"The Imagined West" (1991)[1]

Richard White

For more than a century the American West has been the most strongly *imagined* section of the United States. The West of Anglo American pioneers and Indians began reimagining itself before the conquest of the area was fully complete. In the late nineteenth century, Sitting Bull and Indians who would later fight at Wounded Knee toured Europe and the United States with Buffalo Bill in his Wild West shows. They etched vivid images of Indian fights and buffalo hunts into the imaginations of hundreds of thousands of people. The ceremonials of the Pueblos became tourist attractions even while the Bureau of Indian Affairs and missionaries struggled to abolish them.

Stories about the West evolved into a particular genre, the Western, which first as novels and later as films became a defining element of American popular culture. By 1958, Westerns comprised about 11 percent of all works of fiction published in the United States, and Hollywood turned out a Western movie every week. In 1959 thirty prime-time television shows, including eight of the ten most watched, were Westerns. Mid-twentieth-century Americans consumed such enormous quantities of imagined adventures set in the West that one might suspect the decline of the Western in the 1970s and 1980s resulted from nothing more than a severe case of cultural indigestion.

This gluttonous consumption of fictions about the West is, however, only part of the story. Americans have also actively imagined their own Wests. A century of American children grew up imagining themselves to be cowboys and Indians. Such public and private fantasies spawned a store of metaphors of violent conflict and confrontation that became, along with sports metaphors and sexual metaphors, basics of male popular speech. Showdowns, last stands, hired guns, roundups, and the like became metaphors by which American men characterized and understood more mundane personal and public worlds devoid of cattle let alone gunfights or public heroics. Metaphorically, the imagined West intruded constantly on everyday American life.

This imagined West has not, however, overtly intruded on this text until now because it would have been potentially confusing to interrupt each chapter to analyze how various imagined Wests have shaped the topics of discussion. I have postponed the issues of the mythic West until, having nearly reached the end of this book, I can delay no longer. What is, then, the relationship been the variety of publicly imagined Wests—the mythic Wests—and the historic West? Even the question is misleading, for it implies that the two can be easily separated.

To understand this relationship, we must make some necessary distinctions. We must, first of all, distinguish among the people doing the imagining. Residents of the West itself have constructed various local versions of a collective past. Such imaginings have often been folkloric—that is, they are songs and stories (originally oral, later often written down) produced by people belonging to groups narrowly defined by occupation, place, or ethnicity.

The second version of the imagined West is the work of professional writers, journalists, and filmmakers who are often located outside the West itself or in that peculiar corner of it, Hollywood. They disseminate their versions of the West through mass media: books, magazines,

[1] Richard White, "The Imagined West," Ch. 21 from *"It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own": A New History of the American West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 613-32.

and movies. In terms of audience, this second imagined West appeals to national audiences, although it may also have a strong appeal among local groups of westerners, who also produce their own folklore. So powerful is the influence of this imagined West that its fictional creations and personas become symbols of the West, and real westerners model themselves after fictional characters. In the late 1970s a journalist for the *New Yorker*, Jane Kramer, wrote an account, entitled *The Last Cowboy*, of a ranch foreman on the Texas Panhandle. The hero was a skilled working cowboy who was disappointed in the realities of life on a cattle ranch. He viewed his actual modern West of absentee ranchers and agribusinesses as a declension from a truer but vanished West. His true West, however, was an imagined West, and he knew it from Westerns: real cattlemen were John Wayne in *Chisum,* or Chill Wills in *The Rounders*. His own sense of himself, and how he acted, were informed not just by the West he lived in but also by a powerful cultural image of the West he *should* have lived in. The actual West and the imagined West are engaged in a constant conversation; each influences the other.

The imagined West is a mythic West. In its everyday colloquial sense, myth means falsehood. When popular writers publish books to expose the "myths" of American history, they mean to do nothing more than inform Americans that some of what they believe about their country's past is not factually correct. In a second, deeper sense, however, myths are not so much falsehoods as explanations. Myths are stories that tell why things and people are what they are. As the literary historian Richard Slotkin has written, modern myths are "stories, drawn from history, that have acquired through usage over many generations a symbolizing function" central to the society that produces them. Myths are a deeply encoded set of metaphors that may contain all the "lessons we have learned from our history, and all of the essential elements of our world view." Myths give meaning to the world. In this sense a myth about the West is a story that explains who westerners—and who Americans—are and how they should act.

Although both myth and history aspire to derive meaning from the past, we have to distinguish between them. This is, however, not as simple as it might seem. Mythmakers usually draw from history; they use real people or actual incidents. They have no compunctions, however, about changing details, adding characters, and generally rearranging events in order to make the meaning of their stories clearer. Historians also draw from history, and they, too, are selective. Historians necessarily select from among numerous available facts in order to create a story about the past. Historians, by the code of their discipline, put great store in facts, but facts are rarely at the heart of historical disputes. Instead historians argue over the relationships between largely agreed upon facts, for it is the relationship between facts that differentiates one historian's story from another historian's story. This relationship between facts is not something historians discover; it is something they assert and argue over. Historians and mythmakers thus both seek to order the past in a way that conveys meaning. Both tell stories. But historians, also by the code of their craft, cannot reorder facts or invent new ones. Historians are thus more cramped and constricted than mythmakers in their attempts to explain what the past "means."

