
Owen Wister's Paladin of the Plains: The Virginian as a Cultural Hero

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Had you left New York or San Francisco at ten o'clock this morning, by noon the day after to-morrow . . . you would stand at the heart of the world that is the subject of my picture, yet you would look around you in vain for the reality. It is a vanished world. No journeys, save those which memory can take, will bring you to it now. The mountains are there, far and shining, and the sunlight, and the infinite earth, and the air that seems forever the true fountain of youth,—but where is the buffalo, and the wild antelope, and where the horseman with his pasturing thousands? So like its old self does the sage-brush seem when revisited, that you wait for the horseman to appear.

But he will never come again. He rides in his historic yesterday. You will no more see him gallop out of the unchanging silence than you will see Columbus on the unchanging sea come sailing from Palos with his caravels. . . .

What is become of the horseman, the cow-puncher, the last romantic figure upon our soil? For he was romantic.

—From Owen Wister's address "To the Reader" in *The Virginian*

A little more than a century ago, in 1902, Owen Wister published that year's number-one best seller, *The Virginian: A Horseman of the Plains*. It is possibly the most widely read novel ever written by an American.¹

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1. *The Virginian* went through sixteen printings and sold three hundred thousand copies in its first year. More than two million hardbound copies had been sold by 1990, with no

A romantic tale of the frontier West, it defined the cowboy character and thus, for many, the ideal American character. The western stories Wister had produced prior to *The Virginian* largely made up a series of stages leading to the publication of that romance; the fiction and biography he wrote after it never achieved the enormous popularity or critical acclaim of that most successful work. For the intellectual historian, Wister's vision of the western cowboy hero and the public's enthusiastic acceptance of him in the early 1900s provide an important reflection of the ideals, aspirations, and traditions, not only of Wister himself, but of a generation of Americans entering a new century. The continuing influence of *The Virginian* on American culture and society up to and including this century also makes it worthy of interpretation today.

Owen Wister (he detested his first name; family and friends called him "Dan")² was born of an old Philadelphia family in 1860. His maternal grandmother was Fanny Kemble, the flamboyant English actress and writer, who once described her daughter's son as a strange, withdrawn, talented boy who, unfortunately, "like most of his country's people," was "deficient . . . in animal spirits."³ While in his early twenties, Wister earned his Phi Beta Kappa at Harvard, majoring in music and graduating summa cum laude. Trouble arose when his father announced that he was not pleased with his son's proposed career in music. Affected by his father's unhappiness, the younger Wister relented and instead took up a lethally tedious job computing in-

record of paperback sales. The book has been the basis of five films and a 1960s television series. "The Virginian," wrote the editors of the ambitious Time-Life series on the Old West, "was the archetype that fixed the myth of the West" (Robert Shulman, Introduction to Owen Wister, *The Virginian: A Horseman of the Plains* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1998], p. vii). See also Jane Kuenz, "The Cowboy Businessman and 'The Course of Empire': Owen Wister's *The Virginian*," *Cultural Critique* 48 (Spring 2001): 120.

2. Wister's lifelong friend, Theodore Roosevelt, also referred to the author as "old Brigham Smoot." The origins of this nickname appear to date back to their days together at Harvard University. In correspondence to Wister in the early 1900s, the then-president even refers to the writer's children as "little smoots" and "smooterinas" (Roosevelt to Wister, 8 Oct. 1904, Container 33, Owen Wister Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.).

3. Fanny Kemble Wister, *Owen Wister Out West: His Journals and Letters* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 7.



Owen Wister strikes a casual pose in this photograph taken at Yellowstone National Park around the time he began his writing career in the early 1890s. (Courtesy Owen Wister Papers, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie)

terest on deposits buried in the vaults of Boston's Union Safe Deposit Company. Two years later, he suffered a nervous collapse. Returning to Philadelphia in 1885, he was placed under the care of a relative, physician S. Weir Mitchell, who advised the young man to go West for a month or so.⁴

Wister's travels were not particularly adventurous. Two Philadelphia ladies, founders of a private girls' school, accompanied him to Wyoming. Once there, they lodged first at the Cheyenne Club, a comfortable establishment built by two wealthy Harvard graduates. Like his old college friend Theodore Roosevelt, Wister was overwhelmed by the clear, thin, western air. "This existence is heavenly in its monotony and sweetness," he recorded in his diary. In what may have been a counterthrust to Fanny Kemble's comments of ten years earlier, he added (with obvious satisfaction), "I'm beginning to be able to feel I'm something of an animal and not a stinking brain alone."⁵ Wister was also anxious to take part in the strictly masculine pleasures of the hunt and had an obvious sentimental attraction to a certain type of virility. Another entry in Wister's early diary reads, "Killed today the first deer I ever shot at. Hit it plumb in the shoulder and broke its heart."⁶ Wister was a dude, but he was clearly no ordinary tourist. Displaying a "thirst for adventure" that at times approached Roosevelt's, he often rode forty miles a day and killed bear, elk, antelope, and bighorn sheep. Unlike the future president, however, on this and future trips to the West Wister would always remain aware and acceptant of the fact that he was an amateur with a gun, an eternal tenderfoot. Some of the most memorable scenes in *The Virginian*, written in the first-person singular, are recollections of occasions when the Virginian felt obliged to take care of Wister when he failed to tether his horse correctly or carelessly left his shotgun behind.⁷

Although he did not realize it at the time, that summer out West de-

4. Shulman, Introduction to *The Virginian*, pp. xi-xv.

5. Wister, *Owen Wister Out West*, p. 32.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 36.

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 114-15; Owen Wister, *Roosevelt, The Story of a Friendship* (New York: Macmillan, 1930), pp. 28-29; Owen Wister, *The Virginian: A Horseman of the Plains* (New York: Macmillan, 1979), pp. 57-60.

terminated Wister's career. Upon returning East in October 1885, Wister entered Harvard Law School and graduated three years later. Every summer he continued his trips West. In the autumn of 1891, when he was thirty-one, imagination and purpose fused for Wister while dining with his friend Walter Furness at the exclusive Philadelphia Club. Recalling that evening in *Roosevelt, The Story of a Friendship*, Wister wrote:

Fresh from Wyoming and its wild glories, I sat in the club dining with a man as enamoured of the West as I was. . . . Why wasn't some Kipling saving the sage-brush for American literature, before the sage-brush and all that it signified went the way of the California forty-niner, went the way of the Mississippi steamboat, went the way of everything? Roosevelt had seen the sagebrush 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 outlived fact? . . . 'Walter, I'm going to try it myself!' I exclaimed. . . . 'I'm going to start this minute.'

