Cultural Secrets as Narrative Form

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In a 1903 essay for *The Outlook*, William R. Lighton articulated a representative perspective on the beginnings of the Old West as recalled in the U.S. popular press at the turn of the twentieth century: “The pioneering of a new land separates men from the conventional institutions of organized society, from constitutions, codes, and creeds, and throws them back upon the native resources of human nature. Naturally, they set up some rude standards of behavior, standards in which fixedness counts for much less than adaptability.” Looking at legends of the Old West with this interpretive frame in mind, a surprising, even illogical, contradiction surrounds the prototypical hero: The memory of these rough individualists seems carefully crafted in American folklore so that such stock images of frontier mythology are strangely circumscribed by stark limits on their creative agency to form and direct the culture.

Lighton continues: “The familiar ‘bad man’ of Western lore was the product, not of wickedness, but of untrammeled freedom. . . . For a time those little differences in manners were regarded as the distinguishing traits of the West, until time showed them to be ephemeral. They were never so much in the ascendant, even when the West was at its wildest.” Perhaps these characters were never “ascendant” in established Western authority, but even Lighton’s own language concedes the near saturation of these images in the culture. In this imaginative (rather than historical) ascendancy, such characters belonged to the realm of the abstract and so gained their imaginative life from strictly defined symbolic polarities. Despite the “new land” on which they made their lives, they faced exceptionally narrow limits framing their creative agency. America’s heroes and heroines of the Old West played within a fixed symbolic system. By the turn of the century, that system would change, and the Virginian’s complexity outlines this central symbolic shift; he is by contrast the figure
Lighton's text imagines as the ascendant.

Although Western lore is rich and complex in its traditions, some generalities may be ventured and then explored through attention to several of the best-known figures of the American West. Many older Western hero tales typically grew from historical individuals, with varying amounts of true life history, engaged in stock episodes of cleverness and physical prowess and providing occasional glimpses of their (presumably) true—though hidden—gentility; epic significance was liberally added by journalists, fiction writers, and historians alike. From popular legends, dime novels, histories, and later romances, original heroes of the Old West might be remembered most for their capacity to embody—within a single figure—the best and worst qualities of human behavior imaginable to nineteenth-century America. Billy the Kid, for example, was remembered within weeks of his death by one source as “a delicate looking child” with “wonderful energy and remarkable bravery.” Another source, on the other hand, described him as “a low down vulgar cut-throat, with probably not one redeeming quality.”

Sheriff Pat Garrett, Billy the Kid’s executioner, was an ex-outlaw himself, and his conversion to the world of order made him a hero to some, a heartless mercenary to others. In telling the stories of the frontier hero, it quickly became custom to adhere to a symbolic strategy that might somehow contain the western experience by framing it within its deepest contradictions. The hero, like the territory itself, could be alternately dangerous and wonderful, but in either case drawn boldly, every image reaching for the extremes of possibility.

Perhaps the most familiar name among the figures of Western mythology, Billy the Kid actually came from the east, where he was born in 1859 or 1860. He was something of a latecomer when, as a child, he moved with his family to the New Mexico territory. From this minimal sketch of his origins, legends of Billy diverge, but it appears quite certain that he was a fatherless teenager working as a ranch hand just before he became involved in his notorious crimes. His fame grew within the context of one of the important local wars of the time: The Lincoln County War began when the boss of the ranch where Billy worked was killed, and it escalated with subsequent retaliations. By the time he died in 1881, Billy the Kid was national news, and despite the fact that his own executioner was one of the first to shape a narrative about him, countless tales sentimentalized his life and actions.

Indeed, from the start, tales of Billy the Kid’s life emphasized a surprising side of his character. The first dime novel to cover Billy’s life claimed that when he was first jailed for robbery, the arresting sheriff’s
wife and daughter freed him from jail, having succumbed to his innocence and charm. As the story is told, it was not only their “feminine weakness” that brought this about, but also their perception of something deeply true, even noble, in Billy’s character. In fact, according to this account, Billy’s moral demise is tied directly to a tragedy of love gone wrong. This author claims that Billy’s love for a Mexican woman of questionable character—and her engagement to another man—prevented him from “sett[ling] down to a quiet life [as] . . . a good citizen.” In the madness of unrequited love, Billy—according to the tale—then kills his beloved’s fiancé “with a devilish grin on his face” and the “laugh of a demon.” From that point onward, Billy is simply no longer human within the tale. He is at once an extraordinary hero of the range war, rewarded with a job as a constable, and he is a merciless killer.

