. We've gone from ocean to ocean..., burning and butchering and cutting down and plowing under and digging out, and now we're at the end of it. Virginia City's where the fat dream winked out. Now we turn back....We can start digging into ourselves now; we can plow each other under. But not so many men will like that for a hope. Even a good dream, backed up, turns nightmare, and this wasn't a very good one to start with. A belly dream.⁹⁰

But if he is the evaluator of the past, he is also the prophet of the future, of that time when men will have substituted love for hate and life for the everlasting race toward death that now obsesses them. His hooded parka makes him resemble a monk, and his brother Curt calls him "priest," "medicine man," and "prophet." As with any prophet, the meaning of his life comes clear only after his death at Cathedral Rock. His greatest impact, at last, is upon his youngest brother.

Curt Bridges, next to Arthur in age, is the complete angry man. Irretrievably given over to the dark powers of death and disintegration by his own hatred, he has only fury to turn upon the external world. Though he thinks of himself as belonging entirely to the present, he is bound to the past. Like his father he worships money and San Francisco; like Fitzgerald's Gatsby he must believe that the clock can be turned back, that tomorrow will bring bigger and more glorious Comstocks. During the two days and nights in which he hunts the black panther, perhaps the most dramatically powerful pages of the book, all nature becomes

⁹⁰The Track of the Cat, p. 13.

a huge metaphor of his own internal disintegration. Without knowing it he has been running all his life toward the cliff that finally carries him to his death, running from a phantom cat that has its origin in his own warped psychology.

The third brother, nineteen-year-old Hal, is the meeting place for these forces. Beginning as an adolescent, he grows through three revelation-filled days to that position of "bridge" between past and future, between the man who lives all outside and the man who lives all inside, that all Clark's novels ask. Again and again he reminds himself of the lessons that Arthur has taught him, but he never loses the grip on immediate reality that was Curt's special gift. Always he must warn himself away from the blind anger that has destroyed Curt and his mother, for that too is in him. And, finally, he is named for his father, making it clear that the old fat dream of the West is also part of his heritage.

Most reviewers have tended to see the black cat, which kills Arthur and is indirectly the agent of Curt's destruction, as a generalized symbol of natural evil. This is the view held by Joe Sam, an ageless Paiute who lives at the ranch. His wife and children were killed during the first snowstorm of a winter long ago by a huge black panther. For Joe Sam, who is the inarticulate record of all the past in the West (he remembers when Frémont camped beside Pyramid Lake, and so is a survivor from the time before the whites came), the cat has grown to mythological dimensions and has become the symbol of an indestructible natural

evil that intends to drive all men out of the region—perhaps, indeed, now the agent of vengeance for his own people against the white invaders.

To Arthur, who best understands Joe Sam, this is superstition rather than supernaturalism, but perhaps as good a symbol as any of the unknown that most men fear because it is unknown. He does not dread hunting the cat because he thinks it a phantom, but because he knows it is flesh and blood. The rifle he must carry and the prospect of killing destroy his precious rapport with nature, for he has searched for the unknown with joyous anticipation rather than fear. When the cat leaps upon him he is dreaming of his good moments on Cathedral Rock, and his rifle is unloaded.

To Curt, who has the practical man's brutal contempt for Joe Sam as a member of a race that has proved inferior in the struggle for domination, and for all superstition, the cat is a thing to be hunted, a victim for his rifle and skill. He cannot believe that the natural world contains anything that he cannot conquer and destroy. When the natural world becomes unfamiliar in a storm, however, it also becomes the malignant projection of his own hatred, and the cat is its most terrifying agent, sending him running blindly from his own panic toward death.

It is Hal who kills the cat at last. He has tried to understand both Joe Sam's private world of superstition and phantoms and Arthur's equally private mystical sense of union, but he never forgets the real world of real mountain lions. Always he is in

poised balance between Arthur and Curt. Killing the cat is a necessary evil, not Curt's vengeance, and even at the moment of killing, Hal feels compassion for the beautiful thing he has had to destroy.

Thus the cat is a much more specific symbol than the reviewers suggested. It is neither malignant nor benign; it is merely neuter. It is a small part of that indifferent natural world against which each man sees his own nature mirrored. Joe Sam's symbol of the unknown, whether it is to be feared as Joe Sam fears it or joyfully pursued as Arthur has pursued it, remains as elusive as ever; it is not to be tied down to a dead animal lying in the willows. And from the kill of this entirely natural cat, Hal will return to the ranch and his own place in the world of men (too much has been made of man isolate in nature in Clark's work; there is always this return). Of all the second generation Bridges, only he will marry and pass on his heritage to a third generation.

In combination with Clark's major concept, "westering"—the whole past of a region that from the first was wrapped in dream—is the central matrix from which The Track of the Cat draws its symbols and its themes. The two combine, in fact, to become Clark's primary insight: man's reliance upon a natural environment which must sustain him but which in the past he has exploited and destroyed. Now the physical conquest is over; the West has ended at the ocean. Now indeed man must turn back upon himself, eradicate the hatred that made him a destroyer, and create the

world that Arthur envisioned and Hal, the inheritor who understands his inheritance, may help to make. Succeeding, man will abandon his directionless utopian city, return to comprehension of the natural environment upon which he must ultimately depend, and learn at last where he is going. Failing, he will create the dead world of "The Portable Phonograph," a world where the haters and exploiters have had their way at last.

In a general sense, Clark's work can be used as a convenient summary of the new fiction that has taken the West as its subject. For all their differences, these writers have one major theme in common: the conviction that man must turn back upon himself now that he has reached the Pacific, must turn from physical conquest of the environment to conquest of himself as an individual and a member of society, must remove his dream from the wilderness that possessed it for so long and, improving and changing it, direct it to the world of men. The dream of westering was many little dreams, some of them good ones, but there is a sense, in this fiction, that they were all swept up into one big bad dream that turned sour and died. With intelligence, insight, talent, and sometimes major creative gifts, these writers have given us back the past of our West, in a context of far greater meaning than it ever possessed in fiction before.

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