

THE COWBOY LEGEND: OWEN WISTER'S VIRGINIAN AND THE CANADIAN-AMERICAN FRONTIER by John Jennings

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7: The Book (1891–1904)

With the publication of *The Virginian* in 1902, Wister transformed the cowboy. Before its publication, the image of the cowboy was essentially that of the dime novel – a rough, violent, one-dimensional drifter, or the stage cowboy of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West variety. Wister’s novel was to transform this early image of the cowboy almost overnight.

It would be difficult to find a more unlikely bard of the West. Everything in Wister’s upbringing and temperament predisposed him to find these uncouth westerners rather contemptible or, at most, only quaintly interesting. Wister was born and raised a snob. His life began in Philadelphia’s upper crust and, until his trip to Wyoming in 1885, he exerted considerable energy in avoiding unwashed democracy. He was born, in 1860, to a caste preoccupied with antecedents, social hierarchy, and literary pursuits.

His mother, Sarah Wister, came from a distinguished acting family and was herself a literary force, greatly admired, for instance, by Henry James. She was beautiful and charming, but cold and haughty; she spoke French and Italian fluently and played several instruments. Her poetry and essays on music, art, literature, and education found their way into some of America’s leading literary journals. She was also described as being utterly domineering and overbearing and having “a remarkable incapacity to maintain tolerable relations with individuals beneath her station.”¹ Her influence on her son was profound; he wrote to her every week until her death.

She was the daughter of Fanny Kemble, the famed British Shakespearean actress, and Pierce Butler, a prominent Philadelphian with strong roots in Georgian plantation society. Kemble was a great beauty who had published six volumes of poetry and a journal about her time on a Southern



The young Owen Wister, an unlikely bard of the West. His mother kept a diary about his activities entitled "A Child of Promise." His was a hothouse childhood. American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.

plantation, which was credited by some with helping to sway British opinion against intervening on the side of the South in the Civil War.² Owen was also not unconscious that one of his forebears, the original Pierce Butler of Georgia, a man of great vanity and vehemence about the rights of Southern slaveholders, had been a delegate to the Constitutional Convention.³ The vast gulf between Fanny and Pierce over the issue of slavery doomed their marriage; their very public divorce surely contributed to their daughter Sarah's emotional brittleness. It would seem, too, that Owen inherited the Butler arrogance and disdain.⁴ The deep difference of opinion between Fanny and Pierce over slavery was also to have a profound effect on the extended family during the Civil War, a split that Wister would later attempt to reconcile in his writing.⁵

Wister grew up in the shadow of his beautiful, brilliant, and cold mother, desperate to please and impress her and acutely conscious both of her critical view of his achievements and of her lack of affection toward him. Wister's father, a prominent Philadelphia physician, seems less important in Wister's life. By all accounts, Dr. Wister adored his wife and gave her free rein in her literary and social pursuits. He worked very hard and mostly accepted his wife's blueprint for the upbringing of Owen, their only child.

Wister's was a strictly regulated and rather precious upbringing. His father suffered a nervous breakdown, and the family spent three years in Europe, where Wister first went to school in Switzerland and then for a year in England. In 1873, at the impressionable age of thirteen, Wister was sent to St. Paul's School in Concord, New Hampshire, one of America's most exclusive boarding schools. There Wister could indulge both his sense of being very special and also his passion for literature, drama, and music.⁶ He graduated in 1878 and followed the natural path of so many St. Paul's graduates to Harvard. Earlier, while in Switzerland, he had begun to be afflicted with the problem that would send him west in 1885: a paralysis of one side of his face and serious eye problems.

Harvard in the 1870s had perhaps fifty faculty members and a student body of a thousand. Harvard's intimate atmosphere allowed Wister to form a friendship with a student two years his senior – Theodore Roosevelt. The two were to become lifelong friends. Their friendship first took root in Harvard's Porcellion Club, one of the country's most prestigious and exclusive clubs. Here Wister formed many lasting friendships with students who were to become the political and business leaders of America. And, undoubtedly, other important friendships were formed in Count Lorenzo Papanti's dancing classes. Harvard also gave Wister the opportunity to become a solid member of Boston society, allowing him to mingle with the Cabots and

Saltonstalls and the literary and intellectual leaders of American society, such as Parkman, Longfellow, and Holmes.

When Wister graduated *summa cum laude* in 1882 with a double major in music and philosophy, he was confidently ensconced among the most privileged in American society. And there is no indication that he would have had it any other way. His focus was steadfastly on upper-class America and the culture of Europe.

On graduating from Harvard, he was at last able to indulge his first love – music. In the summer of 1882, armed with a letter of introduction from his grandmother Fanny Kemble to her friend Franz Liszt at Wagner’s house in Bayreuth – now the great shrine to Wagnerian opera – Wister sought out the great man and was given an audition. Wister’s father was most unenthusiastic about the prospect of his son devoting his life to music, but was prepared to foot the bills if his son showed great talent – something, it was thought, that could only be determined in Europe. So Wister performed, and Liszt judged him to have “un talent prononcé.”⁷⁷ There followed a period at the Paris Conservatoire, studying under Ernest Guiraud, but it all came to naught. Dr. Wister rejected Liszt’s opinion on the grounds that he knew nothing about what was appropriate for a well-bred American. “Liszt is a damn Jew and I am an American gentleman.”⁷⁸ Though Wister’s father appears to have relented and agreed to musical training in Europe, Wister decided to give in to his father’s true wishes and returned to the United States to begin a career in business.

Through family connections, Wister was given a position at the Union Safety Deposit Vaults with the brokerage firm of Lee, Higginson, headed by Henry Lee Higginson, a man of great wealth and taste who had single-handedly founded the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Soon Wister was immersed in Boston society and, being fresh from Europe, was in great demand among those who avoided “low and common topics” – which included most American subjects. Wister was clearly enjoying himself, but found some of Boston’s society contrived and superficial. He was especially scathing toward Boston’s eligible young women, whom he found “often ignorant of all things in Heaven and Earth except what their first cousins were doing and saying.”⁷⁹

But Wister soon tired of the brokerage world, developed a lifelong distaste for bankers, and increasingly sought an outlet for his artistic side – spurred on, it appears, by the writer William Dean Howells, who befriended him during this period. In the fall of 1884, Wister began work on a novel entitled *A Wise Man’s Son*, but the project seems to have fizzled. About the same time, Wister got his father to agree to a new career – the law.

I would go to Harvard Law School, since American respectability accepted lawyers, no matter how bad, which I was likely to be, and rejected composers, even if they were very good, which I might possibly be.¹⁰

Wister was to begin law school in the fall of 1885. But, in the meantime, his health collapsed. He complained increasingly of bad headaches, vertigo, and even an occasional hallucination. His father, a physician, even spoke of Wister as having a “mental illness.”¹¹

It seems that, at this point in his life, fate intervened in the form of Dr. S. Weir Mitchell, one of Philadelphia’s most prominent physicians, who specialized in treating the nervous disorders of Boston’s and Philadelphia’s upper class. He was a psychiatrist, author of a dozen novels, and conversationalist par excellence. He was also Philadelphia’s First Citizen, as no man had been since Benjamin Franklin and Benjamin Rush.¹² He was a distant relation of the Wisters. He was probably America’s leading specialist at the time in the treatment of nervous disorders, and also Philadelphia’s leading literary figure in the late nineteenth century.¹³ His specialty, the “Weir Mitchell treatment,” called for rest, massage, diet, and exercise, and, most importantly, an extended visit to Europe for relaxation. In Wister’s case, Dr. Mitchell suggested that the cure should be sought in the opposite direction. Dr. Mitchell’s prescription was for Wister to go west and live outdoors, a notion that had probably never crossed Wister’s mind. In the light of Wister’s later literary development, the rest of Dr. Mitchell’s prescription is more than a little ironic. He urged Wister to “see more new people”:

Learn to sympathize with your fellow man a little more than you are inclined to. You don’t feel kindly to your race, you know. There are lots of humble folks in the fields you’d be the better for knowing.¹⁴

So it would seem that the birth of the cowboy mystique owes a lot to Weir Mitchell. Would Wister, the consummate snob firmly focused on Europe, ever have discovered the West and his calling as the Kipling of the common folk if Dr. Mitchell had not intervened at this moment in his life? Wister might just as easily have become a prosperous Boston or Philadelphia lawyer and a failed author.

But, fortunately for American literature, Wister followed Dr. Mitchell's advice and, as outlined in chapter 5, found himself boarding a train for the West at the end of June 1885, accompanied by two of his mother's spinster friends, who were there partly to look after the somewhat neurotic Owen. Their destination was the Wyoming ranch of Major Frank Wolcott, a friend of Weir Mitchell, in the Big Horn Basin.¹⁵

At this point in Wister's life, there is no hint whatever that he was destined to become besotted with the West. If anything, one could expect him to have the same attitude toward the West that his mother persisted in all her life; the West was in the wrong direction, it was uncouth, vulgar, uncomfortable, and peopled by the wrong sort. Yet, in 1885, Wister was at his most vulnerable; he was unhappy in the direction of his life, thwarted in his dream of a musical career – the only area thus far in which he had shown any real talent – and greatly bothered by his sense of inferiority in a family of great achievement. In retrospect, it is clear that Wister in 1885, at the age of twenty-five, was open to a new direction and obsessed with the question of how he was to leave his mark on the world.

How Wister discovered Wyoming and found his calling was the main subject of a previous chapter. He was instantly and profoundly moved by what he saw, and the germ was then planted in his mind that was to mature during later trips to the West, resulting in his western writing of the 1890s and finally culminating in 1902 with his vision of the West expressed in *The Virginian*.

Darwin Payne, in his splendid biography of Wister, is surely right when he states that the trip to Wyoming in 1885 was the pivotal point in Wister's life.¹⁶ In Wyoming, Wister underwent a spiritual awakening – that is not too strong a term. And, as has been argued earlier, Wister's friendship with Everett Johnson was the starting point for what would later emerge as the character of the *Virginian*. In years to come, Wister would record his impressions of the West while actually travelling in the region. But in his "Notes on Wyoming 1885," which actually was written at some later point when Wister was back East, he commented,

I have been hearing a wonderful lot of good stories. I mean typical & characteristic stories from ranchers and cattlemen – gamblers and cowboys. ... A finer lot of men than the cowboys & ranch foreman of the region I have seen nowhere. Their virtues – courage, reckless generosity and a certain kind of "tenderness bred of a wild life." Five or six of them coming 100 miles on the stage with me

were all as attentive and gentle & careful with an old woman who was a passenger – as I fear few gentlemen would have been.¹⁷

Wister again visited Wyoming, in 1887 and 1889, to hunt in the Wind River and Yellowstone country. On both occasions George West guided the trip, and Wister befriended him to the extent that West later became a serious contender for the distinction of being the Virginian. Meanwhile, after his Wyoming trip in 1885, Wister finished his law degree, settled into life in Philadelphia, made other trips to Wyoming in 1888 and 1891, and tried several times to write a comic opera. These attempts came to nothing. Then, in 1890, as his journal makes clear, Wister's literary ambitions began to turn to western themes. By 1891, he consciously began to record western impressions and anecdotes during his stay at a ranch on the south fork of Powder River, just south of Buffalo, Wyoming, and then on a hunting trip with George West. On his return to the East, Wister later claimed, the idea of becoming the Kipling of the American West materialized during dinner in autumn 1891 at the Philadelphia Club with a friend, Walter Furness. Much later, in *Roosevelt: The Story of a Friendship*, Wister described the moment when he became a western writer:

And so one Autumn evening of 1891, fresh from Wyoming and its wild glories, I sat in the club dining room with a man as enamoured of the West as I was. This was Walter Furness. . . . From oysters to coffee we compared experiences. 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 California forty-niner, went the way of the Mississippi steam-boat, went the way of everything? Roosevelt had seen the sage-brush true, had felt its poetry; and Remington, who illustrated his articles so well. But what was fiction doing, fiction, the only thing that has always outlived fact? Must it be perpetual teacups? Was Alkali Ike in the comic papers the one figure which the jejune American imagination, always at full-cock to banter or brag, could discern in that epic which was being lived at the gallop out in the sage-brush. To hell with the tea-cups and the great American laugh! We two said, as we sat dining at the club. The claret had been excellent. "Walter, I'm going to try it myself!" I exclaimed to Walter Furness. "I'm going to start this minute." "Go to it – you ought to have started long ago." I wished him goodnight, he wished me good luck. I went up to the library; and by midnight or so, a good slice of Hank's Woman was down in the rough.¹⁸



Wister, in western clothes, poses sometime during the 1890s. He was then in his thirties and was becoming a well-known western writer. American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.

