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TINSTAR AND REDCOAT:  
A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF HISTORY, LITERATURE, AND MOTION  
PICTURES THROUGH THE DRAMATIZATION OF VIOLENCE IN  
THE SETTLEMENT OF THE WESTERN FRONTIER REGIONS  
OF THE UNITED STATES AND CANADA

DISSERTATION

Presented to the Graduate Council of the  
University of North Texas in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

By

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Denton Texas

August, 1999

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The Western settlement era is only one part of United States national history, but for many Americans it remains the most significant cultural influence. Conversely, the settlement of Canada's western territory is generally treated as a significant phase of national development, but not the defining phase. Because both nations view the frontier experience differently, they also have distinct perceptions of the role violence played in the settlement process, distinctions reflected in the historical record, literature, and films of each country.

This study will look at the historical evidence and works of the imagination for both the American and Canadian frontier experience, focusing on the years between 1870 and 1930, and will examine the part that violence played in the development of each national character. The discussion will also illustrate the difference between the historical reality and the mythic version portrayed in popular literature and films by demonstrating the effects of the depiction of violence on the perception of American and Canadian history.

While some film analysis will be used, film criticism is not the focus of this study. Background sources, chosen for material that reflects the historical nature of this work,

are not intended to be seen as the only sources for the interpretation of these films. All the films considered were available in theatrical distribution at the time of their production, or were available to the viewing public on either American or Canadian television or in video format since their original release. Some of the Canadian films, while transferred to a video format, were only available for viewing in the Canadian National Archives.

The idea that the cultural mythologies of the United States and Canada are different is not a new idea. However, an examination of the historical, literary, and cinematic products of each country can help the reader to understand the unique qualities of both.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION:

#### VIOLENT EXPECTATIONS

The western settlement experience is only one part of United States national history, but for many Americans it is the only significant experience and has become our national creation myth.<sup>1</sup> One problem with defining American history by western settlement is that the West was never specific to either a location or a time period.<sup>2</sup> The idea of the West, however, has been so closely tied to the ideal of what it is to be an American that the distinction between the myth of the West and the reality of the West has frequently been disregarded. According to Western historian Patricia Nelson Limerick the fictitious tale of frontier conquest “bears little resemblance to the events of the Western past. The myth has the undeniable charm of simplicity. Simplicity, alas, is the one quality that cannot be found in the actual story of the American west.”<sup>3</sup>

Even though the historical facts of the American western frontier settlement narrative have been fairly well documented in eyewitness accounts, settler diaries,

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<sup>1</sup> Patricia Nelson Limerick, The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1987), 322-23.

<sup>2</sup> Gerald Nash, Creating the West: Historical Interpretations, 1890-1990 (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1990), vii. In this discussion the term American will refer to the United States and Canadian to Canada.

<sup>3</sup> Limerick, 323.

government reports, tax records, and other surviving documents, they have been at times ignored or confused with sensational Western fiction. Occasionally the facts and the fable coincided, but more often than not people have preferred the imaginative story at the expense of the factual history, burying the reality of an event in a more popular, but fictitious, version.

The driving force in Canadian history seemed to be the search for a unified nationhood, because national culture, not western environment, seemed to be the determining factor in shaping the nation. As Canadian critic Kieran Keohone observed, Canadian national identity is often defined in terms of antagonistic relationships with other identities. "The identity 'Canadian' is given by the ways in which it is 'not-like-the-U.S.'"<sup>4</sup> The settlement of Canada's western territory was generally treated as a significant phase of that search, but not the defining phase.<sup>5</sup>

The United States and Canada both settled large areas of land with similar topography and climate, but while they share a border, they do not necessarily share a historical myth. True, both countries cover most of the North American continent, and both countries developed their far western territories in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Even though there was, and still is, a strong French influence in Canada, for the most part both nations speak the same language, and both had England as a common starting point for governmental and cultural systems. This seems to be where

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<sup>4</sup> Kieran Keohone, "Symptoms of Canada: National Identity and the Theft of National Enjoyment," *Cineaction* 28 Spring, 1992:21-22.

<sup>5</sup> Nash, 52, 57, 139.

the similarities end. The concept of a national pattern of violence is not a trait shared by both countries, and the literature and films of each country reflect this difference.

This study looks at both the historical evidence of frontier settlement from 1870 to 1930 and works of the imagination using the same events produced during and after that time period for both the United States and Canada, and focuses on the idea that physical violence was an integral part of the settlement process. To examine the history, this work will use sources that detail how each country extended its version of civilization into the wilderness and how each confronted violence and kept order during the era of western expansion. To discuss the role of popular culture, the work examines works of western literature, feature films, and television film productions of both countries that depict the violence that became synonymous with the western settlement of the North American frontier areas.

The American and Canadian literary works were chosen because their stories reflected the historical events of western settlement and were also used as the plots of motion pictures. One reason cinema was able to use the narratives of historical events so successfully may lie in the relationship between them identified by film professor Fatimah Tobing Rony. She maintained that cinema functioned as a kind of time machine and that it “appeared to bring the past and that which is culturally distant closer.”<sup>6</sup> In an effort to understand one type of popular culture influence on history, the major focus for this study will be to discuss how films portrayed historical subject matter with emphasis on the

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<sup>6</sup> Fatimah Tobing Rony, The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 9.



depiction of violence as an integral part of their stories.

To accomplish this goal a variety of critical options will be utilized. For some films an analysis of the elements of the western genre will be the most obvious point of evaluation, but for others a plot analysis will be the most beneficial to show the influence of violence within the movie. Along with these critical points of view, some films may be discussed in terms of political or auteur criticism especially when the film inspired these types of criticism when they were first exhibited. All of the films will be subjected to what professor of film studies at the University of Colorado Bruce F. Kawin calls a close reading. He defines a close reading as looking at the visual elements that appear on the screen to determine “how the movie, as a discourse, proceeds and succeeds; not just what it does right, but what it does; how a film ‘works.’”<sup>7</sup>

Background sources for film analysis were chosen for material that primarily reflect the historical nature of this work and were not intended to be considered as the only sources for the interpretation of these films. An added criterion for initial film selection was that all films included in this discussion had to have been available in theatrical distribution at the time of their production. Many of the films have been available to the viewing public on either American or Canadian television or on video format since their original release. All of the American films chosen were available for viewing outside of archives and libraries. However, some of the Canadian films, even though transferred to a video format, were only available for viewing in the Canadian

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<sup>7</sup> Bruce F. Kawin, How Movies Work (New York: Macmillan Publishing company, 1987), 37.

National Archives.

Some of the films included in this study are familiar titles in the western genre canon and have been studied and evaluated extensively, while other films included are extremely obscure; nevertheless, their narratives make them important to this discussion. The primary critical strategies outlined above will be applied to the selected films listed below that depict actual historical events or frontier themes as examples of the following six classifications of violence: 1. military settlement of the West, or violence as a national policy, the story of civilization versus resistant natives; 2. Western expansion and transportation, or violence and the machine, the story of western railroad building; 3. exploitation of the land, or violence and the mining west story; 4. Western geography, violence and the environment, or the man or woman against nature story; 5. the hero at home on the range, violence and the cowboy hero versus the outlaw story; 6. Western law and order, violence and the law, or maintaining order in the town story, with a lone marshal, or Mountie, or righteous gunman as hero.

One of the most enduring episodes of the American Indian-Army wars of the 1870s and 1880s was the Battle of the Little Big Horn, also known as Custer's Last Stand. The three films used to examine the events surrounding the battle were They Died With Their Boots On (1942), Little Big Man (1970), and Son of the Morning Star (1991). Produced in three different eras, each film presented the overall story from a different point of view. Each film reflects not only the elements of the history, but the sensibilities of the era in which each was produced. The Canadian historical equivalent of the Custer

Story was the Riel Rebellions of 1869-1870 and 1885. The Canadian film Riel, produced and released in 1979, depicts the events of the rebellions in a film style somewhat different from the American produced Northwest Mounted Police (1940), a film that uses the rebellions as a plot device.

Films about railroad building in the West explore the story of expansion and the development of modern transportation systems. Films that depicted this endeavor include those from several different time periods, beginning with the a milestone in film history, The Great Train Robbery (1903). Other early films, John Ford's The Iron Horse (1924) and Cecil B. DeMille's Union Pacific(1939), depict the multitude of problems involved in railroad building. Whispering Smith (1948) focuses on the importance of the railroad to the economy and stability of western towns and the violence surrounding maintaining the balance. The Canadian production The National Dream (1975) depicted the problems encountered by the Canadian railroad construction project in Canadian terms, while Canadian Pacific (1949) rewrote the history to resemble more closely the United States transcontinental railroad experience. The Grey Fox (1982), a joint Canadian-American film that depicted the same type of violence as The Great Train Robbery, did so in a subdued presentation.

Call of the Wild (1903) and The Spoilers (1906) were two novels that inspired several cinematic versions of the stories about the exploitation of western lands and the violence surrounding prospecting and western mining. Both novels were filmed at least four times. I chose the film versions of the two novels by what was available for viewing.

I was able to view the 1972 film version of Call of the Wild and the 1942 version of The Spoilers. Other films viewed for this section included a number of so-called Victoria Quickies, rapidly filmed Canadian quota films produced in makeshift studios in Victoria, British Columbia, in the 1930s.<sup>8</sup> Many of these quota films used mining as the basis for their plot narratives.

A major factor in the settlement of the western frontier lands of both countries was the land itself. Violence and the environment, or men and women against nature stories, both historical and imaginative, provided some compelling Western narratives. Two stories of survival, one from the United States and one from Canada, were successful as literary and cinematic efforts. The Wind (1928), a silent film version of Dorothy Scarborough's novel about an eastern woman who is driven mad by the West Texas wind, presented a stark picture of frontier life. The Canadian film, Silence of the North (1982), based on Olive Frederickson's autobiographical saga of her adventures in Alberta and British Columbia from 1917 to the 1930s, presented a more positive account of survival in the frontier.

When most people think of western history books, novel, or movies they think of the cowboy. Owen Wister's The Virginian (1902) and Jack Shaefer's Shane (1949), two of the most famous cowboy novels, became successful cinematic productions as well. The Virginian was filmed four times; beginning with a Cecil B. DeMille silent film in 1914,

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<sup>8</sup> The "Victoria Quickies" were films hurriedly produced in make-shift studios in Victoria, British Columbia, to fill the requirements of 1930s Canadian film laws that mandated that a certain percentage of film exhibited in Canadian theaters had to be produced and filmed in Canada.

followed in 1923 by silent version directed by Tom Furman, in 1929 by one of the first talking westerns, and finally in 1946 by a version with sound and color. All of the cinematic versions retained the major elements of the novel: Civil War veteran goes to the West to start a new life, becomes a successful rancher, defeats the villain, and marries the eastern school marm. The film version of Shane, released in 1953, told the story of a gunman who tries unsuccessfully to hang up his guns and become a rancher. To defend his newfound friends and their land, he is forced back into his role as gunfighter. He defeats the villain, but leaves the civilized community for the lonely wildness of the frontier.

The Canadian popular culture did not venerate the cowboy as American culture did. When a Canadian filmmaker tried to pretend that the difference between the American and Canadian cultural icons did not matter the result was an awkward film such as The Last Gunfighter (1959). The defining image of Canadian tended to reflect the myth of the garden more than the myth of the frontier.<sup>9</sup> The Canadian National Film Board's production Drylanders (1963) tells the story of a farming family's struggle to survive on the Canadian prairie and reflects the Canadian image pioneering.

The last section of this work examines historical events and films that depict the

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<sup>9</sup> The myth of the frontier refers to the idea that the western wilderness was a place that challenged the individual and that the resulting struggle gave rise to a new breed of settler. The consequences of this struggle gave rise to a parallel myth, the myth of the garden. Under this second myth the tamed wilderness became a garden, an idyllic Eden in the West. See Henry Nash Smith, Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970) for a discussion of these myths.

individual and the solitary nature of the American concept of Western law and order, contrasting it against the collective Canadian official response to lawlessness and disorder. The three American films critically analyzed in the narrative reflect three different decades and approaches to the subject. High Noon (1952) tells the story of one man who must defend his town against four gunmen, even though the townspeople urge him to run away. The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance (1962) is a look at what happens to an inexperienced Easterner when he comes West and accidentally becomes a hero when the townspeople think he has killed the town bully. Unforgiven (1992) is an uncompromising and more contemporary look at a retired gunfighter who straps his guns back on to collect a bounty for avenging the mutilation of a prostitute. Nearly every element of this film slightly skews the comfortable elements of the western formula.

The Royal Northwest Mounted Police, not the lone marshal, sheriff, or contract gunman, represented an ideal image of Western Canadian law and order. Dan Candy's Law (also known as Alien Thunder) (1974) was a Canadian production that presented the story of a Mountie and how he got his man. Visually and thematically, this film differs from either the American marshal story or American-produced films that depict the Mounties. Three American-produced films that used the Northwest Mounted Police and Canadian history as plot elements illustrate the contrast. The films are Northwest Mounted Police (1940), an historically inaccurate look at the Riel Rebellion and the newly formed Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP); Pony Soldier (1952), a film that depicts the power of the police force over the native Indians by focusing on a Mountie

who single-handedly stops an Indian uprising; and finally Saskatchewan (1954), which takes place just after Custer's massacre in the United States and shows how one lone Mountie can convince the Sioux to return to Montana and the Cree not to go on the warpath.

Each of the films chosen for this study depicted various historical and cinematic aspects of the six classifications of violence I identified for my discussion. In some cases, they were films that many film historians include in their studies, in others, they were not. One may also argue that there were other films that could have been used in the study, but an added criterion, that the films be easily accessible for viewing, limited some choices. Although the idea that the cultural mythologies of the United States and Canada are different is not new, an analysis of the historical, literary, and cinematic products of each country can help the reader to understand the unique qualities of both.

## CHAPTER 2

### REAL, READ, AND REEL HISTORY:

#### A FORMULA FOR VIOLENCE

Nations may try to rehabilitate their past in the writing of their history. Often they artificially reconstruct past events rather than faithfully document them in an effort to mold their present.<sup>1</sup> The nation's founders probably did not have the frontier in mind when they talked about the defining characteristics of American society. Thomas Jefferson and others of the eighteenth century championed freedom and republicanism as the hallmarks of America, while the nineteenth century thinkers stressed immigrant assimilation, technological innovation, or business acumen as the defining elements of the culture. Overshadowing both of these explanations is the notion that the pull of the vacant continent shaped American life and character.<sup>2</sup>

The relationship between the American character and the North American environment gained a voice and historical relevance in 1893 when historian Frederick Jackson Turner delivered his now famous paper entitled "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." Turner's genius lay in taking a major American myth and making it

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Kammen, Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Henry Nash Smith, Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950, 1970), 3.



effective history.<sup>3</sup> In a sense Turner legitimized the existence of the Western myth when he declared that “the existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development.”<sup>4</sup> Under Turner’s model of American expansion the wilderness often defeated the new colonists, but the confrontation eventually resulted in the creation of a new breed of settler, the American. His historical and economic model was important because people believed in it and acted upon that belief, not because it was accurate. The primary concern for the American was the potential for a confrontation with the wilderness and the necessity for a battle with nature.<sup>5</sup>

Man’s confrontation with the frontier was only one aspect of American mythology; the consequences of this struggle gave rise to a parallel myth, the myth of the garden. Under this second myth the tamed wilderness became a garden, an idyllic Eden in the West. The garden, not the farm, became the dominant image in Western land advertisements. Aimed at new immigrants, these promotions showed only the positive pictures of plenty and, for the most part, denied the reality of life on the Western plains.

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<sup>3</sup> Warren I. Susman, Culture as History, The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 17.

<sup>4</sup> Frederick Jackson Turner as quoted in, The Frontier Thesis: Valid Interpretation of American History?, ed. Ray Allen Billington (Huntington: Robert E. Krieger Publishing Corp., 1977), 9.

<sup>5</sup> Frederick Jackson Turner, History, Frontier and Section, Three Essays by Frederick Jackson Turner, introduction by Martin Ridge, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1993), 61. Several historians have disagreed with Turner’s thesis; among them are George Peirson, Fred A. Shannon, Benjamin F. Wright, and John D. Barnhart. Reprints of parts of their rebuttal can be found in Billington’s essay collection cited above. Smith, Virgin Land, 260. Smith concludes his book with an observation on the agrarian ideal and the problem it created for American historiography.

The myth of the garden allowed prospective pioneers to ignore the possibility of hard work. The Western Eden was not a means of subsistence, but rather an idealistic concept of the relationship between man and nature. The basic flaw in this mythic characterization lay in the very concept of the garden. A garden is a place of static beauty, cultivated to be pleasing to the eye, but the farm is a place of work. The real confrontation between settler and the wilderness took place out on a frontier farmstead not in a garden. Because the farm was not aesthetically pleasing, farm and the farmer, which were directly related to the country's economic system, had to be transformed into something more poetic. In literature, at least, the farm, now garden, was raised above the mundane to become the epitome of the hopes and dreams of those who identified with this version of the Western myth.

Next the myth needed a hero. The trapper was too exotic, the mountain man too isolated, and the farmer too fundamentally a dull drudge. None of these characters was a satisfying hero. The figure who rose to fill the role was the fictional cowboy. He was daring, competent in the wilderness, exotically exciting, and also part civilized; but above all, he really did not have to work. As Robert Warshow noted, he was "par excellence a man of leisure."<sup>6</sup> The cowboy could appear to be employed without having to engage in physical labor, thus leaving him free to pursue his mythic occupations. The American mythic hero was not superhuman or a demigod like his European predecessors. He was a practical hero who could fix things without the necessity of an extensive education. He

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<sup>6</sup> Robert Warshow, The Immediate Experience (Garden City: Anchor Books, Doubleday Co., 1946/1964), 92.

could hold other occupations if necessary, but somewhere in his past he was just a cowboy. He was a hero who could bridge the gap between the wilderness and civilization. So closely tied to the wilderness was the American hero that he seemed to merge with it, and this synthesis personified the American myth.

The American frontier myth was, and in many ways still is, a myth of attitude as well as location, a myth that colored not only what Americans think about themselves but how they measured their worth. The determining influence on American culture seemed to be the relationship between man and nature, or rather, even more specifically, between American man and the American West.<sup>7</sup>

Turner told Americans that they counted their cultural worth by their success in taming the West. He also told them that the line between the frontier and civilization was gone, at least by the reckoning of the 1890 United States Census Superintendent, and his audience mourned the passing of that vital part of American development. As writer Frank Norris wrote in 1902, "We liked the Frontier; it was romance, the place of poetry of the Great March, the firing line where there was action and fighting, and where men held each other's lives in the crook of a forefinger. . . . So, lament it though we may, the Frontier is gone."<sup>8</sup>

In reality , there was still plenty of unsettled land in the West in 1890, but the mythic appeal of the West was stronger, and was kept alive in the public's hearts and

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<sup>7</sup> Smith, Virgin Land, 187.

<sup>8</sup> Frank Norris, "The Frontier is Gone," World's Work 3 (February, 1902): 1728-29.

minds through art, literature, and ultimately through modern electronic media. From James Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking Tales to contemporary Westerns such as Larry McMurtry's Lonesome Dove, the formulaic Western story of the vibrant and violent frontier became a specialized symbol of the American experience. Understanding the evolution of the Western formula helps to explain the power its metaphor holds for American culture and American history.

The evolution of the Western formula and the American Western myth was a synthetic process that reconciled the romantic conventional myths of Europe to the American experience.<sup>9</sup> The Western formula and its formula hero had their beginnings in the West of colonial New York with James Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking Tales (1823-1841).<sup>10</sup> Cooper created an active hero whose exploits were based on the activities of several real frontier trailblazers. These men acted as agents for the advancement of civilization, scouted the trails, and tamed the wilderness to make it safe for the settlers who would follow them. Historian Daryl Jones lists Daniel Boone as one of the first of these trailblazers to be publicly popularized, and points out that his actual exploits were almost as spectacular as his fictionalized ones.<sup>11</sup> Boone was an acceptable hero because

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<sup>9</sup> Richard Slotkin, Regeneration Through Violence (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), 17.

<sup>10</sup> John Cawelti, The Six-Gun Mystique (Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Popular Press, n.d.), 34. The Leatherstocking Tales series consisted of five books published between 1823 and 1841: The Pioneers, The Last of the Mohicans, The Prairie, The Pathfinder, and The Deerslayer, which follow the life of the frontier hero Natty Bumppo.

<sup>11</sup> Daryl Jones, The Dime Novel Western (Bowling Green: The Popular Press, 1978), 33.

he was a combination of the civilized white man and the forest-wise savage. Depicted as a man who was as at home in the forest as an Indian, he was also genteel enough to be invited to a formal dinner party.<sup>12</sup> As the protagonist in John Filson's book entitled The Discovery, Settlement, and Present State of Kentucke[sic] (1784), Boone faced the ultimate challenge of the Western hero: whether or not to embrace savagery. Like the heroes to follow, Boone masters the technique of living on the frontier without losing his white social values or Christian religious ideals.<sup>13</sup>

In the early nineteenth century, Davy Crockett succeeded Boone as the prototype of the Western hero. He was characterized in fictional accounts as half-horse and half-alligator.<sup>14</sup> Equally at home in the woods as Boone, Crockett was reputed have "killed him a b'ar when he was only three."<sup>15</sup> A Narrative of the Life of Col. David Crockett (1834), documented his exploits and chronicled his rise from poor frontier lawyer to war hero, politician, and successful hunter. Crockett and his heroic image were immortalized by his death in the final attack on the Alamo (San Antonio, Texas) in 1836.<sup>16</sup> By the middle of the nineteenth century, Boone, Crockett, and other trailblazers like them provided the basis for a significant body of popular fiction about the West and a model for

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<sup>12</sup> Russel Nye, The Unembarrassed Muse (New York: The Dial Press, 1970), 281-283.

<sup>13</sup> Slotkin, Regeneration, 286-287.

<sup>14</sup> Jones, Dime Novel, 36.

<sup>15</sup> "The Ballad of Davy Crockett" lyrics by Tom Blackburn, music by George Burns (1955).

<sup>16</sup> So much mythology has been build around the defense of the Alamo that it is difficult to ascertain all of the facts about Crockett's part in that confrontation.

its hero.<sup>17</sup> In the Leatherstocking Tales, Cooper took the strengths of the romantic frontiersmen and began to fashion the formula Western hero. The formula Western hero who descended from Cooper's woodsman operated in plots that expressed simple virtues backed by swift and direct action. The theme of these plots was the embodiment of the primitive, nationalistic aspirations of the American people.<sup>18</sup>

The success of Cooper's stories led to imitators who were primarily concerned with the more sensational aspects of the Western experience. Cooper's Western hero and his plots were used as the basis for many of the Dime Novels published in the late nineteenth century. These books were read avidly by both Eastern Americans fascinated with the West and by prospective immigrants who thought they were learning how things would be for them when they went West. These lurid tales had little in common with the Leatherstocking series except the Western action and the Western setting. However tawdry most of the novels were, the Dime Novels did make a contribution to the body of Western literature and to a general interest in the West itself.

The Beadle and Adams publishing company printed the first of these action stories in the 1860s.<sup>19</sup> The rousing adventures of such heroes and heroines as Seth Jones, Deadwood Dick, Calamity Jane, and Hurricane Nell titillated, fascinated, and tantalized Eastern American readers. With stories designed to excite and entertain the reader, not to

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<sup>17</sup> Nye, Muse, 283.

<sup>18</sup> John Williams, "The Western: Definition of the Myth," The Nation, 11 November 1961, 404.