Wister went upstairs to the Philadelphia Club library and wrote much of his first western story—"Hank's Woman"—that night. *Harper's Magazine* promptly accepted it, and before long a check arrived at his desk in the law office of Francis Rawle, "where I worked at fiction for twenty-five years and at the law nevermore."⁸

"Hank's Woman" was Wister's first attempt to save the human part of the western experience through literature. The story begins with a description of an idyllic fishing scene in the Teton River Basin. Through the characters of Hank, the nasty little miner; Willomene, an abandoned and refined lady's maid from Austria; and especially through Lin McLean, the teller of this "traveler's tale," Wister sets up the relationship between the rugged, frontier West and the civilized, genteel East. Lin describes how hasty people in the West can be by recounting the pathetic tale of Hank and Willomene, who were married after just two or three days of courting. Following a week's honeymoon on Willomene's money, they head off for the camp at Galena Creek. Before long, a conflict between their differing ways ensues to the point of violence. Hank puts a bullet hole in her crucifix and is found dead on the edge of a canyon "with a big cut in his skull." Willomene lies far below, having slipped off the cliff in her bungled at-

8. Wister, *Roosevelt, The Story of a Friendship*, pp. 28–29.

tempt to push Hank over the side. The most interesting and significant character in the story, however, is neither Hank nor Willomene, but the cowboy who tells the tale, Lin McLean. As the vernacular commentator, this cowboy storyteller has more depth as a character than either the protagonist or the antagonist, is imbued with the "western" values of rugged honesty and self-reliance, and closely embodies Wister's own commitment to the West.⁹

Most of Wister's friends in Philadelphia and New York took little notice of his story at first. When those in Boston heard of it they responded, "What a horrible place the West must be!" Theodore Roosevelt was a notable exception, hailing Wister the next time they met with an emphatic "Bully for you!"¹⁰

"Hank's Woman" was not the first western story, but it was the first story of the cowboy to be written on a particular literary level. Henry Nash Smith has pointed out that as late as the 1870s, the very word "cowboy" was relatively new. Most were simply called "herders," and their popular collective image was that of a mangy, squalid crew of barbarous and peace-disturbing yahoos. Five years before the publication of "Hank's Woman," the popular writer Prentiss Ingraham had already begun to create a more heroic cowboy image in his own series of western stories. In 1882, while he attended the first Wild West Show in North Platte, Nebraska, Ingraham's attention was drawn to a cowboy fittingly named Buck Taylor. "Beginning in 1887," Wallace Stegner has written, "Ingraham immortalized this rodeo cowboy, first in a fictitious biography and then in a series of dime novels. He devised for him some colorful semi-Mexican garb that made him picturesque, and he endowed him with all the skill, courage, and masculine grace that have marked every heroic expression of the folk mind from Leather-stocking to Superman." This picturesque, visual element, first in the work of Ingraham and, later, Wister, would play a crucial role in the public's formation of the cowboy image. With the growth of photography in the late nineteenth century—particularly

9. Owen Wister, "Hank's Woman," *Harper's Weekly* 36 (27 Aug. 1892): 822-23. For a discussion of Wister's first western story, see Neal Lambert, "Owen Wister's 'Hank's Woman': The Writer and His Comment," *Western American Literature* 4 (Spring 1969): 39-50.

10. Wister, Roosevelt, *The Story of a Friendship*, p. 30.

the reproduction of pictures and drawings in popular newspapers and magazines (and with moving pictures just around the corner)—the American popular image of the cowboy was becoming even more dependent on the pictorial element than on the literary one. The meeting of Owen Wister and the distinguished western artist Frederic Remington appeared to be destined.¹¹

Wister and Remington met on 8 September 1893 in Yellowstone National Park, and their friendship and collaboration for *Harper's Monthly* began almost instantaneously. Like Wister and Roosevelt, Remington came from an established eastern family, underwent a neurotic crisis in his youth, and found personal regeneration in the West. Wister and Remington had differing personalities and interests that eventually caused their friendship to falter; the artist fixated on realistic details, while the writer preferred to focus on types of character. Importantly, however, both men viewed the West in the same way—as a last oasis of independence, sincerity, and virility—and had a similar vision of the American role in the evolution of world history. It was a vision that accorded perfectly with that of Theodore Roosevelt; further, according to historian John Lukacs, it was one “that propagated the legend and not the reverse.”¹²

Wister's vision of the American type was fully presented in the essay “The Evolution of the Cow-Puncher,” which appeared in the September 1895 issue of *Harper's* and featured five excellent Remington illustrations. As with most of the articles published in that monthly magazine, “The Evolution of a Cow-Puncher” and numerous other Wister-Remington contributions were aimed primarily at eastern audiences seeking adventure, romance, and travel, an escape from the dull routine of urban existence to a more exciting place and time. In-

11. Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (New York: Vintage Books, 1950), p. 109. Ingraham's earliest “western” stories were published as part of “Beadles's New York dime library” series and included the titles *Wild Bill, the Pistol Dead Shot* (1882), *Lon Star, the Cowboy Captain* (1882), and *Revolver Billy, the Boy Ranger of Texas* (1883). His efforts to defend the cowboy as a class began with *Buck Taylor, King of the Cowboys*; or, *The Raiders and the Rangers. A Story of the Wild and Thrilling Life of William L. Taylor* (Beadle's Half Dime Library, No. 497, 1887). Stegner quoted in Ben M. Vorpal, “My Dear Wister”: *The Frederic Remington-Owen Wister Letters* (Palo Alto, Calif.: American West Publishing, 1972), pp. viii–ix.

12. John Lukacs, *Philadelphia, Patricians and Philistines, 1900–1950* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1981), p. 247.



In this sketch entitled "New Mexican fantasia," which Frederic Remington included in a September 1894 letter to Wister, the artist appears in a rare depiction of himself on horseback. The sight of the pale, urban-looking character of immense bulk actually seated on a horse must have formed an odd contrast to the romanticized view of the cowboy. (Manuscript Photo Neg. #LCMS-46177-9, Owen Wister Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.)

deed, the same issue in which this particular essay appeared also included "The German Struggle for Liberty," concerning the Napoleonic War ventures of Frederick William III and his staff of militaristic yet well-meaning Prussian advisors and generals; a tour of magnificent architecture and art in several of India's most famous palaces and mosques; a visit to Turkey, Persia, and Arabia in "Arabia, Islam, and the Eastern Question"; and a hair-raising account by "Three Gringos in Central America," who described their dangerous trip through the dense jungles of Honduras where "there is nothing green that grows . . . that is not saturated and alive with bugs, and all manner of things that creep and crawl and sting and bite."¹³

13. Richard Harding Davis, "Three Gringos in Central America," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 91 (Sept. 1895): 504-5.