If we differentiate history from myth solely on the basis of facts, we will, however, run into conceptual difficulties over what a fact is and, more significantly, miss a larger difference. For a good historian, the past is, as the cliché goes, another country. People in the past operate in a different context than do we in the present; they often live by other logics. Any lessons the past teaches are those about processes and change; we cannot derive uniformly valid rules about our present situation from the past. Myth, for all its attention to the past, denies this and thus denies "history" itself. Myth refuses to see the past as fundamentally different from the present. Again, as

Richard Slotkin explains, in myth "the past is made metaphorically equivalent to the present; and the present appears simply as a repetition of persistently recurring structures identified with the past. Both past and present are reduced to single instances displaying a single 'law' or principle of nature, which is seen as timeless in its relevance, and as transcending all historical contingencies."

What Slotkin means by this is that in myth, time brings no essential change. The past and the present are not only connected, they are also metaphorically identical. The lessons of a story from the past apply equally well to the present. Myth rips events out of context and drains them of their historicity. How a cowboy acts in myth is how an American male should act regardless of time or place. A man has to do what a man has to do. Myths thus are antihistory, for history above all depends on context.

Myths may be antihistory, but myths themselves are also historical creations. Myths, again to quote Slotkin, are "generated by a particular set of cultural producers in a peculiar historical moment." People create myths at certain times and places for certain purposes, and as these purposes change over time, the meanings of mythic stories also change. American moviemakers, for example, have made Westerns during most of the twentieth century, but the meanings communicated by Westerns early in the century differed from those communicated later in the century. Myths themselves thus become historical sources reflecting the values and concerns of the period and people who produced them.

But if myth, the imagined West, is a historical product, we must remember that history—as *The Last Cowboy* shows—is also a product of myth. As people accept and assimilate myth, they act on the myths, and the myths become the basis for actions that shape history. Historians find they cannot understand people's actions without understanding their intentions, and those intentions are often shaped by cultural myths. The mythic West imagined by Americans has shaped the West of history just as the West of history has helped create the West Americans have imagined. The two cannot be neatly severed.

A western historian, Patricia Nelson Limerick, gives a remarkable example of how the imagined West and the actual West intertwine when actual Westerners and mythologized Westerners keep bumping into each other: "In 1849, Kit Carson set out to rescue a white woman, providentially named Mrs. White, who had been taken captive by the Jicarilla Apaches. When the search party caught up with the Indians, it was too late; Mrs. White had just been killed, but Kit Carson came upon a surprising souvenir: 'We found a book in the camp,' he reported, 'the first of the kind I had ever seen, in which I was represented as a great hero, slaying Indians by the hundreds.'"

This actual event in New Mexico in 1849 could be a scene from a novel by Italo Calvino: the actual Carson confronts the literary Carson. And in a sense the literary Carson proves the stronger of the two. Carson's reaction to finding the book, probably Charles Averill's *Kit Carson, Prince of the Gold Hunters* (1849), was to lament his failure to live up to his fictional reputation. The fictional Carson became the standard for the real Carson, and the connection between the two goes beyond this, for the story of the incident comes to us in a book, written by the actual Carson, to capitalize on the market the mythic Carson had created for him. The mythic Carson partially shaped the actual Carson in his image.

What Kit Carson confronted in the deserted Jicarilla camp, Westerners have in a sense been confronting ever since. There are cultural visions of the West, constantly changing but always present, that define both for Westerners and others what the western experience means.

There is not and never has been a single myth, a single imagined West. Myths and meanings are constantly in competition just as various groups within the West were always in competition.

Myths and the West: Local Imaginings

Why the West—an area long on the fringes of American life—should take pride of place in the American imagination is not entirely clear, but the rough outlines of an answer are possible. It is easiest to begin where the problem is the least mysterious: the creation of local legends about the West.

The folklore of the American West is, like all folklore, local even though the basis of most of it was imported or borrowed. This is only a seeming paradox, for even when they brazenly steal outside materials, the retailers of folklore always deposit their proceeds locally. Barre Toelkin, in writing about western folklore, has shown how an English hymn about "Beulah Land, sweet Beulah land... My heaven, my home, forever-more" came to serve, like a musical national forest, multiple uses in the West. Westerners originally used the hymn to illustrate a national myth that imagined the West as a garden awaiting immigrants. The decline of garden imagery in the face of actual experience in the West did not eliminate the hymn, but instead gave it a new life in local parodies. The hymn's lines "I've reached the land of corn and wine / and all its riches now are mine" became in South Dakota, "We've reached the land of dying wheat, / Where nothing grows for man to eat." In New Mexico, the same lines became "This is the land of dusty roads, / Of rattlesnakes and horny toads," and in Oregon, "I've reached the land of rain and mud, / Where flowers and trees so early bud." As people repeated the parody, they made it their own, localizing it to reflect the conditions of a particular place.

