

Plundered Province: The American West as Literary Region

by Gregory McNamee

“Let a philosophic observer commence a journey from the savages of the Rocky Mountains eastwardly towards our seacoast,” Thomas Jefferson wrote in 1808, after he had learned of such matters from the reports of Lewis and Clark. “These he would observe in the earliest stage of association, living under no law but that of nature, subsisting and covering themselves with the flesh and skins of wild beasts. He would next find those on our frontiers in the pastoral state, raising domestic animals to supply the defects of hunting. Then succeed our own semi-barbarous citizens, the pioneers of the advance of civilization, and so in his progress he would meet the gradual shades of improving man until he would reach his, as yet, most improved state in our seaport towns. This, in fact, is equivalent to a survey, in time, of the progress of man from the infancy of creation to the present day.”

It should stand as little more than a

curio of proto-social Darwinism, but Jefferson’s survey instead offers a program for the great mass of writing about the American West, from James Fenimore Cooper’s *Leatherstocking Tales*, written at a time when the Connecticut River marked the Western frontier, to Louis L’Amour’s ongoing saga of the Sackett clan, where the vicious wilderness of catamounts and rogue Indians stands opposed to the virtuous advance of Eastern mores. Although students of westward expansion have rejected Jefferson’s continuum since its last gasp in Frederick Jackson Turner’s *The Frontier in American History* (1920), it continues to thrive in the artificial canyons of Manhattan, where a sizable branch of the publishing industry still elaborates the myth of the West and of the savage frontier.

The myth and the mythmaking apparatus are nearly as old as the nation, fueled by the accounts of explorers like James Ohio Pattie and John Charles Frémont, whose legendary lying fixed his name in American history. It presents a West of steel-jawed, rugged individualists, of cruelly deceptive aborigines (with Comanches, Apaches, and Sioux as the favorite villains), of fifth-column outlaws and renegades foolishly attempting to thwart Manifest Destiny. Alone of the planet’s geographical regions, the American West has had the dubious distinction of spawning a literature that bears precious little resemblance to reality, of providing the stage for a morality play that will not end.

The industrial mythmaking process owes its origins not only to explorers’ embellishments and the tall tales of mountain men, a popular genre in the 1840’s, but to the romantic journalism that accompanied the first great westward migrations—Mark Twain’s exaggerated tales of the jumping frog of Calaveras County, Charles Lummis’s paradisaical accounts of the Pueblo Indians in their state of natural innocence, Bret Harte’s depictions of the whiskey-soaked raw frontier. In the manner of contemporary journalists, their lesser progeny seized on the un-

usual human-interest story, ignoring the mundane realities of life in mining camps, fishing villages, and dusty farmyards. They were especially fond of celebrating violent deeds and of elevating common criminals to the rank of folk heroes, sociopathic exemplars of the breed of people who would settle the wild frontier.

A case in point is William Bonney, a/k/a Kid Antrim, a/k/a Billy the Kid. Bonney was an unlucky cowhand caught up in the so-called Lincoln County War of the 1870’s, a New Mexican feud between rival cattlemen. In the five-year course of this bloody business vendetta, Bonney is known to have killed only three men, a day’s take for your average cocaine overlord; thanks to his having chosen the losing side, a fixed jury sentenced him to hang for a murder he did not commit. He escaped, only to be shot unarmed a few days later. The journalists were there all along to misinform an eager nation of his deeds (Larry McMurtry’s 1988 novel *Anything for Billy* does a fine job of pegging their role in the unfortunate young man’s posthumous rise to fame), and within a year of his death eight books with Billy the Kid as their monstrous protagonist saw print. The industry has continued unabated ever since, continuing to advance the notion that Bonney killed 21 men in cold blood, one for every year he lived.

The Kid’s legend is one of many in a fabulous roster: Calamity Jane, Wild Bill Hickok, Wyatt Earp and the shootout at the OK Corral (which should properly be called the massacre at the OK Corral, for Earp’s enemies, as was his custom, were without weapons), the Wild Bunch, the Hole in the Wall Gang, Johnny Ringo. These are among the fruits of newspaper reporters’ overactive imaginations, fed to an overly credulous Eastern readership—Jefferson’s civilizing force—that demanded more and more tales of the savage West.

And the (American) East was not the only contributor to the process. Karl May (1842-1912), a German hack writer imprisoned for fraud,

passed his jailhouse days by inventing a cowboy hero named "Old Shatterhand" and his noble Indian companion Winnetou. May had never seen America, but he wrote 15 hugely popular novels in the 1860's and 70's wherein civilization—more exactly, German civilization—overcame savagery in a mythical West that resembles the unnamed isle of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, itself one of the first works in European literature to be set in the Americas. May's novels continue to sell, and they propel German tourists to visit the American West by the hundreds of thousands each year.