Assuming that readers survived these other excursions, Wister's essay went on to sell them a portrait of the cowboy out West as a descendant of the great Anglo-Saxon heroes of the ages. According to "The Evolution of the Cow-Puncher," the cowboy (the "true" American) was "no product of the frontier, but just the original kernel of the nut with the shell broken."¹⁴ As Wister put it, this modern-day champion was the immediate successor to the Knight of the Round Table, "his direct lineal offspring among our Western mountains."¹⁵ The cowboy was uniquely suited to survive in cattle country, a task, Wister wrote,

which requires spirit of adventure, courage, and self-sufficiency; you will not find many Poles or Huns or Russian Jews in that district; it stands as yet untainted by the benevolence of Baron Hirsch. Even in the cattle country the respectable Swedes settle chiefly to farming, and are seldom horsemen. The community of which the aristocrat appropriately made one speaks English. 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. Among the Spaniards and the Portuguese no Cortez or Magellan is found today. Except in Prussia the Teuton is too often a tame, slippered animal, with his pedantic mind swaddled in a dressing-gown. But the Anglo-Saxon is still forever homesick for out-of-doors.¹⁶

Thus, for Wister, the cowboy appeared as a reemergence of a specimen from the days of Camelot. What remained of the frontier in the late nineteenth century, Wister believed, gave the Anglo-Saxon a last chance to shed his "modern guise" and show again the heroic "medieval man." As Jane Kuenz writes in her recent article "The Cowboy Businessman," "Wister's cowboy is, quite explicitly, a pure racial type, the hardy Anglo-Saxon whose superiority reasserts itself periodically throughout history, essentially unchanged."¹⁷ While this vision ignored the fact that one-third of all cowboys were either black, Mexican, or American Indian, it was in keeping with the racist and paranoid atmosphere of the era. Like the Wests of Roosevelt and Rem-

14. Owen Wister, "The Evolution of the Cow-Puncher," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 91 (Sept. 1895): 610.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 606.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 604.

17. Kuenz, "Cowboy Businessman," p. 102.

ington, Wister's was a white man's West, a sealed domain (in contrast to the East), in which the Anglo-Saxon worked out his racial destiny. Alexander Nemerov described Remington's preoccupation with social evolution, noting, "His writing and painting repeatedly refer to evolutionary processes that he hoped would eventually leave all but the Anglo-Saxon race extinct."¹⁸ Nemerov's observation might as easily have applied to Wister.

Such was the essence of Owen Wister's vision in the 1890s. The cowboy was "The Last Cavalier," and, using that title, Remington illustrated what Wister had put into words. His painting accompanied "The Evolution of the Cow-Puncher" and shows an American cowboy, lanky, free, and self-reliant, with a bronzed Anglo-Saxon face. In the shadowy background is an assembly of knights in armor, plumed gentry, and bearded mountain men. The work is clearly a period piece that belongs to the mid-1890s, a time when Theodore Roosevelt and Rudyard Kipling held dreams of an Anglo-Saxon destiny. It also provided the perfect picture of what, seven years later, Wister would embody in *The Virginian*.¹⁹

Between 1895 and 1902, a series of events enabled Owen Wister to reintegrate himself with his eastern boyhood. With the publication and acknowledged success of his Lin McLean stories, Wister began to feel that he could again hold his head up high amongst the proper Philadelphia crowd and avoid "creeping back to the displeased law with my tail between my legs." In addition, after a long and sometimes difficult bachelorhood, he married his cousin, Mary Channing Wister, in 1898. As Wister's daughter later maintained, her father was "at ease with himself at last."²⁰

In January 1902, the author and his wife, accompanied by the three little Wisters, returned to Charleston, South Carolina, where the cou-

18. Nemerov, *Frederic Remington and Turn-of-the-Century America* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 9. See also Philip Durham and Everett L. Jones, *The Negro Cowboy* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1965).

19. Wister, "Evolution of the Cow-Puncher," p. 605.

20. Wister and his daughter are quoted in G. Edward White, *The Eastern Establishment and the Western Experience: The West of Frederic Remington, Theodore Roosevelt, and Owen Wister* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1968), p. 137.



Remington's "The Last Cavalier" equated the cowboy with a variety of romanticized figures ranging from medieval crusaders to the warriors of Ghengis Khan. Wister loved the painting, which Remington sent to him as a gift in November 1895. (Reproduced from Owen Wister, "The Evolution of the Cow-Puncher," *Harper's Monthly* 91 [Sept. 1895]: 605)

ple had honeymooned, and spent five months there. Wister still had most of *The Virginian* to complete, including the important task of fitting previously published short stories together into novel form. The effect of his environment was definite. In Charleston, the writer felt he had become reacquainted with the old Philadelphia of his childhood. What Wister had once thought to be suffocating he now viewed as charming. As he "pegged away at the *Virginian*" in this romantic atmosphere, "all of Wister's dreams about the possibilities of America seemed to take shape."²¹ Describing Charleston, Wister wrote, "Full of echoes this little, coherent, self-respecting place was also full of life; retaining its native identity, its English-thinking, English-feeling, En-

21. White, *Eastern Establishment*, p. 138.

glish-believing authenticity; holding on tight to George Washington and the true American tradition, even though loyal to its lost cause." For Wister, that tradition had once again become associated with an upper-class lifestyle. In the previous two decades, he had discovered the "real American tradition." In *The Virginian*, Wister would attempt to synthesize the "real" of Wyoming with the "true" of old Charleston.²²

Wister's magnum opus is a curious book and, in some respects, hardly a novel at all. Built from several of his previous western stories, *The Virginian* is episodic to the extent that many of its chapters could be read independently of one another. They are, however, inserted into a new narrative of the hero, the nameless "Virginian," and his courtship with Molly Wood, a Vermont girl who has come to Wyoming as a schoolteacher. A main subplot of the story features the heightening conflict between the Virginian and the devious villain, Trampas. In the final "showdown" chapter, these two stories make a clear connection as Molly begs her lover not to fight but the Virginian's code of honor demands that he meet and destroy his challenger Trampas. If the love story is rather predictable, culminating in marriage and a "happily ever after" closure, the episodes of ranch and trail life are not. The most significant subplot, if one can call it that, consists of Wister's interwoven sketches describing the significance of the "cowboy" Virginian's character and life.