Such parodies and tall tales seemingly denigrate the local place by making it too windy, too cold, too hot, too wet, too dry, and so on, but at the same time they are a form of local chauvinism that identifies the local people with the place and its peculiarities. In other places with cultures rooted for hundreds or thousands of years, such an observation might be obvious and trivial. In the West, however, except among Indians and Mexican Americans, personal roots rarely went back more than a generation or two. Thus even when expressed derisively and humorously, such identifications created a link between local people and endured hardship, between local people and the special character of the place. They turned the garden imagery on its head. Songs and stories implied that it was only the labor and toughness of the singers and storytellers and their ancestors that had made the land habitable. By denigrating nature, they exalt the pioneers. Implicit in such local folklore was the larger message of much of the locally imagined West: "We or our parents survived this place; we created whatever is good in this place." Westerners often made the claim in a backhanded manner, and their humor was self-deprecating. But the claim remained nonetheless the essence of the locally imagined past.

> Our neighbors are the rattlesnakes—
> They crawl up from the Badlands' breaks;
> We do not live, we only stay;
> We are too poor to get away.

In such stories, as Toelkin suggests, white Westerners expressed their need to "sweep away what had been there before them." They had to make the West "a place of great hazard and

disarray which they had been heroic enough to have brought into order"; they "needed to create a blood bond with the land which would have the power to supersede everything prior to itself."

Creating this blood bond involved creating a common past and a pattern of shared memory. This shared memory was often very much an invention. It consisted less of an amalgam of personal memories than a collective re-remembering of what Clyde Milner, writing of Montana's early white settlers, has called events of "great emblematic significance." Thus, being a real Montana "pioneer" involved having memories of certain events regardless of whether or not such events had in fact occurred or whether the "pioneer" had participated in them. In Montana these emblematic events were conflict with Indians on the journey west and memories of the suppression of Henry Plummer's band of highwaymen by the Montana vigilantes.

Having defined, in effect, what it meant to be a pioneer—to have participated in key "events" in Montana's past—early white settlers used their memoirs to provide their credentials. Even though daily trail journals they kept at the time had mentioned little Indian contact or friendly exchanges with Indians, memoirs tended to reimagine this past by inserting Indians as an omnipresent danger. Indians played a crucial symbolic role in giving this "pioneer" past meaning. As Harriet Sanders summarized the logic in her memoir: "The emigrants who passed through the country previous to 1868 did so at the peril of their lives. The Indians becoming jealous at the appearance of the whites, lay in ambush for the unsuspecting victims, and many a scalp-dance was danced and war-songs chanted over the forms of those who aspired to plant an empire in the unknown west. But in the end, however, the pioneers conquered the wilderness and transformed it into a land of peace and plenty."

Sanders had constructed a narrative of what the settlement of Montana and the West meant. With the meaning established, early white migrants structured their memories to conform to it. Hostile Indians were necessary to this imagined past, and hostile Indians populated it whether in fact the people providing the memories had even encountered hostile Indians. Thus an overland trail journey largely devoid of hostile Indians became in popular memory—in the imagined past—a trip full of threatening, bloodthirsty warriors. Montanans created a past appropriate to their present. Indians were violent outsiders whose present dispossession was necessary for progress to occur. Thus, the real history of Montana began with the coming of the pioneers, who were the metaphorical pilgrims of Montana society. Such memories suited a Montana of subordinated and marginalized Indians and dominant whites.

The marginalized and subordinate, however, could also imagine the West, and Mexican Americans and Mexicans did this in their *corridos,* the folk ballads that created a popular past. The singers of *corridos* also reworked popular memories to locate emblematic events. Deaths of vaqueros; deaths of young men in a car crash; the travails of early- twentieth-century immigrant workers: all of these survived in *corridos,* creating a sense of everyday life lived in a place of common sufferings. They countered the Anglo folklore of an empty West, or of a West whose earlier inhabitants had disappeared. In the *corridos,* the white settlers of the West, when they appear at all, are usually exploiters or oppressors; the hard work of altering the West is the work of Mexicans cheated of their just rewards; and resistance, when it occurs, is the work of heroes, men like Gregorio Cortez, who appears "with his pistol in his hand."

Myth and the West: National Imaginings

The creation of an imagined West by those who lived in a place and sought to bond themselves to it seems readily understandable, but the creation of an imagined West by those who lived outside the West and have few or no ties to the place itself is more mysterious. Yet it is the critical issue, for the nationally imagined West has been far more powerful than the locally imagined West. It has, when necessary, put local traditions to its own uses and shaped local myths in its own image. In Montana memoirs, for example, some writers not only added Indian fights to their memories but clearly modeled their accounts of those fights after contemporary dime novels. New Mexicans who read nationally published stories about Billy the Kid made those stories their own and then retold them to interviewers as if they were their personal experiences.

The nationally imagined West depended on the mass media, and the popularity of western stories with the mass media was in part serendipitous. Anglo American settlement of the West happened to take place simultaneously with the rise of penny newspapers, dime novels, and sensationalist journals such as the *National Police Gazette.* That mass media, a mass audience, and mass western migration all bumped into each other, as it were, at a given historical moment does not, however, explain why they struck up such a lasting acquaintance. It only explains why the acquaintance was possible.