Had May ever seen the places he wrote about, he likely would not have changed a word. Zane Grey (1872-1939), an Ohio dentist who moved to Arizona in 1907 to take up a new career as a writer, traveled the West endlessly to capture the social and natural detail that provides local color, but his most famous novels—*Riders of the Purple Sage*, *The Call of the Canyon*, *Wanderer of the Wasteland*, like his forty-odd other adventure stories—are no more authentic than May's, except in incidentals of the local dialect. Neither are those of his famous successor Louis L'Amour, whose vaunted research did not save him from perpetuating the same genre-locked romantic myths of black-spittled outlaws and lone noble heroes. His Sackett saga, a multivolume mass of sloppy cliché, might as easily be set in the highlands of Scotland or the Kalahari for all the historical truths it advances.

Max Brand, Max Evans, Terry Johnston, Jim Miller, Bill Reno—the pulp-romance tradition continues, urged along by a constant readership. Like the vast run of bodice-ripper gothic and science-fiction novels, which share many other similarities with Westerns, their books are mass-produced and interchangeable, the literary equivalent of the barbed-wire strand or the Colt revolver. In their flood, books that speak to the real West, that takes the region as something other than a vermilion-and-ochre backdrop, drown unnoticed: J.P.S. Brown's *The Forests of the Night*, Charles McNichols' *Crazy Weather*, James Welch's *Fool's Crow*, and, perhaps the greatest novel ever set west of the Hundredth Meridian, Cormac

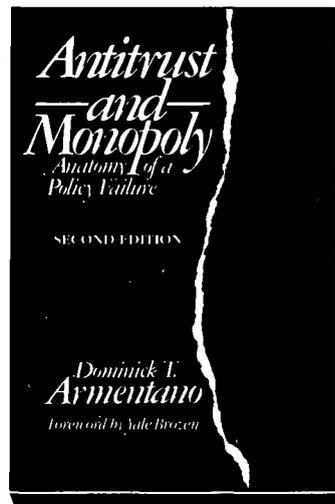
McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*, to name but a few.

Hollywood's voracious appetite for formulaic stories doesn't help matters. Evelyn Waugh hit the mark when he observed, "Each book purchased for motion pictures has some individual quality, good or bad, that has made it remarkable. It is the work of a great array of highly paid and incompatible writers to distinguish the quality, separate it, and obliterate it." Why write authentically when *Dances With Wolves*, the most nakedly cynical lone-good-guy-against-the-world oater of recent years, is the hit of the day? For every historically and culturally faithful look at the West—and in this regard Roman Polanski's *Chinatown*, Don Siegel's *The Shootist*, and Jonathan Wacks' *Powwow Highway* earn top marks—there are a dozen spaghetti Westerns, Sam Peckinpah shoot-em-ups, and mediocrities along the lines of *Little Big Man*, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, and *The Missouri Breaks*. There is little hope for improvement in an industry where the squeaky-clean Marie Osmond is cast as Josephine Marcus, Wyatt Earp's pros-

titute wife, and the constantly mugging Emilio Estevez is thought to make a suitable Billy the Kid. It appears that we'll have to make do with *Blazing Saddles*, and wonder when Arnold Schwarzenegger will take on the role of George Armstrong Custer.

Neither does it help that, in the main, academia continues to relegate both Western history and Western literature to the infra-dig confines of the overview course. As a geographical literature, writing about the American West comprises an area as large as Europe—but no sensible teacher would ever think to offer a survey embracing Homer, Petrarch, Knut Hamsun, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Thomas Mann, and the *guslars* of Macedonia with any hope of intelligible discovery. Nevertheless, it is not uncommon to hear of courses that take in Mark Twain, Mary Austin, Willa Cather, Robinson Jeffers, Ivan Doig, Frank Norris, Richard Hugo, Wright Morris, and N. Scott Momaday on the mere grounds of their supposed geographical proximity. Had Robert Frost remained in the city of his youth, San Francisco, and Mary McCarthy in Seattle, they

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would likely be required reading in that survey as well.