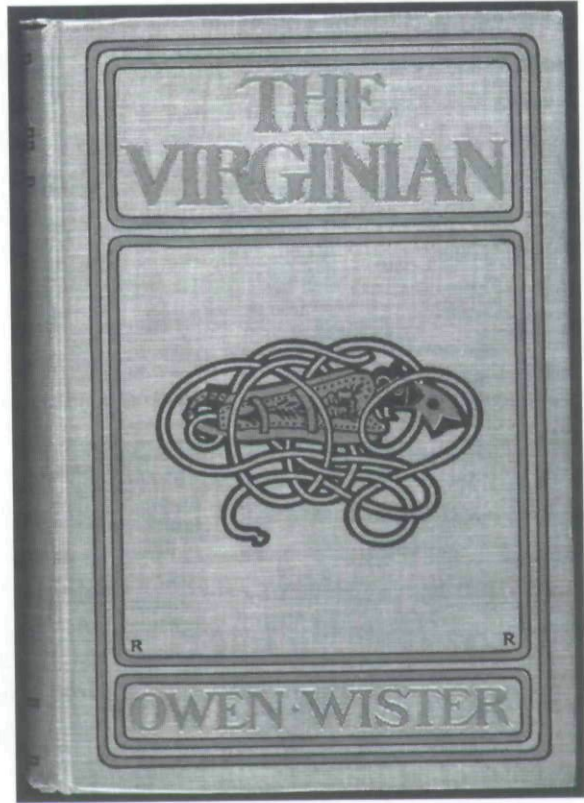
The Virginian was written at the height of what historian G. Edward White has called the "heroic" phase of Owen Wister's response to the West.²³ Wister apparently had his tongue in his cheek when he wrote that his novel "presents faithfully . . . Wyoming between 1874 and 1890," for it did nothing of the sort.²⁴ As critic Douglas E. Branch complained back in the 1920s, "It is strange that Wister could have called his *Virginian* an historical novel of the cattle-country when there is not one scene set on the range among the cattle, and when the cowboys seem throughout to spend their days in playful pranks, in

22. Wister, Roosevelt, *The Story of a Friendship*, p. 103.

23. White, *Eastern Establishment*, p. 139.

24. Quoted in Douglas E. Branch, *The Cowboy and His Interpreters* (New York: D. Appleton, 1926), p. 196.

Pictured here is the cover of the first edition of *The Virginian: A Horseman of the Plains*. The book struck a responsive chord with American readers and critics when it appeared in 1902. (Courtesy Rare Book and Special Collections Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.)



love-making, in thief-hunting, in anything except work.”²⁵ In one of the only negative contemporary reviews, entitled “A Fake Novel,” the critic for the *Times* in Washington, D.C., let loose with the charge that “it is some time since a more remarkable collection of inaccuracies has been strung on a plot and entitled literature.”²⁶ Most significant of Wister’s departures from “reality” was his deliberate idealization of

25. *Ibid.*, p. 198.

26. “Fake Novel,” *Washington, D.C., Times*, 3 Aug. 1902, Container 79, Owen Wister Papers. Despite his harsh criticism of *The Virginian*, however, in some respects this critic appears to have bought into the romantic cowboy image to an even greater extent than Wister himself, grumbling that the author “sets cowboys to digging ditches when the real cowboy would not consider such a proposition for half a minute.”

his horseman of the plains. At the very outset of *The Virginian*, right after the narrator's first encounter with his hero, Wister writes, "Here in flesh and blood was a truth which I had long believed in words, but never met before. The creature we call a *gentleman* lies deep in the hearts of thousands that arrive born without a chance to master the outward graces of the type."²⁷ Commensurate with this big build-up, the author goes on to give his readers a near-perfect cultural hero for the times in which he was writing.

The popular literature of the Progressive Era was dominated by aggressive and virile male heroes: frontiersmen, adventurers, adolescent entrepreneurs, ape-men, and heroic dogs. Readers in 1902 must have responded enthusiastically to the Virginian's qualities of "manliness." While Wister had his own reasons for being attracted to the masculine aspects of the West, these were, at least in part, closely related to the tensions present in America throughout the last three decades of the nineteenth century. Professor White has noted that "the triumph of industrial enterprise paradoxically produced a heightened consciousness of women as delicate flowers and men as their defenders against the evils of a strange new world, resulting in a nation-wide assertion of masculinity." There is never any doubt that the Virginian is a "real man." Though six feet tall, he is perceived by the narrator as a "giant," and while kind and well-mannered around women, they immediately sense his "volcanic" power. He is strong, intelligent, finely coordinated, and confident and possesses many exceptional abilities. The story's eastern schoolmarm, Molly Wood, eventually surrenders her civilized heritage in Vermont to marry the hero because, as she reveals to Grandmother Stark, "I wanted a man who was a man."²⁸

Wister's audience of readers must also have been pleased with the manner in which the Virginian rose from obscurity to success like

27. Wister, *The Virginian* (1979), p. 10.

28. White, *Eastern Establishment*, pp. 140–41. See also Wister, *The Virginian* (1979), p. 141. Nemerov notes that *The Virginian*'s several references to volcanoes (as in "the quiet of this man was volcanic") mark it as "a product of the years of Hawaii's annexation and of American equatorial imperialism generally, when volcanoes came unprecedentedly to the attention of the American public" (Nemerov, *Frederic Remington*, p. 74).

some grown-up Horatio Alger hero. Born into poverty, the Virginian goes west to seek his fortune. Wandering from Texas to Montana, he eventually settles as a cowhand on the Sunk Creek Ranch in Wyoming. There, he serves his employer faithfully, respecting property rights, risking his life in the performance of his job, never complaining but determined to make his boss recognize his worth. He is a man who makes his own decisions and accepts their consequences. When duty demands that he hang his old friend Steve for cattle rustling, he does it. Self-reliance, an important aspect of the success ethic of the post-Civil War generation, is key to the Virginian's personal success. "A man," he insists, "must take care of himself." As he climbs the so-



Printed in 1962, illustrator Everett Henry's map entitled "The Virginian from America's First 'Western' Novel, Written by Owen Wister" highlights various scenes from *The Virginian* depicted against the outline of Montana, the Dakotas, Wyoming, Idaho, and Nebraska. (Geography and Map Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.)

cial ladder, pulling himself up out of his lower-class status by his bootstraps, he reveals his own sentimental pieties to the system of "making it" that has enabled him to be promoted to foreman: "After a while . . . I noticed a right strange fact. The money I made easy that I wasn't worth, it went like it came. I strained myself none gettin' or spending it. But the money I made hard, I was worth, why I begun to feel right proper about that. And now, I have got savings stowed away. If once you could feel how good that feels."²⁹ With this kind of attitude, the Virginian eventually rises to become a partner in the firm, which prospers under his management, while other ranches are going broke. At the story's conclusion, the ex-dirt farmer is "an important man, with a strong grip on many enterprises and able to give his wife all and more than she asked or desired."³⁰ Wister, however, went much farther than this in his efforts to make his western cowboy a suitable hero for the industrial society of the East.