The West became the center for the media's imaginative attentions in part because Americans had already assigned significant symbolic meaning to westering. When Henry Thoreau wrote, "Eastward I go only by force; but westward I go free," or when Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn "lights out" for the territory to escape the constraints of "civilization," both spoke to an audience for whom westering, and thus the trans-Missouri West, had already taken on an identification with freedom and independence in a country that regarded freedom and independence as its peculiar hallmark.

Americans significantly associated freedom and independence with the borders of their own society, and they attached these values most fully to single males without permanent connections with family or society. In Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's analysis of the Davy Crockett almanacs, popular in the years when American settlement of the trans-Missouri West began, Crockett negates the accepted values of the East: "He is loose, liminal, and wild." Crockett and heroes like him took on the qualities of animals that they fought and consumed. They became violently and dangerously natural, existing beyond the boundaries of civilization, assaulting each other and all others they found outside the bounds. The stories made white male violence seem "natural, timeless, and inescapable." The appropriate targets of this violence became the inhabitants of nature, particularly Indians. Domesticating this natural male violence became a part of the mythic agenda.

Existing alongside the Crockett stories, however, was another pervasive image of the West that posited the West as a place of peace and serenity: the garden. In the garden image, freedom became freeholding; the land yielded not wild animals but pleasant fields full of domestic stock and cultivated plants. Nature was not threatening but beneficent, eagerly awaiting the hand of the cultivator. The images seem contradictory, but both sets of images identified the West with freedom and nature. Both sets of images made it, in a sense, the most American part of the country, for only the West—whether as garden or wilderness—offered something that Europeans did not and could not possess.

Stories of the garden and the wilderness formed the disparate, seemingly incompatible parents of Western adventures. These contradictory images, however, proved particularly useful for resolving a diffuse sense of cultural crisis that afflicted many Americans as the nineteenth

century wore on. With the country as a whole urbanizing, industrializing, and becoming more like Europe, there developed a widespread dissatisfaction with modern culture itself—with, as the historian Jackson Lears puts it in *No Place of Grace,* "its ethic of self-control and autonomous achievement, its cult of science and technical rationality, its worship of material progress." These values seemed a sham, and to many middle-class Americans—particularly men—life had become overcivilized, sterile, and unreal. They themselves seemed morally impotent.

Cultural critics of "overcivilization"—including the future president of the United States and occasional Dakota rancher Theodore Roosevelt—worried about the destruction of a corrupt American elite by a "foreign" rabble of workers. Frederic Remington, whose own art did much to create an enduring imagined West, played at being a rancher and espoused a "cowboy philosophy" that combatted "overcivilization" with what might be called an aggressive undercivilization: "Jews, Injuns, Chinamen, Italians, Huns—the rubbish of the Earth I hate—I've got some Winchesters and when the massacring begins, I can get my share of 'em, and what's more, I will…. Our race is full of sentiment. We invite the rinsins, the scourins, and the Devil's lavings to come to use and be men—something they haven't been, most of them, these hundreds of years…."

The bloodthirsty racism of Remington was an extreme, but hardly unusual, example of the use to which an invented West could be put. The West, violent and primitive, would provide the backbone that would save the country from "the Devil's lavings." Without such renewal the republic itself seemed in danger. The result was an antimodernist middle-class cultural rebellion of sorts, which, while rejecting modern culture as corrupt, sought to revitalize and transform it. In penetrating the "wilderness" and transforming it into a modern garden, society itself could be saved.

Late-nineteenth-century Americans imagined the West—that most modern of American sections—as the premodern world that they had lost. In it life was primitive but also simple, real, and basic. Every action in this world mattered, and the fundamental decisions of everyday life supposedly involved clear moral choices. Life in the West could restore authenticity, moral order, and masculinity. Life in the premodern West could, ironically, justify the very core of modern values that had come under question. For in this imagined primitive West, as it turned out, autonomy and self-discipline were the qualities that mattered most. In the end, the imaginative journey to the primitive West rehabilitated modern values and reoriented Americans toward a version of progress that supposedly avoided "overcivilization" and decadence.

All of this might seem a heavy burden for stories about cowboys, cavalry, outlaws, and Indians to bear, but those who told the stories were quite clear about the morals and messages that they wanted to convey to readers. Owen Wister's *The Virginian* (1902) became the classic literary Western, and its author's premodern preferences ran through it pure and unadulterated. The cowboys of Wister's West had "wild and manly faces…. In their flesh 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." Western saloons, Wister wrote, contained more death than New York City saloons, but less vice, "and death is a thing much cleaner than vice."

