PROJECT MUSE®

Regionalists on the Left: Radical Voices from the American West by Michael C. Steiner (review)

Forrest G. Robinson

Western American Literature, Volume 49, Number 2, Summer 2014, pp. 224-226 (Review)

Published by University of Nebraska Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/wal.2014.0056>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/549216>

Rothermel reveals Eastwood's rejection of "the juvenile fantasy of masculinity and courage" (101). Arguing for a view of *Mystic River* (2003) as a tragedy, Robert Merrill and John L. Simons see the film's determinism in a complex nexus of childhood sexual abuse, adult murder, and the received masculine roles of detective and violent avenger. In "Lies of Our Fathers: Mythology and Artifice in Eastwood's Cinema" William Beard focuses on Eastwood's skeptical view of the individualistic male hero. Beard demonstrates brilliantly how *Flags of Our Fathers* (2006) rejects the feel-goodism of *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) and *Band of Brothers* (2001) by depicting "how the sausage of charismatic patriotism is made" (245). One crucial element in this manufactured patriotism, Beard shows, is the idea of individual male soldiers who always act out "the reassuring spectacle of buddies risking their lives for one another" (240). Finally, to take one last example, John M. Gourlie and Engel analyze *Gran Torino* (2008) as a family film in which the central character matures from loner to a man invested in the needs of others, a community not of "bloodline kin." In this film Gourlie and Engel see Eastwood "passing the keys of American manhood to immigrant sons of another race" through the conviction that male self-sacrifice, a defining feature of manliness, can be broadened to include not just one's buddies but "all of humanity" (275).

As a whole this collection should prove valuable not only to students of Eastwood but also to readers interested in how America's films speak about, and sometimes against, the nation's dominant values.

Scott D. Emmert
University of Wisconsin, Fox Valley

Michael C. Steiner, *Regionalists on the Left: Radical Voices from the American West*. Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 2013. 328 pp. \$39.95.

Editor and contributor Michael C. Steiner declares that "a basic purpose" of *Regionalists on the Left: Radical Voices from the American West* "is to expand our understanding of western regionalism and American regionalism in general by uncovering a woefully neglected intellectual tradition. . . . The radical regionalists in this book paved

the way for the pluralist, cosmopolitan versions of western regionalism that are increasingly possible in the present" (3). The volume's principal subjects are discussed by an array of scholars in individual essays collectively dedicated to rescuing regionalism from its reputation as politically conservative and backward looking. This sharply polarized framework has the disadvantage of foreclosing consideration of major regionalists who occupied something like a middle ground—Willa Cather, Bernard DeVoto, and Wallace Stegner, for example—all the while foregrounding the work of much less important figures, some of whom in fact fail to meet the book's decidedly left-leaning ideological admissions standards. I hasten to add that this all but unavoidable problem scarcely diminishes the collection's success at retrieving and representing a broad-based, eminently "usable," progressive, often radical tradition among novelists, visual artists, and historians of the American West.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, the quality of the essays in *Regionalists on the Left* varies considerably. Among the essays that most attracted my attention I would include Byrna R. Campbell's fresh and informative chapter on Joe Jones, a painter and muralist of strongly leftist leanings who rose from humble origins in St. Louis to develop a potent counternarrative to the conservative artistic vision of Grant Wood and Thomas Hart Benton. Jones's emphasis on social conflict fostered by the depredations of capitalism is also a dominant theme in William W. Bevis's forceful treatment of D'Arcy McNickle. Bevis traces the novelist's ideological evolution from an early liberalism to the "radical reassessment of capitalism" (242) clearly on display in the posthumous novel *Wind from an Enemy Sky* (1978). The tragic fate of Native Americans is similarly featured in two other excellent chapters. Shirley A. Leckie Reed writes movingly about Angie Debo's Indian histories, scholarly work undertaken in a climate of brutal misogyny at the University of Oklahoma but later celebrated in a 1988 PBS documentary and in a Lifetime Achievement Award from the American Historical Association. Three other essays strike me as especially worthy of note. José E. Limon's comparative treatment of J. Frank Dobie and Américo Paredes juxtaposes two famous Texas regionalists whose careers and political ideologies moved over time in opposite directions, Dobie's from the conservative right sharply to the left, and Paredes's from youthful

radicalism to a later life withdrawal from public and political activities into narrower academic pursuits. Paredes is best known for his novel *George Washington Gomez* (1990) and “*With His Pistol in His Hand*”: *A Border Ballad and Its Hero* (1958), a critical study of the famous corrido involving Gregorio Cortez and his heroic struggles with the Texas Rangers. In “Regionalism and Social Protest during John Steinbeck’s ‘Years of Greatness,’ 1936–1939” David Wrobel focuses his attention on *In Dubious Battle* (1936), “The Harvest Gypsies” articles on migratory worker camps (published serially in the *San Francisco News* in 1936), and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). Wrobel argues persuasively that these works reveal that Steinbeck’s “vision for a more humane, more socially and morally responsible America became fully developed only when it intersected with his deep regionalist proclivities and concerns” (329). Michael C. Steiner’s concluding essay is equally successful in aligning his subject, Carey McWilliams, with Steinbeck as the “two fiery regionalists on the left” (354) who loomed above all others in California during the years of the Depression. *Factories in the Field*, published within months of *The Grapes of Wrath* in 1939, “sparked intense controversy and roused the national conscience with [its] enduring portrayals of injustice and want in a land of plenty” (355).

Regionalists on the Left serves to remind us that the so-called New Western History, which famously advanced the point of view of the oppressed, colonized, and conquered, was more properly a late, well-publicized variation on an earlier, broad-based, and firmly established post-Turner revisionist historical impulse at large across the West well before World War II. In part because so much of this “woefully neglected intellectual tradition” (3) took a literary turn, it failed to attract the attention of newcomers inclined more generally to overlook significant precursors. Professor Steiner and company have done well to promote this ever-timely rapprochement of Clio and Calliope.

Forrest G. Robinson
University of California, Santa Cruz