After the Civil War ended in 1865, a number of leaders of American public opinion (particularly among the business class) began using Social Darwinism to justify laissez-faire economics in the United States. Their chief prophet, English philosopher Herbert Spencer, insisted that Charles Darwin's theory of evolution—"the survival of the fittest"—applied not only to biology but to society, as well. Therefore, so his argument went, the rich deserved to be rich, and the poor deserved to be poor. As William Graham Sumner, Spencer's leading disciple in America insisted, competition "is a law of nature"³¹ and "poverty belongs to the struggle for existence" into which all of us are born.³² It cannot be alleviated by social welfare. "Let it be understood," he wrote, "that we cannot go outside of this alternative: liberty, inequality, survival of the fittest; not-liberty, equality, survival of the unfittest. The former carries society forward and favors all its best members; the latter carries society downward and favors all its worst

29. Owen Wister, *The Virginian: A Horseman of the Plains* (New York: Macmillan, 1928), p. 168.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 392.

31. Sumner, *The Challenge of Facts and Other Essays* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1914), p. 25.

32. Quoted in Mody C. Boatright, "The American Myth Rides the Range: Owen Wister's Man on Horseback," *Southwest Review* 36 (Summer 1951): 160.

members."³³ In *The Winning of the West*, Theodore Roosevelt applied the theory of evolution to history; a decade later, Wister exemplified it in his cowboy fiction.³⁴

A major factor in the writer's admiration for the West was his belief that it allowed the law of natural selection to operate unhampered. One of the most interesting minor characters in *The Virginian* is Shorty, the pathetic anti-cowboy from Brooklyn. Except for his affection for Pedro his horse, Shorty is a complete incompetent. And Wister sees it to be the law of the West, the law of nature obeyed by man, that incompetence must be destroyed. The weak go down, and Shorty does not survive. The fittest—the successful, victorious Virginian—is Shorty's polar opposite, nature's Darwinian Knight of the West, and, as such, worthy of surviving. Pondering this matter in a passage that could just as easily have been written by Spencer or Sumner, *The Virginian's* narrator tells us,

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 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 the violence to human nature. Therefore, we decreed that every man would henceforth 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.³⁵

The theory of social evolution also bolstered Wister's wholehearted subscription to the myth of Anglo-Saxon racial superiority, first evidenced in "The Evolution of a Cow-Puncher" and fully manifested in

33. Sumner, *Challenge of Facts*, p. 25.

34. Theodore Roosevelt, *The Winning of the West*, 4 vols. (New York: Putnam, 1889–1896).

35. Wister, *The Virginian* (1979), p. 114.

The Virginian. White Americans had always regarded American Indians, blacks, and Mexicans as racially inferior. In the late nineteenth century, however, this doctrine was extended to all races, as the Protestant clergyman Josiah Strong, among others, proclaimed that the Anglo-Saxon race, because of its inherent superiority as displayed in its genius for politics and moral goodness, was destined under God to rule the world. One obvious reason for the widespread acceptance of this view was its usefulness in providing rationalization for the new brand of American imperialism. In 1900, Americans had reelected William McKinley to lead their nation, thereby endorsing a policy by which the United States would take on its share of the "white man's burden." In that same year, Congress enacted the Platt amendment, which asserted the right of the United States to interfere in Cuba to protect the rights of American citizens there; United States troops were fighting in the Philippines against Filipino revolutionaries; and forces arrived in China as part of the relief expedition sent to suppress the Boxer Rebellion. Some of these activities were believed to be justified on economic or strategic grounds, but all were defended on the grounds of white supremacy and the moral responsibility of whites to Christianize and educate inferior peoples. Not surprisingly, then, the press was full of praise for Anglo-Saxon law, civilization, courage, and chivalry. At the same time, it preached of the duty to defend the spiritual values of this master race from the menaces of black savagery or the yellow peril.³⁶

This new glorification of the Anglo-Saxon involved the corresponding denigration of minorities in America. Like many other Americans in the 1890s, Owen Wister was impressed with the technological and financial triumphs that emerged from the East but was annoyed by the crowded conditions of the cities and intensely hostile toward the influx of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe. In an *American Magazine* article entitled "Shall We Let the Cuckoos Crowd Us Out of Our Nest?," Wister attacked these "Ellice Island mongrel

36. Boatright, *American Myth*, pp. 161–62. The phrase "white man's burden" was coined by Rudyard Kipling in a poem originally published as "The White Man's Burden: The United States and the Philippine Islands" in *McClure's Magazine* 12 (Feb. 1899).

mobs" of "Croats and Vandals" who were "invading our shores" and undermining the "American spirit" and way of life.³⁷ In *The Virginian*, his Anglo-Saxon cowboy hero fires some racist salvos of his own by ridiculing the intelligence of blacks in song ("I never went to college, but I'se come mighty nigh—I peeked through de door as I went by"); calling Jews "Hebes" and Germans "Dutchmen"; and making it clear that he regards American Indians as subhuman.³⁸ (At one point, the narrator in Wister's 1895 article "The Evolution of the Cow-Puncher" admits that "the Mexican was the original cowboy," but says that "the American improved upon him. . . . Soon he had taken what was good from this small, deceitful alien, including his name, *Vaquero* . . . translated into Cowboy."³⁹) Had the Virginian still been riding the trails in 1905, he may perhaps have enjoyed taking time out to read Thomas Dixon's *The Clansman*, a book that assailed the "barbaric" and "bestial nigger" while glorifying the Ku Klux Klan's emergence "against overwhelming odds" as "one of the most dramatic chapters in the history of the Aryan race." In the fervently patriotic, racist, and xenophobic milieu of early twentieth-century America, it, like *The Virginian*, was a best seller.⁴⁰

In an insightful essay, the late scholar and novelist Louis Owens points out that the American Indians who populated the land in *The Virginian* were not supposed to have agency and were virtually looked upon as buffalo. Owens writes that they had essentially vanished from a meaningful place in the world: "In the West of Owen Wister's novel, there is no Native American history, no history at all to be found in the Western landscape prior to the coming of the European settler. Wister's Wyoming is a new land, a clean slate on which white ranchers will write their history and build their fences. In the rare moments

37. Owen Wister, "Shall We Let the Cuckoos Crowd Us Out of Our Nest?" reprinted from *American Magazine* in Anders Breidlid, ed., *American Culture: An Anthology of Civilization Texts* (New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 38–39.