Well, it makes a good story, but Wister was being less than candid. It was probably true that he began “Hank’s Woman” that night, but the story was not his first attempt at a western theme. His first western manuscript, *The Story of Chalkeye: A Wind River Romance*, which was not published during his lifetime, bears the inscription on the front, “This was a first essay – begun in early 1891 and never finished.”¹⁹ Wister’s western writing did not start with a flash of inspiration, a sudden recognition of a calling. It began with a rather uninspired story which Wister never published. *The Story of Chalk-eye* was based on a real cowboy of that name who had worked with Johnson on the 76 Ranch. It is important to note that Wister was writing about real people in the form of Lin McLean, whose real name was Jim Drummond, and Chalkeye, both of whom, according to Johnson, were known to Wister in Wyoming. But both plots obviously came from his imagination.

“Hank’s Woman,” though third rate, is intriguing because Wister’s wonderful ability to catch the westerners’ rhythms of speech and peculiar expressions is clearly evident. The cowboy theme first appears in this story, but there is no hint of the epic cowboy hero who later emerges in his writing. His cowboys are rough, primitive underlings; however, there is just a trace of the emerging theme of western superiority.

Once again, Weir Mitchell gave destiny a prod. Two manuscripts, “Hank’s Woman” and “How Lin McLean Went East,” gathered dust until Mitchell urged Wister to send them to Henry Mills Alden at Harper and Brothers, promising to provide a letter of introduction. Alden accepted the manuscripts, and Wister was launched as a minor western author. Though Wister had probably been thinking of western themes for some time, 1892 marked his emergence as a western author.

It is perhaps a bit odd that Wister should rather suddenly come to his new calling, work feverishly on his first effort, and then produce a story, “Hank’s Woman,” that is both excessively sombre and unflattering to the West – a very un-Kiplingesque little story. After Wister’s euphoric view of Wyoming in 1885, he recorded in his diary at the time of writing “Hank’s Woman,” “I begin to conclude from five seasons of observation that life in this negligent irresponsible wilderness tends to turn people shiftless, cruel and incompetent.”²⁰

However, in his second attempt, “How Lin McLean Went East,” published in the December 1892 issue of *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, there is the first glimpse of the theme that would make him famous – eastern artificiality and false values evaporating before the openness and spontaneity of the West.²¹ But there was a vast gulf between the footloose and womanizing

Lin McLean and the quiet and gentle cowboy figure who later, in the form of the Virginian, would capture the nation.

Wister's cowboys of 1892 had only one thing in common – utter irresponsibility. “They gallop over the face of the empty earth for a little while, and those whom rheumatism or gunpowder do not overtake, are blotted out by the course of empire, leaving no trace behind. ... A few ... take a squaw to wife and supinely draw her rations from the government while she cuts the wood, digs the irrigation ditches, and bears them half-breeds with regularity.”²² Wister's initial cowboy was charming and refreshing in his directness and lack of artifice, but was essentially a philandering and dissolute drifter. What does come through Wister's early western writing in a clear and striking way, however, is an acute ear for dialogue and a sense of realism. But there is no evidence at this early stage of an attempt to create a cowboy legend.

Wister was also busy in 1892 in a different direction. He published a story, “The Dragon of Wantley,” a parody of the King Arthur legend. It met with enthusiasm, certainly from Mark Twain, who wrote Wister, “I have taken *The Dragon of Wantley* away from my wife and daughter – by violence – I am reading it with a delicate and tingling enjoyment.”²³

It would seem that there was little to connect the Arthurian legend to Wister's western writing, but perhaps even now a link was forming in Wister's mind between the chivalrous world of Arthur's England and the shadowy figure, the Virginian, who would first appear in 1892 in “Balaam and Pedro,” a story of shocking cruelty to a horse, avenged by the silent cowboy from Virginia.²⁴ Certainly, by 1895, the link between the legend of Arthur and the American cowboy would be very clear in Wister's article “Evolution of the Cow-Puncher.”

“Balaam and Pedro,” like his two previous western articles, was based on actual events in Wyoming. In this case, the theme came from an incident of terrible cruelty to a horse that Wister had witnessed while staying on the TTT Ranch. The owner, Bob Tisdale, became so infuriated with a played-out horse that, after beating it unmercifully, he reached forward and gouged out one of its eyes, leaving a “sinkhole of blood.” This incident clearly preyed greatly on Wister's mind, partly because he did not have the courage to intervene. By exposing Tisdale in this story and having him severely beaten by the Virginian, he was making amends for his own lack of courage.

When Roosevelt read the story, he wrote Wister to tell him how much he liked the piece, but argued very strongly that the description of the eye gouging was too graphic. Wister took his advice and toned down the description of the incident considerably in the later novel.

So, exactly a decade before the publication of *The Virginian*, Wister had begun to introduce some of the characters and themes that were to become central to the novel. Besides the Virginian, Wister introduced Balaam (Tisdale); Trampas, the arch-villain of the later novel, with the inappropriate first name Sorgy for someone so thoroughly wicked; Judge Henny (who eventually became Henry); and Shorty, the initial owner of Pedro. At the end of the story, Balaam and the Virginian are attacked by Indians, as also happens in the novel. Balaam is saved by Pedro, who senses the presence of the Indians. The fate of the Virginian is not clear; it is presumed that he has been killed. This so upset a law office clerk who worked on the piece that he wrote Wister to tell him that he must not let the Virginian die.

And Wister, most importantly, had begun to reshape his image of the cowboy. In his new character, the Virginian, Wister had begun to develop a different sort of cowboy – soft-spoken and gentle with horses and women, but terrible in his righteous fury. In “Balaam and Pedro,” a large part of which was to become a chapter in the novel, the evolution of the cowboy who was to make Wister famous began.

Wister sent “Balaam and Pedro” to the *Atlantic Monthly* and to *Cosmopolitan*, but was rejected at both publishing houses. The story was eventually published by *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* in January 1894. Wister seems to have been at least partially conscious of the turning point this story represented: “I know I have never done anything so good, or that contains such a big swallow of Wyoming.”²⁵

1892 was a busy year for Wister. He was now writing regularly and had more or less abandoned the law. He also began performing publicly in a piano quartet, one of whose members was a distant cousin, Mary Channing Wister. He would later marry “Molly” Wister in 1898. Also, in 1892, Wister made a trip to Texas in search of western themes. There he found a number of interesting subjects, but Texas was certainly no Wyoming in his estimation. He found Texans generally hypocritically moralistic, murderous, and of the “poor white trash” calibre.²⁶ Wister’s enduring cowboy hero would not be a Texan, the most representative cowboy of the time; instead, he would consciously choose another type – a Tidewater Virginian with the very un-Texan gentlemanly code of the Old South.

After “Balaam and Pedro,” illustrated by a man he had heard of but not yet met – Frederic Remington – Wister was delighted when *Harper’s Monthly* asked for a series of eight articles on the West. Actually Wister was *Harper’s* second choice; Rudyard Kipling had declined. In July 1893, Henry Alden of *Harper’s* wrote to Wister with his offer. “Each must be a thrilling story having its ground in real incident, though you are left free

for imaginative treatment.” Of all the topics “not the least striking ... is that of the appeal to Lynch Law, which ought to give a capital subject for one of your stories.”²⁷

One of these articles, which appeared in the November 1893 issue of *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, was about a deranged hen by the name of Em'ly, but it marked a very important stage in the development of Wister's *Virginian*.²⁸ The setting was Judge Henny's ranch on Sunk Creek, and the story introduces the relationship between Wister and the *Virginian*, which was to be so central to the later novel.

The story marks the first time that Wister would write in the first person, a literary device that is central to the novel. And, of great importance for the theme of this book, Wister set the story in 1885, the year he first came to Wyoming and was chaperoned for the summer by Johnson.

It was my first taste of Wyoming and I was justly called the tenderfoot. ... I was known simply as the “tenderfoot,” and a special cowboy was assigned to guide me in my rambles and prevent my calamitously passing into the next world. ... I am sure he cursed this novel job that had fallen to him, although he betrayed no feelings whatever. A more silent man than he was at first I have never seen. During his odious duty of companionship over the trackless country ... he would not speak an unnecessary syllable. ... In his eyes I must have appeared a truly abominable thing.

Here for the first time is Wister's acknowledgment that he spent much of his first summer in the company of a cowboy who was ordered to look after him, much as Johnson described the situation to Jean. And it was the first time that Wister had written with candour about his rather humiliating condition in the summer of 1885.

The article and the later chapter of the novel are very similar; they both do two important things. They establish the theme of eastern incompetence through contrasting Wister's constant bungling with the *Virginian*'s quiet competence, and they establish the close friendship that grows between them through their shared sentiments toward the antics of the poor deranged Em'ly.

There is one seemingly insignificant change in wording from the earlier to the later version. In describing the chicken that takes off for parts unknown, the *Virginian* in the novel refers to her as a “right elegant” Dominicker. In the earlier version, the *Virginian* uses the expression a “right smart” Dominicker. One of Johnson's favourite expressions throughout his life, to

make a special point, was that something was “a right smart of...” Perhaps it was an expression that Wister remembered from riding with Johnson that summer of 1885. In Johnson’s vocabulary, the word “smart” did not mean intelligent. The expression is used throughout the novel by the Virginian, and it is entirely plausible that Wister used it because he associated it with Johnson’s way of speaking.

A month later, in December 1893, Wister had another of his western stories published. “The Winning of the Biscuit-Shooter” included a shadowy Virginian and Judge Henny, and also features the first appearance of Molly Wood, the new school marm. However, the story’s central theme involved Lin McLean and his courting of Miss Peck, the biscuit-shooter, a woman of “thick waist” and “brutal comeliness.” Lin McLean’s courting of Miss Peck is the opposite of the hero’s courteous wooing of the refined eastern schoolteacher in *The Virginian*. At one point in “The Winning of the Biscuit-Shooter,” Miss Peck is heard to shout “Quit, now, Lin McLean, or I’ll put yur through that window, and it shut.” The story ends with the two of them off to the justice of the peace to be married, and Wister makes it plain that the easygoing and somewhat dissolute Lin does not deserve to be permanently attached to this plain and unpromising woman.²⁹ (In a later story she kills herself with a drug overdose.) Here is not the stuff of a Kiplingesque saga!