Even with the breadth between these divergent personae, however, Billy never again emerges with the ambiguities of humanity, as a complex figure with conflicting desires. His exaggerated symbolic roles translate easily into superstitions about his life and existence: “The more superstitious regarded him as immortal. Wonderful stories were afloat as to his vanishing into air. . . . He was called a wizard, a spook, a devil, anything that was supernatural and horrible.” Later commentaries too echo this theme; in 1926 Eugene Cunningham reports the disappearance of any proof of Billy’s death: “Today, so utterly has all trace of the grave vanished, that there are those who say that the Kid has never been killed.” Beautiful, young, violent, and lost to this world in the advance of civilization and progress, Billy perfectly embodies what so much of nineteenth-century America saw as the passing ways of the Wild West.

Daniel Boone—a quite different figure from the highly romanticized Billy—is one of the best-known characters representative of the frontier movement referred to as “overland expansion” in Henry Nash Smith’s classic account of the West. Boone’s life has somewhat less drama and more ambiguity as it is translated—first in John Filson’s 1784 frontier biography and then in Daniel Bryan’s Adventures of Daniel Boone (1813)—into a frontier archetype. Appended to The Discovery and Settlement of Kentucke, the Boone narrative was popular in the United States and Europe. It was translated into French for a 1785 printing and also reprinted in London; further, it helped establish conventions that would shape Western tale telling for at least a century.

Filson’s text was advertised to be “as accurate a description of our country as . . . can possibly be given.” Both in the description of Kentucky and of Boone’s life, Filson claimed that he “cautiously endeavoured to avoid every species of falsehood.” In this narrative Boone’s adventures read
much like the captivity narratives of earlier generations; the most significant change from those earlier texts is that this hero comes to rely on himself rather than on God for deliverance. In Filson’s account Boone becomes “the representative hero of the trans-Appalachian frontier,” the first to “define the tradition of the Western hero.” As an articulate woodsman who prefers nature to society, the image of Daniel Boone resonates with European primitivism. Whatever the factual links for the Boone legend, Filson’s narrative sketch of his life clearly dominates the tradition that follows.

Filson had gone west to Kentucky to receive land awarded to veterans of the Revolutionary War. There he taught school and worked in the fur trade and as a land surveyor until he died, allegedly killed by a member of a local Indian tribe in October of 1788. Filson’s narrative is meant first as an educational tract but quickly becomes sensational, focusing on Boone rather than on the western territories. Ironically, according to Filson, Boone was the only member of an original exploration party who was not killed by Indians. Purportedly he lived in the wilderness of Kentucky—known by local tribes as “the Dark and Bloody Ground”—until 1771, when—as a very old man—he moved to Pennsylvania. Kentucky, Filson writes, is “the most extraordinary country that the sun enlightens with his celestial beams.” In this context, Filson’s account expands into a tale of the divinely ordained process of settlement originating with Boone, whom he presents as the self-proclaimed representative of God.

Given Filson’s military service with the colonial army and the fact that Boone reportedly lost at least two sons during the Revolutionary War, readers might expect more narrative attention to the events surrounding 1776, particularly perhaps as a harbinger of frontier individualism. Actual battles, however, are mentioned merely in passing, and overall the focus remains only obliquely related to colonial politics. Like Crèvecoeur’s Farmer James, Filson’s Boone seems most pleased at the thought of the war’s end rather than of independence:

What thanks, what ardent and ceaseless thanks, are due to that all-superintending Providence which has turned a cruel war into peace, brought order out of confusion, made the fierce savages placid, and turned away their hostile weapons from our country! May the same Almighty Goodness banish the accursed monster, war, from all lands, with her hated associates, rapine and insatiable ambition. . . . This account of my adventures will inform the reader of the most remarkable events of this country.—I now live in peace in safety, enjoying the sweets of liberty, and the bounties of Providence.
This passage is replete with irony from both historical and mythic points of view. The narrative refuses to clarify whether it is indeed the Revolution or the border skirmishes between Native Americans and frontiersmen that accounts for “the most remarkable events of this country.” The determination cannot be made because Boone’s narrative voice claims to speak from Pennsylvania in the 1770s, after returning from decades in Kentucky. As potential hero, furthermore, the voice behind this passage clearly credits the divine with whatever peace has been established, though a major point of the Boone tale as a whole is the development of a self-reliant hero.19

From these details alone it is clear that the Boone narrative deviates in significant ways from the Wild West tale exemplified by the stories of Billy the Kid. From these ambiguities—particularly the retreat from the language of individualism to the language of providence—the Boone legend suggests weaknesses, even failures, in the terms of remembrance used for the frontier myths and heroes. Like the legend of Billy the Kid, however, the legend of Daniel Boone places the hero in an easily recognizable symbolic system (this time, that of providence) and so inscribes upon him narrow limits framing any possibility of creative agency.

Perhaps these recognizable frames of interpretation help familiarize—and so popularize—the frontier hero. In any case, Billy the Kid, Daniel Boone, and other Western figures—often mountain men, outlaws, or quick shooters—had captured the interest of a vast majority of reading Americans by the mid-nineteenth century. Later frontier biographies, struggling to satisfy the continuing public appetite for epic adventure, would openly warn readers of the inadequacy of language in any form to capture the grandeur of their subject. For example, Kit Carson’s story, as told (apparently) “to a literate friend” around 1856, but not published until 1926, begins with a “final caution to the reader”: “Carson was so modest and undemonstrative, and the exploits of his everyday life were frequently so remarkable, that the reader must supplement his simple narration with the resources of his own imagination if he is to appreciate the true nature of the things Carson relates.”20 Through such open appeals to an anxious cultural imagination, a tradition of western iconography grew quickly from the stories of a relatively small number of individual figures.

Despite the innumerable variations within each of the stories of these heroes and despite the many differences among them as individual historical figures, there is something remarkable—and remarkably similar—in the patterns of their narrative life. History—its senses of time, process, and change in the material conditions of existence—is utterly absent in the life stories of these American frontier heroes. Experience is removed from the historical plane onto an epic plane; no legends account for the develop-
ment of innocence into violence, or violence into civilization; what each tale notes is their odd coexistence. The symbolic strategy of western folklore works by dramatic juxtaposition of irreconcilable oppositions, the framing of everyday action with a recognizable paradigm that lifts these figures out of material existence. While this strategy permits—even promotes—the coexistence of hero and villain legends for the same person, it more significantly eclipses any possibility of representation beyond the bounds of a fixed opposition and enforces a static iconography outside of the realm of experience and history.

Evolving Western Heroes

By the turn of the century, writers interested in reanimating the West as a powerful force in national life seemed inclined to start anew—to build a mythology not framed by the familiar symbolic polarities (innocence and violence; the civilized and the wild). Instead, this important second stage in the symbolic life of the West was an attempt to account for exactly those categories ignored and excluded from the form of old western folklore—categories of experience rather than symbol, temporal process rather than frozen iconography. Indeed, many popular representations of the West—in newspapers, periodicals, and fiction—began to distinguish clearly between two different mythic Wests. The old myth had its heroes in figures such as Billy the Kid; the new myth rejected the drama of the outlaw for the steady improvements left by the hard worker.21

Although this shift from an iconic to a cumulative view of the meaning of the West shifts America’s attention from tall tales of a wild country to well-reasoned stories of a welcoming, tamed frontier, it proves to be a no less controlling style of narrative representation. While the first method dealt with hopes and fears by using the most exaggerated of them to establish a frame of possibility, the second method responded to the same anxiety—what might happen on this field of possibility—by inscribing western life and lore within the paradigm of beneficent development or, more precisely, social evolution.22

For a second-stage myth, the theme of “lost possibilities” might have been an alternative standard refrain. One circumstance encouraging this was the inheritance of civil war, transplanted to the west. Despite the fact that many classic nineteenth-century histories of the West do not address these issues, Eugene Berwanger has shown that topics of both nationalism and reconstruction after the Civil War were of extraordinary interest in the West.23 Union success during the Civil War could not dismantle the
entrenched resistance of southern culture, and far less could it prevent the reemergence of such sympathies in the western regions. Late in the century, in fact, the West was home to draft dodgers from both sides, particularly from the South, and there was a strong presence of both Union and Confederate veterans as well.