<sup>19</sup> Smith, Virgin Land, chapters IX and X, pages 90-120 deal with the development of the Dime Novel.

teach him history, the writers sometimes went to fantastic lengths to justify what the main character could accomplish. For example: Edward L. Wheeler's Deadwood Dick, a deadly shot, skilled horseman, master of disguise, and expert tracker could evade pursuit and track down villains because he was funded by the income from his personal gold mine.<sup>20</sup> Many Dime Novel heroes were characterized as social outcasts who were set against society in revenge stories. The Dime Novel characters became highly stylized and easily recognized. Characters such as the resourceful scout, the two-gun sheriff, the murderous Indian, the deceitful Mexican, the gallant outlaw, the humorous old trapper/pro prospector, and the hanging judge were some of the stock images who became the heroes and villains of the formula Westerns that followed. Louis Nye argued that the Dime Novel had a denigrating effect on Western literature. "The trouble," he asserted, "was that the dime-novel writers never took the West seriously; the flood of cheap fiction they poured out simply inundated and invalidated any meaning implicit in the Western experience."<sup>21</sup> Few of the authors who wrote for Beadle had accurate knowledge of the West or bothered to investigate. As a consequence, they presented a patently false portrait of the West, which remained fixed in the public mind.

Not all of the early Western writers who followed Cooper were hacks. There were some serious writers who lived and traveled in the West and used their actual experiences as the basis for their writing. Works such as Bret Harte's "Luck of the Roaring Camp" (1870), Mark Twain's Roughing It (1871), and O. Henry's Heart of the West (1907) were

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<sup>20</sup> Jones, Dime Novels, 76.

<sup>21</sup> Nye, Muse, 286.

written by men who were knowledgeable about the West and who tried to present an artistically accurate picture of the land and the people.<sup>22</sup>

By the early 1900s the sensational frontier heroes of the Beadle Westerns were beginning to lose their appeal and a new hero rose to take their place, the cowboy. Historically, the actual era of the cowboy was short. It dates from the early cattle drives of the late 1860s to the 1880s when a combination of elements including overgrazing the land, decimation of the herds by blizzard and drought, barbed wire fencing of the open ranges, and the completion of the transcontinental railroads made the drives obsolete. But the roughly twenty-year period was long enough to provide a useful fictional myth, and to give birth to a new American hero.<sup>23</sup>

Owen Wister's The Virginian (1902) provided the first popular literary cowboy hero and changed the form of the Western novel. To the basic Western formula, formed from the Leatherstocking series and Dime Novels, Wister added two lasting features: the serious cowboy hero and romantic love. Wister considered the cowboy to be the "last of the freedom-loving Americans," and from this idealistic conception he fashioned the modern Western hero.<sup>24</sup> In works after The Virginian, one could physically recognize the cowboy because he always wore dusty dungarees, a dark shirt, a wide-brimmed hat, a six-shooter at his hip, and sat astride a horse. Philosophically, one could recognize the cowboy hero because he was always truthful, brave, honest, merciful, a believer in clean

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 287.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 288.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 288, 290-291.



living, fun loving, a restorer of order, a righter of wrongs, and above all democratic and individualistic.

The success of The Virginian encouraged other writers to follow Wister's example. Some of the works produced in the early twentieth century were artistic fiction, others were pulp similar to the earlier mass-market Dime Novels. Of the early pulp fiction writers, Zane Grey probably had the most influence on the Western formula destined to be portrayed in a new entertainment media form, motion pictures. As Louis Nye noted, "Wister introduced love to the Western. Grey introduced sex, good and bad."<sup>25</sup> The mass-market writers of the 1930s and 1940s, such as Max Brand (Destry Rides Again, 1930), Ernest Haycox (Man in the Saddle, 1938), Luke Short, (Ride the Man Down, 1942), and Frank Gruber (Broken Lance, 1949), refined the Western formula into its present form.<sup>26</sup>

The one element included in all of the retellings, literary and later cinematic, was violence: according to literature and motion pictures, the West was won through violence--physical violence, of the people, by the people, against the people. According to Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary, violence is defined as "[1] an exertion of physical force to injure or abuse; [2] injury by or as if by distortion, infringement or profanation; [3] intense turbulent, or furious often destructive action or force."<sup>27</sup> The subject of violence is ever present in American history, but the nature and scope of it has

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 291, 496.

<sup>26</sup> Cawelti, Six-Gun, 99-100.

<sup>27</sup> Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary (Springfield: G.&C. Merriam Company, Publishers, 1967), 993.

at times been questioned. Violence could be overt, as a slap-in-the-face or a fist-fight, or it could be implied and indirect as a threatening look or a hostile verbal exchange. In most western literature and films the violence depicted was usually overt and extremely physical. Richard Hofstadter argued that Americans have a history of violence because it has been frequent and commonplace. But, he maintained, that history of violence did not translate into a tradition of violence because American violence lacked “both an ideological and a geographical center; it lack[ed] cohesion; it had been too various, diffuse, and spontaneous to be forged into a single, sustained, inveterate hatred shared by entire social classes.”<sup>28</sup> A second reason Hofstadter believed that Americans have no tradition of violence he called our “national amnesia,” or the tendency to forget the excesses of violence and consign it to the distant past.<sup>29</sup>

While stories about Western settlement were closely associated with violence, and that settlement was often a violent activity, it was also true that Eastern American society during that part of the nineteenth century was equally as violent. The urban historian Richard Wade (Violence in the Cities: A Historical View, 1969) and Southern historian John Hope Franklin (The Militant South, 1956) both pointed to widespread use of violence in areas other than the Western frontier. According to these historians, during the last half of the nineteenth century every major American city endured several major riots, and in the South the public use of firearms, dueling, vigilante groups, and public

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<sup>28</sup> Richard Hofstadter, American Violence: A Documentary History, ed. Richard Hofstadter and Michael Wallace (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970), 3.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

lynchings were common at the same time that the Western frontier was experiencing its most violent period.<sup>30</sup>

The American Civil War called into question the sacred ideals of freedom and equality and challenged not only the political assumptions of the nation but the moral ones as well. At the end of the Civil War, the nation saw the rise of industrialism, the growth of labor unions, a widening in social classes, and a growing fear of new foreigners in the East, along with the renewal of brutal Indian wars in the West. In the effort to rebuild and mend the fractured nation, people valued physical courage and boldness, two virtues often closely associated with war and violence. The reality of the West was difficult land conditions, hard work, and frequent failure. The myth of the West was free land, lack of restrictions, and the unlimited opportunity for success through violent adventure. It was hardly surprising that people chose the myth over reality. Historian W. Eugene Hollon believed that: "Westerners themselves must share much of the blame for the image that the frontier came to represent. They have emphasized the more bizarre events, and they have developed a talent for taking something small and blowing it up to giant size. . . . The general public expected the frontier to be violent and would not have it any other way."<sup>31</sup>

One explanation for the American image as a violent people could be related to our continuing national love affair with the gun. There is really no historical reason for our

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<sup>30</sup> W. Eugene Hollon, Frontier Violence, Another Look (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 194.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 194-195, 197.

national support of outmoded gun control laws.<sup>32</sup> The statistics regarding gun violence point to the consequences. As a cause of injury-related death in the United States, firearm violence is second only to automobile-related fatalities, and this type of violence seems to be increasing.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, the statistics seem to disprove the claim that American gun violence is wholly a result of our frontier history, because other countries with a frontier past that established strict gun control laws only have experienced limited numbers of handgun murders. For example, in 1992 handguns were used to murder 128 people in Canada and 13 in Australia, while 13,495 were killed by handguns in the United States.<sup>34</sup> Like it or not, Americans developed, and then kept, a dependence on the gun to solve problems of order or disorder in their communities, a mentality that is without parallel among other industrialized nations.<sup>35</sup> Consequently, American cultural images that have been translated so often in literature and in cinema have tended to focus on Western violence and the gun. Other genre literature and films such as detective and science fiction stories used these same violent images. This focus is partly responsible for the way in which many Americans view their history. The reality of the western settlement was that it was both less violent or more violent than the movies portrayed it depending on the time frame, and the violence probably had more to do with the people involved than with the

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<sup>32</sup> Hofstadter, American Violence, 5.

<sup>33</sup> Centers for Disease Control (CDC), "Deaths resulting from firearm and motor vehicle related injuries: United States, 1968-1991," Mortality and Morbidity Weekly Report 4 (1994): 37-42.

<sup>34</sup> Violence Related Statistics and Facts, <http://www.inetwave.com/stv/stats/html#canada>, Source: Embassies & Foreign crime reporting agencies, FBI uniform crime reports, center to prevent handgun violence.

<sup>35</sup> Hollon, Frontier Violence, 106.

location.<sup>36</sup> As prominent as the image of western violence has been, the reality is that “America[n] violence has traditionally been an urban rather than a frontier problem,” according to the report of the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence (1969).<sup>37</sup> Having a frontier history is not the only national trigger for violent behavior. During our national history only a small portion of the total American population has ever been on a frontier, and a comparison of the American, Canadian and Australian frontiers seems to refute the notion that a long frontier history automatically produces patterns of violence.<sup>38</sup>

The perception of a national pattern of violence is not a trait shared by the United States and Canada, and the differences are reflected in their histories, literature, and films. Canada has resisted the appeal of the gun and views its cultural and historical development differently from its southern neighbor. But, just as there is no one definitive explanation for United States culture and history, neither is there a monolithic view of Canadian development.

Canadian historian Vernon Fowke took an economic and regional approach when he compared the two nations. While he found some points of similarity, he concluded that different cultural values and the apparent absence of sectionalism in Canada differentiated their development patterns.<sup>39</sup> Some of his contemporary Canadian historians disagreed

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<sup>36</sup> Hofstadter, American Violence, 35.

<sup>37</sup> Hollon, Frontier Violence, 194.

<sup>38</sup> Hofstadter, American Violence, 11-12.

<sup>39</sup> Vernon C. Fowke, “National Policy and Westward Development in North America,” Journal of Economic History 16 December 1956: 461.

that Canada was free of sectionalism. One of the major obstructions to Confederation was the feeling that the English Canadians of Lower Canada would overwhelm the French Canadians of Quebec and that both would ignore the needs of the West. In Canada, sectionalism tended to be more cultural and political, than merely geographical, but it had economic overtones as well. Colonial discontent had not been resolved by Confederation. It was still a factor in national economic uncertainties in the 1880s and 1890s. Most of these concerns centered on the shrinking Western population figures. From 1871 to 1891 more people left western Canada, mostly for the United States, than arrived there as settlers.<sup>40</sup>

One historian, Seymour Lipset, attributed the differences between the two countries to cultural differences in the settlement pattern. Lipset found that the Canadians felt that they had to be ever vigilant against American incursions, and could therefore not leave their western land unprotected or self-governing. By 1850 the established national expansion practice was first to establish law and order, and then allow settlement. As a consequence, according to Lipset, Canada had no history of vigilantism and little Indian warfare. This settlement pattern did not rely on the individualism of its settlers; in fact individualism was discouraged.<sup>41</sup> There was neither a revolutionary tradition, nor a civil war in Canada that could produce the national heroes such as the Americans had. As Andrew Malcolm noted, "Possibly the only 'hero' of national stature most Canadians might know is Louis Riel, an Indian half-breed whose late-nineteenth century western

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<sup>40</sup> Barry Gough, Canada (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1975), 96-97.

<sup>41</sup> Seymour Lipset as cited in Gerald Nash, Creating the West, 139.

rebellion actually symbolized the bitter French-English linguistic divisions that still plague Canada. He was hanged."<sup>42</sup>

Most historians would agree that variances exist in the settlement patterns of the United States and Canada, differences that affect the way both countries look at their past. To illustrate these contrasts Canadian historian Carl Berger pointed to fundamental character distinctions between the two Anglo North American neighbors. Canadians, he asserted, were blinded by a belief in the superiority of British institutions that assumed that life in Canada was more orderly than in the United States. He further maintained that Canadians also labored under the dubious belief that French and English Canadians had traditionally treated each other with toleration, compromise, and conciliation.<sup>43</sup>

Some Canadian historians viewed the settlement of Canada's western territory as physical expansion spurred on by modern industrialism.<sup>44</sup> Others argued that characterizing the Canadian western experience in terms of production was too limiting. Historian William Morton, for example, believed that the history of western Canada transcended its mere commercial value.<sup>45</sup> The Canadian frontier experience seemed to place greater emphasis on the practicalities of settlement and order than on the more appealing mythic saga of taming the wilderness. A nineteenth-century land promoter asserted that:

The law abiding condition of the Canadian Territories has been from first to

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<sup>42</sup> Andrew H. Malcolm, The Canadians (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), 57.

<sup>43</sup> Carl Berger, The Writing of Canadian History: Aspects of English-Canadian Historical Writing 1890-1970 (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1976), 63.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 242.

last a familiar and highly credible feature in their history. It is a fact that life and property are safer there than in any portion of the United States or the eastern Provinces of the Dominion. . . . Crimes against the person are almost unknown, and in one, at least, of the Territories, murder has never been committed.<sup>46</sup>

Taking a more practical point of view, western land promoter A.J. Cotton encouraged Canadian pioneers to remember that settlement was hard unglamorous work:

You cannot be promised ease or luxury. There will be a certain amount of hardship to endure, obstacles to contend with, and privations to overcome. Your first four years would be your greatest worry. After that you would be in shape to go ahead. Of course, the more capital you put into it, the easier you can get through.<sup>47</sup>

Few, if any, advertisements for American land opportunities would have been phrased in those terms; they would have been much more optimistic. Northrop Frye points to the differences in cultural optimism between the two nations when he observed that Americans are conditioned "to think of themselves as citizens of one of the world's greatest powers. Canadians are conditioned from infancy to think of themselves as citizens of a country of uncertain identity, a confusing past and a hazardous future."<sup>48</sup>

Seldom in the Canadian picture of settlement as hard work is there an image that overcoming the obstacles must be violent work; for as Canadian George Denison proclaimed: "From British Columbia to Cape Breton we, Canadians, can proudly point to one of the largest and finest countries in the world, with as well-behaved and law-abiding

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<sup>46</sup> Homes for the Millions, The Great Canadian North-West, ed. N.F. Davin, (Ottawa: 1891), 18, 19.

<sup>47</sup> A.J. Cotton as quoted in J. M. Bumstead, The Peoples of Canada: A Post-Confederation History (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1992), 115.

<sup>48</sup> Northrop Frye, "Thoughts of a Great Scholar," Maclean's 5 April 1982: 43.



a population as can be found anywhere, while south of us, the lawlessness is wide-spread, and crimes of violence almost without number.’<sup>49</sup> What people say they believe and the reality of the situation is often different. In a 1993 General Social Survey poll, over one-quarter of Canadians who responded indicated that they did not feel safe. The same survey revealed that while the perception of personal danger had increased the actual numbers of violent incidences had not increased in over five years. Non-violent property offenses accounted for 53 percent of Canadian crime, while violent crimes equaled only 10 percent of the total offenses committed in 1993.<sup>50</sup> Images of violence do exist in Canadian media, and politically funded polls indicate that Canadian parents are worried about the effects of violent media programming on their children. The national response seems to rely on the ability of the government to regulate Canadian media and to control those images coming from American television and films. According to the Liberal Party’s Red Book, Canadians like to believe that they live in a country where they do not have to worry about their personal safety. Canadians reported that they considered the non-violent character of Canada to be one of the distinguishing features of Canadian identity.<sup>51</sup>

While the argument has raged over a definition of national culture in Canadian academia, popular culture, both in Canada and the United States, have muddied the issues.

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<sup>49</sup> George T. Denison, Centennial of the Settlement of Upper Canada by the United Empire Loyalists (Toronto: n.p., 1880), I, iii.

<sup>50</sup> Bureau of Justice, Statistic Canada, 1997, <http://132.204.132.161/Publications/Prevention/english/02.html#crime>.

<sup>51</sup> “Violence in Canadian Society,” Liberal Party of Canada Red Book (Ottawa: Liberal Party, 1996), 84. The Red Book is the official party publication detailing party goals and positions.

Unfortunately for Canada, the western myth of the United States crept across the border. In spite of the wealth of written records detailing the settlement process, the American mythic West frequently distorted the Canadian images. Historians have often pointed to the Turner thesis when discussing the western development of both countries. Paul Sharp used the Turnerian approach when he compared the two nations and wrote that “the passing of the frontier is seen in a somewhat different perspective when a continental viewpoint is adopted.” He further noted that in Canada “the first two decades of the twentieth century were marked by one of the greatest land rushes in North American history,” a time when over one million Americans poured onto the Canadian prairies. “The last frontier truly, ‘was the Canadian West’ which remained open for ‘nearly three decades after 1890’.”<sup>52</sup>

Most Canadian historians realized Turner’s thesis could only be applied to Canada under selective circumstances, and they believed that their western settlement had been achieved in a more orderly fashion. Proof, they said, lay in the creation of the Royal Northwest Mounted Police and their history of law enforcement on the Saskatchewan Prairies and during the Yukon gold rush.<sup>53</sup> John MacCormac further asserted that: “Canadians are less impulsive than Americans and far less given to violence. The gun on the hip has never been part of Canadian tradition, . . . Canada has hanged rebels but no ‘radicals.’ Relatively few Canadians murder each other and many are hanged when they

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<sup>52</sup> Paul Sharp as quoted in Gerald Nash, Creating the West, 61.

<sup>53</sup> Berger, Writing Canadian History, 119.

do.”<sup>54</sup>

Within the comparative picture of the American and Canadian frontier experience one can discover a uniqueness in their common past, while acknowledging the variances. This comparison will serve to illustrate the difference between historical reality and the mythic version that has been perpetuated by popular culture. It can also demonstrate the effects of the media on the American and Canadian perceptions of their own histories and mythic stories as reflected in western movies. No historian can avoid making comparisons and drawing conclusions as he or she begins to build a picture of the past. The historian's choice of topics often determines the national historical narrative. What a country wants the rest of the world to know generally finds its way into the written historical record, or more often into popular culture. Frederick Jackson Turner is credited with adding a new element to the study of American history, the notion of frontier uniqueness. His thesis encouraged the definition of an American character born out of the vast wilderness space. “Time,” Richard Hofstadter noted, “is the basic dimension of the history, but the basic dimension of the American imagination is space.”<sup>55</sup> So strong is the appeal of the west in terms of mythic images that it still colors much of American popular culture and it does not stop at the border; the frontier myth also captured Canada.

Early in the twentieth century the Western literary formula found a new and potent form of expression, the moving picture. As film historians George Fein and William

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<sup>54</sup> John MacCormac, Canada -- America's Problem (New York: Viking Press, 1940), 154.

<sup>55</sup> Richard Hofstadter, The Progressive Historians, Turner, Beard, Parrington (n.p., 1968), 5.

Everson noted, "American Western literature would have remained confined to limited domains of folklore and narrow literary genre or at best to the specialized field of history if the birth of motion pictures had not exerted the stupendous verdict of their own possibilities."<sup>56</sup> The visual qualities of the Western's setting and constant action demanded by the formula made it a perfect subject for filmmakers. As popular culture critic Tag Gallagher noted : "so popular were Westerns during narrative cinema's formative years (1903-1911) that it may well be that rather than cinema having invented the Western, it was the Western, already long existent in popular culture, that invented the cinema."<sup>57</sup> From Edwin S. Porter's technically crude The Great Train Robbery (1903), to John Ford's classic Stagecoach(1939), to Clint Eastwood's gritty Unforgiven (1992), the Western movie matured into an art form that made full use of the formula and its hero. The history provided the subject matter, and the formula provided the form to transfer the Western movie into a most persistent icon of American culture. Most modern Americans know, or at least they think they know, how the West was won, because of that wealth of popular Western literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the numerous films and television programs that visually and repeatedly reproduced the story.

The technological development of the motion picture occurred about the same time as the final phase of American western frontier settlement. In the United States,

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<sup>56</sup> George N. Fenin and William K. Everson, "The Western From Silents to Cinerama," The American West on Film, ed. Richard Maynard (Rochelle Park: Hayden Book Company, Inc., 1974), 57.

<sup>57</sup> Tag Gallagher, "Shoot-out at the Genre Corral," Film Genre Reader, ed. Barry Keith Grant, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 204.

Thomas Edison, is credited as the inventor of the motion picture projector, but he was not the only man working on the technology. The kinetograph (projector) was really the product of Edison laboratory assistant W. K. L. Dickson. Working along similar lines, in other laboratories, inventors in England, France, Germany, and the Soviet Union added refinements to the basic machine. Competing American researchers, Lee DeForest, Theodore Case, and Herbert Kalmus, also contributed to the technology.<sup>58</sup>

Basically three machines, all created by the 1890s, make cinema possible: the camera, the film printer, and the projector. The basic technology of motion pictures was relatively simple. Film passing through the motion picture camera captured images in rapid succession. The printer converted the processed exposed film into positive images. The projector reversed the process. As the film passed through the projector, the positive print moved past a lens and a light source to project the resulting image onto a screen. The quality of the picture improved with advances in lenses, film stock, and processing emulsions. Special effects, including sound, color, wide-screen, and more recently computer enhancement capabilities, were added to the basic process.

Beginning in 1895, inventors in Thomas Edison's laboratory experimented with sound, but failing to solve the synchronization and amplification problems, they abandoned the project in 1913. It took a collaboration between the Warner Brothers Company and

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<sup>58</sup> Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery, Film History, Theory and Practice (New York: McGraw-Hill Publishing Company, 1985), 111. While numerous sources are available for the history of the development of film technology, this source provides the basic technological information, and general historical background necessary for this discussion.

the American Telephone and Telegraph Company to perfect the sound-on-film system. The first so called talking picture, The Jazz Singer (1927), starring Al Jolson, was a success with audiences. Other film companies also experimented with sound and the success of Jolson's film gave them an economic reason to embrace the technological innovation wholeheartedly. Improved cameras, lighting equipment, and film processing made color films possible by 1936. In 1939 faster and improved film from the Technicolor Corporation made the color image more natural and more popular with audiences.<sup>59</sup>

In 1896 audiences in New York City viewed the first commercially projected film. Initially, the technological wonder was a curiosity; people went to see it because it was new and different. Several small companies filmed and exhibited short, fuzzy, jerky pictures at five cents a view, but the film industry had yet to be created. The freewheeling nature of the nickelodeon era ended around 1908 with the formation of the Motion Picture Patents Company (MPPC).<sup>60</sup> This new organization could control admission prices, quantity of films available for distribution, and exhibition locations. It seemed to give inventor Thomas Edison and others what they craved: control of the patents, but it did not last long. After 1912, trust-busting efforts of the United States government, artistic pressures from producers such as Sigmund Lubin to make longer films, and the market entry of international competitors made the MPPC obsolete. New business combinations that followed it included not only inventors, technicians, and businessmen, but artists who performed before the cameras as well. These included Famous Players-Lasky (later

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 117-121, 127.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 145.

named Paramount), headed by Adolph Zukor, and United Artists, formed by actors Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks, and Charlie Chaplin, and director D.W. Griffith. As the early companies expanded, they not only produced films but also developed distribution outlets by building and operating theaters to exhibit their products. By the 1930s five major corporations, Loews, Inc., Radio-Keith-Orpheum (RKO), Warner Brothers, 20th Century Fox, and Paramount, known as the big five, along with three smaller companies, Columbia, United Artists, and Universal, dominated the production and distribution of American films.<sup>61</sup> Through vertical integration, the major studios controlled all aspects of the industry, production, distribution, and exhibition of motion pictures until forced to divest after 1948.