38. Quoted in White, *Eastern Establishment*, p. 143.

39. Wister, "Evolution of the Cow-Puncher," pp. 608, 614. See also Boatright, "American Myth," pp. 162–63.

40. From Thomas Dixon's address "To the Reader" in *The Clansman: A Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1905).

when Native Americans appear in the novel, they are not merely dehistoricized but carefully and fully dehumanized. . . . The native is simply erased in this paean to a mythic West."⁴¹ At one point in the novel, a handful of "unpermitted" Indians break out from a reservation and, in keeping with Owens's thesis, are quickly and easily apprehended and incarcerated. In the two other appearances, Indians are either incorporated into the tourist industry for the enjoyment of sightseers or kept at a safe distance. "European Americans," writes Owens, "have taken full possession of the West in *The Virginian*, lock, stock and barrel."⁴²

Just as the most deserving were destined to flourish in American society, so, too, were the best qualities of East and West destined to meld in *The Virginian*. Wister's theme of the deliberate reconciliation of East and West is emphasized most clearly in the longstanding, dynamic tension between the Virginian and Molly, the cowboy and the schoolmarm. Wister set up a version of the standard debate between nature and culture or rural and urban values linked specifically, in this case, to the man of the West and the woman of the East. The opposition between the two is clear, as Molly's reliance upon her heritage, her pacifism, and her false social and intellectual standards contrast directly with the Virginian's self-reliance, skillful use of violence to gain mastery over other men, and natural intelligence and gentility.⁴³ The author repeatedly points up this contrast, which reaches its climax when Molly insists that the Virginian refuse to fight the villain Trampas under threat of breaking off their wedding engagement and returning to the East. Caught in this conflict of love, duty, and honor, the Virginian shows no hesitation. He explains to Molly why other

41. Owens, "White for a Hundred Years," in Melody Graulich and Stephen Tatum, eds., *Reading The Virginian in the New West* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), pp. 75-77.

42. Ibid., pp. 79, 83. In the same volume, historian Jennifer S. Tuttle makes quite a different contention concerning this conspicuous erasure of indigenous people, writing that Wister's protagonist possesses many of the same traits and qualities of American Indians. See Tuttle, "Indigenous Whiteness and Wister's Invisible Indians," in *Reading The Virginian*, pp. 89-111.

43. See chapter two of Christine Bold, *Selling the Wild West: Popular Western Fiction, 1860 to 1960* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

obligations must come second to the code of masculine honor, concluding, "Can't yu' see how it must be about a man?"⁴⁴ Further, the Virginian confronts Trampas believing that his defense of this honor will lose him the woman he loves. Naturally, events do not take this turn. The Virginian kills Trampas, and Molly realizes that her love for him transcends her moral reservations. "Thus did her New England conscience battle to the end," Wister writes, "and, in the end, capitulate to love." With this dramatic resolution, the conflict between eastern and western values, civilization and wilderness, ends.⁴⁵

Gender historian Jane Tompkins observes that the shootout in *The Virginian*, and in countless other Westerns to follow, was not only an outpouring of male-against-male violence, but also a kind of revolt against women. She believes that it is no mere coincidence that the Western gunfight is staged, time and time again, as a direct violation of what the lead female character in the story desires. Drawing examples from the films *Shane* and *High Noon* to substantiate her argument, Tompkins writes that honor demands that the male hero meet the challenge. "But what honor is," she contends, "is the need to do exactly what the woman most hates and fears in order to prove that you are not under her control." Furthermore, after the cowboy does everything the woman has begged him not to do, she takes him back. With such an utterly safe rejection, the historian asserts, "No wonder the Western was so popular!" For Tompkins, the Western shootout is frequently "a moment of rebellion, of escape from the clutches of female authority." What Tompkins finds most interesting about the Western is its emphasis on manhood as *the* ideal—"certainly the only one worth dying for"—and the model that Wister and others created for men as they came of age in the twentieth century.⁴⁶

Tompkins makes an excellent point, but Wister could not allow himself to write a novel in which either East or West absolutely overwhelmed the other, for his Virginian is infused with values of both the primitive and the civilized. Thus, when the hero goes East with his

44. Wister, *The Virginian* (1979), p. 410.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 416.

46. Jane Tompkins, *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 18–19, 144.

bride to meet her family, he fits in just as well in the land of the gentleman as he did back in Wyoming. Instead of a cowman, the East sees "merely a tall man with a usual straw hat, and Scotch homespuns of a rather better quality than most in Bennington."⁴⁷ Molly's proud old aunt takes a look at her new nephew and finally says, "I think I understand why [Molly] wanted to marry him. . . . He'll do."⁴⁸ The Virginian clearly does "do," both as a man of the cattle West and as an eastern gentleman.

Owen Wister was the first writer to create a western hero who was noble and chivalrous enough (due, in part, to his Southern origins) to marry a cultured, educated easterner. By also making him immortal in the spiritual, if not literal, sense ("His wild kind has been among us always . . . a hero without wings"⁴⁹), Wister achieved his goal of creating a vision for Charleston, the new industrial East, and the vigorous spirit of the "Wild West." Perhaps Wister sensed that many other Americans of his day had similar dreams of a unification of the "best" elements of the nation's supposedly polarized regions. Indeed, with socialite cowboy Theodore Roosevelt (to whom *The Virginian* was dedicated) in the White House, it seemed for a time that a reassertion of the older traditions and social patterns in a modern, technological age might be possible.

In many respects, Wister's vision of frontier society appeared much like that of his near-contemporary Frederick Jackson Turner, author of the seminal essay "The Significance of the Frontier in American History."⁵⁰ With the union of the Virginian and Molly, Wister suggests that the "true American"⁵¹ traditions of the Atlantic Coast were repeatedly revitalized as they moved westward, creating an even greater and more unified nation. Similarly, Turner argued that America's recurrent frontier experience had been a source of the values and institu-

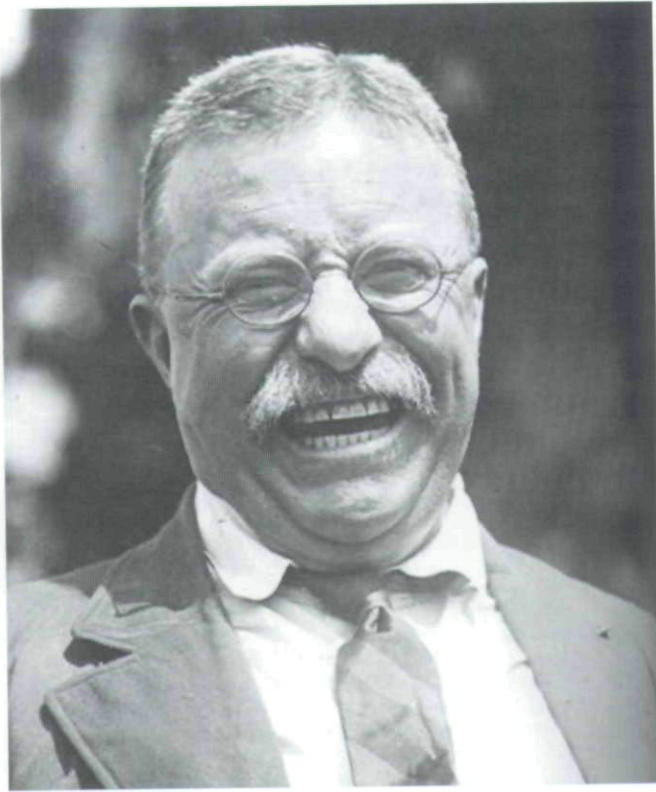
47. Wister, *The Virginian* (1979), p. 430.