A number of popular legends were dominated by figures like Jesse James, a transplanted southerner who had belonged to a Confederate guerilla squad. From every angle, his lawless ways seemed quintessentially antinationalistic; he represented a multitude of impediments to an establishment of a regulated system of justice. James was well loved as America’s Robin Hood by some popular audiences. He and his cohorts had a degree of romance cast around them, maybe because they seemed to be rooted in the obsolete threat of “the Lost Cause” of the Confederacy. Perhaps in that context, somehow their danger seemed remote, only legendary. This type of tale exemplifies the way that the West had become a perfect setting for tales of anachronism, bound to appeal to a nation seeking immediate healing from the traumas of civil war.

But even if the Civil War had been revived as a symbol of loss and recast in legend in a second stage of mythology, the Wild West was unalmented, its tales left intact, and stories simply began again. At the turn of the century, eastern and western periodicals were flooded with surprising news from the west. In 1903 Harper’s Weekly explained how a late-nineteenth-century population glut in some western cities had produced first a brief crisis of unemployment: “The towns, swollen with excess of people who had assembled with no definite intentions for the future, nor even clear conception of the present, were left . . . with twice as many inhabitants as could find employment.” People caught between mythic Wests, without an earlier generation’s “definite intentions for the future” or a subsequent generation’s “clear conception of the present,” drained western towns of economic prosperity and resources, at least for the moment.

Then, with no concerted effort, the situation seemed to cure itself as a new age began. This newly reassessed West by all accounts had one fundamental quality that would ensure its survival—that is, a deep restlessness, born perhaps of a sense of having missed the great days of old, but also with some innate defense against the retreat to nostalgia. Almost inexplicably, Harper’s reports, the population of many major cities and towns in the West declined sharply from 1890 to 1900, yet there appeared no alarm. By 1903 those people who had found themselves superfluous to yesterday’s promise and who had become invisible—to census takers as well as to much of the settled population of the United States—reemerged to demonstrate a developing balance of urban and rural populations; they
suddenly found their places within a newly imagined western society. According to this and many other such reports, the shift was an unspoken national self-corrective: “[I]t marked the beginning of a sounder life, a restoration of equilibrium for America.”

Equilibrium in the New West would be a constantly shifting dynamic, but its shifts would be regular and directed, and it would have little use for the volatility of Old Western experience. Writers conceded (with relief) that “the wild, free West of yesterday” was over and that “pioneering [and] experiment” were yielding to lives of greater “permanency.” However, they emphasized too that this New West demanded as much active energy as before; the difference now was prescribed direction: “The evolution of the West does not mean that it has come to a position of assured affluence . . . but that it has come to a better understanding of its possibilities, that it is gaining steadily in population and wealth, that it has conquered some of the erroneous ideas of the days of new settlement and is on the substantial way toward business independence. This is not everything, but it is enough to mark a new and important era in the development of the level lands.” These writers shared a common purpose: to quell the “exaggerated ideas” left from the pioneer days, to leave them in the sealed trunk of wild western lore, and to overwrite such notions with an understanding of “the real underlying basis of progress” at work on the newly closed frontier.

More elusive than the bold iconography of the Old West, a symbolic vocabulary for the New West became nonetheless recognizable. As the west shifted in identity from being a region of anomaly to being the primary representative of a nation’s accomplishments, the United States underwent some of the most divisive decades in its history. Between the Civil War era and the turn of the century, the story of the West changed rapidly from that collection of tall tales to a narrative about the virtues of (characteristically eastern) industriousness and progress.