People did not go to see the movies because they admired the technology or to make the Warner Brothers rich. They went to see a story miraculously unfold before their eyes there in the darkened theater. What was that story? It was the story of people, either doing things the audience did do, wished that it could do, or that it would never do. Often it was the story of Western settlement. The genre's constancy and pliancy were some of the reasons that Western films proved to be profitable for movie makers. As film historian Stephen Neale notes, "genres function to move the subject from text to text and from text to narrative system, binding these instances together into a constant coherence." He goes on to assert that "genres, then, are not systems: they are processes of systematisation [sic]. . . . It is only as such that they can function to provide, simultaneously, both

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 149.

regulation and variety.”<sup>62</sup> The Western genre story was able to change and adapt to meet new attitudes and social conditions as they arose. Westerns could represent the exploration of a variety of social problems: they could fight Communism, protest the Black List, support foreign wars, protest foreign wars, and even be transported into outer space. The Western story remained a dominant subject for films from the 1920s to the 1950s and seemed to give the audiences what they wanted: an escape from disillusioning reality and an appeal to a more comforting and successful past. Most of these Westerns had little to do with historical reality; they offered instead more a mythic interpretation of American expansion. While there are several ways to examine the relationship of the Western and its audience, this study will consider the Western film as the product of a formulaic construction.

A formula could be culturally specific when it depicted stereotypical characters such as the hot-tempered Irishman, the virginal blonde, or the sexy brunette, or it could be a culturally nonspecific theme or plot pattern such as the boy-meets-girl, boy-loses-girl, boy-gets-girl.<sup>63</sup> A formula, considered in a broader context, is an artistic construction whose individual elements are as important as the whole work when they represent the embodiment of specific cultural themes set in terms of universal archetypes.<sup>64</sup> This cultural reference forces the viewer to consider the whole story, but to evaluate it by virtue of its parts. The Western formula’s success in modern American media lies in a

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<sup>62</sup> Stephen Neale, *Genre* (British Film Institute, 1980), 49, 51.

<sup>63</sup> John Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1976), 5.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 6-7, 29.



construction that allows it to be accessible to diverse groups with divergent interests and value systems.<sup>65</sup> Under the formula the Western story uses standard conventions that set up common ground between the creator of the story and the audience. For example, when the viewer sees a man wearing blue jeans, a cotton shirt, wide-brimmed hat, with a gun in a hip-holster, riding a horse into a dusty deserted town followed by a herd of cattle, the viewer knows he is seeing a Western. The repetition of familiar form, or conventions, offer the audience a kind of security, in that they know what to expect from the story. If the hero looks like a cowboy, talks like a cowboy, and acts like a cowboy, then the audience can comfortably assume he is a cowboy. Besides the image of the hero, an essential convention for the Western is the landscape itself. The story is set in and derives meaning from its Western location. Wide-angle shots of vast open prairies with rugged snow-capped mountains in the distance visually identify the film as a Western on the basis of terrain.

Just as the hero and location are vital elements in the American Western formula, so is the plot's narrative. In essence the plot of an American Western is similar to a game with set rules and patterns of action:

1. The story depends on the presence of opposing players, the hero and the good guys versus the villain and the bad guys, and the relationship between these two sides dominate the action. The crisis between the two groups is usually preceded by a series of violent acts. The villain sends the bad guys to beat up the shepherders three different

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 30.

times and then the hero comes to defend them, defeating the villain in a final shoot-out.

2. The story has a pattern of action; that is, it is expected to occur in a certain order, and certain situations are excluded by the rules of the formula. For example, there is a sequence of chase and pursuit that precedes the hero's triumph. The hero tracks the villain and finally defeats him in a shoot-out usually outside of the town.

3. The story depends on a particular setting, much like a playing field. One cannot take the story out of the Western location. The story's action could take place in Virginia City, Nevada, and be an American formula western, but not in New York City.

4. The goal of the story is to resolve the hero's problem, his alienation versus a sense of commitment; this dilemma allows for several possible endings. The hero can stay in the town and become part of the community, or he can ride off into the sunset.

Changes in cultural attitudes are often reflected in the story's ending.<sup>66</sup>

The Western films were so popular, in part, because they offered an outlet for the expression of cultural values that a great many Americans hold dear. The supremacy of the individual, his freedom to rise, his self-reliance, and his capacity for direct action were what many Americans valued in the past and still value today.<sup>67</sup> These were not the only American values depicted in Westerns, but they were relatively important ones. The

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<sup>66</sup> Cawelti, The Six-Gun Mystique, 19-20, 71-72. Cawelti compares formulaic art to games and play.

<sup>67</sup> Ralph Brauer, The Horse, The Gun, and The Piece of Property (Bowling Green: The Popular Press, 1975), 206. Henry Nash Smith, Virgin Land, discusses how the perception of the Western experience affected the way in which Americans saw their country and themselves. He cites Frederick Jackson Turner's Frontier Thesis, and several of Ralph Waldo Emerson's essays in his analysis.

artistic construction of formulaic Western films allowed for this selective portrayal because the formula story did not speak for the entire culture, just for certain aspects of one, or more parts of it. They were about frontier life, wherever the frontier happened to be.<sup>68</sup> Just as the location of the West changed over the years, so did the formulaic portrayal of it. Some observers noted that, to remain effective as a cultural tool, the stereotypes of a formula had to be periodically and culturally renewed with new elements and new facets for old characters.<sup>69</sup>

Unlike oral myths that changed with the retelling because of the fragility of memory, written myths changed when the writer altered them to fit the prevailing fashion.<sup>70</sup> Film functions similarly to literature in terms of mythic retelling. If the stories portrayed in the films are not refreshed, the audience can find them dated and less than satisfying. When the audience no longer finds something satisfying in literature, they do not read it; when films no longer provide a western image that is culturally relevant, they will stop watching. The number of new Westerns produced has declined remarkably since the genre's zenith in the 1950s, but technological advances in the form of the video tape has made the old ones, both well made and mediocre, available to new generations of viewers. From the large screen to the small one the relationship between the elements of the American myth and the symbolic terms of the Western formula worked well. The

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<sup>68</sup> Richard Collins, "Genre: A Reply to Ed Buscombe," Movies and Methods : An Anthology, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1976), 160.

<sup>69</sup> Cawelti, Mystery, 33, 193, 11-12.

<sup>70</sup> Richard Slotkin, Regeneration Through Violence (Middleton: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), 20.

Western provided one of the few forms of American mass fiction suitable for the honest exploration of moral issues and tragic views of the human condition.<sup>71</sup> The relationship between the history of the West and the myth of the West, however, blurred reality for much of the public: historical figures became fictional heroes and movie stars became genuine Westerners.<sup>72</sup> Watching a Western allowed the viewer to mourn the passing of the past and yet feel hopeful about the future, and it also allowed for a resolution of the conflicts between the benefits and disadvantages of both civilization and wilderness, something that did not happen in the real West.<sup>73</sup> Westerns were the product of a formula in which life was simple, enemies were easily identified, and righteous victories were assured. Old-fashioned virtues such as courage, integrity, pride, and honor prevailed within an unambiguous uncomplicated society where success and failure could be easily identified and measured.<sup>74</sup> Underlying all of the virtue and courage was physical violence.

Violence in the formulaic Western was often tied to crimes against survival, either committing them, preventing them, or avenging them. It was part of the struggle to subdue nature and build a community on the frontier.<sup>75</sup> Americans will probably always treasure the Western, both literary and cinematic, as a valid cultural expression of American Western expansion and settlement. Applied to the Canadian experience,

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<sup>71</sup> "Ike, Mr. Dillon, and the PTA," TV The Casual Art, ed. Martin Williams (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 104.

<sup>72</sup> Jenni Calder, There Must Be A Lone Ranger: The American West in Film and in Reality (New York: Taplinger Publishing Company, 1976), xii.

<sup>73</sup> Thomas Sobchack, Vivian C. Sobchack, An Introduction to Film (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1980), 224.

<sup>74</sup> Russell Nye, The Unembarrassed Muse (New York: The Dial Press, 1970), 304.

<sup>75</sup> Collins, "Genre" in Movies and Methods, 160.

however, the Western film suffered as a cultural metaphor.

In the modern media depiction of Canadian frontier settlement, filmmakers often ignored truly Canadian themes. In the earliest years of film production the use of Western settlement stories and Western landscapes were popular in both American and Canadian cinema. The film industry in the United States developed a powerful presence in American society; the same did not hold true for the Canadian film industry. In the early years of Canadian cinema the theater owners were Canadian, but few of the films they exhibited were Canadian productions. About 60 percent of the films were American and 40 percent were British and French. In some theatres the only thing Canadian on the screen was the scenery.<sup>76</sup>

Canadian film historian Gerald Graham noted that Canada's domestic needs and priorities differed from those of the United States and Europe. In the United States and Europe, filmmaking was economically a private enterprise, a profitable means of expanding entertainment programs. In Canada, film became a promotional and educational tool that encouraged settlement and fostered national unity.<sup>77</sup> Another Canadian film historian, Peter Morris, agreed, but offered another deterrent to Canadian

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<sup>76</sup> Peter Morris, Embattled Shadows: A History of Canadian Cinema 1895-1939 (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1978), 26. This work, though over twenty years old, provided the historical background necessary for my discussion. Newer studies are becoming available outside of Canada, but do not necessarily differ significantly from Morris's analysis.

<sup>77</sup> Gerald Graham, Canadian Film Technology, 1896-1986 (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1989), 22. For a detailed study of the development of the Canadian film industry and its relationship to the Canadian government see Michael Dorland, So Close to the State/s: The Emergence of Canadian Feature Film Policy (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998).

film expansion. He suggested that those countries that developed strong film industries already had well established vaudeville, music hall, and theatrical traditions, and these entertainment outlets provided the pool of talent for the early cinema production companies. Canada, however, had no such tradition, and most touring companies came from either Great Britain, the United States, or France.<sup>78</sup>

In 1896 Canadians got a look at the new exciting living pictures at the Toronto Industrial Exhibition - Canadian National Exhibition. Two companies competed for the crowds, The Edison Vitascope Company and the Lumière Cinématographe Company.<sup>79</sup> The exhibition was a hit and new Canadian film companies formed in many cities, including: Ottawa's Canadian Film Manufacturing Company (1911), Montreal Motion Pictures (1912), Canadian Cinematograph Company of Montreal (1914), and Dominion General Film Corporation (1914). All of these early companies set up business, made a few short films, and then died. Some of the problems had to do with money; many of these companies did not have enough capital to continue operating. Some of the problems had to do with the Canadian climate; it was often too cold, or too dry, or too windy, or too wet for the equipment and production teams. Some of the problems had to do with the talent drain to the south or east; many film pioneers who began their work in Canada left the country to work in the United States or Europe. The list of these artists includes such notables as directors Sidney Olcott and Mack Sennett, producers Jack Warner and Louis B. Mayer, and actors Mary Pickford, Marie Dressler, Fay Wray, Walter Pidgeon,

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<sup>78</sup> Morris, Embattled Shadows, 28.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

and Walter Huston.<sup>80</sup> The talent drain problem, along with too few exhibition locations and lack of interesting films to show, all severely handicapped the early Canadian film industry. Film was an urban entertainment, and even though Canada was still vastly rural, Canadian filmmakers found ways to showcase her land and her life.

The earliest Canadian films produced and photographed by Canadians were local interest films, short scenes of Canadian life. These led to formation of production companies owned by businesses interested in making films that promoted Canadian settlement. The largest producer of these types of films was the Canadian Pacific Railroad.<sup>81</sup> By 1912 some Canadian companies were producing dramatic films but these were few compared to the output of American, British, and French companies exhibiting in Canada. Interestingly enough, many of these films could be classified as Westerns, at least in genre terms, such as the British American Film Company production of The Battle of Long Sault (1912). In a story about the defense of the Montreal under an Indian attack in 1660, this film included many Western genre elements familiar to audiences. Filmed in Canada, by Canadians, using Canadian actors and extras, the movie opened to good reviews in 1913, and proved to be the beginning and the end for British American. The company produced no other films.<sup>82</sup> Other companies began to produce films for Canadian distribution, but few of them caused much of an impact and none of them lasted very long.

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 29-39.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 47-48.

Canada's entry into World War I had a great impact on her budding film industry as it created an awareness of a distinct Canadian identity. The most active period in Canadian filmmaking was from 1914 to 1922. Many of the films produced in this era were war propaganda for both the soldiers fighting in France and the folks back home. Films like Hello Dad (1915), The New Teacher (1917), 100% Canadian (1918), and The Adventures of Dot (1918) offered glimpses of home life and patriotism to audiences at home and to the troops overseas.<sup>83</sup> After this promising beginning, however, the Canadian industry never truly developed enough in volume or popularity to withstand the onslaught of the United States Hollywood film industry. Even though Hollywood controlled most of the distribution outlets, and often dictated the subject matter of films, Canada still managed to develop a distinctive style.

Fledging Canadian film companies that could not compete with American, British or French feature filmmaking developed, instead, a strong tradition of documentary production. Nanook of the North (1922) is probably the best known of these early works. Produced, filmed, and edited by Robert Flaherty, Nanook set the standard and style for documentary filmmaking. The story follows the life of Nanook and the other Eskimos in his village, purporting to show native life as it was before white contact. Flaherty's film demonstrated the kind of film grammar that fiction filmmakers employed allowing the audience to view an episode from many angles and distances through the use of long

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 56-57.



takes, re-framing, and depth-of-field cinematography using deep-focus lenses.<sup>84</sup> The audiences felt as though they were part of the action in contrast to the travelogue style that had characters pose for the camera.<sup>85</sup> Film historian Fatimah Rony noted that in *Nanook* “the spectator becomes both participant [seeing with the eyes of *Nanook*] and observer [an omnipotent eye viewing *Nanook*].” She also credited Flaherty as the first filmmaker to open up ethnographic cinematography, because in his film he created the “perfect relationship between filmmaker and subject, the ‘innocent eye,’ a search for realism that was not just inscription, but which made the dead look alive and the living look dead.”<sup>86</sup> Modern audiences still appreciate the power of this film. At the Mannheim Film Festival in 1964, documentary filmmakers from many different countries cited *Nanook* as the greatest documentary of all times.<sup>87</sup>

The success of films such as *Nanook* encouraged Canadian filmmakers to produce more of that type of cinema. Documentaries fit well within the production realities of the Canadian film industry because the Canadian provincial and federal governments were involved heavily in film production and distribution. In 1900, the Canadian government established a film bureau, making it one of the oldest national film agencies of its kind. The government in Ottawa refined its operating duties, and in 1917 renamed it the

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<sup>84</sup> Fatimah Tobing Rony, “Robert Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North*, The Politics of Taxidermy and Romantic Ethnography,” *The Birth Of Whiteness, Race and the Emergence of U.S. Cinema*, ed. Daniel Bernardi (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 316.

<sup>85</sup> Eric Barnow, *Documentary, A History of the Non-Fiction Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 39.

<sup>86</sup> Rony, “Robert Flaherty,” 314, 316, 322.

<sup>87</sup> Barnow, *Documentary*, 43.

Exhibits and Publicity Bureau. In 1923 the agency became the Canadian Government Motion Picture Bureau, but by 1941 the bureau had ceased to be an effective promoter of Canadian films, and the National Film Board, headed by John Grierson, replaced it. The National Film Board of Canada operates yet today. In 1967, the Canadian parliament established the Canadian Film Development Corporation (CFDC) to promote the production of feature films through grants and guaranteed loans. This policy gained another governmental bonus in 1978 when the government enacted a tax shelter for film investment to encourage more production. Even with these governmental advantages, the Canadian film industry is still dominated by the American majors who control 80 percent of Canadian box-office receipts. Most of the truly Canadian cinema production exists in the work of a few French-Canadian directors.<sup>88</sup>

From 1896 to the present Canadian film production has undergone significant changes. Often it has been eclipsed and controlled by economic realities of film production and distribution by companies owned and controlled in the United States. Truly Canadian themes and scenery often has been absent from the screen, replaced by Hollywood's version. Canadian actors, directors, and technicians had to go to California or London or Paris to get work. Most films depicting Canadian history were susceptible to the same inaccuracies as the American historical film. Canadian historian Pierre Berton pointed to the damage that a purely filmic image of history has done to Canadian heritage: "The only consistent impression of us that outsiders have received in this century has

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<sup>88</sup> David Cook, *A History of Narrative Film*, 2nd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1990), 617, 620.

come from the motion picture. . . . And by 'movies' I don't mean the earnest and often brilliant documentaries of the National Film Board. I mean commercial pictures that Hollywood made, scores of which are still being seen on smaller screens."<sup>89</sup>

While Berton places most of the blame on American movies about Canada for this distortion, not all Canadian critics agree with his assessment. Canadian films about Canada often had the same effect. Films about the settlement of the Canadian West produced by Canadians often resorted to the same types of formulaic images that appeared in American films, but there are some recognizable differences that point to the uniqueness of each nation's culture and approach to history. The history, literature, and cinema of both the United States and Canada reflect both the truths and myths about their western expansion and the part physical violence played in the process. The degree to which each nation embraced or denied the violence is reflected in the discussion that follows.

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<sup>89</sup> Pierre Berton, Hollywood's Canada: The Americanization of Our National Image (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1975), 12. Berton is probably the most vocal and prolific critic of American films using Canadian subjects and scenery. Newer film critics have been questioning some of his more sweeping assertions, but his observations are still worth noting and provide a good platform for argument.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE MILITARY SETTLEMENT OF THE WEST:

#### VIOLENCE AS A NATIONAL POLICY

The settlement of the American Western frontier exacted a high price from both the land and its inhabitants. The cost was not just a monetary one. The land paid a price when settlers squandered and depleted its natural resources. The native tribes paid a price when newcomers either erased or changed their culture forever. In the territory claimed by the United States, small groups moving out onto the land settled the Western frontier. Law followed settlement. In the Western territory claimed by Canada, the national government controlled movement onto the frontier. Settlement followed law.

The most obvious representatives of the national governments in this process, especially after the 1860s, were the United States Army and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP). Their names indicate the national inclination in the settlement process--the United States sent an army; Canada, a police force. The United States Army's efforts to subdue the American Plains Indians was an exercise in violence as a national policy. The actions of the RCMP generally reflected the Canadian government's reliance on negotiation first, then force if all else failed. Two historical episodes serve as examples for each country's experience. The post Civil War Plains Indian Wars, including the military action that resulted in the U.S. Army's disastrous defeat at the Battle of the Little Big

Horn, also known as Custer's Last Stand, exemplify American commitment to forceful settlement. In Canada, the Western Riel Rebellions of 1869 and 1885 illustrate the Canadian government's dilemma in extending the Confederation westward. Both of these events have been dramatized in literature and on film, and both stories illustrate the physical violence inherent in the American and Canadian military settlement of their Wests.

The story of Custer and his final battle is one of the most enduring sagas of the Western frontier, but the treatment of that battle in the years since 1876 has varied greatly.<sup>1</sup> The variations include several scenarios: Custer as valiant hero dying gallantly

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<sup>1</sup> A discussion of the various texts and commentaries that deal with George A. Custer would constitute a book of its own. For the purposes of this examination I have chosen several that represent a cross sample of the differing views. Some like John Finerty's War-Path and Bivouac, or the Conquest of the Sioux: A Narrative (1879) (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1961), Private Theodore Ewert's Diary of the Black Hill Expedition of 1874, ed. John M. Carroll and Dr. Lawrence Frost (Piscataway: Consultant Resources Incorporated, 1976), Life in Custer's Cavalry: Diaries and Letters of Albert and Jennie Barnitz, ed. Robert M. Utley (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), and Custer in '76: Walter Camp's Notes on the Custer Fight, ed. Kenneth Hammer (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1976), offer a contemporary account of Custer, conditions in the United States Cavalry and the events surrounding the military campaign against the plains Indians in the 1870s. Other texts such as Thomas B. Marquis, Keep the Last Bullet for yourself: The True Story of Custer's Last Stand (New York: Reference Publications, Inc., 1976), Shirley Leckie, Elizabeth Custer and the Making of a Myth (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993), Bruce Rosenberg, Custer and the Epic of Defeat (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1974), Robert Utley, Cavalier in Buckskin, George Armstrong Custer and the Western Military Frontier (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), and Evan Connell, Son of the Morning Star (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1984) offer a wide range of sometimes contradictory views of the boy general and the events leading to his death. One of the newer editions to the list of Custer histories is Jeffry Wert, Custer, The Controversial Life of George Armstrong Custer (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1996). Wert's book presents a balanced look at Custer, his military career and his death. He uses new archaeological evidence from the battlefield in Montana to provide information about what might have happened to Custer and his men.

at the hands of blood-thirsty Indians; Custer as coward who gave a subordinate, Major Reno, an impossible task and then abandoned him; Custer as a madman, hating the Indians and hungry for glory, rushing headlong into battle; Custer as a failed commander who committed suicide rather than submit to defeat by the Indians. The problem with all of these interpretations is that they are speculative and mostly unverifiable. Some events can be validated, but Custer's last motives, thoughts, and fears cannot. Most of what we know about Custer's final defeat comes from extremely biased sources: fellow officers who were either part of his favored circle or bitter rivals, army records which sought to affix blame for the massacre, his wife who sought to enshrine him and sell her books, and newspaper accounts which depended more on lurid tales than truth to sell newspapers. Everyone had an opinion and an agenda. Somewhere along the way, the reality of the battle and the complicated person that was George Armstrong Custer got lost, and the myth was born.<sup>2</sup>

American national problem-solving methods often depended on violence rather than reason. Custer died while carrying out a national policy of western expansion that demanded one group of people be dispossessed by force, if necessary, to make room for

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<sup>2</sup> The mythology of Custer and his last stand is discussed in articles such as "The Custer of our Dreams" Commentary 79 (March 1985): 74. Richard Slotkin devotes three chapters to Custer as mythic hero in his work The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800-1890 (New York: Atheneum, 1985). Other works, such as Douglas Jones, The Court-Martial of George Armstrong Custer (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1976), Lawrence Frost, Custer Legends (Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1981), and Wayne Sarf, God Bless you Buffalo Bill: A Layman's Guide to History and the Western Film (Rutherford: Associated University Presses, Inc., 1983), also examine the mythic Custer. These are just a few of the sources available on this topic.

another group. The impact of violence committed in the name of national expansion cannot be ignored. According to some historical observers, the violence is an integral part of American myth and history. Richard Slotkin believes that, “[i]n the case of the Frontier War, exterminating violence is justified as the means to the end of ‘regeneration’—the renewal of politics, of fortune, of spiritual strength through Indian fighting.”<sup>3</sup> The depiction of American history in literature, theater, and the modern film must come to terms with the violence of the story, because as Michael Kammen pointed out: “We arrange our memories to suit our needs, so we must be cautious about taking those memories for granted. The public has a short memory for catastrophe and humiliation—it often turns them into a rallying cry.”<sup>4</sup>

Custer was both a typical and unique military man on the American frontier of the 1870s. He was a West Point graduate, but he graduated in 1861 last in his class of thirty-four. Three days after graduation he was in the field with the Second Cavalry at the first Battle of Bull Run. Custer’s daring exploits on the battlefield earned him a reputation for recklessness, but also resulted in field promotion to brevet Brigadier General. Custer learned to control his enlisted men, but struggled with self-discipline.<sup>5</sup>

The Custer legend begins with his death, but all of his previous exploits paved the way for its creation. Characterized as the worst defeat in U.S. military history, the Battle

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Slotkin, The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800-1890 (New York: Atheneum, 1985), 275.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Kammen, Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1991), 713.

<sup>5</sup> Shirley A. Leckie, Elizabeth Bacon Custer, and the Making of a Myth (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993), p. 23-24.

of the Little Big Horn became a monumental event in the entire nation's history. Any officer could have been in command of the Seventh Cavalry in June of 1876. Any officer could have suffered the defeat, but the aftermath of the battle with the public outcry and the effort to either affix or avoid blame created a public awareness that paved the way for the posthumous creation of Custer's heroic reputation. According to his legend, for the first time in his so-called charmed life his luck failed, and he became a fallen symbol of the country's policy of violence. Custer's massacre became the subject of dime novels, numerous stage productions, and finally motion pictures. Perhaps no medium captured the essence of both the legend and the violence as well as the motion picture. Custer's story has been dramatized in many films, each one focusing on a different aspect of his life and death. This study will focus on only three films, all released during periods of military involvement by the United States: They Died With Their Boots On (1942), Little Big Man (1970) and Son of the Morning Star (1991).