In September 1893 came a critical moment in the history of the cowboy legend. Quite by accident, while escaping an early winter storm in the Yellowstone country, Wister took shelter at North’s Inn and found, to his delight, Frederic Remington, who was similarly taking refuge. The two men immediately took to each other and spent long hours swapping visions of the West. Both were deeply conservative in their political views, and, though Remington was far more unromantic and realistic in his outlook, he shared Wister’s excitement for the West. Here began what was shortly to become a critical collaboration to invent what was to become the popular image of the cowboy. Remington had been commissioned by *Harper’s* to illustrate western stories, but the two men had not yet met. Remington by now was a very well-known artist of the American West and, in 1889, had published his first significant article on the West in *Century Magazine* – “The Horses of the Plains.”³⁰ Wister, in 1893, was in the West on assignment to *Harper’s Magazine*, writing his series of western stories. *Harper’s* would send Wister to the West again in 1894 in search of more real western stories.

Remington, like Wister, would make many trips to the West in search of themes for his writing and illustrations. His great purpose was to record what he considered to be the passing of the frontier in a realistic and



Theodore Roosevelt first went west in 1883 and was captivated by the ranching country of the Great Plains. He established a ranch in the Dakota Badlands and collaborated with Wister and Remington in a new vision of the cowboy. Here he poses with this favorite horse, Manitou. Library of Congress, LC-USI 62-91139.

unromantic fashion. His work focused on the early explorers, Native interaction with frontiersmen, pioneers, soldiers, and, finally, cowboys.

Wister and Remington independently knew Theodore Roosevelt, who had already begun writing on western themes and had established a ranch in the Dakotas.³¹ Remington, since the mid-1880s, had been a well-known illustrator of the West and by the late 1880s was a regular illustrator for such magazines as *Harper's*, *Outing*, and *Century* and was very busy producing illustrations for Roosevelt's *Ranch Life and the Hunting Trail*, published first in serial form by *Century*. Now Wister and Remington, with Roosevelt's advice from the wings, began very self-consciously to develop an image of the American cowboy that was to be a blend of realism and wishful thinking. All three shared a profound love of the West and revered the rugged life that seemed to have been lost in the East. But it went far beyond this. All three came from old American stock and shared a deeply conservative outlook. And, most importantly, they all thought that something was profoundly wrong with America.

1893 was a significant moment for this collaboration to take root. The United States had just plunged into one of the worst depressions of the century and, as already discussed, Frederick Jackson Turner was to announce,

in a paper that year to the American Historical Association, the closing of the American frontier, with all that this fact implied. In this atmosphere of economic depression, old-guard Americans became increasingly alarmed by massive European immigration. As Richard Hofstadter has so brilliantly argued in *The Age of Reform* and elsewhere, America was going through a psychic crisis in the 1890s. Americans like Wister, Remington, and Roosevelt, products of a quickly disappearing caste, were disturbed to the core.

With selective nostalgia, they looked back to an era of simple virtues and racial homogeneity (conveniently ignoring, of course, those of African and Native ancestry). Now, at the height of the era of the robber barons, America, they were convinced, was losing her soul. The America of Jefferson was being replaced, on the one hand, by a polyglot immigrant society and, on the other, by an urban and effete society that had forgotten the moral principles that had made the country great. Remington saw industrial America as a cancerous growth spreading across the continent.³²

As they looked at their country with a bitter wistfulness, they wondered if there was any salvation. So it was in this frame of mind that the three looked at America's last, rapidly disappearing frontier and found there a type of American that, they thought, was no longer to be found elsewhere. Unconsciously or not, they were Turnerians in their belief that the frontier imparted moral qualities not to be found in the rest of the country. And they began to look on the cowboy as the last "type" of free American, unadulterated by the decadent influences pervading the rest of the country.

So the three set about to enshrine the cowboy in the image of American qualities that they believed to be in danger of extinction. It will no doubt come as a shock to the casual reader of cowboy literature to learn that the transformation of the cowboy type was motivated by a deep pessimism about American society and an equally deep racism; certainly Wister and Remington were pronounced bigots, even if the same cannot quite be said of Roosevelt. The cowboy they created was Anglo-Saxon, with well-defined racial characteristics; they invented him as a counterbalance to the new multiracial society that was emerging through massive new immigration in the 1880s and 1890s.

Remington's influence on Wister's vision of the cowboy is clear, direct, and well documented; that of Roosevelt is more indirect and not as easy to document. Roosevelt, who was a voracious reader, was very aware of Wister's western writing before his cowboy theme emerged in the mid-1890s. Roosevelt knew him well enough to invite him in 1894 to be an associate member of the Boone and Crockett Club, which he had founded in 1887 largely to interest influential men in protecting wildlife. The club was



Frederic Remington, "The Cowboy." Remington's horses were very realistic; he was also one of America's foremost painters of horse movement – he and Charlie Russell. Remington's cowboy exudes all the "Anglo-Saxon" qualities of toughness and virility that Wister and Remington wished to convey. Amon Carter Museum.

named for his two heroes who would feature in his *The Winning of the West*, Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett.³³

The fact that Roosevelt included Wister in his prestigious club indicates that he believed that Wister shared the same beliefs about the western wilderness and its endangered wildlife. Douglas Brinkley, author of *The Wilderness Warrior*, a very impressive and thorough study of Roosevelt's crusade to preserve America's wildlife and wilderness, goes so far as to argue that Roosevelt had a significant influence on Wister's writing about western wilderness and its wildlife.³⁴ Wister and Roosevelt had many discussions about the role of the West in revitalizing American society; it is plausible that Roosevelt's influence can be seen in Wister's shaping of part of the Virginian's character. The Virginian does not have the typical rough attitude toward animals; his concerns for the depraved chicken Em'ly and his towering rage at the mistreatment of a horse are not those of your average cowboy. And his love of the unspoiled wilderness, so wonderfully expressed at the end of the novel when the Virginian takes Molly to his special wilderness retreat for their honeymoon, could come straight out of Roosevelt's writing.

When Roosevelt first went west in 1883 and 1884, he described the Badlands of Dakota in much the same way as would Wister soon after. The land seemed "hardly proper to belong to this earth." He found a sacredness to this land "that exuded a cosmic sense of God's Creation as described in Genesis."³⁵ This was in 1883, two years before Wister's almost identical description of Wyoming. And when Roosevelt first went west, he held the same romantic view of cowboys as Wister did somewhat later, likening them to the knights of England.³⁶ Was it mere coincidence that both men saw these things in such a strikingly similar way?

The fact that Roosevelt was the first of the two to discover the West, buy into a ranch and establish another, and to write about cowboys and ranching indicates strongly that it was Roosevelt who probably influenced Wister's thinking about the West, and not the other way around. By the time that Wister began to write about the West in the early 1890s, Roosevelt had already established himself as an important writer on the West and was emerging as the most important American conservationist of the late nineteenth century.

In 1884, Roosevelt collected his experiences on hunting and ranching in his first book on the West, *Hunting Trips of a Ranchman*, published in 1885. His main theme: the importance of the vigorous life as an antidote to the artificial and feminizing life of the eastern city. His core message was that hunting and the western life was good for the American soul; it awakened



Theodore Roosevelt in a very posed studio portrait in 1895, his Winchester 1876 Delux model at the ready, and his silver-mounted Bowie knife designed by Tiffany's of New York in his belt. Significantly, he has shed his glasses; in the West he was known as "Old Four Eyes." Over the years, he was to capitalize on his western image with great success. Harvard College Library, Theodore Roosevelt Collection, R500P69a-001.

the primitive man, a theme that would pervade his writing. American democracy required a return to the savage.³⁷

Certainly, it took some time for Roosevelt to acquire the look of a savage. When he first went west, it was as a squeaky-voiced, “four-eyed” easterner. The cover illustration for *Hunting Trips of a Ranchman* did not help matters – it featured a studio portrait of Roosevelt in buckskins, gun at the ready. It exuded a distinct air of phoniness and caused much hilarity back in the Dakotas.³⁸ But Roosevelt soon won respect in the West for his enthusiasm and tenacity and his willingness to pull his weight at roundups.

Next came his book, in 1887, on the western expansionist Thomas Hart Benton, father-in-law of John Charles Fremont, the western “pathfinder.” His theme here was an ode to American expansionism and manifest destiny; the US had the *right* to “swallow up the land of adjoining nations who were too weak to withstand us.” These nations included Great Britain; her colonial possessions in North America should belong to the US! His bullying attitudes in international relations were matched by his acceptance of western attitudes toward law. Western pioneers were “a race of masterful spirit [who were] accustomed to regard with easy tolerance any but the most flagrant violations of law.”³⁹ What emerges from Roosevelt’s western writing is a rather alarming sense of flouting the law and an American exceptionalism in foreign relations. Might makes right!

In 1886, Roosevelt wrote six articles for *Outing Magazine* and noticed elsewhere in the magazine the illustrations of an artist new to him. He was greatly impressed by the freshness and honesty of Frederic Remington’s work; on the spot he decided that his next book must be illustrated by Remington.⁴⁰ Two years later, in 1888, Roosevelt’s *Ranch Life and the Hunting Trail* appeared, illustrated by Remington. This was followed in 1893 by *The Wilderness Hunter*. Despite this, they did not become close friends until later. But it is clear that Roosevelt had great admiration for Remington’s art. For instance, he wrote him in 1895 to say, “I never so wish to be a millionaire ... as when you have pictures for sale. It seems to me that you in your line, and Wister in his, are doing the best work in America today.”⁴¹ Roosevelt, for instance, would not have considered Remington suitable for membership in his Boone and Crockett Club; Remington was just a bit too coarse and bumptious – and he associated with sheep! For his part, Remington did not take greatly to Roosevelt at first. Inherited wealth grated on him, as did Roosevelt’s imperious manner. Just as Wister would later hold Remington at arm’s length, after the initial euphoria of collaborating on western themes, so, too, did Roosevelt. Yet, at the end of 1897, Roosevelt wrote Remington, “You come closer to the real thing with the pen than any other man in the

western business. And I include Hough, Grinnell and Wister. ... I don't know how you do it any more than I know how Kipling does it."⁴²

Somewhat later, in 1898, when Roosevelt was presented with a special gift by his regiment at the end of the war with Spain, he broke down with emotion when he unveiled Remington's first and perhaps greatest sculpture – the Bronco Buster. It was the perfect gift, so completely representing Roosevelt's feelings for the cowboy and the West. Roosevelt wrote Remington in September 1898, "It [the Bronco Buster] was the most appropriate gift the Regiment could possibly have given me, and the one I would have valued most. I have long looked hungrily at that bronze, to have it come to me in this precise way seemed almost too good."⁴³ Roosevelt again wrote to Remington in 1908 to say, "I do not think that any bronze you will ever make will appeal to me more than the one of the broncho-buster, which you know my regiment gave me."⁴⁴ That sculpture now resides as a permanent fixture in the Oval Office of the White House.⁴⁵