Despite these changes, though, and despite the major cultural shifts of the late nineteenth century, the old hero tales of the West were never rejected or overturned, nor was there any effort to expand the bounds of their claims. The legend of Billy the Kid, for example, remained important and popular although it continued to fluctuate between its long familiar hero and villain versions. Perhaps most striking culturally is that such a rich and cohesive tale—one well woven enough to be stored for generations—continued to be virtually universally accepted within the bounds of its established parameters, as predictable, inflexible, and outmoded as those parameters quickly became. Calling this tale an example of “the origin of epic subject matter,” Alfred Adler has persuasively argued
that the main clue left by this and other legends is one about the needs of the culture in time of crisis:

As a narrative pattern, [the legend of Billy the Kid] could have arisen out of a different set of events. However, it is a common human denominator, a nucleus of basic, extramoral agreement among people who did not seem to agree on anything; it is a piece of evidence that they were able to agree on very important things, where, in the windy regions of social strife literal agreements seemed impossible, they united to descend to the springs of folklore. . . . The case of Billy the Kid leads us to formulate an hypothesis: created at a certain time, a legend is not a reflection of that time, but an indication that the time needed a legend.31

No time “needs” a legend as much as the visibly receding past; thus the New West, its new stories and myths, revered the Old West from an odd critical distance. Proclaiming themselves happy to be beyond that dangerous moment, this generation of westerners expressed in their new sketches of the West (in a wide range of magazines and pamphlets) at once feelings of moral superiority and almost religious dedication to the world framed by the old polarities of hope and fear, innocence and violence. New claims required new stories; new stories required newly imagined symbolic frames. The established western lore would have its due influence; it was, after all, the record of a startling imaginative consensus in the midst of turmoil. From there, however, the direction turned toward a focused but unframed narrative, one without a defined horizon of ideal hope. By 1900 the teleology of the story of the West—and so the story of America—was dangerously open ended.32

In this second stage of mythmaking—the making of narratives inclusive of time and change out of the materials of fixed iconography—familiar notes of progressive historiography and current terms of evolutionary science offered a known vocabulary and so perhaps a safe start. Countless voices throughout turn-of-the-century United States culture echoed variations on those timeworn themes: “Another kind of opening lies before the settler, in many respects a better one, and its promise is of exceeding brightness. . . . The settler of the early days had to grapple with nature unadorned. . . . The settler of today goes into very different circumstances. . . . The greater lessons have been learned. The age of experiment, with its expensive tutelage, is past. . . . [There has never been] so little probability of failure.”33

Great opportunities were not to be squandered on careless men, and whatever one’s opinion of the Wild West’s heroes, they clearly failed to
embody stability and commitment, those newly desired qualities for the bright days to come. Nationwide, magazine essays and promotional tracts were particularly careful to say that the West was no longer a land only for hearty, independent souls. Scores of essays were devoted to advertising the safety of emigration for women and children.  

What made the New West safe for families was, ironically, the residual roughness of the Old West. Vigilante justice, controversial from the start, gained much wider acceptance and support particularly as vigilantes banded together into “committees.” Though in practice, the workings of these watch groups may not have remedied the haste and bias of individual vengeance that characterized vigilante justice, still the appearance of a governing board of moral standards seemed to encourage families to come west, promising a community opposed to feared vices such as prostitution and thievery.

With no sense of controversy or uncertainty, popular magazines announced that “bad men and women always go in the early trains to a new country; but when the country is worthwhile, the men of character and achievement go after them and send the others to their holes.” Thus appealing not only to hope but also to the vanity of the successful merchant and the sense of moral duty in the law-abiding easterner, these invitations to the second stage of the American West at once promised peace and invoked activist support: “Though a red shade now and then flutters in the wind of the main street, the second lot of Americans have been received, and these are the real builders of empire. These decent Americans do not care to dwell and to bring up their children in the midst of an immorality which is so prevailing as to make the social atmosphere of the community, and therefore the tough and his companions are moved off quickly by a vigilance committee.”

By the turn of the century, the “toughs” of the first wave of emigration were thus divided between law keepers and lawbreakers, for these early pioneers made up the vigilance committees as well as the bands of rogues. That first generation indeed had great chance for moral triumph, but it faced temptations that would be mercifully hidden from subsequent generations. According to this new logic of western heroism, those who overcame temptation and those who came to follow in their respectable footsteps were to be the agents of the new story of national experience; from them the West of the closed frontier would draw the strength of its mythic base.