They Died With Their Boots On was a romanticized look at George Armstrong Custer and his career. It was not historically faithful in its treatment and stressed Custer as national martyr to Western expansion. The film was produced and released during the World War II era. Custer was not the main focus of Little Big Man. The film, based on Thomas Berger's novel by the same name, follows the life of the supposedly last white survivor of the Battle of the Little Big Horn. This film depicts Custer as a raving madman, hungry for fame and scalps. It is the least historically accurate of the three, often distorting or changing facts to suit the narrative's bias. Released during the Vietnam War



era, it reflects the national trend of the 1970s to glorify Native Americans, while it portrays Custer as a tool of American imperialism. The most graphically violent of the three films is Son of the Morning Star. Also based on a literary work, this film tries to capture more of the complexity of Custer's nature and to present a more inclusive picture of the American western experience. The film aired on network television during the Gulf War in 1991. All three films use some elements of the formula Western, and all three are affected by adaptation from a literary work or influences of the era in which each was produced.

They Died With Their Boots On (1942), directed by Raoul Walsh, takes a semi-historical look at Custer's military career.<sup>6</sup> Erroll Flynn played Custer and cut quite a dashing figure as the flamboyant young general. The film began with Custer's entry to West Point in 1857 and ended with his death at the Little Big Horn. Along the way the film skipped blissfully through most of Custer's life, blending fact and fiction, and quickly established him as a likable rebel who got into trouble because of his impetuous nature, beginning with his introduction to West Point and ending with his final battle.

The first glimpse of Custer is his entry to West Point. He arrives dressed in a custom-made uniform carelessly astride a mule followed by a pack of hunting dogs. Mistaking him for a visiting officer, Senior Cadet Ned Sharpe, played by Arthur Kennedy,

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<sup>6</sup> All quotes in this section are from They Died With Their Boots On, Warner Brothers Production, directed by Raoul Walsh, starring Erroll Flynn, Olivia DeHavilland, with Arthur Kennedy, Sydney Greenstreet, John Litel, George Huntley, Charley Grapewin, Gene Lockhart, Regis Toomey, Stanley Ridges, Anthony Quinn, and Hattie McDaniel, (1942). Transferred to video format by MGM/UA Home Video Inc., and Turner Entertainment Co., 1990.

greet Custer with a full military display. When he discovers that Custer is only a new cadet, Sharpe decides to teach him a lesson in humility. “What made you honor the Army by choosing it as a career?” Sharpe asks, “Glory, Mister Sharpe, Glory,” replies Custer, “I want to leave a name behind me that the nation will honor. There’s a great many more statues for soldiers than civilians, I’ve noticed.” “Well, you will fit right in as part of the horse,” Sharpe retorts. After this disastrous beginning, Custer’s life at West Point is hardly idyllic, nor is his academic record stellar. Even after he leaves the academy his cadet-years enemies, the largely fictional Cadet Ned Sharpe and Instructor Major Romulus Taipe, continue to play significant roles in his destiny. These fictional characters seem to reflect the men who, Libbie Custer claimed, envied and thwarted Custer’s so-called luck.<sup>7</sup>

Thanks in great part to the Civil War, Custer does graduate and gets his cavalry commission. The war sequences set the scene for the concept of Custer’s luck. Walsh’s treatment of Custer continues the image of an overly impetuous adolescent who is lucky at every turn. He gets the posting he wants. He gets the horse he needs. He wins the battle and saves the campaign. He gets the promotion and he does it all while wooing the love of his life, Libbie Bacon, played by Olivia de Haviland. If Walsh’s Custer was a bit larger than life, one might excuse the excesses because Custer was a military hero, and in 1942 there was a real war to be fought and the country needed all the heroes it could get.

The Civil War battle sequences visually resemble the Indian battles to follow. In some the scene begins with Custer and his cavalry riding toward the camera with a reverse

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<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of Libbie Custer’s claims about her husband’s career, see Boots and Saddles (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987).

angle shot of the Rebel cavalry whooping and yelling in hot pursuit. In others the soldiers pass through the scene before a stationary camera; jump cut edits to other sections of the battlefield includes the viewer in the entire battle. The scenes are full of movement and noise, but not much visually portrayal of physical violence. Most of the scenes look more like a series of races than battles. When the camera shows an engagement, there are casualties but no blood. According to this version--one quick victory and Custer, who is wounded in the engagement, becomes a hero. He gets sent home to recuperate, to bask in his glory, and to propose to Libbie. His active duty only temporarily interrupted, Custer returns to the war just in time for Gettysburg. According to this account, Custer's promotion to Brigadier General is a clerical error, but he rises to the occasion. He disobeys yet another order and saves the Union flank at Gettysburg. Visually, Pennsylvania looks like Oklahoma, and the battle sequence is once again mostly racing horses, smoke and dust, the sounds of gunfire and bugles with no visual casualties. The rest of the war is depicted in a montage of magazine covers extolling Custer's bravery. He returns home a hero to marry Libbie in a proper military ceremony.

After the excitement of the war, Custer is bored with civilian life. He spends some time drinking and some time feeling sorry for himself. He turns down an offer to become a land speculator, because, as he explains to Libbie, he values his war record too much to

make money selling his name to land schemes and the Indian Ring.<sup>8</sup> It is not until he is recalled to military service that he is able to muster his old fervor.

In this film version of Custer's story, he is posted directly to the Dakota Territory, ignoring his time in Texas and Oklahoma, and the incident at the Washita River is omitted. Custer gets the task of drilling the Seventh Cavalry into fighting shape. He pulls the regiment together, but only after he closes the trading post's bar, which is owned and operated by his old enemy Ned Sharpe.<sup>9</sup> Along with the training sequences, Walsh manages to inter-cut a few Indian battle scenes, but the skirmishes are brief and the on-screen violence is minimal. Even though the purpose of an army is to fight, this film is careful in choosing when to focus on actual battles and to provide good reason why the violent activity could not be avoided.

In accordance with President U.S. Grant's Indian Peace Policy, Custer convinces Crazy Horse, played by Anthony Quinn, to sign a peace treaty at Fort Lincoln. The treaty guarantees the Sioux control of the Black Hills. Crazy Horse predicts one last decisive battle if the treaty is broken by the white men. Custer assures him this will not happen because Walsh's Custer is a friend to the Indians, only they do not know it. The evil

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<sup>8</sup> The Indian Ring was a group of government officials and civilian speculators who profited from cheating the Indians placed on reservations through land schemes and sales of liquor and guns among other things. This account differs greatly from what Libbie Custer wrote about her life with Custer. For her version of the story see Following the Guidon (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), or Tenting on the Plains (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994)

<sup>9</sup> According to this film, Ned Sharpe and his land speculation /trading post business represents the business interests that were most concerned with the opening of the Dakota territory. Custer was opposed to the Indian Ring, and made many political enemies.

money-grubbing Indian traders and the corrupt government bureaucrats, in the characters of Ned Sharpe and Romulous Taipe, are the real villains of the story. The traders and the politicians want the Black Hills and they are willing to start a war to get them. Custer goes East and tries to get the army and the politicians to honor the treaty. When they refuse, he returns to the West to do his duty. If only his death will convince the government to save the Indians, then Custer is willing to make the sacrifice.

Custer will have to fight the Indians to save them, because that is what good soldiers do. He will, however, take his old adversary with him. He gets Sharpe drunk and kidnaps him, forcing him to be present at the last stand. Why does Custer do it?, asks Sharpe. Custer's reply is central to Walsh's treatment, "The greater the odds, the greater the glory." For director Walsh the glory justifies the violence. As the situation worsens, Sharpe chooses to stay and fight with Custer to regain his self-respect and do his patriotic duty. Even as Custer forces Sharpe to face his duty as a good American he tries to send his friend, the Queen's own (as he is designated by the film), Captain Butler back to Fort Lincoln with dispatches. After all Butler is English, and this is not really his fight, Custer explains. The former British officer, now American, objects: if Custer is willing to face the overwhelming number of Indians massing for a fight, then he is too. Butler does not want to miss out on the glory either.<sup>10</sup> As Custer and his men meet the onslaught of the Indian cavalry charge across the open plain, they are, according to the film, "riding to hell

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<sup>10</sup>This could be an appeal to the World War II audience to remember that the British were U.S. allies in the present war. Viewers who saw the film in theaters in 1942 reported that the ending also included an image of an American soldier with an American flag flying in the breeze behind him.

or glory.” The realities of the actual battle and how it was fought are ignored as Custer stands next to his beloved American flag firing at the oncoming enemy until his equal in battle, Crazy Horse, personally shoots him. Custer has his last stand and becomes an even larger legend in death than he was in life. The final visual of the film is a montage of Custer riding off to destiny with the Seventh cavalry to the strains of the “Garry Owen.”

The main focus in They Died With Their Boots On was the glory of service to the country. It did not seem to matter to the filmmaker that the national policy implementing the subjugation of the Western Indian tribes demanded physical violence. Furthermore, it did not seem to matter that Indian resistance often took a violent and bloody form, nor did it matter that innocent people on both sides died for essentially what amounted to a gigantic land grab. It also did not seem to matter that director Walsh ignored a significant amount of Western history when he made this film. Perhaps one of the more troubling aspects of this treatment for historians and cultural critics is the glorification of armed conquest as the expense of historical balance. Walsh seems to be validating the physical violence by ignoring the historical ambiguities of the era implied in the actions necessary for the domination of one group by another. One argument that could explain Walsh’s treatment would be that film is not intended to be a medium of historical truth. It is essentially a medium of entertainment, and any other by-product is incidental. The story presented in They Died With Their Boots On, as critic Richard Schickel stated, “is not

history as it was, but history as it should have been. It is all honor and glory.”<sup>11</sup>

If Walsh’s Custer was a depiction of honor and glory, then Arthur Penn’s Custer in Little Big Man (1970) was a reflection of the perversion of those values.<sup>12</sup> Based on Thomas Berger’s novel Little Big Man (1964), this film is a sometimes comic, sometimes ironic, and sometimes absurd look at the Western at its violent worst. The novel dramatizes the complex cultural conflict enacted on the American Plains during the Indian-Army wars which culminated in the Battle of the Little Big Horn. The film, however, seems to focus primarily on the inherent theme of American violence.<sup>13</sup> Berger’s novel was a satire that looked at both the Indian and the White Man and found something for which to praise and condemn each group. Penn’s film depicted the events described in the book in a one-sided manner.<sup>14</sup> He challenged the idea that history book heroes were really brave or that the cavalry was the good guys and the Indians the bad guys.<sup>15</sup>

Custer was not the hero of this film, but he was an important and recurring character. The story was told in flashback by an extremely old man named Jack Crabb,

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<sup>11</sup> Richard Schickel as quoted in Wayne M. Sarf, God Bless You Buffalo Bill: A Layman’s guide to History and the Western Film (Rutherford: East Brunswick Associated University Presses, Inc., 1983), 172.

<sup>12</sup> All quotes in this section are from Little Big Man, A Millar-Penn Production, directed by Arthur Penn, starring Dustin Hoffman, Faye Dunaway, Richard Mulligan, Martin Balsam, Jeff Corey, and Chief Dan George, (1970) CBS/FOX video, 1992. The film was based on the Thomas Berger novel, Little Big Man (New York: Delacorte Press, 1964).

<sup>13</sup> John W. Turner, “Little Big Man (1970),” Western Movies, ed. William T. Pilkington and Don Graham (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1979), 116.

<sup>14</sup> Penn’s treatment of both the novel in particular, and the formula Western in general, has been characterized as a product of the Vietnam era. See Sarf, 170-177.

<sup>15</sup> Penn as quoted in Sarf, God Bless You Buffalo Bill, 177.

who insisted that he was the sole white survivor of Custer's Last Stand. The problem with Crabb's story was that much of it could not be verified, leaving the reporter who transcribed the tale to wonder, in the voice-over narration, whether Crabb was "the most neglected hero in the history of this country or a liar of insane proportions."<sup>16</sup> The George A. Custer that Jack Crabb remembers was a cruel, arbitrary, insane martinet who hated Indians and killed them without remorse. Custer as he was portrayed in this film bore little resemblance to the historical figure. He was, instead, the embodiment of all the stereotypical racist military officers who supposedly sought to eliminate all of the Indians in the West. In his capacity as filmmaker Penn either did not know or decided to ignore the facts concerning the Indian wars.

For the period from 1865 to 1890 the U.S. army enlistment included approximately 25,000 enlisted men. In order to kill all of the Indians in the West it would have been necessary to have engaged in a major massacre a day to eliminate the some 250,000 Indians listed on the Indian Bureau census. Furthermore, from 1789 to 1898 only approximately 1,240 armed encounters occurred between the Indians of North America and the United States Army. During that period, army casualties totaled 2,125 killed. The Indian casualty figures were not precise, but, even allowing for exaggeration, military historian Don Russell believed that no more than 3,000 Indians were killed in all of the U.S. Army's fights. Even if one credited all the wildest claims, the total of Indian casualties would not exceed 6,000.<sup>17</sup> The problem with Penn's depiction, many critics

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<sup>16</sup> Sarf, God Bless You Buffalo Bill, 177. Quoted from film narration.

<sup>17</sup> Don Russell as quoted in Sarf, God Bless You Buffalo Bill, 178.



pointed out, was that he so grossly distorted all of the real events he featured in the action that he lost any claim to historical relevance for his message.<sup>18</sup> The historical good, bad, and ugly were not so well defined as Penn would have had the viewer believe.

Penn's film is a visual blend of Western vistas and terrifying close-ups. The first massacre he chose to show is a parody of the Washita Massacre, the first Indian battle of note for Custer. In history Custer and the Seventh Cavalry attacked a Cheyenne village on the banks of the Washita River in 1868 under written orders of General Phil Sheridan. Custer's force surprised the village early in the morning, killing many women, children, and old men as well as a number of braves defending the camp. Penn's version is a masterpiece of cinematography, but it varies greatly and unnecessarily from the historical realities of the real battle.

The sequence begins benignly. The early morning winter landscape peacefully shimmers in the icy air. The sleeping village is only beginning to stir. Protagonist Jack Crabb awakens in his lodge and his wife, Sunshine, presents him with his newly born baby. Jack suddenly hears the neighing of the horse herd. He races off through the camp looking for his Indian grandfather. He finds him sitting near the horse pen. "Grandfather, what's wrong with the ponies?" Jack asks. "Don't you hear that, my son?" Grandfather replies. Only then does the audience and Jack hear the faint hint of music playing in the distance. Slowly the volume of the music begins to increase and the audience hears it

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<sup>18</sup> For criticism of Penn's treatment of Custer and the historical relevance of Little Big Man see Jon Tuska, The Filming of the West, (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc, 1976), 364, 366-368, as well as Sarf, God Bless You Buffalo Bill, 178, and John Turner quoted in Western Movies, 116.

more clearly at the same time Jack does. The camera focuses on the ghost-like figures of the cavalry coming out of the white misty landscape, then on Jack, and then back to the oncoming riders. As the martial tones of the "Garry Owen," Custer's regimental song, grow louder, the screen explodes with the force of the attacking soldiers and the music punctuates the scene. The camera leaves nothing to chance; we see the full brutality of the charge. Penn allows the camera to find Custer in the middle of the battle and we hear his orders: "Shoot the ponies." When a young officer questions the order Custer replies, "You think it is shocking to shoot a few ponies? Well, let me tell you, the women are far more important than the ponies, the point is they breed like rats. However, Lieutenant, this is a legal action [the emphasis is mine] and the men are under orders not to shoot the women, unless of course they refuse to surrender." The soldiers shoot both horses and women with the same precision. For the Vietnam era audience, Penn's Custer could represent Lieutenant Richard Calley and the My Lai massacre. The film seems to be reinforcing the sentiment that we did it before and we are still killing the natives.

Penn characterizes Custer as a villain. By the time Penn stages the final battle at the Little Big Horn, the audience has no sympathy for either Custer or his men. In this version, they get what's coming to them. Visually, the last battle is less violently staged than the massacre at the village. Jack observes in his voice-over that Custer's hate for the Indians and his ambition will be his downfall. In this version of the story, Jack is correct. Penn's Custer is a buffoon. When subordinate officers try to talk some sense into him, his responses are either illogical or inane. Dressed in white buckskin with his long golden hair

flowing in the wind, Custer leads his men to the waiting Indians and certain death.<sup>19</sup>

“Onward to the Little Big Horn and glory,” he shouts, and they all ride to their deaths accompanied by the strains of the “Garry Owen.”

Penn does not use any of the actual battle sequences in his reproduction because the historical battle is not important to his story. The cavalry and the Sioux meet on the open plains in opposing cavalry charges, and at least the outcome is historically correct-- Custer dies. According to Penn's vision, Custer was a megalomaniac who hated Indians and only wanted personal glory. Custer goes crazy on the battlefield, and he and his troop are cut down in some sort of divine revenge for former massacres. The narrator, Jack, survives and returns to the Cheyenne who raised him. He is puzzled by his grandfather's reaction to the battle. Even though the Indians had won, his Indian grandfather wants to die. Grandfather has the last word on the battle: “There is an endless supply of White Men, but there always has been a limited number of Human Beings. We won today, but we won't win tomorrow.”

For nearly one hundred years, in formula Westerns, both literary and cinematic, authors and producers portrayed Indians as villains obstructing white settlement. The increased militancy of Native American civil rights groups in the late 1960s may have influenced Penn's depiction of Indian life in Little Big Man. From groups such as the

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<sup>19</sup> Nearly every visual account of the Battle of the Little Big Horn shows Custer with his long blond hair streaming in the wind. The flowing hair could be an attempt to visually link Custer with other failed heroes depicted with flowing hair, such as Samson. Most serious biographers of the general and historians of the event agree that Custer had cut his hair just prior to this last campaign. See the works cited in the first footnote at the beginning of this chapter.

National Indian Youth Council, which advocated reestablishing Indian national pride through presentations of more positive cultural images, to the militant and confrontational American Indian Movement (AIM) that commanded attention by occupying Alcatraz Island and the Wounded Knee Battleground, Native Americans began demanding better social treatment, governmental services, and more honest portrayals in history books and media.

In support of Native American civil rights groups, Penn's depiction of so-called white civilization as opposed to the native frontier is super critical of the first.<sup>20</sup> He punctuates that conflict with scenes of violence that place the blame wholly on the shoulders of the white interlopers. The national government's efforts to extend United States sovereignty into the Western territory resulted in physical violence. The historical truth is that neither side in the conflict of expansion was entirely guilty or entirely innocent; both used violence to try to get the upper hand in a profound cultural dilemma. Little Big Man is not an historical document; it is a work of fiction and a work of cinema. The images used, however, are based on historical figures and events. The depiction of the violence surrounding Custer and the Seventh Cavalry perpetuates the mythic Custer and the mythic West while ignoring the realities and complexities of both the man and the era.

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<sup>20</sup> Roberta E. Pearson, "The Revenge of Rain-In-The-Face? Or, Custers and Indians on The Silent Screen," The Birth of Whiteness: Race and the Emergence of U.S. Cinema, ed. Daniel Bernardi (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 295. Pearson points out in this essay that newer film treatments of Custer's Last stand were not necessarily fairer in their treatment of the Indians than silent films. Nor were films like Penn's more accurate, balanced or authentic.

The historical Custer was what Evan S. Connell used as the basis for his book Son of the Morning Star (1984). The portrayal of George Armstrong Custer in both Connell's book and a 1991 film based on it fulfill Jon Tuska's critical opinion about legend and the American frontier personality. Tuska pointed to a three-sided portrayal of legendary frontier personalities: all bad, all good, or as good becoming bad.<sup>21</sup> Connell's Custer was the good soldier becoming bad. The 1991 television film, Son of the Morning Star directed by Mike Robe, takes the same point of view.<sup>22</sup> The Custer in Son of the Morning Star was more historically relevant, but none the less the legend was still more evident than the historical man.

Connell's book was filled with detail and color; unfortunately as most reviewers pointed out, it was also too full of distracting and confusing details. The Custer narrative got lost among the digressions into other Western subjects.<sup>23</sup> The book begins two days after the battle, opening with General Alfred H. Terry and his command discovering the aftermath of Custer's battle. It continues with a crazy-quilt narrative employing flashback, flashforward, and historical digressions that do nothing to clarify Custer, the American West, or the Battle of the Little Bighorn. Connell's Custer was a little kinder, he is neither

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<sup>21</sup> Jon Tuska, The American West in Film (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1985), 218.

<sup>22</sup> All quotes in this section are from Son of the Morning Star, (1991) directed by Mike Robe, produced by Preston Fischer, starring Gary Cole, Rosanna Arquette, Dean Stockwell, Rodney Grant, Terry O'Quinn, David Strathairn, Stanley Anderson, and George American Horse with Buffy Sainte-Marie as the voice of Kate Bighead. Republic Pictures Home Video/Facets MultiMedia, Inc.

<sup>23</sup> Wayne M. Sarf, "The Custer of Our Dreams," Commentary 79( March 1985): 74.

Indian hater nor incarnate fiend. The author, however, tends to discount any military prowess, content to dismiss Custer's military talent.<sup>24</sup> As critic Wayne Sarf pointed out in his assessment of the book, instead of relying on a systematic analysis of the Little Big Horn battle, Connell offers too many facts and possibilities, leaving the bewildered reader to choose for himself.<sup>25</sup> This lack of organization is especially troublesome as the book begins and ends with that battle and the intervening 400 or so pages do not clarify the subject. The 1991 television film tries to do a better job at interpreting Custer, the battle, and the Western violence. It too is flawed, however, by choosing to use the order imposed on it by the original written work. Where Arthur Penn's adaptation of Thomas Berger's novel Little Big Man changes both the cultural and the historical message, the director of Son of the Morning Star tried faithfully to follow Evan Connell's version of this history without making many critical artistic decisions.<sup>26</sup>

Son of the Morning Star aired as a mini-series in February of 1991 on the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) network. One device the film employed that Connell's book did not was the use of dual narrators.<sup>27</sup> The exposition came alternately from Libbie Custer, played on screen by Roseana Arquette, and Kate Bighead, voice over by Buffy

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> For a discussion of script adaptations, George Bluestone's Novels into Film (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), although an older source, is good place to start.

<sup>27</sup> Bernard Dick, in Anatomy of Film (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990) provides a concise description of the filmmakers use of the narrator. The use of two narrators, one white and one native American, might indicate that the filmmaker is trying to give the audience a balanced picture of the events.

Sainte-Marie, a Cheyenne woman who reportedly knew Custer and who witnessed some of his triumphs and his final failure.

In an effort to establish an authenticity for the story, Son of the Morning Star did a better job of sticking to some of the known history. Shot on location in Montana, the film used actual Native Americans speaking their own languages and portraying the historical culture of the Plains Indians. Visually, this version was far more graphically violent than either They Died With Their Boots On or Little Big Man. In the words of a Newsweek magazine reviewer, “[t]his may be the grisliest production ever telecast. It displays a near-obsessive fascination with scalp removals, dismemberments and other sanguinary doings.”<sup>28</sup> The one thing that this production did better than the others was to capture the contradictory nature of Custer himself. Gary Cole, who played Custer, presented a character who is far more complex than Erroll Flynn’s characterization in Boots, and who is pathologically contradictory instead of just being pathological, as in Richard Mulligan’s Little Big Man portrayal. If this film suffers from one thing that the other portrayals do not, it is in the attempt to show the viewer too much contradictory history with too little critical interpretation.