Wister's cowboys got drunk, frequented prostitutes, gambled, slept with other men's wives, and killed each other, but their life and violence was, nonetheless, "pure." It set them apart from the eastern immigrant worker. Beneath the plot of *The Virginian* ran a subtext on inequality, an attempt by Wister to explain why some Americans were, by the very human nature that the West laid bare, destined to rule and command others. For in the "newest part of the New World" it was the basic inequality of human beings that shone through. "Equality," the Virginian

proclaimed, "is a big bluff. It's easy called." And Wister's narrator, reflecting on the "eternal inequality of man," concluded that "true democracy and true aristocracy are one and the same." The Virginian, who survives Indians, punishes outlaws, gains the respect of lesser men, and kills the vicious Trampas, becomes proof of the proposition. For in the West, where life is basic and men are self-reliant, the "quality" rises above the "equality." To do so, the "quality" sometimes has to use means unsuited to a civilized society, but as Molly Wood, the eastern fiancée of the Virginian, comes to learn, such means, even though they violate civilized canons, are appropriate and necessary. Only they can bring civilization. The premodern West purges the corruption of the East and simultaneously demonstrates the tightness of hierarchy and inequality. There are those, of course, who succumb to the "savagery" and wildness of the West, but they only temporarily triumph. The result in the end is a reinvigorated civilization, a garden. In this West the Virginian becomes "an important man, with a strong grip on many various enterprises," whose wife believes "his work would kill him." This was a West where middle-class businessmen had redeemed themselves through natural virtues and proved their right to rule.

The Virginian was a novel aimed at the middle class, but imagining Wests in order to provide moral and social lessons for the country as a whole also went on in numerous other forums. Probably no incident in western history entered into national myth more quickly than Custer's Last Stand. Here was a bloody, dramatic, racial confrontation that captured national attention. And because the battle yielded no white survivors, it presented an ideal opportunity for the national imagination to exercise itself. The mythologizing of Custer in the mass-circulation dailies made the conflict between Custer and the Indians a metaphor for the conflict between whites and nonwhites and capital and labor in much the same way that the conflict between the Virginian and Trampas served as metaphor between "quality" and the "equality." In the hands of James Gordon Bennett, owner-editor of the *New York Herald*, Custer's Last Stand became a story useful for denouncing all kinds of enemies of the social order. Bennett denounced the Sioux as "communistic"; he compared Indian violence with that of labor radicals; and he made lower-class tramps and vagrants the equivalent of "savages."

Custer, the boy general, became in Frederick Whittaker's *Complete Life of George A. Custer* (published the very year of Custer's defeat) "the brave cavalier, the Christian soldier," and valiant defender of civilization against savage hordes. Like the Virginian, Custer embodies ideal traits in particularly powerful form. Unlike the Virginian, he dies, but he dies heroically, a martyr to the weak policy (advanced by reformers) that appeased "savages." His death bares the true nature of the conflict, points the way to the right policy, and assures the eventual triumph of brave cavaliers over savages. The Custer myth became a way to talk about race and class, a way to demonstrate the necessity of subordinating savages of all kinds. Indians were the equivalent of tramps, anarchists, and criminals, none of whom should be indulged. They had to be reformed and taught the meaning of work and order.

Imagining the West in certain ways thus became a means to shape popular consciousness and to impart certain visions of what an American social order should look like. No one group, however, ever secured a monopoly on imagining the West. Stories about Custer could be ways for capitalists to attack workers, but other western stories could be vehicles for workers to attack capitalists. Stories and songs about outlaws, for example, became a contested ground. In some stories, suppressing outlaws was the work of a natural elite symbolized by the Virginian, but outlaws themselves could be romanticized as a means of attacking the social order.

The romanticization of the western outlaw began not in the national media but in local folkloric traditions in the West. It then spread to local newspapers, and from them it moved into the national media. Eventually, in much popular culture, the American West might as well have been Sherwood Forest; its plains and prairies teemed with what the English historian E. J. Hobsbawm has called social bandits. Robin Hood stood as their prototype. Driven outside the law because of some act sanctioned by local conventions but regarded as criminal by the state or local authorities, the social bandit was forced to become an outlaw. Members of the community, however, still considered him an honorable man. The bandit, robbing the rich and helping the poor, thus became a hero rather than a villain.

Just as Custer's Last Stand was a historical event that quickly spawned a myth, so actual outlaws, from the various Mexican bandits who together became Joaquin Murieta to the James-Younger and Doolin-Dalton gangs, spawned social bandit stories. The romanticization of these outlaws as social bandits began while they were still alive. Actual social bandits found support because they provided aid in what were often chaotic local conflicts in which people viewed the constituted authorities as corrupt or ineffective. By specializing in bank and train robberies, social bandits like the James-Younger gang and the Doolin-Dalton gang avoided doing direct harm to their supporters. They also inadvertently became surrogate heroes for farmers, workers, and minorities disenchanted with the newer America whose great symbols and sources of power were banks, railroad corporations, and police forces of the modern state.

The tellers of stories and the singers of songs had imagined the historical figures they commemorated before the heroes ever existed. Robin Hood, as a type, for example, existed before Jesse James or Bill Doolin robbed their first bank. The stories about them were cast in an existing mold; the outlaws became Robin Hoods. Similarly, along the Rio Grande border, the Tejano communities of the area developed in their *corridos* heroes of border resistance, roles into which actual men stepped. In the most famous of these *corridos,* "The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez," singers celebrate the resistance of a peaceful Tejano, falsely accused, who is forced to defend himself and flee from brutal Anglo Americans *rinches*, or Texas Rangers, and sheriffs. The *corridos* about Cortez arose from an actual incident, but, as Américo Paredes put it, "the Border people had dreamed Gregorio Cortez before producing him, and had sung his life and deeds before he was born." As in so many other examples, an imagined West not only reshaped a historical past, but also cast a future partially in its own image.