Roosevelt's next western writing, *The Winning of the West*, occupied him from 1888 to 1896.⁴⁶ He had been urged to write on this theme by his good friend and mentor, Henry Cabot Lodge, then America's leading imperialist. This multivolume work was a history of western American expansion from Boone to Crockett. It was an ode to western expansionism, its central theme being the triumph over those who blocked the way. In the introduction to the first volume of *The Winning of the West*, Roosevelt traced the history of Anglo-Saxons from Alfred the Great to George Washington. He argued that the most important part of world history in the last three centuries was the spread of English-speaking peoples over the "waste spaces" of the globe. The remorseless advance of Anglo-Saxon civilization was merely destiny, and the winning of the American West was the "crowning achievement" of that mighty movement. Of course, the "warped, perverse and silly morality" that would preserve the American continent "for the use of a few scattered savage tribes, whose life was but a few degrees less meaningless, squalid and ferocious than that of the wild beasts with whom they hold joint ownership" was beyond contempt.⁴⁷ With the publication of these four volumes, Roosevelt became America's leading propagandist of Anglo-Saxon frontier conquest and, as well, the country's leading proponent of social Darwinism. And then, in a passage that would come back to haunt him:

The most ultimately righteous of all wars is a war with savages, though it is apt to be also the most terrible and inhumane. The rude, fierce settler who drove the savage from the land lays civilized mankind under a debt to him. ... It is of incalculable importance

that America, Australia and Siberia should pass out of the hands of their red, black and yellow aboriginal owners, and become the heritage of the dominant world races.⁴⁸

Somewhat later, and unlike Wister, Roosevelt would show a change of heart toward Native peoples, especially after a visit to the Sioux reservation at Pine Ridge. He came away with a great compassion for the western tribes who had been herded literally at bayonet point onto reservations.⁴⁹

The first volumes of the *Winning of the West* were published just as Wister was developing his cowboy themes for *The Virginian*. It would seem clear that he was influenced by Roosevelt's views, both in print and in conversation. Roosevelt's view of the cowboy certainly came close to that of Wister's in his 1895 essay "The Evolution of the Cow-Puncher," discussed in more detail below, which fused all his significant beliefs on that figure. Wister's article would give to the country a completely fresh and far more sophisticated image of the cowboy. But it is important to realize just how important Roosevelt was to this process.

In *Ranch Life and the Hunting Trail* (1888), which first appeared as a series of articles in *Century Magazine*, Roosevelt had this to say about the Dakota cowboy: he faced life with a "quiet, uncomplaining fortitude," brave, hospitable, hardy, adventurous,

... he is the grim pioneer of our race; he prepares the way for the civilization from before whose face he himself must disappear. Hard and dangerous though his existence is, it has yet a wild attraction that strongly draws to it his bold, free spirit. ... The moral tone of the cow camp, indeed, is rather high than otherwise. Meanness, cowardice and dishonesty are not tolerated. There is a high regard for truthfulness and keeping one's word, intense contempt for any kind of hypocrisy, and a hearty dislike for a man who shirks his work. ... A cowboy will not submit tamely to an insult, and is ever ready to avenge his own wrongs; nor has he an overwrought fear of shedding blood. He possesses, in fact, few of the emasculated, milk-and-water moralities admired by the pseudophilanthropists; but he does possess, to a very high degree, the stern, manly qualities that are necessary to a nation.⁵⁰

Nothing like this had been written previously about the American cowboy. Roosevelt and Wister also clearly shared a strong belief in the cowboy as an antidote to milk-and-water, limp-wristed easterners.

More than six months before Frederick Jackson Turner would deliver his famous address at the Chicago World's Fair on the importance of the frontier, Roosevelt, in January 1893, gave the biennial address before the State Historical Society of Wisconsin at Madison. His thesis: the Old Northwest was the "heart of the country." Turner, who was in the audience taking notes, later quoted Roosevelt's address in his 1920 book *The Frontier in American History*. After Turner gave his address in Chicago, Roosevelt stated that Turner had "put into definite shape a good deal of thought which [had] been floating around rather loosely."⁵¹

The link between Roosevelt's early volumes of *The Winning of the West* and Turner's paper on the significance of the frontier in American history is very clear. Turner demonstrated his admiration for Roosevelt's first two volumes in a review in 1889 and had marked Roosevelt's passage describing "the significance" of the vast movement that conquered the West.⁵² Wilbur Jacobs has argued in *The Historical World of Frederick Jackson Turner* that Roosevelt's *The Winning of the West* gave Turner the inspiration for his thesis. In turn, Roosevelt praised Turner's 1893 paper and wrote to him that he intended to use his theme in the later volumes of *The Winning of the West*.⁵³

Roosevelt in a popular venue, and Turner in an academic one, were saying similar things. Roosevelt stressed conquest and unabashed triumphalism; Turner put his emphasis on the quiet conquest of the axe and plough, but both were celebrating the Anglo-Saxon male conquest of nature and the Indian barrier, although Turner said very little about Indians. Both found the focal point of American development in the frontier and in the unique character it fostered.⁵⁴ Neither one had anything to say about the "frontier of sewing" or the "frontier of laundry."⁵⁵ Today, Roosevelt's *Winning of the West*, whose final volume came out in 1896, is hard reading with its trumpeting of manifest destiny and the glorification of violence against both Native peoples and neighbours to north and south.

As Turner was giving his now-famous address in Chicago at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition, celebrating America's four hundred years since Columbus, close by were Buffalo Bill Cody and his Buffalo Bill's Wild West and Congress of Rough Riders of the World, fresh from the triumphs of London and Paris. In his own way, Cody, too, had his frontier thesis, one that came much closer to Roosevelt's version than it did to Turner's. Turner stressed settlement, not conquest; Cody's theme of violent conquest and the taming of the Indian was actually closer to what really happened. Cody's genius was to popularize Roosevelt's theme of triumphant conquest.

Turner's frontier statement has become unquestionably one of the most quoted and controversial sentences in American historical literature: "The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explains American development."⁵⁶ Historians are still fighting over Turner. Turner's emphasis on the peaceful occupation of a largely empty continent is obviously open to criticism.⁵⁷ Because of the way that Roosevelt, Cody, and many others emphasized conquest, Turner was consciously looking for another tack: "I have refrained from dwelling on the lawless characteristics of the frontier because they are sufficiently well known. The gambler and the desperado, the Regulators of the Carolinas and the vigilantes of California, are types of that line of scum that the waves of advancing civilization bore before them, and of the growth of spontaneous organs of authority where legal authority was absent."⁵⁸ Above all, Turner studiously avoided Cody's Wild West and its central theme, the unabashed conquest of a continent bristling with Indians. Instead, Turner attempted to counter in his writing what he considered Cody's grossly exaggerated picture of the West, along with other equally lurid and sensational literature about the West.⁵⁹

Turner must be seen in the context of his time. To present-day historians, he appears to downplay the blood and gore of the frontier and has been accused of giving a false picture of the western frontier. However, he was doing so to bring a more academic, balanced interpretation to an overheated literature. But, as Patricia Nelson Limerick has pointed out in *The Legacy of Conquest* and elsewhere, no amount of careful historical research seems to be able to influence the popular mind on the issue of the West. As a prime example, Cody's carefully honed mix of excitement, violence, competition, and dramatic narrative were just too powerful. Even today, most people want to believe in the likes of Billy the Kid and Jesse James. In the heyday of the dime novel, a small, self-appointed group wielded an enormous and rather dangerous power over the public mind – and this holds true today in regard to the movie industry. History is manipulated in the most callous, and sometimes insidious, way. The truth gives way to what sells! Scrupulous historians can try as they might to change this, but to no avail; for most, Billy the Kid and Jesse James, both products of the dime-novel industry, remain heroes, and Yellow Hand died in a hand-to-hand duel.

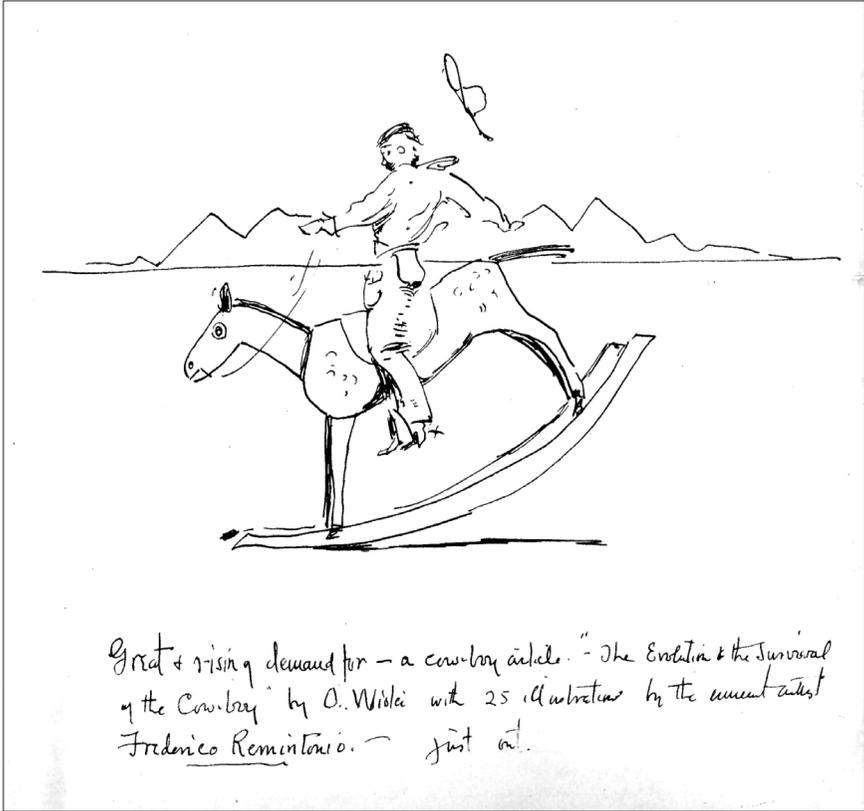
Turner stressed the progressive nature of American society, claiming that this unique American style of progress was very much the result of an enduring frontier legacy, not the product of a European heritage. But, paradoxically, Turner argued that this American culture was achieved by a continual retreat to the primitive simplicity of the frontier.⁶⁰

Meanwhile, Wister, almost a decade before Turner's frontier paper, began to think in a similar way in 1885 when he enthused that the atmosphere of Wyoming was "unvarnished by Europe." Roosevelt, Wister, and Cody all saw the West as the nucleus of a new Americanism. So, it can be argued that Turner was almost a latecomer to arguments that others were already expressing. On one level, Wister's belief that the hope of the country resided in the cowboy appears absurd. But, especially in the crass and ugly era of the Gilded Age, there was something very refreshing in the honest simplicity of the western outlook, in the directness and lack of artifice, and in the lack of adulation for money in a period of intense greed and unchecked capitalism. Surely Turner was also onto something when he argued that progress required the stripping away of false and shallow values that tended to encrust "sophisticated" society. Sadly, after Wister's moment of revelation, he reverted to kind and became among the worst offenders in upholding the values of an impossible eastern caste of snobs and racists. But Wister's legacy from his moment of revelation still reverberates strongly in American society. Wister's other writings are now long forgotten, and he is remembered only for the one great work that he so soon rejected. More than any other writer of the West, he stirred the American imagination with the image of a frontier figure that remains an icon for much of what is best in American society.