The film opens with General Alfred H. Terry’s troops riding through a deserted Indian village and then finding the battlefield. Captain Frederick Benteen and Lieutenant Thomas Weir ride into the village from the other direction, thankful to see the relief column, still uncertain of Custer’s fate. The dead horses on the hill above the camp leave

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<sup>28</sup> Harry F. Waters, “Custer Rides The Airwaves”, Newsweek, 4 February 1991:

no doubt as to the battle's outcome. "What happened here?" Terry, played by Terry O'Quinn, asks. "Mistakes were made," Benteen, played by David Strathairn, replies. From a close-up of Custer's dead face, the action flashes back to Kansas in 1866.

The film proceeds to detail some of Custer's early career in the West to set the stage for the final battle. Libbie narrates the story according to the white point of view and Kate Bighead offers an Indian view. Different from the treatment in Boots and Little Big Man, the battle at the Washita is handled in a somewhat historical manner. The film does point out that Custer was acting under written orders from General Philip Sheridan. In a scene before the battle, the general even reads them to Custer so that there will be no misunderstanding. The extreme brutality of the attack on the sleeping village is ably handled in cinematic terms. The attack comes at dawn while the village sleeps. The first sound the Indians hear is the trumpet sounding the charge. The troopers shoot indiscriminately, killing women and children as well as the few braves in the camp. The casualty figures reported by the white narrator do not match those of the Indian narrator. Libbie tells the audience that the raid was necessary for the pacification of the area. Kate Bighead views the conflict differently. She tells the audience through the voice-over that the conflict "was always about the land." After the cavalry attack at the Washita, General Custer gets philosophical; he wonders about the Indians and their culture. "What do they think the world is? Or do they think of these things; are they able to think?" he asks Libbie. She does not know.

The choice of Libbie as the white narrator's voice seems appropriate. She was in



life and in the film a staunch defender of her husband and her country. Son of the Morning Star gives a more complete and realistic characterization of Libbie Custer than in the previous films. It also shows the audience visual signs of the devotion that husband and wife shared in their marriage. After Custer's death in Montana, Libbie spent the remaining fifty-seven years of her life defending her husband's name and reputation.<sup>29</sup> Her defense of his reputation is in part responsible for strength of the Custer legend and is an integral part of this film.

To illustrate the nature of the Plains Indians wars, the film offers realistic depictions of the hit and run tactics of the Sioux and the frustration of the United States Army as it attempts to countermand them. Visually the audience sees a series of chases. The army chases the Sioux, and the Sioux chase the army. And of course both shoot at the other from horseback. There are also scenes of so-called Indian atrocities that contain graphic depictions of mutilated bodies covered by flies with buzzards circling over head. These scenes could serve to remind contemporary audiences of the horrors of war.

The film moves forward in time after the battle of the Washita to 1870 and features the treaty that assures the Sioux and Cheyenne possession of the Black Hills "for as long as the grass grows and the waters run."<sup>30</sup> The end of this treaty came sooner than anyone expected because of a gold strike in the Black Hills in the summer of 1874. Ignoring Indian

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<sup>29</sup> Leckie, Elizabeth Bacon Custer, 22.

<sup>30</sup> Familiar quote refers to the language of various U. S. and Indian land treaties. Forms the basis for the title of Angie Debo's work on the relationship of the United States government and the Five Civilized Tribes of the American southeastern region, And Still the Waters Run: The Betrayal of the Five Civilized Tribes (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1984 reprint).

land claims, miners move into the area. A confrontation is inevitable and the government leaders in Washington begin planning for it. General William T. Sherman sums up the army's position when he says to President Grant: "We've been killing Indians for hundreds of years, let's get the business over with. I want Custer to lead the expedition: we need one great bloody battle." Grant replies, "He'll guarantee one."

The gold rush in the Dakota Territory gives the government the excuse that it needs to force the Sioux and Cheyenne out of the Black Hills and onto reservations. While the tribes resist and try to drive the miners and other whites off their land, the mining companies and traders appeal to Washington for military protection. The tribes begin to gather together in the Black Hills, and Custer is pulled into the conflict. On the one hand, he sees the validity of the Indian claims, and on the other, he is sworn to carry out national policy. As the situation becomes more volatile, Custer is called back to Washington to testify before a congressional committee investigating the Secretary of War, General William Belknap. Custer is extremely vocal and harshly critical of national Indian policy and Secretary Belknap. Custer's testimony against him displeases the president. To punish him, Grant denies Custer permission to lead the summer campaign. Finally, pressure from the press and Generals Sherman and Sheridan forces Grant to reconsider and return Custer to the West. As Custer prepares for his final campaign, he quips to Libbie, "Here's to a star or a coffin."

Not everyone is happy about Custer's return to Fort Lincoln and the Seventh Cavalry. This is the only film of the three that portrays any of the conflicts that existed in

the Seventh Cavalry's officer core at the time. The strained relationship between Benteen and Custer is evident. David Straithairn's portrayal of Benteen presents the audience with a vain but bitter and spiteful man who is jealous of Custer's popularity. In a conversation with Major Reno he refers to Custer's book My Life on the Plains as "My Lie on the Plains." Benteen takes every opportunity to undercut Custer and to promote others over him. When Terry chooses Reno for a scouting mission that Custer feels should go to him, Benteen gloats. Reno bungles the job; disobeying orders, he fails to bring back the necessary information, forcing Terry to deploy his troops with faulty intelligence. Finally, Custer gets command of the Seventh and a vital part in the final battle planning. In this version of the legend General Terry's orders are verbal.<sup>31</sup> Custer is to pursue the Sioux and keep them from escaping from the area. Confident that he can do the job with just the Seventh, Custer refuses both reinforcements and artillery. The final march begins, and they ride off into history.

Son of the Morning Star does try to depict the realities of life in the cavalry and the hardships of the march as it focuses on the urgency of Custer's pursuit of the Sioux. He forces his men onward in a night march with the exhortation "don't let them scatter." The film follows the historical record of the battle up to the point where Custer deploys the companies under the command of Benteen and Reno. The final battle sequence takes

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<sup>31</sup> This version ignores the historical record, which maintained that General Terry gave Custer written orders so that there could be no misunderstanding. For a detailed account of this episode see Robert Utley, Cavalier in Buckskin, 175-76. Lawrence A. Frost, Custer Legends, 186-87. Bruce A. Rosenberg, Custer and the Epic of Defeat, 25-26.

almost as much time to show the engagement as the actual battle took to fight. The sequence is well over twenty-five minutes in length and violently graphic in its depiction of dead or dying soldiers and Indians.

The concluding scene of the film returns to the beginning image of the hill and the dead troopers of the Seventh Cavalry. Both narrators acknowledge the finality of Custer's Last Stand for both Custer and the Indians. In the end Custer loses his life but gains legendary status. The Indians win the battle but lose the war. Both Connell's book and the television film attempted a realistic look at both the battle and the United States Indian policy. The outcome, however, is just as mixed as other efforts to do the same. Historical events from the Indian-Army wars from the 1860s to 1890s often served as plot material for formula Westerns. The emphasis for these works of literary and cinematic fiction centered on the white heroes and their exploits, not on the reality of an event. When the mythic version of an event got repeated often enough it took on the appearance of historical relevancy. So much of the reporting about Custer and the Plains Indian wars became so firmly intertwined in Western mythology that it became difficult even for serious historians to get the story straight. In a culture that values action and results, perhaps no other hero or episode so clearly demonstrates the nature and consequences of American expansionism in the nineteenth century as Custer and his last stand. In the end, the culture that was able to sustain the level of violence and bear the losses it demanded was victorious. Cultural differences among people trying to settle the Canadian West was also at the heart of another story of national force against an indigenous group. The Canadian

story, however, highlights the indigenous hero not the general.

July 1, 1867, marks the day Canadians celebrate the formation of their Confederation. In reality that date represents the beginning of the formation of the nation, not the date of its completion. As of 1867, the country consisted only of four provinces, Ontario, Quebec, Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick, under a constitution that established a strong central government that dealt with national issues while allowing the provinces to control local matters. The new government was conscious of its weaknesses and of the territory it did not control. West and north of Ontario lay the vast territory claimed by the Hudson's Bay Company, known as Rupert's Land.<sup>32</sup> The area included the Red River settlements of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and British Columbia. In 1868 a delegation from Canada went to London to arrange for the transfer of the territory from the Hudson's Bay Company to the new Canadian Confederation. While the ministers negotiated and conferred in London, officials in Canada began preparations for the eventual transfer.

The population of Rupert's Land was culturally diverse. The largest group in the area was the Métis, the French mixed-bloods, who, for the most part, were a group of traders and trappers and not serious farmers. The popular images of the Métis reflected a stereotypical picture of the rough, uncouth Canadian frontiersmen. Canadian historian George Stanley romantically described them as, "honest, hospitable and religious . . . and happy-go-lucky, without care and without restraint, true sons of the prairie, as free as

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<sup>32</sup>The Hudson's Bay Company controlled the area since 1670, and only loosely governed the inhabitants which included the various native tribes, French mixed-bloods, English mixed-bloods, French trappers, English trappers, and a few other white settlers.

the air they breathed and by nature as independent as the land which gave them birth."<sup>33</sup>

The Métis were more politically astute than their popular image credited them. The secular Métis leaders and clergy realized that the changes brought by the land transfer would threaten their society and would probably lead to resistance. They also realized that their opposition could only postpone the transfer, not stop it.

The Hudson's Bay Company officially transferred title of Rupert's Land to Canada on October 1, 1869. The Canadian government, under Prime Minister John A. MacDonal, chose William McDougall as the first lieutenant-governor for the Manitoba territory. McDougall was an ardent expansionist but a terrible diplomat, and given the temperament of the Red River settlers and the Métis, exactly the wrong person to send west.<sup>34</sup> He arrived in the territory late in October, accompanied by the prospective provincial secretary, the new attorney general, the new collector of customs, and the new chief of police. Much to his dismay as he crossed the forty-ninth parallel, he was greeted not with enthusiastic welcome but with a letter from the National Committee of the Métis. The letter said:

To Mr. McDougall,  
The National Committee of the Métis of Red River informs  
Mr. McDougall that by order he is not to enter the territory of the  
Northwest without the special permission of this Committee.  
By order of the president  
John Bruce  
Louis Riél, Secretary

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<sup>33</sup> George E.G. Stanley, The Birth of Western Canada, A History of the Riél Rebellions (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1961, 1970), 8-9.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 65-66. According to this source McDougall was the man most closely associated to the Canadian expansionist movement by the Métis. They would hardly welcome him into the West.

Dated at St. Norbert, Red River on October 21, 1869.<sup>35</sup>

Not only were a majority of the inhabitants not welcoming the government with open arms, they were decidedly hostile to its presence. The animosity between white, mixed-blood, and Indian inhabitants in the Red River settlements had been building for a number of years, and after the transfer of the Northwest Territory from the Hudson's Bay Company to the Canadian government it intensified.

A combination of governmental insensitivity, local greed, religious intolerance, and native mistrust caused the Red River Uprisings of 1869 and the 1885 Rebellion. The story of these rebellions was the basis for one of the most stirring epics of the Canadian West. The protagonist of the story was the great Métis folk hero Louis Riél.<sup>36</sup> The French-Canadian settlers revered Riél as a Robin Hood figure fighting for the rights of the downtrodden. The English Canadians viewed him as a dangerous rebel who stood in the way of national expansion. The Riél Rebellion seemed ripe for retelling, but in reality it has not been the subject matter for that many re-creations. In 1885 and 1886 three plays depicted Riél and the Northwest Rebellion. The first, written by George Broughall, a staff sergeant in the Canadian Army, was a burlesque entitled The Ninetieth On Active Service: Campaigning the North West; the second was a drama by Professor Charles Bayer and E. Parage, called Riél: Drame historique en quatre acts et un prologue, and

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 43. The letter was quoted in French in Stanley's text as found in Correspondence and Papers connected with Recent Occurrences in the North-West Territories, C.S.P. 1870, Vol. V, No. 12. I quote the letter's translation.

<sup>36</sup> Thomas Flanagan is perhaps the best known of Riél's biographers. See Louis 'David' Riél: 'Prophet of the New World' (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979).

the third play, written by Dr. Elzéar Pacquin, was entitled Riél: tragédie en quatre acts. All three plays depicted the theme of “triumph over adversity, whether in military victory or defeat.”<sup>37</sup>

In 1936 John Coulter, an Irish immigrant playwright, moved to Canada and became intrigued with the story of the Northwest Rebellions. He saw in Riél and the Métis the spirit of an oppressed people not unlike the spirit of the Irish under English domination. The Canada Council (national arts council) commissioned Coulter to write a trilogy about Riél. He completed the first, Riél, in 1936 and finally added the last two plays, The Trial Of Louis Riél and The Crime of Louis Riél, by 1960. For many Canadians, Riél and his story is as close as Canada comes to producing a national mythic hero. Coulter’s dramas were the basis for the one long Canadian produced feature film about Riél.

Riél, a 1979 joint venture for the Canadian Broadcasting Company and Green River Productions directed by George Bloomfield, begins after the Rebellion has been put down and Riél has been tried, convicted, and executed. French Canadian film star Raymond Cloutier plays Riél, and Roger Blay portrays Dumont. English Canadian actor Christopher Plummer brings Prime Minister MacDonalld to life. Some of the other actors would be recognizable to American audiences because they have also appeared in American movies and television: William Shatner plays the flamboyant Wild West Show’s

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<sup>37</sup> Rota Herzberg Lister, “A Distinctive Variant , 1885 in Canadian Drama,” Swords and Poughshares: War and Agriculture in Western Canada, ed. R.C. Macleod (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1993), 91.



barker, Arthur Hill plays Taylor the sympathetic newspaper reporter, Lloyd Bochner plays Canadian expansionist Dr. Shultz, and Leslie Nielsen plays the Northwest Mounted Police commander Major Crozier.

The film tries to show the events from both the Métis and the English view by switching back and forth between Riél and Prime Minister John MacDonald. It slowly develops the conflict not only between eastern Canada and the Métis but also between the various factions in the Métis communities and the overall problems of Canadian confederation. The conflict was one of the most violent in Canada's history, yet this film rarely depicts physical violence in a graphic way. The villains are clearly the Orangemen (English settlers) who are portrayed as opportunists who exploited the Western territory for their own gain. The film depicts them as people who intimidate old women and abuse children. The most despicable English characters are Tom Scott, and Dr. and Mrs. Schultz, who represent the embodiment of racial and cultural intolerance. The audience first sees Tom Scott as he and Mrs. Schultz cheat a Métis farmer out of his land. Mrs. Schultz's intolerance is blatantly evident as she places a newspaper ad announcing the coming Confederation. When the newspaper owner suggests that the paper run a story about Louis Riél's return to the Red River settlement, she remarks that the only ones interested in that event cannot read. This slow moving, long, and sometimes confusing motion picture seems to be trying to include all of the contradictions of the era by trying to cram two years of history into two hours and twenty minutes of film. The result is a

sometimes confusing, distorted portrayal.<sup>38</sup>

The film opens on what seems to be Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. The show's barker invites the people to see the last of the wild west heroes including the Métis general Gabriel Dumont. A man from the audience challenges Dumont to shoot a coin in the air. Dumont does and then leaves the stage. As he walks away a man from the crowd approaches him. The man is a newspaper reporter named Taylor who asks him to tell the

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<sup>38</sup> The years 1867-68 were disastrous for the Red River country: grasshoppers had destroyed the crops, the thinning bison herds had migrated south beyond the Missouri River, and the Hudson's Bay was about to transfer ownership of the territory to the newly formed Canadian Confederation. The predominately Catholic French-speaking Métis living in the Red River Colony were concerned about becoming part of Canada because they believed that their religious and linguistic balance would be disturbed by an influx of English-speaking Protestants from Ontario. They formed the National Committee of the Métis of Red River and named John Bruce as its president and Louis Riél as secretary. After denying the new Canadian governor, William McDougall, entry into the Colony until Ottawa agreed to discuss the terms of the transfer with the Colony, the committee sanctioned the occupation of Fort Garry. Canadian Prime Minister John A. MacDonalld tried to defuse the situation and sent a message to MacDougall forbidding him to declare the transfer complete until talks could be held. The message did not reach the west in time to stop MacDougall, and he issued the transfer proclamation on December 1, 1869. The Métis ignored the proclamation and organized a Provisional Government on December 8, and later named Louis Riél as president. MacDonalld had no choice but to send a negotiating team to the area. During a second convention held in January 1870, English settlers in the area attempted several times to break Riél's power in the provisional government. Two of these attempts included assassination attempts on Riél. Both failed. A member of the English Canadian Party (also known as Orangemen), Thomas Scott, participated in both attacks against Riél. Métis forces captured him after the first attack, but he escaped, only to be jailed again after the second attack on Riél. Scott apparently was a problem prisoner, and at the request of some of the Métis leaders, Riél finally agreed to his court-martial. The unfair trial, conducted entirely in French, was little more than a judicial travesty. Scott failed to understand the gravity of what was happening and did not have any legal representation. He joked and mocked his accusers all during the proceedings. The Métis jury found him guilty and sentenced him to die by firing squad. Several influential people tried to stop the execution but Riél would not yield and Scott was shot. Scott's death would haunt Riél's public career for the rest of his life and would contribute to Riél's own demise.

“real” story of the Rebellions and his friend Riél. Dumont’s response to him sets the tone for the film: “Go ask the prime minister, go ask the railroad, go ask the jury . . . . Ask me a question I haven’t heard before.” “Why did you lose?” Taylor asks. “Who says we lost?” Dumont replies. Taylor seems to want to understand what really happened, but Dumont maintains that he never will because he does not understand what the real issues were. “Do you know what Métis is?” Dumont asks. “I think so, yes--a person of mixed blood,” answers Taylor. Dumont laughs bitterly, “A half-breed Indian from his mama, French from his papa, the big winners and from both of them, proud, very proud.” “And Riél?” asks Taylor. “Maybe God knew what I needed and put Riél there just at the right time.” Visually the on-screen image goes “out of focus” alerting the audience to a flashback sequence shifting the narrative in time from the “present” to Riél’s 1869 return to the West from Montreal. He enters the frame as a lone rider coming out of the landscape back to the Métis way of life. The film is non-linear with regard to time, shifting from Dumont in the present to the past as it chronicles the events of the rebellion. It laboriously develops the main characters in the conflict through dialogue not action. Visually, the audience see both sides talking about the conflict, not engaging in it.

The pivotal act of violence in both history and the film is Tom Scott’s failed assassination attempt on Riél. As Riél tries to negotiate with the Canadian government, Dr. Shultz and Scott try to incite the English settlers to violence. Scott ambushes Riél but fails to hit him. Shultz escapes from the settlement but Scott is captured. The action is mainly people shouting and gesturing. Even the ambush is low keyed and only minimally

violent. Riél sends the Hudson's Bay representative, Donald Smith, to Ottawa to make the Métis demands clear: they want to be the political power in the region. As Smith negotiates with Ottawa, the Métis try Scott for his crimes. His trial is depicted as fair and legal under Métis law, and his conviction for treason supposedly is based on adequate evidence. The portrayal of physical violence is minimal. Even the execution is subdued in terms of graphic depiction. Scott is dragged whimpering and sniveling to face his firing squad. He was a bully and a coward in life and has no dignity in death, but he becomes the rallying cry for English vengeance. After the Scott incident, the Canadian government in Ottawa finally agrees to allow the Métis political representation in Parliament, but insist that Riél be exiled to Montana to ensure the peaceful transfer of power in the province.

The historical Riél posed a serious political and cultural threat to the newly united Canada, and the film clearly highlights this conflict as the scene shifts back to the Wild West Show. The aging Dumont tells the reporter that after Manitoba was added to the Confederation the Métis were forced to move farther west to Saskatchewan, but were still persecuted and denied their lawful rights. The scene then shifts back to past events. Dumont finds Riél in Montana and urges him to return to Canada to unite his people once again. Fifteen years after the first confrontation Riél again becomes a political threat in the West. The second Métis rebellion comes just as eastern politicians MacDonald and Smith are having problems building their national railroad. They will use the perceived threat of an Indian and Métis uprising to press for the completion of the line, and as a rallying cry for Canadian domination of the Northwest Territory. The film moves quickly over the

events leading to the final confrontations at Duc Lake and Batoche.

According to the film the war begins accidentally. Major Crozier and the police arrive to arrest Riél, but Dumont maneuvers them into a confrontation. Visually this is not much of a fight. Quick-cut edits shift the focus from the police to the Métis and back. There is a great deal of gunfire but not much blood. Crozier is wounded and so is Dumont, but it is the police who retreat from the battle. The scene shifts from the Métis victory to Ottawa as the prime minister learns of the battle. Prime Minister MacDonald uses the skirmish to call for all-out war and sends five thousand troops to the West. In their bright red uniforms they get a heroic send-off as they board the trains that will take them to Saskatchewan. In parallel scenes, while the soldiers move west, Riél holds a vigil for his wounded military leader Dumont, as the Bishop in Quebec worries about Riél's so-called new religion. While Dumont recovers, Riél renounces the traditional Catholic religion and vows to fight on as the prophet of the new Western religion.

There is little graphic violence in this war. From the first confrontation at Duc Lake to the final battle at Batoche, military engagements are depicted with great restraint. As the leader of the Canadian expedition, General G. J. Wolseley, approaches the area he talks about dividing the troops and surrounding the hostiles. In response to this plan one of his officers makes a reference to Custer and the Indians. "Who?" the general asks, just as Dumont opens fire on the column. There are approximately forty-five seconds of an actual battle scene and then both sides talk about the war. The final battle for Batoche begins with a cannon barrage on a seemingly empty town, and then the general quietly, in

an almost bored voice dripping with overconfidence, orders an infantry charge against an enemy they have not even seen yet. The general deploys the Gatling gun, and the spray of bullets hits the church building. None of the Métis defenders is injured because they are not in the church. The Métis have dug firing trenches to protect the town, and now Wolseley's infantry, caught in a cross fire, are forced to retire from the battle scene. The Métis rejoice at their victory, which will be short-lived. The movement in this scene is achieved through jump cut and cross cut edits rather than camera movement. Focus changes also redirect audience attention from character to character throughout the scene.

Wolseley and his forces finally manage to overwhelm the Métis defenses, but little death or blood is actually depicted. We hear the battle sounds as Dumont talks about the killing, but the viewer does not see the carnage. Riél surrenders and Dumont escapes. The scene shifts back to the present where Dumont and Taylor discuss Riél's final fate.

The outcome of Riél's trial for treason is a foregone conclusion. MacDonald acknowledges that no matter what they do one faction or another will be displeased, but that Riél cannot go free, because he is just too dangerous a threat to Canadian unity. He is found guilty and sentenced to hang. Even the capital punishment scene sequence is almost devoid of physical violence. Riél accepts his fate and calmly walks to the gallows accompanied by an old friend from his seminary days.

The film ends the way it began, in the present, at the Wild West show. Taylor still does not understand Riél's importance to Canadian history, but Dumont does. Dumont points out that he really has not told the reporter anything that he did not already know

except for Dumont's interpretation of the man, a judgment that Dumont is unwilling to confide. As they part Taylor says to Dumont, "The last time you saw him you said that you believed in him." Dumont looks at the reporter and then replies, "I still do." That is the message of this film, and it is presented in as understated a way as the violence. Most non-Canadians would not get the point because they would be looking for something more dramatic and more active.