The stories of bandits, of Custer, of cowboys that have entered into popular culture have proved very mutable. People could, and did, reimagine those figures in a variety of ways. The stories changed as the larger society changed, and different groups recast the stories to create new meanings. The West became, in this sense, something of a national mirror. When Americans looked into the imagined West for images of themselves, their own present situation determined what was reflected back. One of the best examples of how writers, moviemakers, and popular historians reimagined the West are the various stories told about Billy the Kid.

The actual Billy the Kid was a relatively inconsequential gunman and stock thief killed in 1881 at the age of 21 by Pat Garrett. He was, however, by the time of his death a national figure of sorts because the *National Police Gazette* and mass-circulation eastern papers reported the story of his crimes. In New York City eight newspapers published notices of the Kid's death.

The reimagining of the Kid began with his death, but the imagined Kid was initially a villain and not a hero. He was at worst the equivalent of Trampas in *The Virginian*, or at best the Virginian's former friend Steve, a good man gone bad. He was the kind of man whom the

Virginian banished from the West. The Kid symbolized savagery; he was a threat to the social order. Pat Garrett was the autonomous, self-disciplined hero—the Virginian—who killed the Kid and tamed the West. In 1901, Emerson Hough, writing of Billy the Kid, made his confrontation with Pat Garrett a conflict between "savagery" and "civilization." Garrett "stood for the new order of things; Billy the Kid clung steadfastly to the old." The lessons of these Billy the Kid stories, like those of *The Virginian* or the Custer stories, were straightforward. Americans, cleansed of overcivilization in the premodern West, should resist strikers and other "un-American" radicals and foreigners just as western heroes battled Indians, outlaws, and Mexicans. As Hough put it, a "dozen town marshals of the old stripe would restore peace and fill a graveyard in a day of any strike."

Such a confrontation seemed a straightforward conquest of "savagery" by modern society—a confident fable of progress—but lurking within the devilish Kid of these early stories was a second Kid who, while a villain, had virtues worthy of admiration. This Kid resembled the social bandits who, in other stories, rode with the Jesse James or the Daltons. He usually killed only in self-defense or for revenge, and he never robbed a poor man. This Kid shared Garrett's autonomy, but not his restraint. This was a potentially far more subversive Kid who possessed the very premodern virtues that symbolized the West, but he did not use them to rescue and revitalize the social order, as did Pat Garrett or the Virginian, but instead he actively subverted it.

This more ambiguous and dangerous Kid reached full flower in the imagined West of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s. He challenged the older imagined West, where, as Stephen Tatum has written, "in the vision of Owen Wister, Theodore Roosevelt, Frederic Remington, Emerson Hough, Steward Edward White, and, later, Zane Grey, the West became an ideal golden world of heroic Anglo-Saxons whose courage, common sense, stoicism, and willingness to fight for what is right affirmed and preserved true American ideas of democratic freedom." But a sympathetic Kid confused such simple lessons. When the Kid represented the wild, premodern virtues, was not his death a tragedy, an implied criticism of a society that killed the best in human beings?

The new Kid emerged during the 1920s and prospered in the 1930s. Walter Noble Burns brought him fully to life in his 1926 *The Saga of Billy the Kid,* and Hollywood solidified the new Kid in *Billy the Kid* (1930). But the new Billy did not turn out to be as subversive as he seemed. Just as Molly Wood's eastern relatives thought the Virginian a "savage" even though he was actually revitalizing civilization, so the new Kid, too, eventually became a means to revitalize rather than undermine that society. In the thirties, with the country in the midst of the Depression, it was easy to make the Kid a Robin Hood defending ordinary Americans against corrupt capitalists who were driving the country to ruin. He is, however, if not a conservative, at least a New Deal liberal; he destroys evil bankers but not banks. The Kid becomes Pat Garrett; he becomes the Virginian. He defends American ideals. The transformation is no transformation at all.

Yet a troubling problem remained for the creators of the new Billy the Kid, for the historical Kid and the early legendary Kid had died at the hands of the law, as was the proper fate for the outlaw. But if the Kid was now a western hero, then his death at the hands of a sheriff gave the wrong message: it indicated that those possessing the virtues necessary to create a civilized society die at the hands of civilization. Premodern virtues are out of place in a modern society. To solve this dilemma, many of the movie versions of the Kid story simply changed the ending. Billy survives and rides into the sunset. And because reimagining the West often has repercussions on the actual West, "Walk-along" Smith, a contemporary of the Kid, claimed in

1939 that the Kid in fact had not died. Pat Garrett, Lew Wallace, and Billy the Kid staged the death and buried two bags of sand in his coffin. In 1950, Brushy Bill Roberts claimed to be the Kid, himself, and petitioned the New Mexico governor for a pardon.