* * * * *

However, in 1893, the year of Chicago, Wister's western beliefs were just beginning to jell. The first collaboration between Wister and Remington developed with Wister's story "Baalam and Pedro," but the new image of the cowboy first emerged in force in a pivotal article in 1895, written by Wister and illustrated by Remington, "The Evolution of the Cow-Puncher." The story was Wister's, but the writing was clearly a collaboration of beliefs. The idea for the article took root in January 1894 when Wister was visiting Remington, and Remington urged him to tell the story of the cowboy – his rise and decline. Then Remington began sending regular suggestions by mail.

1895 was the high point of Wister's writing on the West. He wrote five western essays that year, including his most important thus far, "The Evolution of the Cow-Puncher." He also published in January 1896 his first collection of western stories, *Red Men and White*, which was a compilation of previously published stories. This collection has been called his "law and order" stories. It is interesting to note that several of his stories portray lynch mobs in very negative terms. His attitude changed as the Johnson County



Frederic Remington sketch, sent to Wister in 1895 when Wister was writing "The Evolution of the Cow-Puncher." The caption read, "Great and rising demand for - a cowboy article - "The Evolution and the Survival of the Cowboy" - by O. Wister with 25 illustrations by the eminent artist Frederico Remintonio - just out." Library of Congress, Owen Wister Papers, box 33.

War approached, and he became an apologist for the vigilante tactics of the big ranchers in Wyoming.

"The Evolution of the Cow-Puncher" appeared in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* in September 1895; Wister wasted no time getting to his theme:

Our first hundred years will grow to be only the mythological beginnings in the time to come ... it won't be a century before the West is simply the true America with thought, type, and life of its own. ... No rood of modern ground is more debased and mongrel [than the East] with its hordes of encroaching alien vermin, that turn our cities to Babels and our citizenship to a hybrid farce, who

degrade our commonwealth from a nation into something half pawn-shop, half broker's office. But to survive in the clean cattle country requires a spirit of adventure, courage, and self-sufficiency; you will not find many Poles or Huns or Russian Jews in that district. ... Even in the cattle country the respectable Swedes settle chiefly to farming, and are seldom horsemen. ... The Frenchman to-day is seen at his best inside a house; he can paint and he can play comedy. ... The Italian has forgotten Columbus and sells fruit. Among the Spaniards and Portuguese no Cortez or Magellan is to be found to-day. Except in Prussia, the Teuton is a tame slippered animal. ... But the Anglo-Saxon is still forever homesick for out-of-doors. ... It is not the dollars that played first fiddle with him, else our Hebrew friends would pioneer the whole lot of us. Adventure, to be out of doors, to find some new place far away from the postman, to enjoy independence of spirit or mind or body ... this is the cardinal surviving fittest instinct that makes the Saxon through the centuries conqueror, invader, navigator, buccaneer, explorer, colonist, tiger-shooter.⁶¹

Sir Lancelot, Drake, Raleigh, Hawkins, Boone – “from the tournament at Camelot to the round-up at Abilene,” the Anglo-Saxon had maintained the spirit of adventure as had no other race and, as often as not, had done so in the company of a good horse.

The cowboy had taken from the Mexican vaquero – that “small, deceitful alien” – his customs and accoutrements, and the Anglo-Saxon spirit burned afresh:

Thus late in the nineteenth century, was the race once again subjected to battles and darkness, rain and shine. ... Destiny tried her latest experiment upon the Saxon, and plucking him from the library, the haystack, and the gutter, set him upon his horse; then it was that, face to face with the eternal simplicity of death, his modern guise fell away and he showed once again the medieval man. It was no new type, no product of the frontier, but just the original kernel. ... The cow-puncher took wild pleasure in existing. No soldier of fortune ever adventured with bolder carelessness, no fiercer blood ever stained a border. If his raids, his triumphs, and his reverses have inspired no minstrel to sing of him ... it is not so much the Rob Roy as the Walter Scott who is missing. ... These wild men ... begot no sons to continue their hardihood. War they made in

plenty, but not love; for the woman they saw was not the woman a man can take into his heart. ... Grim lean men of few topics and not many words concerning these ... indifferent to death, but disconcerted by a good woman, some with violent Old Testament religion, some avowing none. ...

And what has become of them? Where is this latest outcropping of the Saxon gone? ... he has been dispersed, as the elk, as the buffalo, as all wild animals most inevitably will be dispersed. Three things swept him away – the exhausting of the virgin pastures, the coming of the wire fence, and Mr. Amour of Chicago, who set the price of beef to suit himself. But all this may be summed up in the word Progress.⁶²

The sense of lament is palpable, both for a type that is quickly disappearing and for the lack of a poet “to connect him with the eternal” – there has not yet been “distance to lend him enchantment.”

We have no Sir Thomas Mallory! Since Hawthorne, Longfellow, and Cooper were taken from us, our flippant and impoverished imagination has ceased to be national, and the rider among Indians and cattle, the frontiersman, the American who replaces Miles Standish and the Pathfinder, is now beneath the notice of polite writers.⁶³

Here certainly is the first serious treatment of the cowboy in American literature. There is no question that Wister took the cowboy of the dime novel and turned him into a respectable subject. But Wister’s cowboy of 1895, who leaps off the page at the reader, has, as yet, none of the charm and subtlety of his eventual cowboy hero. “The Evolution of the Cow-Puncher” marks a midpoint in Wister’s own evolution on the subject of the cowboy.

Wister’s cow-punchers of 1895 populate a West that is fast disappearing; the essay is a lament for a time that is quickly passing. Barbed wire and the beef trusts are changing everything. The true cowboy type will soon fade away. One of the characteristics that is most striking about Wister’s cowboy is that he without question embodied the Anglo-Saxon. This cowboy was not a Mexican, and certainly not a Black. The West, for Wister, is the testing ground for Anglo-Saxon qualities. Here is the last refuge of the “true American,” not yet polluted by European immigration.

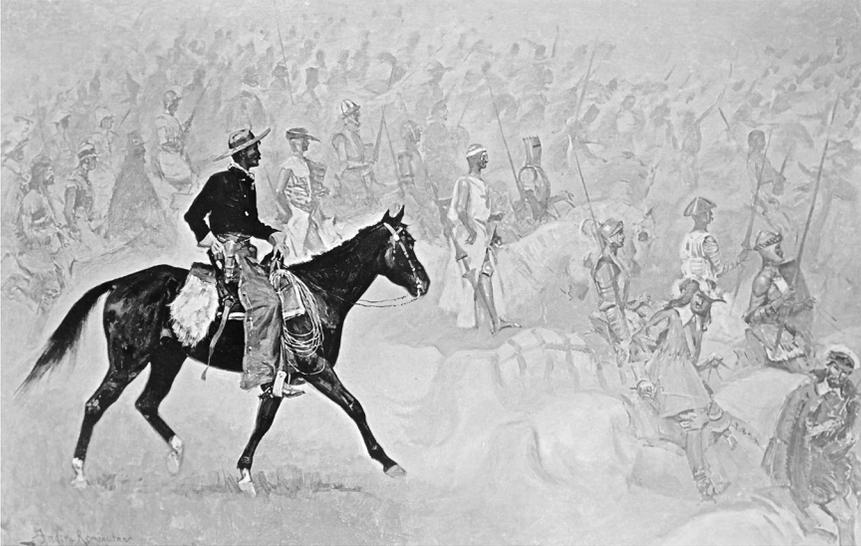
Remington’s first (of five) illustrations for this article fits the theme exactly: a mounted cowboy rampant, with a host of Anglo-Saxon knights,

crusaders, cavaliers, frontiersmen, explorers, and soldiers of the Raj, receding into the misty past. The painting is entitled "The Last Cavalier." The final illustration is equally evocative – a cowboy closing a gate in a barbed wire fence that stretches to the horizon. The free range, and with it the American frontier, are no more. A chapter in American history had ended. The illustration gives no hope for the future.

Wister had consulted closely with Remington over the five illustrations for the article. It is not too much to call it a creative collaboration. The visual impact of Remington's drawings was as important as Wister's words. Wister was delighted with the result. He wrote to Remington,

... nothing I know of yours seems to reach what you have done this time. And other people seem as enthusiastic as I am. The "Last Cavalier" though it brought tears very nearly to my eyes, is not quite so good as you intended, not quite so good as its idea: I'm not sure the idea can be adequately stated short of a big canvas – But "what an unbranded cow has done" is not only vast, but states itself utterly. So much has never been put on any page of Harper – that I've seen, ... The level of the whole five is up in the air – away up. To me personally, the Last Cavalier comes home hardest, and I love it & look at it. It's so very sad and so very near my private heart. But you must do it again – you must get that idea expressed with the same perfection that the unbranded cow is done with. Then we shall have a poem much better and more national than Hiawatha or Evangeline. There ought to be music for the Last Cavalier. Only you couldn't understand it ... the Last Cavalier will haunt me forever. He inhabits a Past into which I withdraw and mourn.⁶⁴

In crafting this pivotal depiction of the cowboy, Wister also was strongly influenced by Roosevelt's article "What Americanism Means," which invoked the rugged individualism, the "strength, integrity and learned equality" of the frontier, in order to counter the hyphenated Americanism of mass immigration. The western frontier would rid America of these hyphenated Americans. The old frontier had turned early American immigrants into true Americans, and it would continue to do so.⁶⁵ In addition, Roosevelt's essay lashed out, as did Wister, at effete eastern society, comprised of "base, low, silly, despicable, flaccid weaklings." One of the most contemptible in Roosevelt's view was Henry James, Sarah Wister's great friend. Roosevelt referred to him as that "miserable little snob" who preferred English society and literature to his own. He accused James of fleeing America because he



Frederic Remington, "The Last Cavalier" (1895), the first of five illustrations for Wister's article "The Evolution of the Cow-Puncher." Remington's painting caught Wister's theme exactly – the cowboy as the last in a long line of romantic horsemen: crusaders, knights of the age of chivalry, cavalry of the Raj, buckskin-clad plains men. Courtesy of Lawrence H. Kyte, Jr.

"cannot play a man's part among men."⁶⁶ He also charged him with writing "polished, pointless, uninteresting stories about upper social classes of England [which] make one blush to think he was once an American."⁶⁷ James privately responded to Roosevelt's charge, calling him a "dangerous and ominous jingo" and the "monstrous embodiment of unprecedented and resounding noise."⁶⁸

Remington's 1889 essay "Horses of the Plains" also had a pivotal influence on Wister's cowboy article, while Roosevelt's 1895 article "True American Ideals," in which he railed against the state of America's economic and political life, had a strong effect on Remington's thinking about the frontier. In turn, Wister's 1894 article "The National Guard of Pennsylvania" (illustrated by Remington), which contrasted the Americanism of the National Guard to the un-Americanism of the labour agitators, influenced Roosevelt's article on American ideals. All three were profoundly upset by the Panic of 1893, the crippling labour strikes, anarchism, and the "disease" of immigrant socialism. They clearly fed off each other in a very significant way.⁶⁹

During the late 1880s and 1890s, Remington was not only the leading artist and illustrator of the American West, but also an extraordinarily



Frederic Remington, "The Fall of the Cowboy" (1895), the last of his illustrations for Wister's article "The Evolution of the Cow-Puncher." The unmounted cowboy is closing the gate on the open range. Barbed wire has imposed a new era on the western range. Even the horses are sad! Amon Carter Museum, 1961-230.

prolific writer. In the two decades between 1887 and 1906, he produced 111 short stories and articles and seven novels and collections of short stories, mostly on western subjects.⁷⁰ In this period, since both Wister and Remington did most of their writing for *Harper's*, they were very aware of each other's writing, even when they were not in close communication.