48. *Ibid.*, pp. 432-33.

49. Wister's address "To the Reader" in *The Virginian*.

50. Frederick Jackson Turner's paper was first read at the meeting of the American Historical Association in Chicago on 12 July 1893 and appeared in the Proceedings of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 14 December 1893.

51. Wister, Roosevelt, *The Story of a Friendship*, p. 103.



The toothy and jovial Theodore Roosevelt shared an affection for the West with Wister. Roosevelt wrote to the novelist that he was "immensely pleased with the dedication" of *The Virginian*, adding, "I am genuinely proud to be associated with such a work" (Roosevelt to Wister, 29 May 1902, Container 33, Owen Wister Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; image courtesy author's collection).

tions of democracy. Like Wister, who represented the East as an environment of decaying values, Turner also feared that the closing of the frontier and simultaneous growth of governmental bureaucracies, labor organizations, and large industrial corporations might extinguish some of those traits that had formed a uniquely American character, such as freedom, expedience, self-reliance, and individualism. Yet, despite these similarities, Turner's and Wister's views of the frontier

were actually quite different. Turner was, after all, a liberal progressive. That it is so easy to find surface similarities between the two men suggests the degree to which both reflected many of the cultural preoccupations widespread at the end of the nineteenth century: the realization that the United States was becoming predominantly urban rather than rural, an increasing awareness of the changes being wrought by industrialism and new technologies, a growing sense of the complexity of modern society and the expendability of those working in it, the belief that morals were declining, and the quest for some sense of regeneration and reassurance.⁵²

When Wister wrote *The Virginian* at the turn of the twentieth century, he struck a number of responsive chords in the hearts of his readers. As America's economic and technological progress reached unprecedented levels and more immigrants from an increasingly mixed array of ethnic groups poured into the country, many of the native-born came to view the white Anglo-Saxon United States as the most glorious and endangered nation in the world. In this environment of pride and paranoia, they often regarded the rules of masculinity, gentlemanliness, and individualism as matters of crucial importance, and, because Wister was writing during a time in which the Old West and "the last romantic figure upon our soil"⁵³ would never come again, his accounts were considered all the more significant. Furthermore, the author's own eastern heritage (which had driven him West) enabled him to communicate the western experience in a manner that would resonate with his eastern contemporaries.

In the creation of his ultimate cowboy hero, Wister combined several conflicting images from American life into one fascinating character who, for him, represented the best of what his nation had to offer. The Virginian is a new self-made man, but he is also the "Last Cavalier," an immediate successor to the medieval knight; he is a masculine, virile, fearless killer, skilled in mortal combat, yet a kind and

52. John G. Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), p. 226.

53. Wister's address "To the Reader" in *The Virginian*.

gentle lover and friend; he is an early entrepreneur and marries a New England schoolteacher, but as a native of the Old South he possesses the chivalric ideals of the antebellum period; he is a rugged individualist who holds personal honor above all else, yet he is a dedicated employee and member of the community.

That Wister himself was immensely pleased with his extraordinary cowboy is evident in a letter he wrote to his mother shortly after *The Virginian* was published. Even then, the author realized that "never again can I light on a character so engaging. That only happens once."⁵⁴ A correspondent from Indiana who had spent a number of years out West as a mining engineer wrote to Wister, "Your 'Virginian' is *not* a creation—however much you may cherish him. He is *real*. . . and I have known him."⁵⁵ Another reader was so enthralled with the character that he apparently spent the rest of his life trying to emulate him. Writing to Wister in 1931, the Colorado cowboy thanked Wister for having written *The Virginian*, which he credited with having "fetched me west, aheading straight for Wyoming" twenty-six years earlier.⁵⁶

Contemporary reviewers, meanwhile, praised virtually every aspect of the *Virginian's* character. The *Boston Daily Mail* remarked perceptively, "It is clear that the story meets with [Mr. Roosevelt's] approval. Hence the *Virginian* may be said to have received the Presidential hall-mark as a desirable type of national character."⁵⁷ Edward Clark Marsh, writing for *Bookman* in 1908, examined the relations between

54. Wister to Sarah Butler Wister, 5 July 1902, Container 11, Owen Wister Papers. Wister's mother, quite typically, had several criticisms of her son's work. On 30 June 1902, Owen Wister wrote, "I shall thank you for your criticisms of *The Virginian* which I value as you know, and most of which I see as just—but not-all." In the letter he wrote to his mother six days later, though, he agreed with only one of her points, that "the heroine was a failure. She seems to me," the author admitted, "without personality." His spirited defense against the other criticisms were indicative of the pride he took in his *Virginian* and his apparent unwillingness, at least in private, to accept much "guff" from the work's critics—including his own mother.

55. Frank Atherton Ross to Owen Wister, 3 May 1902, Container 79, Owen Wister Papers.

56. Neal Lambert, "A Cowboy Writes to Owen Wister," *American West* 2 (Fall 1965): 31.

57. *Boston Daily Mail*, 29 July 1902, Container 79, Owen Wister Papers.

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Wister's fiction and the ideals of the century's first decade. "Where is our classical record of life on the Western frontier, in the fleeting period of its cowboy domination which forms the most romantic episode in American history?" Marsh asked, answering,

Few would dispute that it is in the novels and tales of Owen Wister. . . . *The Virginian* is a triumph. . . . The unnamed hero is indeed the type of the cow-puncher, the classic form of him; but the type is at the same time a highly individualized man. . . . He is all himself, with his quiet manner, his self-reliance, his Southern drawl. . . . Mr. Wister is a historical novelist, always, in the best sense. . . . is American through and through, and believes in it. It was of the cowboys in *The Virginian* that he wrote "Something about them, and the idea of them, smote my American heart." . . . It can quite safely be said that no living American writer of fiction is more completely indigenous than Mr. Wister. It may further be claimed that the Americanism embodied in his books is of the kind in which we may, before a world audience, feel some pride.⁵⁸

Others echoed these sentiments. For the *New York Times*, Wister had "come pretty near to writing the American novel."⁵⁹

Obviously, many Americans were grateful for Wister's mythic renderings of the Virginian cowboy. *The Virginian's* amazing popularity resided in the novel's ability to satisfy the seemingly contradictory needs of reaffirming old values whilst seeking solutions to new prob-

58. Edward Clark Marsh, "Representative American Story Tellers VI: Owen Wister," *Bookman* 27 (July 1908): 459-60, 466.

59. "'The Virginian': Owen Wister's Stirring Novel of Western Life," *New York Times Saturday Review of Books*, 21 June 1902, p. 426. Similar sentiments appeared in the *Philadelphia Times*, 2 May 1902, which described the novel as "bristling with Americanism," and in *Dial*, 1 June 1902, where the critic claimed, "The story is one which comes near to the heart of essential Americanism" (both in Container 79, Owen Wister Papers).