This kind of resolution of the Kid stories—and similar easy resolutions for Westerns in general—did not go uncontested in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. Although Zane Grey and Louis L'Amour continued to turn out immensely popular Westerns in the older vein, they were eclipsed by the so-called classic Western. The impact of McCarthyism on Hollywood, a reaction against the conformity demanded by a mass society and a corporate economy, and, later, the countercultural movements of the 1960s and 1970s all found reflection in Westerns such as *The Searchers, Shane, High Noon, The Left-Handed Gun, Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid, One-eyed Jacks, Little Big Man,* and numerous others. Instead of trying to reconcile the contradictions between the premodern virtues of a western hero saving a modern society that threatened those very virtues, the classic Western flaunted those contradictions. In these Westerns the hero might still, as in *Shane* or *High Noon,* make the West safe for civilization, but it was a civilization that had no place for him. The movies end with the hero forced, as in *Shane* or *The Searchers,* to leave a society that he can only disrupt.

As the 1960s moved into the 1970s, these Westerns virtually reversed the old homilies. "Savagery," symbolized by outlaws or Indians, now became good, and "civilization," symbolized by the town or farmers or the U.S. Cavalry, now became either evil or weak. The defeat of the Indians, the conquest of Billy the Kid, now became the victory of vice over virtue, of oppression over freedom. The meanings had been reversed.

The Pictorial West

Movie Westerns imitated the patterns of literary westerns, but they also increased their effect by offering a powerful visual image of the West. In the John Ford Western *The Searchers,* the movie opens with a view of the immense and spectacular western space, in this case the Monument Valley of Arizona. The hero, played by John Wayne, rides out of that immense space, a space of which he is a part, toward a small house dwarfed by the scenery around it. In a Western movie, the West is not just imagined and described, it is actually seen and experienced by the viewer as empty and vast. The camera imparts an impression of verisimilitude, but both movie cameraman and early western photographers have imagined a West rather than simply captured what appeared before their lenses.

William Henry Jackson was probably the preeminent nineteenth-century photographer of the American West. As a free-lance photographer, as a member of the Hayden Survey, and as a railroad publicist he photographed the West as American settlement began to transform it. His pictures did not so much capture this process as mythologize it. Because Jackson's active career proved so long and so fruitful, and because he was a photographer of genius, he recorded several mythic versions of the West. Because he had to sell what he produced, he had to be sensitive to the particular meanings that his contemporaries and customers sought in the West. He was, as Peter Hales put it, "reflecting back the preconceptions, myths, and desires of the eastern audience that projected, onto the vast tabula rasa of the West, a set of completed landscapes."

Precisely because photographs do not seem so much created as found, because they have the illusion of simple factuality, they became the ideal means for giving the imagined West a simple actuality. Early in his career Jackson presented the West as a potential garden awaiting the

transforming hand of civilization. He seemed to record its transformation from desert to Eden. The best photographers—and the most popular—emphasized meaning over form and copied and built upon the conventions of landscape painting. The meanings, depending on the period, the context, and the audience, could be various. Jackson's early pictures celebrating the garden yielded to his survey pictures, in which survey scientists entered a pristine and powerful nature to learn its secrets, and these pictures, in turn, yielded to his railroad pictures.

In the railroad pictures the railroad enters the still immense nature; it vanquishes that nature without, however, diminishing it. As in *The Virginian,* a comfortable middle-class resolution has been achieved. Civilization has entered the wilderness and in doing so has become revitalized. These pictures often show tourists disembarking from the trains to stop in meadows, pause at streams, or view spectacular mountains and canyons. Nature no longer threatens; it heals the alienated and overcivilized. It exists easily beside the technology that makes modern civilization possible. The picture itself both embodies the myth and becomes a commodity; it is a product of modern technology and an object for commercial sale. It invigorates its viewers even as it makes its producers a modern living.

The Female West

The imagined West that has gripped American consciousness has been, on the whole, an overwhelmingly masculine West. But it is an odd masculinity because it reverses the usual symbolism that identifies men with culture and women with nature. In the imagined West, men—the descendants of the half horse-half alligators of the Crockett stories—are identified with nature, and white women usually enter the stories as symbols of civilization or culture. To do this, the stories strip white women of the sexuality that usually marked women as natural. Only nonwhite women remain uniformly natural and thus sexually potent and dangerous. But by making white women "civilized," Westerns, and modern cowboy art from Frederic Remington to the present, also deny white women access to the premodern virtues the West supposedly embodies. Women are weak and genteel; they are dependent and if not passive, then conventional. When they act, they often initially do so out of mistaken judgment, deceived by their own gentility. They often at first—as in *The Virginian* or *High Noon*—reject the premodern virtues embodied in the hero, although they come eventually to acknowledge such virtues as superior to the "civilized" values they hold. In the early Western it was the union of the premodern hero and the civilized schoolteacher that often symbolized the reconciliation of the premodern West and the new civilized West. In later Westerns, with their celebration of paradox and pessimism, sexual union is often desired but impossible. Shane's love for a married woman threatens civilized settlement and civilized values. And in *High Noon* the heroine, to join her husband, has to reject her own Quaker past and leave a corrupt civilization.

