The Cowboy

The historical cowboy, the hired man on horseback who rode the ranges and trails of the post-Civil War West, was quite unlike the representations made of him by novelists, playwrights, and other purveyors of entertainment, who began their work in the 1880s for eastern audiences already nostalgic for what they believed to be a rapidly disappearing West. The historical cowboy was actually a rather prosaic fellow, a common laborer in the context of his times. Many of these cowboys, if they could have found other employment, would have abandoned the hard, dirty job of cowboying in an instant. By the time the writers and publicists had finished with the cowboy, this sometimes reluctant wage-earner had become in the popular mind a dashing hero, the embodiment of noble virtues like truth and justice, a two-gun, guitar-strumming fashion plate astride an unusual horse, and, altogether, a behavioral example worthy of emulation, especially by small children. Dime novelists and Hollywood script writers replaced an ordinary worker with an Americanized knight-errant and, in the process, created not only an enduring image but also a cultural symbol recognized around the world. High visibility makes the cowboy image a ready point of tourist identification for states like Oklahoma, with some connection to the history of the range cattle industry.

William F. Cody was among the first to remake the image of the cowboy when, in 1884, he introduced a twenty-seven-year-old Texan named William Levi Taylor to audiences attending Buffalo Bill's Wild West as Buck Taylor, "King of the Cowboys." Three years later, Prentiss Ingraham, a prolific writer occasionally employed by Cody as a publicist, made Taylor the protagonist in the first of a series of dime novels, confirming Taylor's popularity with youngsters. By the time Buck Taylor died in 1924, Theodore Roosevelt, Owen Wister, Will Rogers, William S. Hart, and Tom Mix (among others) had made substantial contributions to cowboy imagery, each in his own way contributing to the separation of the cowboy from his historical and occupational context, so that, by the end of the process, the cowboy would be not a laborer, but a heroic figure who had little or nothing to do with cows. As the television series *Rawhide* (CBS, 1959-1965) indicated, trail-driving merely provided an excuse to be in a different locale every week. The cattle business became an essential backdrop, but, like scenery in a play, it could be conveniently ignored, as Gil Favor, Rowdy Yates, and the rest of the trail crew left the herd and rode off in defense of law, order, and fair play.

Today, one contemplates the cowboy in PBS documentaries of contemporary ranch life; in rodeo performances; in television and magazine advertising; in museums like the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City, the Pawnee Bill Ranch in Pawnee, Oklahoma, and the 101 Ranch in Ponca City; at "gatherings" of cowboy poets;

and in the seemingly endless reprints of novels written by Zane Grey and Louis L'Amour. Clearly, popular interest in the cowboy, either as he existed in history or as Hollywood and the novelists have imagined him, remains strong. Understanding the cowboy image, in its various manifestations, may lead to an understanding of the ways Americans, at different times and in different places, have perceived their history and, in some measure, defined themselves. The cowboy of fiction and cinema may be taken to represent freedom to a population coping with adjustments to life in a post-industrial society, and, if that is so, his cultural durability must also be of interest. As entertainment fare, the cowboy has outlasted the mountain man, the pioneer, the soldier, the settler, the gold seeker, the scout, and even the Indian in terms of frequency of appearance, if not in quality of representation. The readings for this program may help to explain the primacy of the cowboy over all other western types from the nineteenth century.

Cowboy Life: Reconstructing an American Myth
edited, with an introduction and afterword, by William W. Savage, Jr.
This anthology contains views of the historical cowboy by nineteenth and early-twentieth-century observers, with a bit of cowboy autobiography for comparison, supported by dozens of photographs. Included are the unflattering observations of Joseph G. McCoy, the entrepreneur who wrote the first published history of the cattle business; the perspective of Richard Harding Davis, the most prominent American journalist of his day; the favorable opinion of Joseph Nimmo, Jr., who, as chief of the U.S. Bureau of Statistics, had conducted an extensive investigation of the cattle industry in the mid-1880s; and the experiences of Charles A. Siringo, author of the first cowboy memoir. The editor's introduction chronicles the passage of a largely anonymous laborer from socio-economic obscurity to literary and cinematic prominence, while arguing that the transformation has been incomplete, since the cowboy has yet to pass from the realm of popular culture to the level of high art.