Wister's linking of the cowboy to the cavalier of Sir Walter Scott and to a far wider Anglo-Saxon mythology was compelling but not completely original. The germ of the idea surely came from Roosevelt's introduction to *The Winning of the West*. This was also the period of Anglo-Saxon adventurers who sacrificed themselves to duty and empire in darkest Africa, the Arctic, and the Antarctic. The belief in Anglo-Saxon superiority suffused Captain Scott's race to the South Pole, his first attempt falling in the year of the publication of *The Virginian*. Americans, too, were caught up in the theme of Kipling's "white man's burden," which was actually addressed to Americans, urging them to their duty of taking civilization to the "lesser breeds," in this case the Filipinos. The brass plaques in Westminster Abbey, honouring explorers for their "signal intrepidity" spoke, as well, to Americans about the sacred duties of race. It is no surprise that Wister wrote

three passionate books during the period of the First World War and the early 1920s pressing his countrymen to support the Anglo-Saxon against the Hun.

It was in this period, just prior to the First World War, that Roosevelt would explore one of the most remote rivers on the planet, the River of Doubt, a tributary of the Amazon, which would later be named for him. He was attacked by Natives, and even the frogs were poisonous. As Roosevelt was descending the river, Ernest Shackleton was attempting to cross the Antarctic.⁷¹

Wister's conspicuously Anglo-Saxon cowboy, however, was more than a little fraudulent. Like it or not, the real cowboy owed a great debt to Wister's "small, deceitful alien," the Mexican *vaquero* – as well as to the gaucho of Argentina, the *huaso* of Chile, *llanero* of Venezuela and Columbia, and the *vaqueiro* of Brazil. Richard Slatta, in his magisterial book *Cowboys of the Americas*, brings to light both the huge debt owed by the American cowboy to his southern cousins and, also, the striking similarity in these other cowboy cultures to the American idolization of the cowboy. With great authority, Slatta tells the story of the spread of horses and cattle throughout the Western Hemisphere, from Patagonia to Alberta. Charles Darwin could be describing one of Wister's cavaliers in this depiction of the Spanish gaucho of Argentina: "they are generally tall and handsome. ... Their politeness is excessive."⁷² As Slatta points out, "the gaucho has become the epitome of Argentine national virtue: 'obedience, patriotism, honesty, trustworthiness.'"⁷³

Remington urged Wister to include other cowboy types in "The Evolution of the Cow-Puncher," but Wister was clearly intent on promoting the Anglo-Saxon, not any other inferior race. Nonetheless, this was the high point of Wister's and Remington's collaboration and close friendship. Considering how soon Wister withdrew to an aloof reserve with Remington, his letters of the period to Remington display a surprising warmth and informality. "Why the L _ Oh Bear don't you write to me?" And, in obvious reference to Remington's first sculpture, the Bronco Buster of 1895, Wister addressed him "Dear Mud."⁷⁴ (Remington had just written to Wister in high excitement that he had been playing with mud. He had produced in his first effort what many consider his greatest sculpture.⁷⁵)

Yet, even while writing his article on the Anglo-Saxon cowboy, Wister was working on other western articles that would eventually be incorporated into *The Virginian* and developed into the character of his Virginian cowboy. It would seem that Wister by the mid-1890s was developing both

Frederic Remington, *The Bronco Buster*, 1895, Remington's first attempt at "playing with mud." At this stage, he was virtually untutored in sculpture. The result is astonishing - the balance and raw energy jump from the sculpture. This version of the Bronco Buster was created using the cumbersome sand-cast method.



Remington's 1909 version of the Bronco Buster. It was almost his last sculpture. It was slightly larger than the original 1895 sculpture and exuded even more energy and raw power. Remington was now using the more satisfactory lost-wax technique, which allowed the sculptor to put more detail into the sculpture.





Frederic Remington, *The Rattlesnake* (1905). Both horse and rider are in complete balance. The cowboy is concerned only with keeping his hat! This is perhaps Remington's greatest cowboy sculpture – the harmony between horse and rider is extraordinary. Remington produced a number of cowboy sculptures: *The Stampede*, *Coming Through the Rye*, and *The Wicked Pony*. All of them exude power and vitality; they epitomize Remington's, Wister's and Roosevelt's vision of the West.

a general, archetypal cowboy and his own special cowboy, who was unique and was meant to stand out from the herd.

By 1895, with the publication of “The Evolution of the Cow-Puncher,” Wister had his cowboy “type” clearly in mind. Then, between 1895 and 1902, he would refine his story and add the romance. Much of this was done while he lived in Charleston, beginning in 1898, when he was starting to think of the themes of the book he would write after *The Virginian*, a study of Charleston society titled *Lady Baltimore*, after a special kind of cake! This book would stress the bleakness of the American political, economic, and cultural landscape and lament the fact that there were only pockets of true gentility left in the country. Already, by 1902, even before the publication of *The Virginian*, Wister was beginning to retreat into his bitter little enclave of Butler Place and the “right sort” of people in Charleston.

After completing the story of Em'ly, Wister's next theme involving his Virginian appeared in March 1896. "Where Fancy Was Bred" recounts the famous baby-swapping incident at the Goose Egg Ranch. Judge Henny has now become Judge Henry, and Trampas has lost the rather silly name Sorgy. Shorty, Lin McLean, and Jim Westfall are also front and centre at the Swinton Brothers' barbeque. Now, many of the main characters of *The Virginian* are present, and the story includes some of the main themes of the novel – the rescue of Molly from the bogged-down stagecoach; the beginning of the lethal feud with arch-villain Trampas; the baby swapping, abetted by Lin McLean, which was a famous story from Texas to Montana; and, finally, the beginning of the Virginian's courting of Molly. By the final writing of the novel, these themes were spread over three chapters. And it is clear that this story marks the emergence of an important literary figure. Wister was no longer just writing squalid tales of local western colour.

But what is so fascinating in this period of Wister's writing is that he was juggling three very dissimilar themes at once – the ugly and vulgar West of Lin McLean, the upper-crust world of aristocratic post-Civil War Charleston, and the highly romantic parts of *The Virginian* that would create an instant national sensation. An extraordinary tour de force!

In March and September of 1897, two more Lin McLean stories appeared: "Separ's Vigilante" and "Destiny at Drybones," both published by Harper's. Both stories were again of the squalid variety and very different in quality to the parts of *The Virginian* that were about to be created to fill in the gaps between the Virginian episodes already written. Between these two stories, there emerged another Virginian story, "Grandmother Stark," that was to become, almost unchanged, another chapter of the novel. This story would become one of the key sections of the novel – Molly's finding of the Virginian, left to die by hostile Indians; her nursing him back to health; her decision not to leave the West for Vermont; and her final capitulation to his wooing. One question emerges. By this point, it is clear that Wister had much of the eventual shape of the novel in his mind. The main themes were there, and it was now a matter of creating the links between episodes that would produce a novel. But, with the novel now clearly in mind, why would he give away one of the most important themes of the novel – the circumstances that led Molly to change her mind and decide that her future was with the West – and with the Virginian?

There is one important difference between the article and the later chapter. Although the two are almost identical, one vital theme was added between 1897 and 1902 – the issue of lynching. While the Virginian is delirious after the Indian attack, he refers to the lynching of his good friend

Steve. In the novel, but not in the article, the Virginian murmurs, “Steve ... it ain’t so ... Steve, I have lied for you.” As has been seen, Wister was referring to a real incident in Johnson’s life over which he agonized greatly. Several authors have read utterly absurd implications into these few words, coupled with Steve’s use of a private nickname for the Virginian, to speculate about a very intimate relationship between the Virginian and Steve. Their speculations are totally spurious and without any basis whatever.

In 1897, Wister completed his first cowboy book, *Lin McLean*, which was published later that year. This book, which was really a collection of six stories based on some of his real experiences in the West, was well received as “perhaps the truest representation of an actual cowboy that American fiction has given us.”⁷⁶ But the book was not a literary success. It was too episodic, and, more to the point, the rough Texas cowboy that Wister depicted did not catch the public imagination. The story was rescued from its rather silly plot by effective descriptive writing, a wonderful eye for detail, and an ear for dialogue. The book was illustrated by Remington.

From 1897 until 1902, after finishing *Lin McLean*, Wister started concentrating on his second cowboy, the Virginian. He also married Mary Channing Wister, a distant cousin, in 1898 and embarked on a six-month honeymoon, starting in Charleston and including a prolonged visit to his old friend George Waring from Harvard days, who was still living in the Methow Valley of Washington State (see chapter 5). Oddly, this was his first visit to Charleston, and it seemed to hit him in a fashion reminiscent of his first visit to Wyoming. He had found an oasis in “our great American desert of mongrel din and waste.” Here he found the old gentility, whose disappearance he so lamented.⁷⁷ His mother urged him to write about the unique society of Charleston, as he had done with Wyoming.

After returning from his marathon honeymoon, Wister got back to his writing, producing a little book, *Padre Ignazio*, about an Indian mission in California, and an essay about the Virginian, “The Game and the Nation,” in which the Virginian humiliates the villain Trampas with his frog story. He also wrote a two-part series on Richard Wagner’s operas. In the next year, 1900, he published a collection of western short stories, *The Jimmyjohn Boss and Other Stories*, in which *Hank’s Woman* appeared, but this time featuring the Virginian, not Lin McLean. He also wrote some poetry and a short biography of President Ulysses Grant. So this was a prolific period for Wister, and it is clear that he was no longer obsessed with becoming the Kipling of the West. The intensity of the period of writing “The Evolution of the Cow-Puncher” seems to have dissipated, and the close relationship with Remington also seems to have faded. None of these writings caused

much of a stir; Wister said that he made enough money to keep one horse in hay, but not two. And he had ballooned somewhat, to almost two hundred pounds, causing him to hire a fitness trainer. It is not clear what credentials the trainer claimed; he advised Wister that his delicate health was caused by taking too many baths.⁷⁸

Remington, too, had ballooned – to over three hundred pounds – and the spark between the two, which their collaboration on the cowboy had ignited, was now extinguished for good. They had been drifting apart after the heady days of collaboration over Wister's essay on the cow-puncher, but the rift became permanent in 1899. They had arranged to meet in New York but, at the last minute, Remington had wired that he couldn't make the appointment. Wister didn't get the message. He waited, with increasing annoyance, and, later, when Remington brushed off the incident in his usual casual way, Wister was deeply offended and ended the friendship. After that, their relationship became formal and professional. There were to be no Remington illustrations in *The Virginian*.^{78a}