(*Opposite page*) The Macmillan Company both encouraged and gloated over the success of Wister's book in this 1902 pamphlet and numerous other advertisements run in newspapers across the country. Another half-page newspaper spread featured a map of the United States replete with glowing quotations from critics in two dozen cities. (Reproduced from Container 79, Owen Wister Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.)

lems in an increasingly urban, industrial America. On the one hand, the mythical West that Wister had claimed would never come again represented the old America the way those of his class, in particular, wanted to understand it. On the other hand, the novel drew attention to the uncertain future of a modern nation. Wister's West, in effect, merged the two by offering a vision that reaffirmed the old values of individualism, self-reliance and chivalry in a changing "eastern" future. As Donald E. Houghton has noted, the complex issues raised by the conflict between East and West are carefully smoothed over, for the Virginian "creates the happy illusion that we need not give up one world to gain the other." Wister's work both recalls and, at the same time, anticipates history in a manner that calmed the public's uncertainties.⁶⁰

In the fearful and xenophobic world of 1902, in which technology, commerce, politics, and even war were becoming increasingly complex and abstract, Americans turned to the western cultural hero in the hope that society might not turn out to be so complicated or different after all. Wister's Virginian provided the public with simple solutions, reminding them that there was such a thing as being too civilized and that there comes a point in every conflict when a punch in the nose beats talk. But Wister's Virginian was also a man with a good job, his own piece of land, money in the bank, and, for that matter, an eastern tailor and an appreciation of the classics. In an apparent blending of elements from the works of James Fenimore Cooper and Horatio Alger, Jr., Wister manages his material in such a way that the values of both the West and the East seem to emerge triumphant.

On the one-hundredth anniversary of the publication of *The Virginian*, several scholars presented their views of Wister's classic in *Reading The Virginian in the New West*. In the Introduction, one of the volume's editors, Melody Graulich, provides support for the view that, while the novel was by nature nostalgic, the story also looked to the fu-

60. Houghton, "Two Heroes in One: Reflections on the Popularity of *The Virginian*," *Journal of Popular Culture* 4 (Fall 1970): 505. The idea of *The Virginian's* great appeal through both recalling and anticipating history is expressed in both Houghton and Lee Clark Mitchell, "When You Call Me That. . . Tall Talk and Male Hegemony in *The Virginian*," *PMLA* 102 (Jan. 1987): 67.

ture, closing with a view of the New West. The Virginian becomes "the owner of a coal mine," while the West itself is "getting down to the serious business of resource extraction, labor management, irrigation projects, competition for markets, railroad monopolies, foreign investment, Los Angeles real estate speculation, 'cheap foreign' labor, and tourism, all mentioned in the text."⁶¹ While many scholars would point out obvious differences between the Old and New Wests, contributing author Susan Kollin takes the view that Wister's charting of such issues as land and resource management, tenure rights, and Indian aggravations would indicate that the differences are much less sharp than some would have it.⁶²

Today, historical interpreters (including this one) identify many anachronistic ideas in *The Virginian*. That Wister's creation contains numerous examples is hardly surprising and is part of what makes the work so valuable to historians. The book was written for its time, not for today. Yet, *The Virginian* also holds a special place, arguably, as one of the most important works of the twentieth century. In the decades that followed the novel's publication, the Virginian remained immensely popular as more Americans embraced a vision of the Old West as the "real" America and held on to an underlying, hopeful vision for the future, as well. This ancestor of some ten thousand later cowboy figures, similarly tailored to fit the peculiar social environment of each of their creators, would make up much of the basis for a twentieth-century Western industry that moved from dime novels and novels like *The Virginian* to pulp magazines, movies, and television shows. Its profound influence on American literature and culture is unmistakable.

Although the United States has undergone great changes over the past century, and the twenty-first century begins with social and cultural contexts quite different from those of Wister's day, new interpretations of the book continue to appear and to be relevant to our understanding of American society. While the Western is no longer the dominant genre it once was, its form remains much alive in journal-

61. Graulich, Introduction to *Reading The Virginian in the New West*, p. xi.

62. Susan Kollin, "Wister and the 'New West,'" *ibid.*, pp. 233-54.



As of 1990, more than two million hardbound copies of *The Virginian* had been sold, with no record of paperback sales. The book has been translated into several languages, including this undated Arabic edition. (Courtesy Rare Book and Special Collections Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.)

istic imagery, advertising, tourism, political cartoons, and many other manifestations today. Writing for the *New York Times* in 1992, Timothy Egan observed, "The West as a theme park built around its legends is stronger than ever. Nearly a hundred years after the American fron-

tier was pronounced dead by historians like Frederick Jackson Turner, a new generation of faux ranchers, urban cowboys, and high-country artists are getting rich helping to develop a new economy out of the enduring icons of the West. . . . They make their living not from tearing apart scenery or wrestling with the elements, but from selling an image that Americans refuse to let go of."⁶³ One need look no further than to the current president of the United States for evidence of how the western vision of Wister and others endures. Exactly a century after Theodore Roosevelt presided over the nation, George W. Bush speaks to millions of Americans and the world in press conferences and news clips from his ranch in Crawford, Texas, bedecked in a buckskin jacket. With a steely-eyed squint, the commander-in-chief describes the latest crisis in the post-9/11 era, pledging to "get the drop" on "evil-doers," find them "dead or alive," "smoke 'em outta their holes," and "bring them to justice." It is little wonder that conservative columnist George F. Will once suggested that the famous line from *The Virginian*, "When you call me that, *smile!*," could appear on the seal of the United States.⁶⁴ For all of these reasons, the last line of Wister's novel was more prophetic than he knew: "I think [the Virginian] is going to live a long while."

63. Timothy Egan, "The Mild West," quoted in Kollin, "Wister and the 'New West,'" p. 234.

64. George F. Will, "The Barefoot Billionaire: Ross Perot is starring in a cowboy movie, playing the role of Reluctant Sheriff," *Newsweek* 119 (1 June 1992): 78.

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