The cowboy is the figure linking the Old West with the new. Though often referred to as a sort of relic of the past, the cowboy as an icon in the Old West had an equal chance to mature into a ranch owner or a cattle
At issue was only “the problem of his own nature.” The cowboy who followed the path of virtue and morality was not only the new foundation for the western empire; he was also clear evidence of the importance of will and character in an environment virtually defined by temptation. Most likely he had come west with a sense of reckless adventure; he arrived as a child on an endless playground. But the cowboy who grew to be the “builder of empire” stayed to cultivate, conserve, and protect the land that had seemed so wild to him on his first arrival. He had learned that the most ferocious dangers of the environment were human. He sought conquest no longer of the land but of the most menacing aspects of human nature; he saw these on the range among his associates and, increasingly, in himself.

According to the mythology of the Old West, every cowboy, moral or immoral, promising or corrupt, embodied a spirit of restlessness. Whatever brought him to the prairies eluded precise definition but had something to do with his need for action, growth, and motion. So if the West needed law and order by late in the nineteenth century, it would be an order infused with restlessness, the cowboy’s form of order. Because this land continued to be characterized by an atmosphere where “the air is full of the stimulus and the mystery of chance,” no static legal system could be effective while still respecting that dynamic quality that drew emigrants west in the first place. In this atmosphere of danger and possibility entwined, survival required quick thinking and improvisational action. The cowboy was the figure that history seemed to designate to carry these traits into the following generations.

Perhaps in the early decades of western emigration, everyone from the lone vagrant to the head of the regional stock growers’ association was presumed to share that spirit of restlessness. By the turn-of-the-century, however, that broad spirit had been divided into more specialized qualities. Looking back at the early West, turn-of-the-century American writers made a point of distinguishing between the admirable restlessness of the cowboy and the purely escapist restlessness of others, often called “floaters.” Eastern travelers, it was feared, might confuse the two: “One of the most fascinating characters of the West, at least from a picturesque point of view, is the Floater. Somehow he always affords unbounded satisfaction to the Eastern visitor, for he is one of the Western types the stranger fully expects to see. . . . [But in fact] the Floater is one of the most evident signs, himself somewhat a failure, of the invading army of civilization. He is the spume which the inundating wave of humanity throws up; the wave itself will soon lie deep and lasting over all the West.”

Western writers had been insisting on exactly this distinction for a long
time. As early as 1867 the heroism that saved one from being classed a floater was the act of introducing the institutions of social order, particularly schools and churches. Whereas the floater was an empty seeker, the Western hero was on a mission: “Having followed the ‘Star of Empire’ in her Westward course, [some emigrants] appeared to have a purpose to perform far more worthy, and with that heroism peculiar to the true pioneer, who comes West rather than floats West. This [is the] brave band of nature’s noblemen.”44 Writers assured the eastern public that “the controlling portion of the population” was made up of this more focused type of emigrant, not robber or outlaw but the “true and loyal American.”45

THE VIRGINIAN’S WEST

At odds with each paradoxical angle of the symbolic West he had inherited, Wister’s West represents neither the lost possibilities of the period of exploration nor the fulfilled achievement of statehood. Everything about the novel’s setting defies traditional romantic interpretation. Turning back to the West long after its innate mysteries of geography and indigenous life have been dispelled, Wister focuses our attention on a peculiarly late stage in frontier history, from 1874 to 1890. These years cover some of Wyoming’s darkest history. This is a troubled West, no longer the garden of opportunity nor yet the fulfillment of American promise; the Virginian’s Wyoming is in transition from territory to state and simultaneously suffering some of the most notorious disasters of the white settlers’ experience of frontier history.46 In the territorial disputes of the Wyoming cattle wars of 1892, large livestock corporations and independent owners of small ranches provided news accounts with material to illustrate the graphic lawlessness of anger, which remained even as native tribes posed an ever-weakening threat.47 Violence between outlaw rustlers and the often corrupt cattle owners reigned through the end of this period, when northern-tier territories were gaining admission as states.