Wister spent much of 1901 developing the *Virginian* manuscript and writing a short book, *Philosophy 4*, based on a real incident at Harvard when two rich and lazy students hired a Jewish tutor to help them swat up for an exam, and then did better on the exam than the tutor. *Philosophy 4* is a truly nasty little book, showing Wister at his worst. It is full of anti-Semitism and extols the natural superiority of the Anglo-Saxon – the chosen ones who, by right of birth, should be at Harvard, and the ones who, by natural right, should go on to be America's leaders. Later, in *Roosevelt: The Story of a Friendship*, Wister would reminisce about his student days at Harvard, "Not a musical show had yet been concocted by the Broadway Jew for the American moron."⁷⁹

Wister paid a visit to the White House that year, on the invitation of the new vice president, Theodore Roosevelt, who had vaulted into the position on the public adulation following his Rough Riders' charge up San Juan Hill during the Spanish-American War. The two had kept in fairly regular touch in the last decade, Wister sending Roosevelt his western stories, and Roosevelt commenting on them, always with considerable adulation. Wister now had a contract for *The Virginian* with Macmillan, and he was spending considerable time turning his series of *Virginian* stories written since 1891 into a cohesive novel. He must have been very conscious, as he developed *The Virginian*, that his first cowboy book had been roundly criticized as interesting but disjointed and episodic. By the time the final novel appeared, eight stories that would become part of *The Virginian* had already appeared, leading some critics to say that the book was mostly a collection of stories

cobbled together in a “scissors-and-paste” fashion. Certainly Wister was aware of this criticism; at one point, he had considered calling the book *The Virginian, A Tale of Sundry Adventures*. However, these criticisms are only partly just. What the novel clearly has is a compelling vision of early Wyoming and, although a number of the early chapters are episodic, based on earlier short stories, there is a clear narrative flowing through half the chapters.⁸⁰

In 1902 the book came out with the title *The Virginian: A Horseman of the Plains*. In the preface, Wister declared his mission: to write about the “last romantic figure” in America. On the issue that was already causing considerable speculation and pestering, he wrote, “Sometimes readers inquire, Did you know the Virginian?” His answer, “As well, I hope, as a father should know his son.” This was the only clue he was willing to give. Obviously, one of the great strengths of the novel was that its hero could not be identified with any real person.

The book was instantly one of the great triumphs of American literature. Within two months, 50,000 copies were printed; within three months, 100,000. In the first eight months, the book was reprinted fourteen times; by 1911, when the next edition was published, forty times.⁸¹ Even Henry James, the most elevated American author of the period, called the book “a rare and remarkable feat.” Only Wister’s mother could find little to admire. Her cold appraisal of her son’s greatest triumph leaves one stunned. For her, popularity was a strike against the book. A novel that the common people could admire was clearly a failure.

The reaction of Wister’s mother is, perhaps, not surprising. For all his life, she had held a suffocating and utterly domineering control over him. In his childhood, she kept a journal entitled “The Early Years of a Child of Promise.” Almost everything he did she criticized. When he went to Wyoming in 1885, she ensured that two of her women friends were looking after him. Even in the moment of his great triumph with the tremendous success of *The Virginian*, she sent him a long letter outlining in detail all that was wrong with the book. Perhaps what upset her most was the dominant theme of masculine escape from feminine control. Wyoming was a man’s world; some have argued that the depraved hen Em’ly represented domineering feminine reformers who are made to look ridiculous; a central theme in the book is the triumph of the untutored western aristocrat over the feminine manners and social position of Bennington. Above all, when Molly tells the Virginian that she will leave him if he fights Trampas, and he ignores her, the pathos of that scene can be seen as liberation for Wister from his mother’s suffocating control. No wonder she hated the book!

In the Wister papers at the Library of Congress, there is a huge outpouring of letters to Wister from all parts of the United States in the immediate aftermath of the publication of the book. East and West, North and South, from westerners who closely related to the book, to the eastern literary set who admired the book as literature, *The Virginian* was an immediate and stunning success. Especially surprising was the very large number of letters from women saying that it was their favourite novel.⁸² This instant and uniformly enthusiastic response to the book must have been overwhelming to Wister, especially after the very muted response to his earlier book-length attempts. There was also, according to a Montana newspaper at the time, an “avalanche” of applications from young women in New England for teaching positions in the West.⁸³ Two years later, *The Virginian* became a play and in 1914 the first movie came out, the first of four movie versions. The 1914 movie was produced by Cecil B. DeMille, followed by new versions in 1923, 1929, and 1946. The 1929 version featured Gary Cooper as the Virginian, a performance that essentially launched his career. In the 1960s, *The Virginian* would also become a TV series, running from 1962 to 1970.

Without question, *The Virginian* launched the outpouring of western cowboy literature that began with Zane Grey and seems to have ended, for the moment at least, with Louis L'Amour and Larry McMurtry. In-between have been hundreds, if not thousands, of cowboy novels, movies, and TV programs. It is safe to say that Wister launched the foremost popular mythology in American history. Even the White House invokes cowboy imagery on special occasions. Perhaps just one example will suffice to demonstrate the power of what Wister started – an example that Wister's mother would have hated most. Gene Autry's *Cowboy Commandments* aptly demonstrate the place of the cowboy in the American firmament:

The good cowboy never takes unfair advantage, keeps his word, tells the truth, is gentle with children, the elderly and animals, is tolerant, helps those in distress, works hard, respects women, his parents, and the law, does not drink or smoke, and is patriotic.⁸⁴

There have been only two persistent criticisms of *The Virginian*: that there is little about cattle, and that the character of Molly is not a success. What a dull story it might have been if filled with cows! The criticism of Molly is more just, but she does play a very important part in the novel as the easterner who has to be brought around very grudgingly to an appreciation of the West. In a way, Molly is a victim of this theme, a theme vital to Wister's purpose. And the end of the book is very powerful when Molly's great-aunt

shows the Virginian the likeness of General Stark and comments wistfully that there used to be men like that in Vermont, but they have gone west. The book ends with Molly understanding that the West is the future of the country. A very powerful theme if you don't know that Wister had already rejected it for a far tamer and more odious one!

Wister had created a western masterpiece that endures to the present, but, even before the publication of *The Virginian*, Wister was already abandoning the West. His Kipling-of-the-West period was over. The president of Macmillan, the company that had published *The Virginian*, asked him to write another western book, but Wister wanted to write something quite different. The West had lost its allure, and he had become besotted with what he considered the last true enclave of aristocracy in America, the close little society of Charleston. There he had found his spiritual home.⁸⁵ By 1902, he was already retreating into an increasingly misanthropic view of American society and into his early extreme snobbery. His next book, *Lady Baltimore*, published in 1906, would be full of pessimism regarding America and nastiness toward new Americans. He was especially bitter about “uppity” Blacks in positions of political importance during Reconstruction, and he argued that Reconstruction was a dismal failure. As one critic, John Lukacs, wrote, “Its pessimism is as pervasive as anything written by Herman Melville or Henry Adams.”⁸⁶

Lady Baltimore was centred in Charleston, for Wister “the most appealing, the most lovely” city in America, encompassing “a high society of distinguished men and women who exist no more. ... Nowhere in America such charm, such character, such true elegance as here.” In Charleston, Wister revelled in a genteel society protected from “our sullen welter of democracy” and “the commercial deluge of the wrong sort ... the lower class, with dollars and no grandparents.” A greater contrast with Wyoming and cowboys could not be imagined!

The “Lady Baltimore” was a wedding cake, made from the Lady Baltimore recipe and ordered for a wedding that never took place because the bride-to-be has allied herself to the decadent and money-grubbing nouveaux riches of the North. These “Replacers” have elbowed aside the old Southern aristocracy of Charleston and created a new and ugly society. The story is essentially a lament for the old South before the Civil War, when Blacks knew their place and a wise and cultured elite ruled the South. *Lady Baltimore* is essentially a Jamesian novel of manners with little plot, an “unabashed homage to aristocratic traditions and class distinction.”⁸⁷ The narrator, Augustus (Wister), lets it be known that he would be happy if all the Blacks were deported; Blacks, after all, are a “menial race” – whose skulls

are more like those of apes. Southern lynching is objectionable only on aesthetic grounds! Even for the time, *Lady Baltimore* is shockingly virulent on the subject of Blacks and Jews. The book “represents an unabashed outpouring of racist attitudes unmatched in the fiction of any other major American writer of the twentieth century.”⁸⁸ The book had modest sales before it “lapsed into popular and critical obscurity.”⁸⁹

In 1909 and 1910, Wister and his wife spent two consecutive summers on the Wyoming dude ranch of Struthers Burt. In the introduction to the 1951 Heritage Press edition of *The Virginian*, Burt recounted an incident that occurred during the second summer. Molly Wister’s father, also a Wister, died while Owen and Molly were out of communication on the Burt ranch. It took several days for the news of his death to reach them. In the meantime, the newspapers of the country somehow assumed that it was Owen Wister who had died, and the obituaries poured forth. Many were long and critical. One in particular called him a “first-rate second-rate writer.” According to Burt, Wister was devastated and never really recovered.⁹⁰ He wrote very little fiction after that.

So, hardly before the ink was dry on *The Virginian*, Wister had returned to his privileged set, eulogizing an era before the “sweeping folly of the Fifteenth Amendment” (the Constitutional Amendment that gave the vote to African-Americans), when Negro servants were properly attentive – “like an old family dog.” *Lady Baltimore* conjures up the image of the old South, so much a part of Wister’s heritage on his mother’s side, as the last citadel of good breeding, an enclave not yet destroyed by “the invasion of the proletariat.” Where was Weir Mitchell when he was needed to remind Wister once again: “Learn to sympathize with your fellow man a little more than you are inclined to. You don’t feel kindly to your race, you know. There are a lot of humble folks in the fields you’d be better for knowing.” Weir Mitchell showed in his lifetime that he was a man of great wisdom and generosity of spirit; Wister, for all his talent, was possessed of a mean and gnarled soul. It is more than a little ironic that Wister dedicated *Lady Baltimore* to Weir Mitchell!

Wister had long ago lost the friendship of Remington through neglect and distaste for Remington’s tiggerish ways. Now he ran the risk of losing Roosevelt as well over his disdain for the unwashed. Roosevelt had always been full of enthusiasm for Wister’s western writing, and over the years had given him much encouragement and advice on western subjects. But Roosevelt did not like *Lady Baltimore* when it appeared in 1906 and told Wister so bluntly.