An American film about an American event usually manages to reflect familiar cultural images, as does a Canadian film about Canadian events. But sometimes cross-cultural films produce some unexpected images. Most Americans can identify George Custer in a film, but few would know Louis Riél. Riél does appear as a character in a 1940 Hollywood produced film entitled North West Mounted Police. Directed by Cecil B. DeMille, this film does great injustice to Canadian history, the Northwest Mounted Police force, the Texas Rangers, and the Cree Indians.<sup>39</sup> The fictionalization of historical events happens frequently in artistic recreations. But when a fictionalized version is presented as the authentic story, the end result can distort people's perception of their history and their culture. DeMille was so concerned for the visual authenticity of his setting that he ignored the historical content of the script. Actually, he did not ignore them, he simply changed the facts to fit his story even though his publicity department vigorously denied that he had done so. The film was actually shot in California because

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<sup>39</sup>There does not seem to be a consensus over the spelling of "Northwest or "North West." Both spelling are used in various sources and both spelling were used for this film. I used both spellings following the spelling conventions of the source so the term will appear in both forms in the narrative.

shooting in the Canadian north was too expensive. DeMille's set designer, however, faithfully recreated Saskatchewan's Fort Carlson. When Samuel Wood, the North West [sic] Mounted Police commissioner, complained that, while the set was authentic, the script was historically inaccurate, DeMille simply brushed away his objections and assured him that script revisions would fix everything. William Pine, DeMille's associate producer, wrote to Wood to put his objections to rest: "I can assure you, however, of one fact. Any motion picture Cecil B. DeMille produces will be true in detail and based on fact. He never garbles or distorts history."<sup>40</sup> Mr. Pine could not have been more wrong. As Canadian historian Pierre Berton observed, "DeMille did more than twist these [the Riel Rebellion] historical facts to suit his purpose. He turned them inside out."<sup>41</sup>

North West Mounted Police tells the story of a Texas Ranger named Dusty Rivers, played by Gary Cooper, who goes to Canada to retrieve Jacques Corbeau, a fugitive from American law. Corbeau is a really nasty gunrunner who also sells whiskey to the Indians. Rivers falls in love with a Canadian beauty played by Madeleine Carroll, who is engaged to a local Mountie, Sergeant Jim Brett, played by Preston Forest, who instantly forms a great dislike for the Ranger. Carroll's character has a brother, Ronnie, played by Robert Preston, who is also a Mountie. Preston's character is secretly in love with a racially-mixed girl, Louvette, played by Paulette Goddard. The villain Corbeau steals a Gatling gun and intends to deliver it to the Indians and the Métis who are planning a rebellion.

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<sup>40</sup> A letter from Pine to Wood, July 19, 1939 as quoted in Pierre Berton, Hollywood's Canada: The Americanization of Our National Image (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1975), 149.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.



The Mountie's job is to prevent the rebellion, the Ranger's job is to retrieve the Gatling gun and the nasty fugitive, but both of them are more interested in Carroll's character than in doing their jobs. If this plot and character synopsis sounds melodramatic, that is because it is. DeMille manages to pack several stereotypical formula characters, such as the Mountie, the non-white villain, the racially-mixed woman, who is unsuitable as a love interest for the Mountie, the white woman who is the proper love interest for the Mountie, and even a Texas Ranger into this story.

Under this formula Canadian Western, Louis Riél's part in the story is a perversion of the historical reality, and he is only a bit player in the rebellion that bears his name. He is portrayed as a weak-willed pawn of the villain, Corbeau, who according to this film was the real mastermind of the rebellion. In this story, which has Corbeau in possession of the Gatling gun, most of the events depicting the 1885 rebellion are a complete reversal of the historical record. In the film's battle at Duc Lake, the Métis ambush the redcoats with their Gatling gun and kill about fifty soldiers. The scene is so relatively serene that violence is almost beside the point. As the gun spits smoke and noise, men fall off of their horses and grimace, but there is little depiction of actual wounds. The Mountie Sergeant Brett defeats Corbeau in hand-to-hand combat, while the Texas Ranger Rivers destroys the Gatling gun. Once the final showdown is over the Métis meekly return to their homes and Riél fades into the background.

DeMille wanted to make what he considered to be an entertaining movie that would bring in the paying public. He did not seem to care for historical accuracy, either

American or Canadian. The problem with DeMille's treatment of the Riél story was not that he changed the history, but that he changed the cultural message. He treated it as an American Western. The Canadian film about Riél focused on the cultural message, but to American audiences it would appear dull and plodding. The roots of the Riél Rebellion were firmly grounded in problems unique to Canadian Western expansion, just as Custer's massacre was an episode firmly attached to United States expansion.

American depictions of American history often use graphic violence to tell the story of an untamed land being settled by a group of settlers who considered themselves to be culturally superior to those already on the land. In the classic American Western little attention is paid to multicultural sensibilities. In stories such as the military conquest of the Plains Indians, plot lines generally reflect the position that dominant white society must bring civilization to the backward natives. If civilization must use violence to do this, then so be it. In Canadian treatments of Western settlement the competing values of many cultures are often part of the plot. While some stories portray one culture as superior to others, Canadian films such as Riél, offer a hope that all sides can come to a peaceful co-existence, not necessarily equal, but peaceful. In a contrast to American Westerns, most Canadian films about their West portray violence as a last resort in settling issues.

## CHAPTER 4

### GOLD :

#### VIOLENCE AND THE MINING WEST

Early explorers went West for a variety of reasons: some looking for a brief adventure and some for a more lasting reason to stay. Many found the adventure, experienced it, and then went back home. Others found the fertile land and stayed to establish new communities. Only a few discovered the West's hidden resources. They pulled from the land the gold, silver, and coal that financed and fueled technological development, not only for the Western territories, but for the entire United States and Canada as well.

Exploration was relatively simple. It could be achieved by a lone man on foot, but permanent settlement and true exploitation were more complex. They required technology and industrialization, which in turn required raw materials and consumers. Raw materials and an underdeveloped market made the West perfect for settlement and exploitation. As with most of the American frontier experiences, the industrialization of the West had its violent episodes.

The United States experienced one of its greatest waves of expansion between 1848 and 1890 as large numbers of immigrants left the war-torn, famine-stricken, or

politically unstable countries of Europe for the United States.<sup>1</sup> As in earlier migration movements, they came for a variety of reasons and with a multitude of expectations. The advertisements circulated in European villages and cities lured thousands to the American West, promising free land and unlimited opportunity, while failing to mention the need for capital to finance the new farm.

The problem of capital was doubly troublesome to the western industrialist, for he needed vast amounts of money to be successful. In the years just before and immediately after the American Civil War, the businesses that returned the highest profit and attracted the largest numbers of settlers were the industrial and mercantile businesses associated with railroad building, gold mining, and the sea trade to California.<sup>2</sup> Many eastern promoters extolled the untapped riches of the West, inviting settlers to take advantage of the riches just waiting beneath the surface. American industrialists such as William Gilpin maintained that the reservoir of western resources was unlimited and that the seemingly infinite supply of gold combined with such enterprises as the railroad would create a lucrative industrial system to replace the limited potential of the agrarian system.<sup>3</sup>

In the middle of the nineteenth century accidental miners and persistent prospectors discovered the true magnitude of the mineral wealth of Western North America. From the discovery of gold on the American River at Sutter's Mill in 1848, to the last great gold strike along the banks of the Klondike River high in the Canadian

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Slotkin, The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800-1890 (New York: Atheneum, 1985), 111.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 213.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 220.

Rockies fifty years later, mining remained a major presence on the American and Canadian frontiers.

In 1849, on foot, aboard wagons, and on horseback, thousands began the arduous overland trip from the eastern states to the new territory of California. Thousands more boarded ships for the equally difficult trip by sea from eastern seaports to the West coast, a trip that took them all the way around South America. When they finally reached the gold fields, many discovered that most of the good claims were gone and many were cheated out of their gold if they found any. Some men did get rich, not from prospecting, but from industries and occupations peripheral to mining. Peddlers, shopkeepers, saloon owners, hotels owners, laundresses, gamblers, and prostitutes who serviced the mining areas were the ones who ended up with much of the riches brought out of the ground. The early mining camps were, by all accounts, rough places to live. The earliest arrivals found no institutions of control so they created their own. In the confusion they created the economic, social, and political controls that permitted them to seek their fortunes as individuals and still enjoy some of the benefits of organized society.<sup>4</sup> To maintain order and to regulate ownership of the claims, the early mining pioneers devised their own rules of conduct known as mining law. They held meetings, elected officers, and voted on a set of operating rules. They used the combined will of the whole group to settle mining claims and to try criminal cases.<sup>5</sup> Mining justice was often harsh, swift, and violent. A

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<sup>4</sup>Rodman Wilson Paul, Mining Frontiers of the Far West, 1848-1880 (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1963, 1974), 7.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 23.

verdict of guilty brought swift punishment. The convicted man could be executed, branded, whipped, or just banished from the district. The main objective of this system of trial and punishment was to deter potential lawbreakers by confronting them with the organized force of the entire community.<sup>6</sup>

After the California discoveries, other strikes brought more prospectors to the West. In 1859 miners poured into Nevada and the new bonanza towns of Virginia City and Gold Hill to try their luck at tapping into the silver of the Comstock Lode. Between 1860 and 1880 both gold and silver were discovered in streambeds and mountainsides in Idaho, Montana, Arizona, New Mexico, and North Dakota. As early as 1875 professional mining companies began taking the place of the solitary miner with pickax and pan. As the giant industrial companies displaced the prospector and placer miner, they transformed the far West frontier into a thriving civilization.<sup>7</sup>

With each new strike, miners and those who followed them moved into areas with little or no governmental control. The federal government appointed a governor, secretary, three judges, an attorney, and a marshal for each new territory. The local community, composed primarily of a newly-arrived men who were relative strangers to one another, chose other officials for local needs.<sup>8</sup> The laws and regulations of these early mining communities mainly concerned mining claims and violence against miners. Early mining communities took the law into their own hands because they had to and were often

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>7</sup> Ray Allen Billington and Martin Ridge, Westward Expansion, A History of the American Frontier, 5th ed. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1982), 572.

<sup>8</sup> Paul, Mining Frontiers, 162.

more effective at controlling violence and crime than the organized governments that developed later.<sup>9</sup> Often, even after territorial governments formed, true law and order was still maintained more by the vigilante than the marshal. As the Cimarron News reported in the 1860s, even a legal courtroom in the mining community of Cimarron , New Mexico, was rough:

We have no power here to enforce the disarming of spectators, but it is very unseemly to have the justice room filled with partisans of either side armed to the teeth. It is entirely subversive of our old fashioned notions of the solemnity of justice , too, to have the whole court. prisoner and all -- save and except the judge -- adjourn, in the midst of a trial for life and death, to have a drink.<sup>10</sup>

Unlike other areas of the American West where the myth was often more violent than reality, the mining West truly deserved its violent reputation. The Canadian mining experience, however, did not share that violent history.

While California was attractive to the United States government even before the discovery of gold, the Canadian Federation forming in Ontario considered British Columbia important only because it blocked American expansion northward. The population of the area was low and mainly composed of Hudson's Bay employees. The discovery of gold along the Fraser River in 1857 changed the official Canadian attitude.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 163.

<sup>10</sup> Cimarron Press as quoted in David Fridtjof Halaas, Boom Town Newspapers, Journalism on the Rocky Mountain Mining Frontier, 1859-1881 (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1981), 77.

<sup>11</sup> A note on the spelling of this Canadian river: in some sources the spelling is "Fraser and in others it is "Frazer." Unless enclosed in a direct quote I will use the "s" spelling. No matter how it is spelled it is still the same river in southwestern British Columbia.

By April of 1858 thousands of would-be miners poured into the area, many directly from the gold fields of California. The Fraser strike proved to be a relatively small one, but two years later more gold was discovered in the area north of the Fraser along Williams Creek in the Cariboo region. While just as rugged and isolated as the California or Nevada gold fields, the Canadian strikes had an air of order to them that the Americans lacked.

The national government, not the local community, imposed order on the area. When British Columbia formally became a colony in August of 1858, Chief Factor Douglas became Governor Douglas with the British Navy and Royal Engineers at his disposal. He appointed a gold commissioner for each camp, an official who could collect the monthly tax and administer local justice. Matthew Begbie served as magistrate for the entire area. Canadian prospector George Ham described Begbie as both a great peacekeeper and a hanging judge: "Sir Matthew Begbie . . . administered justice with a ready and iron hand, and put fear into the hearts of those of lawless tendencies. . . . [He upheld] the dignity of the court proclaiming to all and sundry that a British court of justice, even though held under a pine tree, was not to be trifled with."<sup>12</sup>

By 1860, most of the miners moved on to other fields. The Fraser/Cariboo strike was the most orderly and least productive rush in North American history.<sup>13</sup> The relative calm and orderliness of these early Canadian strikes seemed to render them too tame to

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<sup>12</sup> Barry Gough, Canada (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1975), 82. George Ham, Reminiscences of a Raconteur, 1921, as quoted in The Canadian Style: Yesterday and Today in Love, Work, Play and Politics, ed. Raymond Reid (Toronto: Fitzhenry and Whiteside Limited, 1973), 215-216.

<sup>13</sup> Billington, Westward Expansion, 566.



serve as subject matter for the rough and tumble fiction of the gold rushes.

The small strikes on the Fraser in 1857 and in the Cariboo in 1862 paled, however, in comparison to the strikes made in the Klondike in the late 1890s. On August 17, 1896, while salmon fishing in a small tributary of the Yukon River, George Carmack found the richest gold vein in North America. According to some accounts, Carmack and his two Indian companions found as much as four dollars worth of gold nuggets in just one pan.<sup>14</sup> Carmack registered his claims and told several prospectors in the area about his find, but the rush to the Yukon did not begin immediately. One reason for the hesitation may have been George Carmack's reputation. He was married to an Indian, which in some circles was equated with untrustworthiness, and he had never before taken prospecting seriously, preferring to fish and hunt. The second reason for the delay was the difficulty involved in getting the word to the outside world. Those miners who believed Carmack moved quickly into the area, and some of them made fortunes a full year before the first of the Klondikers made their way north. By 1897 the rush had begun, and two national governments would have to establish some sort of order in the area. Both the trails northward and the gold fields themselves lay partially in Canada and partially in the United States. The Canadian authorities relied on the Northwest Mounted Police and customs officials to keep the peace, while the United States allowed some self-organized local control with the imposition of an army and judicial presence after 1898. A notice posted in Circle, Alaska, gives some idea of the local community's commitment to law and order:

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<sup>14</sup>William R. Hunt, North of 53°: The Wild Days of the Alaska-Yukon Mining Frontier, 1870-1914 (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1974), 24.

**NOTICE  
TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN**

At a general a general meeting of miners held at Circle City it was the unanimous Verdict that all thieving and stealing shall be punished by **WHIPPING AT THE POST AND BANISHMENT FROM THE COUNTRY**, the severity of the whipping and the guilt of the accused to be determined

by the Jury.

**SO ALL THIEVES BEWARE<sup>15</sup>**

There were basically only two routes to the interior of Alaska, and both routes would figure prominently in literature and films about the era. The most popular route north was the all-water passage by way of the Pacific Ocean, the Bering Sea, and up the Yukon River, a round-trip journey of approximately 4, 200 miles from Seattle to Dawson and back. Under good weather conditions the trip could take as little as forty days, but if the weather did not hold and the sea-route froze the trip could take up to as long as eight months. The ships were often overcrowded, and most were ill-suited for arctic travel. Many either sank or got trapped in ice flows along the route. The more direct route north was also the more difficult, difficulty being relative. This route was a combination of water and overland travel and was used by ten times more often by the Klondikers going north. The first leg of the journey began in Seattle, Tacoma, Victoria, or Port Townsend by ship up the Inside Passage to Dyea. Once the ship reached Dyea, each man had to beach his own gear. The price of the passage did not include landing costs. Passengers worked together to unload the ships. Once ashore each man had to arrange for packers to help him move his gear over the next stage of the trip. From Dyea the new arrivals move

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 22.

northward through rocky and forbidding Dyea Canyon and on to Sheep Camp for the first resting place before climbing over Chilkoot Pass, four vertical miles. Many men gave up rather than attempt the climb, discarding their gear and heading south. Others began the ascent one step at a time, the pace determined by the slowest climber.<sup>16</sup> The climb over the Chilkoot was often featured in Klondike films such as The Far Country (1954), starring Jimmy Stewart.

A second land route through Skagway and over the White Pass trail was supposed to be easier. It was not. True, White Pass was lower than the Chilkoot and the grade less steep as well, but in reality the trail did not exist. Klondikers who chose White Pass were faced with a boggy path that was difficult when frozen and impossible when thawed. The pathway was so narrow that traffic jams were frequent and deadly to the pack animals. The trail soon became known as Dead Horse Trail, a label it more than earned.

As difficult as the trails were, men still poured north over them trying to get to the promised gold fields on the other side. Many came but few found the riches they sought. Klondike historian Pierre Berton noted that: “[t]he statistics regarding the Klondike stampede are diminishing ones. One hundred thousand persons, it is estimated actually set out on the trail; some thirty or forty thousand reached Dawson. . . . And out of these fortunate men only the merest handful managed to keep their wealth.”<sup>17</sup> The pattern was similar to the California Rush, the Colorado Rush, and the Idaho Rush: many came not

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<sup>16</sup> Murray Morgan, One Man's Gold Rush, photographs by E.A. Hegg (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1967), 21-43.

<sup>17</sup> Pierre Berton, The Klondike Fever, The Life and Death of the Last Great Gold Rush (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974), 417.

only to look for gold, but to fleece others who came, or at least to profit in some way from someone else's search. And, as with the gold rushes that preceded this one, violence was often a part of the experience.

Many tales from the gold fields depict the violent nature of the search for gold, and often Canadian stories differed from American ones. These stories appeared in newspaper accounts, short stories, novels, and later motion pictures. The American-produced film focused on the violence of the period. Few Canadian films depicted the era at all.

One of the more popular episodes for American films was the story of the gold strike in Nome. The gold discovery in Nome differed from the those in the lower Yukon. No stream or bedrock mining there; prospectors could simply washed it from the sands on the beach. Those who had not struck it rich around Dawson poured northward once again. Klondikers going to Nome had no mountains to climb and no plains to cross, just a pleasant sea cruise to a gold-flecked beach and then they were ready to strike it rich.<sup>18</sup> Nome's problems with law and order came from the people who were supposed to represent law and order-- land office officials and a federally appointed but corrupt judge.

In Canadian Klondike towns like Dawson, miners had to follow the often strange, but fair and strict, rules laid out by the national government and enforced by the Mounties. In Nome, chaotic American democracy prevailed. Conflicting versions of local self-rule resulted in two platting of the town site and contested filings for nearly every claim. There were more than fifty saloons, thirty-three of them on the main street. Sara Fell,

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<sup>18</sup> Morgan, One Man's Gold Rush, 174.

who came to Nome at the height of the rush, described the scene before her in unenthusiastic terms: "We reached Nome, that human maelstrom at night. . . . The streets fairly swarmed with a heterogeneous mass of people. . . . Cultured , intelligent men hobnobbed with the uncultured and ignorant. The one touch of nature that made them all akin was the greed for gold."<sup>19</sup> Nome was a boom town, full of gamblers, con men, pimps, prostitutes, and, of course, miners. Everyone was out to get something. Some would work for it; others would just take it. The local newspaper, The Nome Gold Digger, warned the lawbreakers that the common citizenry was armed, organized, and ready to protect what was theirs.<sup>20</sup> The Vigilante Committee did not bring order to Nome, but then neither did a federally-appointed judge.

In July of 1900, federal judge Arthur Noyes arrived in Nome but made the situation worse.<sup>21</sup> Instead of settling false claims, the judge often sided with the claim jumpers. Later investigations proved that Noyes and Alexander McKenzie, a land promoter, were part of a conspiracy determined to lay claim to all the best sites on Nome's Anvil Creek. When the judge heard a case involving one of these claims he put the property in receivership, and appointed McKenzie as trustee with the right to sequester all the production. The rightful mine owners complained to the Appeals Court in San Francisco. Eventually the court and two United States deputy marshals restored the claims to the rightful owners and arrested McKenzie. Federal authorities removed

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<sup>19</sup> Sara Fell as quoted in Hunt, North of 53°, 112.

<sup>20</sup> The Nome Digger, 21 November 1900, *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>21</sup> Morgan, One Man's Gold Rush, 174-175.

Judge Noyes from office, found him in judicial contempt, and fined him for his part in the scheme. Federal judge James Wickersham went to Nome to repair the damage to the court's reputation and the town finally started to settle down.<sup>22</sup>

The Nome Strike was the one of last of the great Alaskan rushes. By February of 1902, prospectors were moving into the interior Alaskan Tanana valley, but the glory days were gone. The actual gold rush was over, but the Klondike and Alaskan stampedes lived on in the literary and visual creations. They still attract readers and viewers almost one hundred years later.

The California gold rush inspired some literary efforts but few films. Stories such as Bret Harte's "The Luck of Roaring Camp" paint a sentimental picture of miners and their false toughness. Although set during the California gold rush, it was written almost twenty years later and is more a study of human nature than the nature of miners. Some of Mark Twain's narrative, Roughing It, is set in the Nevada mines of the 1860s. It is a collection of tales about Twain and his brother and their experiences in the West and is mainly a description of western characters and western travel rather than a depiction of the miners and the mining towns. Twain and Harte remained famous for more literary efforts than those they produced from this brief period of their lives, and for the most part their stories did not come from their own personal experiences with the pick and the pan.

The writers who wrote stories of the Klondike gold rush, however, tended to stay forever linked to that time period and location. They lived the life and prospected in the

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

Klondike at the height of the rush. Two American authors, Jack London and Rex Beach, are often only remembered for their stories of the Alaskan gold rush, and Canadian writer Robert Service reigns as the Poet Laureate of the Yukon gold fields. These three writers gave the reading public some of the most famous narratives of the Klondike experience that have served as the basis for several plays and films depicting the era. Jack London's Call of the Wild (1902) has been the basis for at least four feature films. Rex Beach's The Spoilers (1906) has been filmed three times, and Robert Service's poem "The Shooting of Dan McGrew" (1909), as well as several other of his Yukon poems, were often featured in Canadian and American film productions.

The Call of the Wild is perhaps the most famous story about the Klondike and the Alaskan gold rush. A tale of bravery, cowardice, cruelty, and kindness, it describes the hardships and the rewards of striking it rich in the Yukon. It is a story of civilization and wilderness; it is a story about men and gold--told by a dog.<sup>23</sup>

Buck, half Saint Bernard and half Scottish Shepherd, is kidnapped from his home in California and shipped off to the Yukon where there is a shortage of sled dogs. He is caged and beaten to break his spirit and forced to learn how to survive as a sled dog. His survival depends on his adaptability. He learns how to pull in harness, make a warm bed in the snow, and defend himself against both dog and man. Buck's story of survival could well be a human's tenderfoot story. London uses his canine hero to introduce his readers to the hardship of the Yukon and to its beauty. Buck's transformation from dog of leisure

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<sup>23</sup> Jack London, The Call of the Wild, *The Portable Jack London*, ed. Earle Labor (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), 349.

to working beast mirrored the transformation of many men lured to the tundra to search for gold.

By using canine protagonists, London could say more about the human condition than was commonly considered appropriate for the era. He can also depict a level of physical violence that would be considered barbaric in humans. The dog's ethical retrogression in the story, his learning to steal without remorse and kill without pity, does not morally offend the reader because Buck is just a dog, not a man.<sup>24</sup> London managed to paint a picture of the violence of the gold fields and the struggle for existence that transcends most of the melodramatic, maudlin literature of his time and still appeal to the modern reader.

London's novel has been filmed several times, and all of the productions were titled Call of the Wild. A silent version produced by Hal Roach was released in 1923. In 1935, Twentieth Century/ Darrell Zanuck Productions released a version starring Clark Gable that focused on the John Thornton character and his search for the lost gold mine, not on Buck and his adventures. In 1972 Charlton Heston starred in an internationally produced version. In 1976 a made-for-television film starring John Beck aired, followed by a 1993 television film starring Ricky Schroder. While the early films based on the book appear to be overly-romantic portrayals of the Yukon that London was trying to avoid, the more recent productions, while editing the plot, have kept the essence of Buck's story. At least one, the 1996 television version, appeared to be more graphically violent than the

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<sup>24</sup> Alfred Shivers, "The Romantic in Jack London," Alaska Review, I (Winter, 1963): 44.



original story.