The Johnson County War, or the War on Powder River, is the direct historical backdrop of the novel.48 This war first received widespread publicity through the conflicted voice of Asa Shinn Mercer, whose Northwestern Livestock Journal in Cheyenne had been “a mouthpiece” for the cattle industry. Apparently under some duress, Mercer’s position changed radically, and he denounced the same cattlemen in his 1894 publication, The Banditti of the Plains, or the Cattlemen’s Invasion of Wyoming in 1892.49 Not surprisingly, Mercer suffered retaliation for his change in position, but one way or another, most reports were equally partisan. John Clay
Jr.—in support of the industry—simply omits mention of the numerous laws and blacklists designed to drive small ranch owners out of business, while Jack Flagg uses his eleven serial installments in *The Buffalo Wyoming Bulletin* to denounce the kings of the industry by—in his own terms—“all means—fair or foul.”

The disputes covered at least a decade of cattle business but focused on an attack by the forces of big business on two alleged cattle rustlers on April 9, 1892. During this, the second year of Wyoming’s statehood, vigilante justice was already out of favor, and in this case few would be able to deny the open exploitation of power that was involved. Tensions were high all around due to an extraordinarily bad winter in 1886 and 1887, during which shocking numbers of cattle died of starvation and cold. The April 1892 incident pitted “fifty armed men,” surrounding a cabin, against two allegedrustlers who had taken shelter there against a blizzard. Ambushed by gunshots and arson, the two purported criminals were killed. Authorities had not expected the response they received, however: “[T]he people rose, but in such a wave of fury as the West has never seen before or since. Thirty hours after their guilty victory on Powder River, the invaders were besieged in their turn” by cowboys and owners of small ranches. The angry retaliation was so powerful that President Harrison was persuaded to send troops to restore order to the county.

The cowboys and independent ranchers did not see the rustlers as criminals but as rebels, fighting in the true and independent spirit of the Old West. They were tired of what they saw as the abuse of power by large stock associations and their connections to “the law”—laws consistently drawn to protect corporate interests. Powder River would not surrender easily to the interests of land holders; it had been the proud center of many Wild West confrontations between legendary “cowboys and Indians” in the 1860s. By 1880 “Powder River [had been] subjected to the last Indian raid in her history.” Between 1884 and 1886, many small ranchers lost half of their stock or more. It was a region and a time later remembered for both confusion and possibility.

Yet even with this notoriously difficult history, Powder River was considered among the richest districts. Up until the Johnson County War, particular circumstances kept Wyoming in a sort of Old West time warp. Political historian Lewis Gould notes that, in the years before oil and coal were of great interest, Wyoming lagged behind its neighboring states in its rate of economic and social development. From the 1870s through the middle of the 1880s, Wyoming seemed a relatively tranquil refuge for the cowboy. The sparse population impeded centralized government, and so, very late into the nineteenth century, Wyoming continued to embody a
mythic American west. Promotional publications flooded the market by 1885 to advertise Wyoming, and even after the disastrous winter of 1886–1887, easterners knew little if anything of the harsh realities that settlers had suffered there.

At least until the Johnson County War, virtually all reports emphasized Wyoming’s limitless potential, particularly for mining and raising stock. One such promotional text came from J. H. Triggs and focused on the “Gold Fields of the Black Hills, Powder River, and Big Horn Countries.” In general, any “hard work, honest endeavor, and capital backed by brains” could be promised “a wide field” and almost “guarantee[d] a sure reward.” These were typical terms of praise for western lands: They emphasized familiarity rather than difference and were directed toward eastern audiences. Writers celebrated the “civilizing” influence of the railroad, reporting that “upon acquaintance with her citizens we feel that we can truthfully say that no city in the United States of the same population can boast of more of this true Yankee Spirit than can this ‘Magic City’ of Cheyenne.” As legend told it, ten years after the first sermon was preached there, the city was born “full fledged . . . in a single night.” It was peopled by those “with that heroism peculiar to the true pioneer,” that late-coming but “brave band of nature’s noblemen.”

Set in between the days of Wyoming as rich resource and Wyoming as a place of dangerous, nationally feared uprisings, The Virginian records a time when both state and nation sought greater organization and control of the population. This transitional time, furthermore, was by no means definitive; versions of chaos reigned long after statehood was established. Apart from the Johnson County War, other acts of infamy in the region included the lynching of “Cattle Kate”—a reputed prostitute who traded with independent ranchers. Once the disputes among cattle owners subsided, violent disputes raged for years between the cattlemen and sheep ranchers. National attention toward the west only increased with the advent of the Roosevelt administration.