The Virginian
by Owen Wister
Published in 1902, *The Virginian* is an archetypal cowboy fiction, although its author was an Easterner who knew very little about his subject. The hero, known only as the Virginian, is foreman of a cattle ranch in Wyoming, a cowboy who made good but who now must police the activities of ambitious former peers, one of whom, Trampas, proves to be a rustler. Otherwise, the Virginian is free to woo Molly, the local schoolmarm, allowing for melodramatic contrasts of East with West. Oddly, considering the setting and the occupations of several of his principals, Wister forgot to include any cows, and not a single one is mentioned in the story. This is significant, however, because it documents an important part of the transformation of the historical to the heroic. The historical cowboy's work was prosaic, and the dull and routine do not make a good story. Thus,

early marketers of the cowboy image separated the man from the beast that was his *raison d'etre*, recognizing that a hero cannot be heroic if he must spend most of his time attending to livestock.

The Log of a Cowboy
by Andy Adams
The Log of a Cowboy (1903) is a former working cowboy's literary response to people like Wister. Adams attempts to portray cowboy life accurately in what is often described as a "plotless" novel. The label is applied perhaps because the drama is provided less by individuals than by the struggles of man and beast against the vagaries of nature. The book recounts a trail drive north from Texas, and it abounds with descriptions of stampedes and river crossings. Its cowboys reveal themselves and their concerns through yarns told nightly around the campfire. Some have argued that Adams produced the Moby Dick of rangeland literature, a book which, were there no others on the subject, would nevertheless tell us all we could care to know about the cowboy and the job he did. The contrast with *The Virginian* is stark, indeed.

Monte Walsh
by Jack Schaefer
Monte Walsh is a transitional novel in which the cowboy virtues Wister limned coexist with revisionist perspectives that would become typical of cowboy fictions in the 1960s and 1970s. The work of Emerson Hough and Zane Grey in the 1920s and 1930s, a host of pulp novelists in the 1940s, and Louis L'Amour in the 1950s merely extended the images drawn from Owen Wister. Schaefer, in this fictional biography of a lone cowboy, pays attention to the concerns of Andy Adams but adds a note of cynicism (the prim schoolmarm of Wister's day has yielded to a diseased prostitute as the primary objective of the cowboy protagonist's affection, for example) that leaves a stronger sense of the reality of the historical cowboy's life than even a more practiced critic like A. B. Guthrie, Jr., had been able to manage in *These Thousand Hills* a few years earlier.

Lonesome Dove
by Larry McMurtry
McMurtry's Pulitzer-Prize-winning novel sets the modern standard for cowboy fiction, where realism overwhelms whatever ballistic or pugilistic activity might otherwise be taken to represent heroic effort--though in the best Wister tradition, McMurtry still separates cowboys from cows to weave a sad narrative about people who spend their lives loving other people who cannot or will not (but in any case do not) reciprocate. McMurtry's crude, visceral, and generally unsavory characters succeed in commanding a degree of our respect (and sometimes admiration), suggesting that American perceptions of what constitutes virtue and grace have changed drastically since Wister's day. The

notion is underscored by the fact that *Lonesome Dove* first existed as a screenplay, rejected by heroic cowboy stalwarts like John Wayne, Henry Fonda, and James Stewart on account of its revisionist posture.

For Further Reading

Non-Fiction

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Filmography

The Cowboys (dir. Mark Rydell, 1972)
The Culpepper Cattle Co. (dir. Dick Richards, 1972)
Junior Bonner (dir. Sam Peckinpah, 1972)
Lonely Are the Brave (dir. David Miller, 1962)
Lonesome Dove (dir. Simon Wincer, 1989)
Monte Walsh (dir. William A. Fraker, 1970)
Red River (dir. Howard Hawks, 1948)
The Tall Men (dir. Raoul Walsh, 1955)

Will Penny (dir. Tom Gries, 1968)
The Virginian (dir. Victor Fleming, 1929)

Discography
Authentic Cowboys and Their Western Songs (RCA LPV-522)
The Cowboy: His Songs, Ballads, and Brag Talk (Folkways FH 5723)
Cowboy Songs Sung by Woody Guthrie and Cisco Houston (Stinson SLP 32)
Gene Autry (Columbia Historic FC 37465)
Michael Martin Murphy: Cowboy Songs (Warner Bros. 9 26308-2)
Roy Rogers (Columbia Historic FC 38907)
The Sons of the Pioneers (John Edwards Memorial Foundation JEMF 102)

"The Cowboy" theme was developed by Dr. William W. Savage, Jr., professor of history at the University of Oklahoma. Development of "The Cowboy" reading and discussion theme and materials was made possible by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.