The 1972 film also focused on the human beings, thus overshadowing Buck's story. The film opens with Buck's kidnapping and his journey to the Yukon. Events that unfolded over several chapters in the novel are compressed into just a few scenes. In this film version, Buck gets quickly accustomed to his new life, and the secondary story of the rivalry between dogs is absent altogether. The depiction of Buck's human ownership is also truncated. John Thornton as played by Charlton Heston is a compilation of several characters in the novel. He is the mail contractor as well as a prospector. The story of getting the mail through in record time and Buck's introduction to the Yukon and his attachment for John Thornton are combined into one story. Visually, the film focuses on the harshness of the Yukon winter with its brutally cold weather that takes its toll on both man and dog. Much of the violence the film shows is the violence of nature.

In the film, as in the novel, after the successful mail run Thornton has no need for the team and Buck, so he allows them to be sold. The team is purchased by a trio of tenderfeet determined to make it to the gold fields ahead of their competition. They drive the dogs over unsafe terrain and force them to pull heavily-loaded and unbalanced sleds. Just as Buck is about to be beaten to death by his new masters for refusing to pull the sled across melting river ice, John Thornton reappears in his life. Thornton saves Buck, but the foolish stampedeers cross the river and drown as the ice breaks up.<sup>25</sup> The film seems to focus on this aspect of the story to illustrate the foolhardy nature of some of those who

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<sup>25</sup> The term "stampedeers" refers to the men and women who went to the Klondike during gold rush of 1890s.

came to Alaska in order to make the audience aware of the lack of individual control and the violence inherent in the frozen wilderness.

The scene in which Buck saves Thornton's life in a saloon brawl, but is arrested and tried by a miner's court gave the filmmaker a chance to depict further evidence of the potential for violence and lack of legitimate governmental control. The miners court was a phenomenon of the American gold rush and was often depicted in films as an unruly mob. Buck is acquitted and allowed to return to the trail with his master. Most of the scenes that depict Buck and his human companions are fairly short, and violence depicted in these scenes usually involves human cruelty, both to men and dogs. The majority of the scenes in the last part of the film focus on the dog. The scenes that depict Buck responding to the call of the wilderness are filmed with a leisurely pacing, with long wide-angle shots of Buck running through the snow-covered woods, romping with wolves, chasing rabbits, or hunting moose. The violence in nature is accompanied by haunting music and slightly out-of-focus images of wolves and forests.

The film ends the way the novel ends. Buck returns to camp after his moose hunt to find everyone dead. He stalks and kills the Indians responsible for his master's death and returns to join the wolf pack. The camera follows Buck as he disappears into the snowy forest, answering the howling of the wolves, the call of the wild. The violence of nature that London substituted for the violence of man is beautifully portrayed in this film as Buck takes his revenge and then disappears into legend.

An American work of Yukon fiction based on an historical incident, that has been

filmed almost as many times as Call of the Wild is The Spoilers written by Rex Beach. Just like Jack London, Beach was a young man when he headed for the Klondike. He held down a variety of jobs while he halfheartedly prospected, but left Alaska at the age of twenty-four, convinced that while it was a great adventure, he had not found a way to make it pay. As a kind of a lark, Beach tried his hand at writing a story based on tales an old prospector told him one cold night in the Yukon. To his surprise, McClure's magazine published his story and paid him fifty dollars. The owner and publisher, S.S. McClure, suggested that Beach write a novel.

Beach decided that the conspiracy between Alexander McKenzie and federal Judge Noyes to steal the richest claims in the Nome area would be a good plot. He called it The Spoilers. "All I had to do," he said, "was add a little imagination, flavor with love interest, season to taste and serve."<sup>26</sup> He also wrote a nonfiction muckraking article about the episode entitled "The Looting of Alaska." McClure's published the article but someone else, the A.L. Burt company, published the novel, which subsequently became a best seller and a Hollywood film. In fact, The Spoilers has been filmed five times. The historical events were fairly violent and the novel's treatment intensifies them by using multiple fistfights, gunfights, explosions, and a train wreck within the plot. The violence is equaled and in some instances exceeded in the film versions. Two films, released in 1914 and 1923, were silent productions. The other three were released in 1930, 1942, and 1955. In all of the filmed versions of the story, the climax is an all-out, bare-knuckle brawl between

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<sup>26</sup> Rex Beach as quoted in Hunt, North of 53°, 291.

the hero and the villain.

The Spoilers (1906) plot follows the events surrounding the illegal efforts of Alexander McKenzie, Judge Arthur Noyes, and the syndicate that backed them. The formulaic characters mirror the types of people who were there, with fictional characters interacting with historically-based ones. The hero is Roy Glenister, an educated easterner, who came West to make his fortune and stayed. His partner, Bill Dextray, is the older western figure, the man who crossed the mountains ahead of civilization and who just wants to live out his life in the freedom of the West. The saloon girl with the heart of gold is Cherry Malotte. The Bronco Kid is a shadowy figure who makes his living as a gambler and secretly loves Cherry. Comic western characters such as Slapjack, an old sourdough, also add flavor to the story. The heroine is Helen Chester, a young eastern woman who naively comes to Nome to help her uncle. The uncle is Judge Stillman, in reality one of the villains. The major villain of the story is Alexander McNamara, the mastermind of the claim-jumping scheme.

The book opens with the hero, Roy Glenister, and his partner, Bill Dextray, about to board a ship heading back to Nome after a trip south to buy mining equipment. The story begins violently with a fight on the docks as they rescue a damsel in distress who is Helen Chester, the niece of Nome's newly-appointed federal judge. Helen is alarmed by her violent reception, but proclaims, "I herald the coming of the law." Glenister, however, has little use for formally imposed order. "The law! Bah! Red tape, a dead language, and hordes of shysters! I'm afraid of law in this land; we're too new and too far away from

things. . . . I like the court that hasn't any appeal," he says, resting his hand on his holstered gun.<sup>27</sup> The older man, Bill Dextry, assures her that with the coming of the official law all will be well. "The law is the foundation--there can't be any progress without it. There is nothing here now but disorder."<sup>28</sup> Helen is drawn to Glenister's virility but repelled by his Western crudeness. He makes a pass at her, but will regret it later. "My pleasures are violent," he tells her, "and my hate is mighty bitter in my mouth. What I want I take. That's been my way in the old life, and I'm too selfish to give it up."<sup>29</sup> Helen is torn between the power of Roy's violence and what she believes to be the proper genteel relationship expected of men and women. These characters are fleshed-out versions of those in less accomplished formula Westerns.

The propensity for violence in this raw western town plagues Helen throughout the novel. Her introduction to Nome is a gunfight, in which Glenister's quick reaction rescues her from the gunmen's cross fire. Shaken but unhurt, Helen delivers her uncle's papers to his accomplice, Alexander McNamara. The documents set in motion the plot to steal the gold claims and in the process seal the fate of the two men who have been her protectors. The first major mine the conspirators go after is the Midas, which is Glenister and Dextry's claim. Unable to believe that Helen's uncle intends them harm, the two men allow the mine to go peacefully into receivership. They soon learn that even the law is not to be trusted in Nome. McNamara is not only determined to take Glenister's mine, he is

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<sup>27</sup> Rex Beach, The Spoilers (New York: A.L. Burt, 1906), 30.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

also planning to take the woman he loves, Helen. In an appeal to his contemporary audience, Beach adds sexual tension to the historical plot.

From the tone of the novel, Beach seems to be excluding the Progressive reforming impulses at work in the United States in the 1890s from the government in Nome. The supposed legal caretakers are actually looting the mine of its value instead of safeguarding it. The partners realize that they will have to fight for their mine, but they need money for either a legal or physical defense, so they devise a plan to rob their own mine. It is a dangerous plan and one that will probably result in more physical violence. If submission to the law has not brought them justice, maybe the gun will. "I'd rather die on the Midas in a fair fight than set here bitin' my hangnails," declares Dextry. Glenister gets away with the gold and manages to smuggle the lawyer, Wheaton, out on the last boat leaving for Seattle.

When Wheaton returns from civilization with a writ setting aside all the bogus claims, McNamara convinces Judge Stillman to ignore it. Legal measures being all but exhausted, the miners turn to violence to solve the problem. They form a vigilante group to take back the mines. Meanwhile, Helen tries some investigating of her own and nearly gets assaulted by McNamara's drunken, crooked lawyer, Struve. This plot is the stuff Victorian melodramas are made of, and the novel might not have survived its initial printing or been transferred to the silver screen except for the rousing climatic fight scene. The description of the fight takes six pages of text. The two men literally fight almost to the death, fist to fist, knuckle to knuckle, beating each other bloody, until the younger

Glenister finally prevails. The story ends happily: the miners get their mines back, the Bronco Kid gets Cherry Malotte, and Glenister gets Helen. The story has something for every reader: adventure, romance, and violence. It was perfect for the movies.

Stills from the first film version of The Spoilers, a silent film produced in 1914, illustrated the rebound copy of the novel I read, and the images appeared to depict scenes that followed the novel's plot closely. Another film based on the novel, produced by Frank Lloyd and directed by Ray Enright, was released in 1942. While the 1914 version appeared to follow the novel closely, the 1942 production differed greatly. The film opens with Cherry Mallotte, played by Marlene Dietrich, impatiently waiting for the boat from Seattle to dock. Because Dietrich was a top moneymaker for the Republic Pictures studio, she got top billing and Cherry becomes a more important character in the plot. As she paces, she recites a few lines from Robert Service's poem "The Shooting of Dan McGrew," a literary reference to the Klondike. The new government man in town, Alexander McNamara, the villain of the film played by Randolph Scott, has been trying to get Cherry's attention but she is waiting for Roy Glenister, played by John Wayne. While Cherry waits for Roy, McNamara tries to convince her that she is wasting her time on a loser. She does not trust McNamara and neither does the Bronco Kid, who is also in love with her. Everybody loves Cherry, and the camera loves her too. There are numerous lingering close-ups of Dietrich's face intercut between scenes of boisterous outside activity. In this film the story is more focused on the love triangle than on the Nome gold rush.

Glenister is not alone on the boat. He introduces newcomer Helen Chester, played by Margaret Lindsay, to Nome. In this film, Helen is not coy with Roy; in fact she actively pursues him. She is also part of the plot to defraud the miners. Most of the characters featured in the novel appear somewhere in the film as well. A character addition, Cherry's black maid, is a stereotypically-portrayed comic character who frets, fusses, and faints at the drop of a hat. Both the novel and this film rely heavily on formulaic characters and plot devices.

In the film Nome itself is physically changed. The town has a real dock area for the port and a railroad. Its streets are still muddy, but the community has more of a settled look about it than is described in the novel and in historical accounts of the era. Visually, it could be a California mining town rather than Alaska, and the scenic designers ignored the historic and geographic differences whenever possible. Violence, however, is still a part of the town. Once again Helen and Roy witness a gunfight in the street as they arrive in town, and the rough behavior of the saloon patrons spills out into street brawls as he takes her to a rooming house. In visual reversal of character roles from the novel, Cherry looks down on the violence in the street from her rooms above the saloon, distanced from the mayhem, while Helen is part of it.

Early in the film Cherry and Dextry figure out that the Judge and Helen are up to no good and try to warn Roy, but he does not take their warnings seriously. Roy is more interested in making Cherry jealous than protecting his mine. After having a disagreement with Cherry, Roy and Dextry go out to their mine, the Midas. In this version the mine is



much more a developed claim with many other miners in their employ, and looks more like a corporate mine than a two-man operation. The confrontation at the Midas follows the novel fairly closely. The action in the film also follows the historical accounts of some of the mine foreclosures.<sup>30</sup>

After several legal attempts to recover the mine, Roy finally decides to take it back by force since the law did not work. He and the miners vigilante group steal the train and use it to ram through the mine's defenses. The force of the crash derails the train, but miraculously most of the men are unhurt, and they fight their way into the mine. The special effects used in the train wreck sequence were amateurish, given the state of the art by 1942. The train wreck in John Ford's Iron Horse (1924) was more visually interesting. The whole scene is noisy but not bloody.

The final confrontation between Roy and McNamara produced one of the more renowned movie brawl scenes ever filmed. The sequence lasts for over five minutes as the two men fight to the finish. No one else joins in as the two men pommel each other with bare fists, literally tearing each other's clothing to shreds. This sequence is the most graphic depiction of violence in the film, and yet it still leaves the audience more tired than upset. In the film as in the novel, McNamara is totally defeated. The film ends as the victorious Roy passes out in Cherry's arms. The story of greed and corruption was well represented in the 1942 version of The Spoilers. The film does reflect the level of violence present in the historic Nome gold fields much the way the novel did.

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<sup>30</sup> Hunt, North of 53°, 22-23.

The violence of the historic gold fields was by all accounts more intense than most of the filmed versions of it. In this instance, at least, history outdid the movies. Most historians agree that the areas under Canadian control were fairly orderly. The Mounties and the customs officials kept a tight reign on the miners in their territory, while vigilante rule on the American side was often less effective at keeping order. Since glorification of personal violence was not valued by Canadian culture, neither Canadian writers nor filmmakers seemed to find the violent Klondike experience worth exploiting. But that was not true of their neighbors to the south. According to Canadian historian and critic Pierre Berton, almost all of the films using the Yukon gold rush as subject matter were produced by American companies. This list includes the following films: A Klondike Steal (Vitagraph, 1911), Code of the Yukon (Select Pictures Corporation, 1919), The Law of the Yukon (Mayflower Photoplay Corporation, 1920), The Shooting of Dan McGrew (S-L Productions, 1924), The Call of the Yukon (Paul Gerson Pictures, 1926), The Trail of '98 (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1929), Klondike (Monogram, 1932), Klondike Fury (Monogram, 1942), North to the Klondike (Universal Pictures, 1942), Trail of the Yukon (Monogram, 1949), Call of the Klondike (Monogram, 1950), Yukon Gold (Monogram, 1952), Yukon Vengeance (Monogram, 1954), and The Far Country (Universal - International, 1954).<sup>31</sup> In nearly all of these films the story may have been set in the Klondike, but action was pure formula American Western. Filmmakers seemed to feel

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<sup>31</sup> Pierre Berton, Hollywood's Canada: the Americanization of Our National Image (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1976), 247-269. These films are listed in the Filmography in this source, but except for some reference to plot in the book's narrative not much detailed information for these films was available.

that a story that worked on the prairie in 1860 also would work in the Yukon in 1890. A search conducted through the National Film Archives of Canada in Ottawa revealed that prints of many of these early silent films either no longer exist or are in too poor a condition for viewing. For many of the others, such as the Monogram series, private viewing is difficult to arrange. Some titles in the series are owned by independent television stations and are sometimes broadcast during non-peak hours. A few, such as The Far Country (1954), were big Hollywood theatrical releases and have been transferred to video tape. Berton's main criticism is that the American filmmakers got just about everything about the Canadian experience in the Yukon wrong. There was no need to have a U.S. marshal in Dawson City because the Royal Canadian Mounted Police were already there. The settlement had almost no armed robbery, few murders, an over-all low crime rate, and saloons closed at prescribed hours.<sup>32</sup> Berton further asserted that, "Law and order were maintained in British, not American fashion. . . . Crime and violence were less and security greater under the British colonial system than under the American flag."<sup>33</sup>

The Canadian Yukon experience was more fully explored in literature than film. Of all the Canadian voices from the gold fields, Robert Service is perhaps the most recognizable. Originally from Scotland, Service emigrated to Canada and took a job with a Whitehorse Bank in 1904. By the time Service got to the Yukon territory, the rush fever had settled quite a bit. "I was glad," Service reported, "I had not been one of those grim

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 214.

<sup>33</sup> Paul, Mining Frontier, 168.

stalwarts of the Great Stampede.”<sup>34</sup> He apparently liked his peace and quiet and eventually became the leading poet of the Yukon experience almost by accident.

Service liked to attend and participate in dramatic poetry readings. The editor of the town’s newspaper, the Whitehorse Star, challenged him to produce an original reading for the nightly gathering. Service went back to his office in the bank where he could work in quiet, but it was Saturday night and the noise from the local saloon drifted into the bank. Abruptly, he was startled by the roar of a pistol in his ear. The bank’s nightwatchman mistaking Service for a burglar, fired at him. When Service went back to his desk he had his theme and wrote: “A bunch of the boys were whooping it up in the Malemute Saloon. . . .” His poem told the tale of a shooting at the Malemute Saloon, and a lurid narrative of unrequited love and vengeance.<sup>35</sup> Service recited his masterpiece at a church concert. After the performance an old miner came up to Service and told him a “story that Jack London never got”--the story of a miner who cremated his partner. Service turned that story into “The Cremation of Sam McGee.” The Songs of a Sourdough, Service’s first book of poems, published in 1908, was an instant success. It was in its twentieth printing by 1909 and has never been out of print since.<sup>36</sup>

In 1924 an American film company produced a silent film melodrama based on “The Shooting of Dan McGrew.” Other films, such as The Spoilers (1942), pay homage to Service’s poems by incorporating them into the dialogue. Virtually every American and

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<sup>34</sup> Robert Service quoted in Hunt, North of 53°, 288.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 289.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 289-290.

Canadian schoolchild at one time or another has had to listen to or recite lines from “Dan McGrew” or “Sam McGee.” The Yukon experience lives on through the words of a bank teller from Whitehorse. They are a gentle reminder of the violence of the era, more powerful than graphic pictures and filmed fight scenes because they are descriptions of ordinary men in a cruel wilderness. Many a young man went north in search of adventure and gold. Some came back empty, a few struck it rich, but many more did not come back at all. Historians, novelists, and filmmakers have managed to preserve some of their experiences for future generations who missed the great adventure.

The history of mining in the American West was one filled with violence. Writers and filmmakers documenting or dramatizing the mining West did not have to invent violent episodes; they had ample material on which to base their narratives. Many American films and television series used the Yukon as the basis for a plot line. The individual seeking his own fortune and becoming a law unto himself fit nicely with the American frontier character, but many times the stories could just as easily have been set in Arizona as Alaska. Stories depicting the Canadian experience were more challenging to produce because Canadian mining history was more an exercise of orderliness and restraint than of action. The novels, poems, and firsthand accounts of the era stressed the maintenance of national control and order, values much harder to fit into an action film. As Pierre Berton noted, when American television producers wanted to use his book about the Yukon as the basis for a series about the Klondike Rush, they had to set the series in Skagway because Dawson was too tame for the story line: there was no murder,

no mayhem, and hardly any drinking. All of the staples of the formula Western seemed to be missing!<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Berton, Hollywood's Canada, 214.

## CHAPTER 5

### GO WEST YOUNG MAN :

#### VIOLENCE AND INDUSTRIAL EXPANSION

The promise of rich frontier land gave settlers a reason to go west, the expansion of the railroad gave them the means to get there. The mathematics of expansion developed by railroad promoters, such as William Gilpin, pointed out that the seemingly limitless resources of the West could best be exploited only through industrial expansion. Gilpin's vision of an industrial frontier required redefining the concept of pioneering with industrial metaphors rather than agrarian images.<sup>1</sup> By the late 1850s Western settlers, prospectors, and industrialists petitioned Congress for faster and more dependable ways of moving both information and people across the continent.

Government subsidies for conventional mail and passenger service by stagecoach proved inadequate, and national leaders finally acknowledged the need for a transcontinental railroad. Deciding on the route it would take was one of the first problems the federally supported railroad builders faced. Should it extend along a southern, northern, or central route? Eventually several major transcontinental lines built with federal subsidies connected east to west: the Union Pacific-Central Pacific

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Slotkin, The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800-1890 (New York: Atheneum, 1985), 219-220.

(completed in 1869), the Southern Pacific (1882), the Atchison Topeka and Santa Fe (1885), and the Northern Pacific (1887).<sup>2</sup> The decision to build the railroads was far easier than the construction itself.

In July of 1862 Abraham Lincoln signed the Pacific Railway Bill, legislation that provided for the two companies, one building from east to west and one starting in the west and moving east to build the first of the transcontinental lines.<sup>3</sup> Dr. Thomas Durant, a railroad promoter from Chicago, directed the early organization of the Union Pacific. He and fellow speculator Herbert Hoxie devised the Credit Mobilier scam, increasing the railroad construction costs two-fold. The road's chief engineer, Peter Dey, objected to the financial manipulation and resigned in protest. General Grenville Dodge, a capable engineer who was apparently not so bothered by the corrupt construction company, soon replaced him. The Central Pacific's chief engineer, Theodore Judah, was having similar problems with his money men as well. In 1864 the Central Pacific's Big Four, Leland Stanford, Collis Huntington, Mark Hopkins, and Charles Crocker, bought Judah out for

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<sup>2</sup> Ray Allen Billington and Martin Ridge, Westward Expansion: A History of the American Frontier, 5th ed. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1982), 581-590.

<sup>3</sup> John Stover, American Railroads (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1965), 67-68. The eastern company, the Union Pacific, was capitalized with \$100,000,000 and allowed to sell stock subscriptions for additional capital. The Central Pacific had been chartered in 1861 with a similar mandate. Both companies were allotted ten alternate sections of public land for each mile of track, increased to twenty sections in 1864. Both lines also received thirty-year government loans in United States bonds and were permitted to issue first mortgage bonds up to the amount of the loan or any other subsidies. The Great Northern, an additional transcontinental railroad line across the northern tier of states between Lake Superior and Puget sound did not receive federal loans or land grants.



\$100,000, determined to build the road their way.<sup>4</sup> The Union Pacific line began in Omaha and extended westward across the Great Plains. The Central Pacific began in Sacramento and moved eastward across the Rocky Mountains. The two lines met in Utah in 1869. If these political and economic manipulations got included in either the literature or films about the railroad, they were usually the work of fictitious villains who were not closely identified with historical figures.

Once the directors of a line chose a route, they gained the right-of-way by obtaining federal land grants. With the route secure, the monumental task of moving building materials and workers began. Many of the men who built the Union Pacific were Civil War veterans from both sides of the conflict, while others were newly-arrived immigrants, mostly Irish. The two men hired by Dodge to recruit workers and keep the pace moving were Jack and Dan Casement. The Casement brothers were small in stature but big in reputation, and they got the job done. As one observer noted, they were “as large as twelve year old boys, but requiring larger hats.”<sup>5</sup> As colorful as the Casement brothers were, characters based on them did not make it into the two major films about the building of the Union Pacific, but they were characters in Ernest Haycox’s novel, Troubleshooter (1936), which was the basis for Cecil B. DeMille’s film Union Pacific(1939).

One of the construction amenities the brothers insisted on was the boarding train.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 71-72.

<sup>5</sup> John F. Stover, A History of American Railroads (Chicago: Rand McNally & Company, 1967), 20.

It had cars that housed every service possible, from a blacksmith shop, carpenter shop, and telegraph office, to sleeping and dining quarters. To encourage faster work, the Casements offered a pound of tobacco to each member of a crew who laid a mile of track in one day, and then increased the offer to an extra half day's wages to any crew who laid a mile and a half in a dawn-to-dusk day. By December of 1866 the finished track extended 293 miles to the base camp at North Platte, Nebraska.<sup>6</sup> As the track advanced, men and materials moved out along the line, using the rails behind them as their supply route. Wherever the line stopped at any phase of the building was known as end of track. Some of the towns that grew up at the end of the tracks, such as North Platte, Nebraska, and Cheyenne, Wyoming, later developed into settled communities. Others faded into history as the railroad workers moved on. The often rough and rowdy end-of-track settlements provided a colorful setting for railroad novels and films.