By that time the language of the West was focused on telling an irrefutable story of democracy. With only brief histories as states, most territories were openly nationalistic in their political agendas. Ignatius Donnelly, a Populist politician from Minnesota, spoke in terms representative of a broad spectrum of approaches when he explained the western embrace of nationalism over states’ rights: “[W]e who come . . . from the far West have not that deep ingrained veneration for state power which is to be found among the inhabitants of some of the older states. . . . W e feel ourselves to be offshoots of the nation. . . . W e are willing to trust the nation.” They trusted the nation precisely because the established East
had made clear that the West represented the living history of its successful policies.

Particularly as expansion became a higher priority in the Roosevelt administration, the West was promoted as the material issue of American triumph. Roosevelt spoke of this direct connection as he addressed an audience at an exposition honoring the anniversary of the Louisiana Purchase in St. Louis on April 30, 1903: “Our triumph in this process of expansion was indissolubly bound up with the success of our peculiar kind of federal government.”63 The story of the West and the story of America were presented throughout turn-of-the-century culture as fundamentally similar stories. Dominant voices from the East linked the two stories on democratic terms. The West was everything America should be—a land of liberty and opportunity.64

Whatever dangers expansion held, neither side could afford to reject its tempting potential as a laboratory for the evolution of social ideals to mark the identity of the United States. Enough of the West’s destiny and experience remained undefined, and so all sides could turn toward it for justification and representation of particular ideals, even if those acts were defenses against considering the realistic fears that made up a core of the West’s identity in eastern minds. One way or another, the West, argues Rush Welter, was a significant force reconciling mid-nineteenth-century conservatives to American democracy; “the promise of western development apparently helped reconcile them to the [national form of] democracy.”65

However, amid this atmosphere of consent, several direct challenges to American nationalism emerged in the few years immediately preceding the publication of The Virginian: the announced, and quickly accepted, fact of a “closed frontier”; the centennial anxieties at the advent of a new century; finally, an event less directly tied to Wister’s project but certainly a definitive moment for his generation, the assassination of William McKinley.

From the start, and particularly in retrospect, the assassination of Lincoln was a symbol of the unspeakable cost of civil war; he became a martyr to the Union cause. When McKinley died, however, explanations were scarce, and symbolic readings were virtually nonexistent. Instead, McKinley’s assassination appeared as a product of the very modernity that should have protected him. The shooting was read less clearly as a political statement than as an expression of a population beyond control, beyond consensus, and above all, beyond law.

In the many memorials published after McKinley’s death, citizens mourned not only the loss of a president, but also the timing of the action.
From Boston responses came that highlighted the tragic irony: Arthur W. Dolan wrote, “McKinley was assassinated in the twentieth century, in the days of the greatest enlightenment and progress which this country has ever seen.” A second city official, Thomas D. Roberts, searched in vain for cause or explanation, finally concluding that the problem “lies, then, largely in the law. We have no law that is equal to this occasion.” This “occasion” clearly was not simply murder, not even the murder of a head of state. As an event it seemed to announce the existence of a newly random, unprovoked, and inexplicable violence, with deep national and international implications: It was the nightmare of the newly expanded country, the fulfillment of every fear.

Adding these events to the context of Wister’s novel, it is clear that the prevalent themes of conflict and disorder would have resonance not only for easterners moving or traveling west, but much more importantly, also for a culture now deep in national, rather than sectional, turmoil. If a conservative faction felt deceived in having accepted the rapid growth of American democracy after the Civil War, surely they found those fears reanimated by the turn of the century. Moreover, if the settlement of the West had been the great democratic experiment, the Old West—now representing a new myth of American origins—demanded reinterpretation. Whether one believed in the region as an emblem of success or failure, turn-of-the-century America was filled with mandates for the reinscription of the closed frontier within a new national story, and that story, it was clear, could use nostalgia only in the service of a forward-looking vision. A new romance of American history, then, would acknowledge the passing of time in a celebration of what that past time had built, facilitated, or foreshadowed.