White women enter these Westerns as symbols in a largely male drama. They are often madonnas or whores. Attempts to escape these formulations only emphasized their strength. One western, *Johnny Guitar*, does have white women take on an active role and embody an aggressive sexuality. But the leading female characters become, in effect, male characters. The result is like watching a conventional western in drag; nothing essential in the story changes, and the cultural incongruities have reduced the movie to a campy classic.

Women, too, however, have imagined Wests. And although these Wests have not been as culturally powerful as the male Wests, they have served to offer commentaries, both positive and

negative, on the male Wests. They have also, on occasion, created counterpoints to them. In terms of the publicly imagined West, women have expressed their West most often in popular literary fictions.

The "Little House" books written during the early twentieth century by Laura Ingalls Wilder are probably the most popular of the Wests imagined by women writers. The Little House series describes homesteading, largely on the western prairies, during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. In most ways Wilder creates a female West that fits easily within the conventions of the imagined male Wests of the period. The stories detail the conquest of the land, the triumph of civilization over wilderness, and, by implication at least, the defeat of "savagery."

What sets these narratives apart from the conventions of the male Western is that the reader views the West from within the various "little houses" that the fictionalized Ingallses occupy. Unlike heroes who exist within the West's wild, open spaces, Wilder's heroines try, as Dolores Rosenblum has put it, "to fill... the emptiness that threatens to affect" them. The books "are organized around a variety of habitations constructed against and in compliance with the vast outer space surrounding the human figure." Wilder conventionally makes her women symbols of civilization. Instead of emphasizing "premodern male" virtues, she emphasizes the "modern female" virtues. The books, as other critics have pointed out, have dual themes, each expressed in gender terms: Pa's male urge to find new wilderness to conquer and Ma's urge to find education for her daughters. The women in these and similar fictions are not awed or terrified by the prairies; they are helpmates of the men who are to transform the land. And at times, as in Willa Cather's *My Antonia* or *O Pioneers*, women beat the burdens of settlement and, at great cost, form enduring bonds with the land itself.

Within this altered context the main character of the Little House books, Laura, acts out a struggle that parallels the male struggle in the conventionally imagined West. Laura is attracted to the culturally defined male tasks in the book. She works in the fields. She is in love with the spacious West. But just as, in the conventionally imagined West of the late nineteenth century, males with premodern virtues enable civilization to triumph and are ideally reconciled with that civilization, so Laura returns to her proper symbolic sphere. Just as a permanent male deviation toward "savagery" is correlated with foreignness and threats to the republic, so persistent female deviation toward male roles is foreign and threatening: "Ma did not like to see women working in the fields. Only foreigners did that. Ma and her girls were Americans, above doing men's work." Laura, her mother, and her sisters exist in essentially the same mythic West as does the Virginian. They are in the house looking out, while he is in the vast space looking in.

Women writers have also, however, produced a darker West that prevents a grimmer vision of the popularly imagined male West. In fictionalized memoirs and novels written during the 1920s and 1930s, the dark, violent side of males in nature is turned not against the culturally permissible targets—Indians, animals, Mexicans—but against women. Western men—often with their other premodern virtues intact—become brutal and violent wife beaters who dominate women not by the moral force of the Virginian but by brute force. In Mari Sandoz's *Old Jules* (1935) or Agnes Smedley's *Daughter of Earth* (1929), men create their autonomy and individualism as much from the abuse of women as from the values they derive from their combat with nature.

This re-visioning and reimagining of the West is never complete. A feminist imagining of the western past will almost certainly arrive. Indeed, it has already begun. Feminist literary critics who consciously seek to re-vision the lives of western women by "entering old texts from a

feminist critical perspective" are self-consciously engaged in yet another version of reimagining the West. The stuff of this imagination is at once the western past itself and reinterpretations of the earlier imaginings of others.

Modern Imagination

The decline of the Western may or may not be permanent, but the imagining of the West continues in other forms. During the 1970s and 1980s the West has produced probably the most skilled and compelling group of writers in its history. James Welch, Larry McMurtry, Leslie Silko, Louise Erdrich, Charles Bowden, Richard Ford, Ivan Doig, William DeBuys, Judith Freeman, William Kittredge, and others have produced western fictions and memoirs that have in common an interplay of an earlier imagined West and a modern West that at once reflects and fails to live up to those imaginings. These are Wests often of cramped towns, cramped families, and cramped possibilities, but awesome spaces and desires.

These Wests exist without any particular privilege of place alongside sillier, but still significant, contemporary imaginings. In the 1980s the designer Ralph Lauren bought a Colorado ranch, outfitted his cowboys in designer outfits, and had the ranch buildings constructed to his own standards. *Vanity Fair* praised Lauren as "a real godsend to Ouray County. He set the tone for the new look of it—really beautiful, well-kept land." In this newly imagined, well-kept West, the neighboring twentieth-century town of Ridgeway is a nightmare in Lauren's daydream. He offered to redesign it at his own expense, thus giving a whole new sense to the western hero's desire to "clean up this town." In Ouray County, at least, the imagined West remains as powerful as the historical West and inseparable from it. Such imaginings, profound and silly, cannot be detached from what the West is, has been, and will become.