While Wister found his spiritual home in the society of Charleston, “the most civilized in America,” Roosevelt accused Wister of creating far

too dark a picture of the hopeless depravity of northern society and of being far too uncritical of southern aristocratic society. In a long letter to Wister in April 1906, Roosevelt argued that northerners were not as lacking in virtue as Wister argued and southerners not nearly so virtuous. After all, they had clung to slavery long after the civilized world had given it up. Wister's Charleston aristocrats

offer as melancholy an example as I know of people whose whole life for generations has been warped by their own wilful perversity. ... They drank and duelled and made speeches, but they contributed very, very little toward anything of which we as Americans are now proud. At the time of the Civil War they were still trying to reopen the slave trade; during Reconstruction they brought their punishment absolutely on themselves.⁹¹

Wister could still argue, fifty years after the Civil War, that giving Blacks the vote was a mistake because they were intellectually and morally inferior, and he defended white southerners' attempts to keep the vote away from them. He even criticized Roosevelt, now the president, for appointing a Black to the important post of collector of customs for the port of Charleston. Wister pointed out that the appointment had caused great consternation among the "right" people in Charleston; Roosevelt countered that Wister was condoning an aristocratic class that was attempting to replace slavery with a system of peonage. He accused Wister of giving strength to those in the South who were doing everything in their power to prevent Blacks from gaining equality and made it clear that he thought that Wister's friends were extreme reactionaries who would do the country great harm. Wister simply could not agree with Roosevelt's main point: progressive and educated Blacks, such as the man he had appointed to an important position in Charleston, must be given a chance, "the very type ... about which [Charleston aristocrats] lie so unblushingly."⁹² To Wister's credit, in his *Collected Works* in 1928, he prefaced *Lady Baltimore* by printing Roosevelt's letter in full, and he revised some of the more negative passages.⁹³

Here was a clear intellectual parting of the ways between Wister and Roosevelt. And there is a large irony in this parting, for Wister was arguing against one of his own most powerful arguments in *The Virginian*, that a natural aristocracy of talent should be able to rise to the top. After his youthful discovery of Wyoming and its cowboys in the mid-1880s, he had soon returned to his very conservative and malevolent view of mankind. Added to his pronounced anti-Semitism and utter disdain for immigrants was an

even greater disdain for Native peoples. In his preface to Remington's 1898 publication *Done in the Open*, he wrote of how accurately Remington had drawn "this inferior race which our conquering race has dispossessed ... ending with its squalid degeneration under the influence of our civilized manners." Actually, Remington's art did not match Wister's words!

One of the main themes of *The Virginian* – which is implicit throughout the novel, but stated explicitly in five central chapters – is that quality will prevail over equality.⁹⁴ The theme is first stated when the Virginian says to Molly, "equality is a great big bluff." The comment is at the centre of his courting; he is telling her that he can rise above his roots and that, one day, he will be worthy of her. The theme becomes, perhaps, the central message of the book in the next chapter: "The Game and the Nation – Act First."

All America is divided into two classes – the quality and the equality. ... It was through the Declaration of Independence that we Americans acknowledged the *eternal inequality* [Wister's emphasis] 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. ... Therefore, we decreed that every man should henceforth have equal liberty to find his own level. By this very decree we acknowledged and gave freedom to true aristocracy. ... 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.

Stirring words. And for a time, Wister really did believe that true American democracy was to be found in the egalitarian air of Wyoming. His Virginian cowboy was America's true aristocrat, capable of rising from humble roots to marry into one of America's most revered families. But it was a passing phase. Even before *The Virginian* was published, Wister had recanted. Now it was the old aristocracy of Charleston – the ultimate inequality, a caste who based their importance on who their grandfathers were – that counted with Wister. Clearly he had soon rejected the innate nobility of the cowboy and had essentially given up on the possibility of the West's ability to reform the nation. Immigrants, especially Jews, were scum; Indians were little better than vermin; the debate with Roosevelt over the ability of a Black to preside over the port of Charleston demonstrated clearly Wister's belief that *all* Blacks were too inferior to hold such a post. He was wholly unmoved by Roosevelt's argument that you can't shut the door on an entire race.

Did his own words come back to haunt him in later life – that *every* man should have equal liberty to find his own level, thus giving freedom to true aristocracy? Perhaps his complete disillusionment with these sentiments in later life accounts for his general disillusionment with the West.

Each of his “natural aristocrats” – George West, Charles Skirdin, Everett Johnson – had proven a disappointment. His youthful optimism about America was clearly misplaced, and he increasingly retreated to what was bred in the bone, a belief in the reliability of old families and old values. Like his old friend and fellow grump, Henry Adams, who looked at his country with a “profound world-weary cynicism” and presided over his tight little circle, the most exclusive in Washington, Wister could only lament the passing of America. He had slipped back very comfortably into that inward-looking and inbred little world that Henry Cabot Lodge described so well in his memoir *Early Days*: “Everybody knew everybody else and all about everybody’s family. Most people were related.” It was a caste utterly set in its ways, “clipping coupons from Granny’s trust fund,” but with “a sense, even in the best households, of living on borrowed time.”⁹⁵

Surely here lies a great irony. As Wister rejected his creation, the whole nation became caught up in what he had wrought. Wister’s Virginian became an instant inspiration for the nation, one that is still deeply embedded in the character of the West. And at the centre of that character is Wister’s notion of “quality.” As Wister was being lionized across the nation, he entered a grumpy, unproductive period in which he wrote only *Lady Baltimore* and two other small works, a short biography of President Grant in 1901 and, in 1907, *The Seven Ages of Washington*.

Roosevelt could not shake Wister from his misanthropic views, but certainly the strong friendship persisted. Again, in the 1911 edition of *The Virginian*, the dedication to Roosevelt was even more fulsome than in the original edition. In that year also, Wister published a collection of western short stories, *Members of the Family*.

Even before the publication of *The Virginian*, Wister was becoming pessimistic about the future of the West. Like the East, it was filling with the wrong sort. Now, he could only find comfort in the lost world of Charleston gentility. In retrospect, it is indeed ironic that one of the greatest attractions of *The Virginian* is that the cowboy is not a rough Texan. Instead, he came from the old Tidewater society of Virginia and embodied that culture, even though he is given humble roots. Despite the terrible war to rid the country of the southern slaveholding mentality that had ended less than forty years before, the entire country was drawn, perhaps unwittingly, to that southern code of honour and the gentle but iron code of manners that lay at the

foundation of slaveholding southern society. And now Wister was retreating into an extreme form of that old southern mentality. *Lady Baltimore*, when it was published in 1906, was only a minor success, which probably pleased his mother greatly.

In 1912, Wister did seek Roosevelt's advice on a proposed western book to be titled *The Marriages of Scipio*. The theme: Scipio Le Moyne, a character in *The Virginian*, was to be the main character in "the tragedy of the cowpuncher who survives his own era and cannot adjust himself to the more civilized era which succeeds it."⁹⁶ Roosevelt's answer – "Why, my dear Dan ... when you come to your cowboy tragedy, why – don't leave it in such an unrelieved blackness. Let in some sunlight." Undoubtedly, if Wister had written the book, he would have let in very little light. Probably, by this point in his life, Wister was incapable of optimism or a generosity of spirit. It seems that after the period of *The Virginian*, Wister descended into an outlook of very selective nostalgia and bitterness. When his book on General Washington appeared in 1907, the review in the influential *American Historical Review* accused him of "crude historical knowledge" and added that the book was unreliable and "idealized beyond reality."⁹⁷

Actually, Wister had asked Roosevelt about three possible books, and Roosevelt had advised him to write all three. Wister decided on *Romney*, a thinly disguised book about Philadelphia's passing from the old to the new order. He never finished the book, but it was clearly meant to be the last of a trilogy connecting the three regions of America. Again, as with *The Virginian* and *Lady Baltimore*, a narrator tells the story. In *Romney*, it is once again Augustus, the narrator of *Lady Baltimore*.

The central theme of *Romney* is very similar to that of *Lady Baltimore*; a study of manners among the old guard of late nineteenth-century Philadelphia. *Romney* and *Lady Baltimore* share a great many similarities; both lament the death of civility, manners, and a ruling caste of education and taste. Certainly Wister was on safe ground in his descriptions of aristocratic Philadelphia. He was born there near his ancestral mansions of Vernon, Grumblethorpe, and Butler Place, and grew up amid family portraits by Thomas Sully, Sir Thomas Lawrence, and Sir Joshua Reynolds.⁹⁸

Wister began work on *Romney* in 1912 and stopped abruptly in 1913 when his wife Molly died in childbirth. After her death, it seems that he couldn't bring himself to continue. And then the war came, and Wister became obsessively caught up in making the case for an Anglo-American alliance in three books: *The Pentecost of Calamity* (1915), *A Straight Deal* (1920), and *Neighbours Henceforth* (1922).

Romney begins with a lament for the demise of the old Philadelphia aristocracy and the “economic destruction of the old American family, and the invasion of the Hun, the Vandal, the Croat, and all the rest of the steerage.” It is perhaps just as well that *Romney* was not completed, since the plot is rather ridiculous and implausible, centred on an Austrian family of great wealth, with a regal “great lady” of a mother and two oafish sons, Mort and Dug, who couldn’t possibly have been the sons of that well-bred mother. Wister created an untenable plot. Mort and Dug represent the new, vulgar rich, whom Wister so detested. Yet the mother is pictured in imperious and cultured old world colours, which Wister so admired. He and his caste, which included Henry James and Henry Adams, looked to Europe for all that was best in music, taste, and culture. But Wister so hated the new immigration from Europe that he used Dug and Mort – two extremely unlikely names for European immigrants – to flail at his pet hate. *Romney* is badly muddled!

In *Romney*, as with his other writing, Wister has moments of wicked genius in his descriptions of character, but the overall theme is contrived; vulgarity is equated with immigration. Wister in this period became the vice president of the Immigration Restriction League; *Romney* appears to be a platform for Wister to vent his beliefs about the destruction of his beloved country by the alien hordes. A minor theme in *The Virginian* had taken over his writing. Wister probably realized that the book wasn’t working and simply abandoned it.

Wister’s last western writing was published in 1928. *When West Was West* is a collection of short stories full of nostalgia, pessimism, and disillusionment. Of the nine stories, seven are very dark, featuring degenerate and abused Indians, aging pioneers whose Garden of Eden has become a junkyard, towns that have been taken over by whores and pimps, and cowboys who are now pathetic relics. The great promise of the West at the end of *The Virginian* has become a lament for the region that has sold its soul to the same “Replacers” who inhabit *Lady Baltimore* and *Romney*. Wister’s daughter commented that Wister never spoke of the West later in life. It’s as if the West that he had built up to be the regeneration of the country had played false with him.

So, in the end, Wister became a great writer for the creation of one character, a character who brilliantly caught the American imagination. That cannot be taken away from him, but Wister cannot be considered in the first rank of American writers, nor, except for one brief moment, with the great western American writers: Willa Cather, John Steinbeck, Walter Van Tilburg Clark, or Wallace Stegner. His heart was too small, and, in the end, he



Wister in his seventies. By then, he was disillusioned with the West and had retreated into his little world of “the right people.” He had become bitter and xenophobic. American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.

returned to the society and ways of thought that he had parodied in *The Virginian*. He could never overcome his upbringing. Roosevelt tried to chide him out of some of his extreme pessimism and spleenfulness, but without success. In the end, it seems that Wister had given up on the West. When he died in 1938, he had long since emotionally left the West behind and was writing a book on French wines! It probably no longer mattered to him who his Virginian was. Perhaps that explains his odd response to the Calgary newspaperman – to be found in the Postscript of this work – shortly before his death. The man was trying, once again, to pry out of Wister whether Johnson was, in fact, his Virginian. Wister was now in a different world; his West no longer existed, and those on whom he had based his Virginian had all proven to be disappointments, West demonstrating his moral failings, Skirdin a night watchman sweeping floors, and now Johnson running a butcher shop. His world now encompassed only the few who mattered in Charleston, Boston, and Philadelphia. So why not reveal his western hero? He was old and tired and sick – and disillusioned with the West. How else to understand his response to the Alberta reporter – “Everett Johnson seemed to be the one.”⁹⁹