The time has come to stop speaking of Western American literature at all. The term has increasingly little meaning except as a buzzword for critics for whom "the new regionalism" is indeed new; it evokes not Thomas McGuane but ten-gallon hats, high noon and not ten seconds till midnight, and it will not suffice. Not long before his death last year A.B. Guthrie remarked that "a good book is not 'regional.' It is a good book because it is a good book. . . . William Faulkner and Eudora Welty weren't regional writers." Sound words, surely. But, Guthrie went on to add, "Trying to fight the [Western] myth, I tell you, is a losing fight. I'm afraid people want to think about the West in terms of Tombstone." They will do so as long as the categories by which writing set outside the Boston-Washington corridor is arranged remain fixed in booksellers' racks, publishers' lists, and college offerings.

Sequester Gary Snyder, Gretel Ehrlich, Leslie Silko, Frank Waters, Barry Lopez, Terry Tempest Williams, Amy Tan, Rick Bass, and Rolando Hinojosa-Smith in a room and you'd surely get lively discussion about the West as a place and as a source of inspiration. You would not, however,

be left with a literature in the sense of, say, the cocktail-circuit New York School of poets, and surely not of the fisticuffs of Norman Mailer and Gore Vidal battling one another in a city and culture far, far away. If writing that merely happens to be set in the West is of a superior quality, then we are properly addressing American literature, period. (As long, that is, as the canon-busters permit the notion of American literature itself to stand.)

Such distinctions are never likely to make their way into the consciousness of the trans-Fall Line East, where the important cultural decisions are made. A region can be a center; in the case of Western writers, it's a corral with a gate that can't be kicked open, as claustrophobically confining as one of Don De Lillo's Manhattan lofts. Just as the American West remains an economic colony, it is sure to remain a cultural colony as well, the source of comforting mortal tales of civilization's progress for Atlantic seaboard living rooms. His Bill of Rights daily erodes, but Jefferson's survey of the American landscape endures.

Gregory McNamee is a freelance writer and editor living in Tucson, Arizona.

Notes From a Writer of Trash

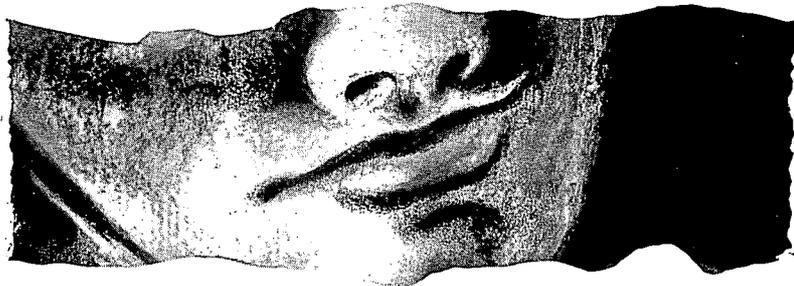
by Richard S. Wheeler

The most important datum about Western fiction is that it is at the absolute bottom of the literary heap, somewhere below pornography. English professors would cavil at calling Westerns literature; they prefer to categorize Westerns as subliterate, or entertainment.

Few, if any, educated people read Westerns. The higher the cultural and academic attainments of the reader, the less likely he will be to crack one open. He will read other category fiction, such as mysteries or science fiction, without embarrassment. But you will never catch him reading Westerns. Westerns sell least well in the upper Midwest and East, the areas with the largest numbers of college-educated people. They sell best across the South and in the Rocky Mountain states, where tastes are the most primitive. They sell around military bases, a sure sign that they appeal to the semiliterate. It is known also that Westerns appeal most to graying males, yeoman blue-collar types who have never gone beyond high school, allegedly the least imaginative and progressive elements in society.

Because Westerns are not considered significant literature, they are not usually reviewed. Most newspaper editors of the book page have never assigned a category Western for review. The *Library Journal* and *Kirkus* review a few hardback Westerns for the edification of librarians, but that is about the extent of attention paid to category Western fiction. You will find nothing about Westerns or those who write them in book news columns. You will not see Western authors on TV or radio talk shows. Western authors are never lionized at parties, and acquire no groupies, fans, or imitators. You will not find Western authors at the National Book Awards. They are never asked to lecture at great universities and neither do they become adjunct professors. Here and there you'll find college courses on Western fiction, but it usually turns out that the professor didn't mean *that* kind of Western fiction; he meant Wallace Stegner and Edward Abbey and Tom McGuane and James Welch and Louise Erdrich.

LIBERAL ARTS



A FAMILY MAN WITH AN APPETITE FOR WOMEN

As *Los Angeles Times* reporter Paul Richter wrote on June 7, "At 59, [Edward] Kennedy is the patriarch of a legendary political family, standard-bearer of American liberalism, conscientious family man and lawmaker with few peers. He is also, in some portraits, a man of flawed judgment with an appetite for women, liquor and ostentatious risks."

—from *Notable Quotables of the Media Research Center*, June 24, 1991