While the Union Pacific found a ready supply of laborers, the Central Pacific had trouble finding men willing to work so hard for so little return. Most men in California were there to search for gold, not work. CP construction boss Charles Crocker solved his problem by hiring Chinese laborers to do the bulk of the work. Few observers believed that the slight-of-build Chinese could stand up to the strenuous work of drilling, bridge building, and tunneling through the Sierras, but they proved more than equal to the task. Before 1867 Crocker had imported over six thousand Oriental workers, many directly from Canton.<sup>7</sup> While no popular novel or major motion picture used a Chinese railroad

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>7</sup> Stover, American Railroads, 72.

worker as the focus of a film, the 1970s television Western series Kung Fu introduced a Chinese-American hero into the Western genre.

The actual construction of both railroad lines was difficult work. Some of the obstacles were geographic, some atmospheric, and others human. Building the line across the Great Plains looked simple on paper. The terrain looked relatively flat and barren, and the rivers looked to be few and far between. In reality the flat prairie land was not so flat nor barren. The thick tall grass that covered rolling hills of the plains tended to burn. Lightning from frequent thunderstorms in the summer and fall months ignited the prairie grass, sending flames across the plains devouring everything in their path. Rain turned the soil into a quagmire that made grading the roadbed and setting the ties and rails difficult. Western rivers that looked small and insignificant on a map often proved to be time-consuming obstacles. Wood beams for bridges had to be carried over completed track or freighted in by wagon because the treeless plains could not provide the raw materials. Rivers that had changed course since surveyors had drawn their maps now required bridges in unexpected places. If the land was difficult, the weather was downright contrary. The plains were extremely hot in the summer and an adequate supply of water for both men and construction needs was often a problem. In the spring and fall, frequent unpredictable rainstorms and flooded rivers hindered construction schedules. In the winter months, frozen ground, often covered by several feet of blowing and drifting snow, made work impossible.

As if nature were not enough of a problem, the railroad builders also had to

contend with human obstacles. The native tribes living on the Great Plains were unhappy about the coming of the Iron Horse. Americans often violated treaties and agreements made with the various tribes, resulting in frequent and costly Indian raids on railroad camps that killed railroad workers and delayed construction. Most Western movies that featured scenes of a train trip included at least one Indian attack on the railroad. Eventually the railroad builders, backed by the United States Army, prevailed against the Indians. The completion of the transcontinental railroads was a major factor in the demise of the Plains Indians and their way of life.

Building the Central Pacific section of the line consumed valuable time and money. Difficult construction in the mountains and across the rugged terrain of the Great Basin presented different challenges from those of the Great Plains. Deep gorges had to be bridged and tunnels blasted through solid rock. Frequent snowstorms and avalanches made construction in the winter months almost impossible. When the tracks reached the Nevada deserts the crews faced a whole new set of problems: water shortages, sand storms, and searing heat. In spite of all these obstacles, by late 1868 the Central Pacific's tracks extended well across Nevada and approached Utah from the West. Meanwhile, the Union Pacific had finally moved through Wyoming and entered Utah from the east. In the first few months of 1869, the two rival companies actually passed each other with parallel lines of forward grading. This competition between the two lines became a plot device in several railroad building films. After federal authorities dictated a meeting place for the two lines, workmen and company officials completed the job in a highly publicized

ceremony on May 10, 1869. When news of the golden spike ceremony at Promontory Point, just outside of Ogden, Utah, reached the East, celebrants dropped a magnetic ball from a pole on top of the Capitol's dome, conducted a four-mile parade in Chicago, and rang dozens of firebells in San Francisco. Bret Harte, a newspaper editor and short-story writer, even wrote a poem to celebrate the scene. The United States' manifest destiny dream of a transportation link for the nation stretching from ocean to ocean had been achieved.

Expansion of railway transportation systems into western territories brought about a number of changes. Railroads made it easier for larger numbers of potential settlers, miners, and tradesmen to move west. Railroads encouraged settlement and enterprise, but sometimes caused damage as well. Presence of the railroad meant that people could move places they had never considered before, but most had little understanding of the ability of the land to support the kinds of farming they had practiced where they used to live. They could settle in places that looked empty but already inhabited by people with a different way of looking at the land and a different way of using the natural resources. Railroads encouraged travel. The rich could visit the West in relative comfort. Travelers such as Florence Leslie, wife of publisher Frank Leslie, went west to see the sights and have an adventure. Safely ensconced in a Pullman car, with linen and china service and round the clock servants, Florence Leslie marveled at the immigrants she met at the station in Omaha, describing the scene as if she were viewing a different species:

Returning to the station we found the platform crowded with the strangest and most motley groups of people it has ever been our fortune to encounter. Men in alligator boots, and loose overcoats made of blankets and wagon rugs, with wild unkempt hair and beards, and bright resolute eyes, almost all well-looking, but wild and strange as denizens of another world. . . . [W]omen looked tired and sad, almost all of them were queerly dressed, in gowns that must have been their grandmothers', and with handkerchiefs tied over their heads in place of hats.<sup>8</sup>

Robert Louis Stevenson, who rode in the immigrant cars when he crossed the United States, had a different experience from Mrs. Leslie's:

I suppose the reader has some notion of an American railroad-car, that long, narrow wooden box, like a flat-roofed Noah's ark, with a stove and a convenience one at either end, a passage down the middle, and transverse benches upon either hand. Those destined for emigrants on the Union Pacific are only remarkable for their extreme plainness. . . . The benches are too short for anything but a young child.<sup>9</sup>

Whatever their experience or circumstance, whether in the luxury of first class or discomfort of the second-class car, thousands of people--new immigrants and lifelong Americans alike took trains to the West. While the coming of railroads to the West encouraged the growth of Western agriculture, the expansion of mineral mining, and the rise of the cattle industry, it also hastened the destruction of the bison, the demise of the Plains Indian culture, and the closing of the American frontier. Expansion of the railroads also gave writers, novelists, and filmmakers subject matter for countless stories about trains and the West, and as with other western tales they contained a good bit of violence.

Railroading in the early days of expansion was dangerous, more so for workers

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<sup>8</sup> Florence Leslie, "A Pleasure Trip from Gotham to the Golden Gate," We Took the Train, ed. H. Roger Grant (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1990), 35.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Louis Stevenson, "By the Way of Council Bluffs," We Took the Train, 53.

than for passengers. Six times as many railroad workers were killed or injured in accidents than passengers, and most of them were engineers or firemen. In addition to the common problems of loose rails or washouts, western railroad workers also faced some unique dangers, such as buffalo on the tracks and drunken cowboys in the towns.<sup>10</sup> Railroaders also had to be on the lookout for another danger--train robbers. Stagecoach robbing already enjoyed a long tradition along wagon roads. Lone bandits or small groups of men preyed on freight companies such as Butterfield, Wells Fargo, and others, sometimes stealing from passengers, but more often hijacking gold and silver going east and minted money going west.<sup>11</sup> As trains gradually took over as the major source of transportation for both people and freight, robbers transferred their attention to them. The excitement of a holdup appealed to many people, who wrote songs and poems in honor of the outlaws, which sold thousands of copies. Because of railroad abuses in the East many people had no sympathy for the railroad and saw the train robbers as popular heroes rather than villains.<sup>12</sup> With so much potential for dramatic portrayal, trains and train travel often figured prominently in Western novels and films; the train brought the hero, heroine, or the villain to town; the coming of the railroad created a town or destroyed it. Sometimes stories recounted the antics of men and women who robbed the trains or those who hunted the robbers. Outlaws who preyed on the railroads, such as the James boys and the

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<sup>10</sup> Dee Brown, Hear That Lonesome Whistle Blow, Railroads in the West (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1977), 171.

<sup>11</sup> Sarah H. Gordon, Passage to Union: How the Railroads Transformed American Life, 1829-1929 (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1996), 163.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

Dalton gang, became the folk heroes of pulp fiction. In nearly all cases, the stories were violent tales of the struggles to civilize, or more accurately, industrialize the far West.

Edwin S. Porter's The Great Train Robbery (1903), filmed in the wild West of New Jersey, gave the eastern viewing public their first glimpse of the excitement and violence of a western train robbery. According to film historian Kenneth Macgowan, it was the first film to exploit the violence of an armed crime, a plot element that has not changed since then.<sup>13</sup> Establishing their outlaw status, the robbers terrorize the station clerk before they ever get around to attacking the train. To emphasize the callousness of these villains, Porter has them throw one of the workers from the moving locomotive. In an equally violent scene, the robbers escape with the loot, but one of them is gunned down by pursuing townsmen. The final sequence of the film is a chase in which the actors shoot at each other and fall from their horses. As Jon Tuska points out, "[i]f the horse chase in The Great Train Robbery seems awkward, this must not be blamed totally on Porter. His riders were inexperienced, and it was the first such sequence."<sup>14</sup> The posse finally catches-up with the robbers in the woods and captures them after a prolonged gun battle. The Great Train Robbery firmly established the sequence of violent crime, getaway, chase, and retribution by gunplay as the action canon of the Western film.

Director John Ford used railroad building as the central plot device in his 1924 silent film, The Iron Horse. According to the film's dedication, it was produced:

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<sup>13</sup> David Cook, A History of Narrative Film (New York: W.W. Norton, 1990), 25.

<sup>14</sup> Jon Tuska, Filming the West, (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1976),5.



To the honour and memory of George Stephenson, the Scottish engineer, and to the men of every nationality, who have followed in his footsteps since England led the way by opening the first railroad in 1825. Accurate and faithful in every particular of fact and atmosphere is this pictorial history of the building of the first American transcontinental railroad.<sup>15</sup>

It may have been dedicated to the history of railroad expansion, but in terms of accuracy it proved to be less than faithful. As one critic noted, "Ford paid scant attention to the few historical events that he did recreate accurately."<sup>16</sup> Scenes such as the one depicting a track laying race ending with ten miles of track being laid in one day were historically accurate. The race really did occur, and it set a building record that was unbroken when the film was made. But in the film the race seems to be a narrative afterthought. Some historical figures, such as General Dodge and Abraham Lincoln, appear briefly in the narrative, but essentially it is the story of the anonymous dreamers who made Western expansion possible. The Iron Horse is a rousing story full of chases, death, violence, villainy, and finally triumph for the hero and the railroad. The hero, Davy Brandon, played by George O'Brien, not only has to track down his father's killer, the three-fingered rancher Bauman, played by Fred Kohler, but woo the heroine, Miriam, played by Madge Bellamy, and finish building the railroad, all at the same time.

This early John Ford film does portray the violent aspects of the era with great visual style. Several sequences in the film demonstrate the hardship, sacrifice, and danger of working on the line: Indian attacks, death, and derailments. The ending, however,

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<sup>15</sup> As quoted in The Internet Movie Database, LTD, 1990-1998, (us.imdb.com).

<sup>16</sup> George N. Fenin and William K. Everson, The Western, from Silents to the Seventies, A New and Expanded Edition (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1973), 139.

downplays the violence it took to get the railroad built and glorifies the historical dream of western expansion, a dream replayed over and over in other films depicting the building of the western railroads. These films link the railroad with American nationalism and frontier expansion. The empty plains are forever altered by the smoking train moving across the landscape. Cultural historian Leo Marx believed that American pastoral ideals developed into a strange and ambiguous idea of history, an idea that offered clear sanctions for conquering the wilderness, improving on nature, and encouraging economic and technological growth.<sup>17</sup>

In 1939, fifteen years after John Ford's The Iron Horse, Cecil B. DeMille produced Union Pacific in an attempt to bring the epic of railroad building to the screen. The film, based on Ernest Haycox's novel Trouble Shooter, tells the story of railroad expansion intertwined with a love story, the conflict between those who want to build for the future of the country, and those who only want to exploit the land. Haycox's novel is a historically inspired account of the construction of the Union Pacific railroad. He used historical figures when appropriate, but his hero, heroine, and villain were characters from his imagination. The film based on the novel changed some of the character relationships and eliminated nearly all of the historical figures. The hero, railroad troubleshooter Jeff Butler, played by Joel McCrea, is sent to the end of the track to stop the sabotage that is delaying the progress of the line. The heroine, an engineer's daughter, Molly Monahan, played by Barbara Stanwyck, and one of Jeff's friends, Dick Allen, played by Robert

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<sup>17</sup> Leo Marx, The Machine in the Garden, Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), 226.

Preston, are also there. The audience knows what the railroaders do not: that corrupt politicians and businessmen have conspired to delay the building for their own profit. Backed by these men in Washington, the villain, Sid Campeau, played by Brian Donlevy, enlists Dick's help in his scheme to ruin the Union Pacific. The principle that western expansion cannot be stopped by a few evil men, no matter what violent means they use, seems to be at the heart of the narrative.

The film firmly establishes that the building of the railroad will involve violence. The sequence that introduces Jeff Butler to the story features an Indian attack on a passenger train heading west toward Cheyenne, the end-of-track town. Jeff joins the train by leaping from his horse onto the caboose in the midst of the attack. Campeau, Dick Allen, and several other crooked gamblers are already on the train. Campeau and his gang are far more damaging to the progress of the railroad than mere Indians. No sooner is Jeff on the train than he has a fistfight with one of the gamblers and ultimately throws the villain off the train. The first scene in Cheyenne features the killing of an unarmed railroad worker in a crooked card game. Scene for scene, the depiction of violence in Union Pacific seems to be greater than in The Iron Horse.

DeMille is even less careful about historical accuracy than Ford. Almost as an afterthought to the history of the era, DeMille includes several building sequences depicting the actual work, such as anonymous men laying track, grading the roadbed, and building bridges, while nondescript women cook and wash clothes in makeshift camps at the end of track. These mundane scenes filled with extras act as a story bridge to the

more violent action scenes involving the lead actors. This treatment is in stark contrast to the novel, which spends a good deal of exposition describing the building process.

Several expressively dramatic action scenes demonstrate the hardships and dangers of railroading, some human in origin, and some caused by the environment. The first is the sequence depicting the payroll robbery. Several trainmen are either killed or wounded in the attack on the train, demonstrating the on-the-job dangers. A second violent sequence follows the train robbery. Indians attack and derail the unlucky train, trapping Jeff, Molly, and Dick. The suggestion of danger and violence is more compelling in this scene than the actual depiction of it. Most of the battle is characterized by off-screen gunshot sound effects. Little blood is visible and only the Indians die, mostly off camera of course. Danger still lurks and doom is apparent in the scene that takes place in the wreckage of the railway car as the characters discuss imminent death. Jeff saves the last three bullets for Molly, Dick, and himself. In true Hollywood fashion, the cavalry rides to the rescue and the story moves on to yet another climactic scene. A third scene depicting the danger of railroading is a construction scene. In an effort to beat the Central Pacific through Utah the construction crews work through the winter months. With the track stalled sixty miles away from Ogden, railroad construction engineers and the troubleshooter decide to lay rails on the ten-foot snowpack so that the line can go around the mountain obstacle and move on toward the meeting point with the Central Pacific line.

The test of the track's stability is left to Molly Monahan's father, the senior engineer, and to Jeff, the troubleshooter. Monahan and Jeff ease the train across the

snowpack, but in a spectacular sequence the locomotive derails and tumbles down the mountain side. Jeff is thrown clear, but Monahan is pinned in the wreckage and dies. The workers repair the track and in homage to the dead engineer they try to move the train again. This time the engine passes over the track and the train moves on to Ogden and the meeting at Promontory Point. The final sequence of the film is not so much about finishing the railroad as it is finishing off the villain. Even as the two locomotives of the Union Pacific and Central Pacific inch toward each other, Campeau hides in the crowd looking for a chance to shoot Jeff. Dick Allen takes the bullet instead, which saves his old friend, releases Molly from her marriage promise, and frees her to marry her true love, Jeff. Visually, DeMille ends the film by shifting the scene from the shooting to the meeting of the trains with the image dissolving into a picture of a modern (1939) train speeding off into the future.

In neither The Iron Horse nor Union Pacific did the filmmakers question the history of American industrial expansion. They accepted the theme of national development as though ultimate progress had already occurred.<sup>18</sup> Both films, and the western stories on which they were based, used the history of western development as a violent, yet romantic, exercise. In addition, both films used the railroad as more of a plot device than central subject matter. Other western literature and films used the railroad differently.

While the western novel has been a staple of American pulp fiction since the late

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<sup>18</sup> Fenin and Everson, The Western, 143.

nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, plots usually did not feature the railroad except in one sub-genre. From about 1890 to 1930, the railroad school of fiction turned out thousands of stories and novels that popularized railroads and railroaders. During this time period the general public held the locomotive engineer in the same kind of awe and respect that today would be accorded to an astronaut.

Frank Spearman, a bank president from McCook, Nebraska, wrote some of the best of these stories. Several stories from his second published work, entitled Held For Orders (1901), have been the basis for silent films. Whispering Smith, a book he wrote in 1906, remains his most well-known work today and still holds the all-time sales record for a railroad novel.<sup>19</sup> The plot structure is similar to that of The Virginian (1902), written by Owen Wister at about the same time period. Whispering Smith is a railroad detective whose sole mission is to safeguard the railroad. His job includes tracking down train robbers and seeing that all of the passengers and freight arrive at their destinations intact. The railroad, not Smith, is the primary focus of the novel. The story features five main characters: the hero, Whispering Smith; his long lost love, Marion Sinclair; the local railroad manager, George McCloud; McCloud's newfound love, Dicksie Dunning; and the villain of the story, Murray Sinclair, a railroader gone bad, who is Marion's estranged husband. The novel highlights the dangerous side of railroading as it describes many violent scenes involving gunfights, derailments, fistfights, floods, avalanches, and fires.

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<sup>19</sup> According to book advertisements released by the Paper Tiger Press for the reprint of Whispering Smith, Railroad specialty newsletter Railroadana Express reported the claim that Whispering Smith was the all-time best seller for a railroad novel, but the release did not include the actual sales figures.

There were two silent film versions of Whispering Smith, one released in 1915, the second in 1926. A 1948 filmed version was Alan Ladd's first color Western. Unlike the novel, the 1948 film made Whispering Smith the main focus of the story. Smith still comes to town to stop a series of train robberies and derailments caused by Sinclair's gang, but in the film the villain and Marion are still married and he and Smith are still friends. Even with changes to the plot line, the main focus of the story is still the integrity and safety of the railroad. Whispering Smith, as did many other late 1940s Westerns, kept overt displays of violence offscreen and left the viewer to imagine it. Even when train robbers shoot Smith during a robbery scene, the audience sees little evidence of blood. The whole sequence is rather antiseptic when compared to the description of the same event in the novel. Part of the reason for this absence of gore may lie in the reality of the times. World War II had just ended and most of the troops had returned home with real violence and bloodshed fresh in their memories. Westerns offered hometown audiences familiar, patriotic, escapist entertainment.

This film, unlike others about the railroads of the West, tries to depict the day-to-day activities of railroad operations. Smith makes it clear that his first allegiance is to the railroad, and if he must use force to ensure that the trains arrive on time and with no interference, then he will. By the end of the film, as in the novel, Smith has had to use the ultimate western violence, the gunfight, to help make Wyoming a safe place for the railroad.

While the films discussed here depict some of the violence and hardships of the

American western railroad experience, they do not translate well into the Canadian experience. Building the Canadian Pacific Railroad was physically just as difficult as building the American Union Pacific but it seemed to be less chaotic and violent. The history of the building of the Canadian Pacific Railway is the story of Western Canadian expansion. Early arguments made by men determined to see Canadian influence spread from the Atlantic to the Pacific universally contained a warning. If Canada did not build a transcontinental railway system and unite the dominion, the United States would be in a position to annex most of the Western Canadian territories. In fact, the agreement that brought British Columbia into the confederation promised the province a railroad.

Construction began on the Canadian Pacific Railway in 1881. George Stephen and Donald Smith supplied the capital, while Rogers Fleming and William C. Van Horne provided the engineering and building skills. Prime Minister Sir John MacDonalD brought the political power. By 1885 the line stretched well onto the Western prairies but construction halted when the company went bankrupt and the government would not advance it any more money. The Riél Rebellion in Saskatchewan highlighted the need to finish the line and the government reluctantly agreed. On November 7, 1885, Donald A. Smith, senior director of the line, drove the last spike at Craigellachie, British Columbia, to commemorate the completion of the road. On June 28, 1886, the first coast-to-coast train left Montreal and reached Port Moody, British Columbia, on July 4, 1886.

The presence or absence of the railroad often determined the course of settlement. Before the railroad route included Calgary, Alberta, it was only a North West Mounted



Police post and a stopping point on the crude road between Fort Benton, Montana, and Edmonton, Alberta. By December 1883 the Canadian Pacific Railroad connected Winnipeg and Calgary with the eastern provinces. The CPR assured the town's growth and its own financial stability through the sale of railroad land to new settlers.

The completion of the main trunk line did not mean the end of Western railroad building. The silver strikes in the Kootenays and the gold strikes in the Klondike highlighted the need to extend the line to other areas. The silver strike in the Kootenays and the pressure from the American-controlled Vancouver, Victoria & Eastern Railroad prompted the building of the Kettle Valley Railway.<sup>20</sup> None of these events seemed film worthy as plots for feature films.

Most western Canadian fiction, whether written literary works or films, featured the railroad as one way to get to the West. In 1949 Hollywood tried to use the building of the Canadian Pacific Railroad as the basis for a co-produced American-Canadian motion picture. The resulting film reinvented the Canadian experience. One problem with completely rewriting an historical event within a literary or cinematic plot is that the book or film can produce cultural confusion for the audience. Unfortunately for Canadian history, the film entitled Canadian Pacific did just that. Starring Randolph Scott, it was basically the same story as The Iron Horse and Union Pacific, only set in Canada. The CPR story was interesting but not necessarily exciting, so the producer and writers simply

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<sup>20</sup> Building on the Kettle Valley Railway did not begin until 1910 and it was not until May 13, 1915 that the first passenger train traveled along its tracks. The entire road was not completed until July 31, 1916.

changed it. The resulting film was an mediocre Western, whose plot bore little resemblance to the events surrounding the building of the railroad across western Canada. Canadians, who pride themselves on the orderly nature of westward expansion, were confronted with a violent reinvention of their history. As a depiction of violence, it exceeded both The Iron Horse and Union Pacific. In this film, as in the other two, the man most responsible for the successful completion of the railroad is a lone troubleshooter, Tom Andrews, played woodenly by Randolph Scott. At the beginning of the film, Andrews is given his orders by the railroad owners: do whatever it takes to get the road completed. He takes them seriously. In almost every scene Andrews is involved in some sort of confrontation or violent act, all committed in the name of railroad law and duty. It seems that Andrews cannot walk into a saloon without beating or shooting someone. In one early scene he arrives in the end-of-track camp and confronts a man who presumably has done something evil that the audience is unaware of, savagely beats him , and even kicks him when he is down, and then, for good measure, throws him out of camp. His audience for this display includes Cornelius Van Horne, a railroad official, played by Robert Barrat. Van Horne wholeheartedly approves of the tactics. "He's the best trouble boss in the country," he says.

The historical William Cornelius Van Horne would probably not have approved of the action. He prided himself on running a tight, orderly operation and personally took charge of the building process without relying on trouble bosses. When the CPR lagged behind in western construction in late 1881, executive committee member James J. Hill

asked American railroader Van Horne to come to Canada. Van Horne was then the general superintendent of the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul Railroad. Hill and the rest of the CPR executives offered Van Horne the post of general manager of the line. Hill warned the Canadians that Van Horne would get the job done but in his own way: "He will take all the authority he gets and more, so define how much you want him to have."<sup>21</sup> Van Horne's reception in Canada was at first icy. As one British Canadian surveyor reported, "We did not like Van Horne when he first came up to Winnipeg as General Boss of Everybody and Everything. His ways were not our ways and he did not hesitate to let us know what he thought of the bunch in a general way."<sup>22</sup> Within two years, by August of 1883, Van Horne had advanced the line over 600 miles west of Winnipeg with few disturbances. Van Horne's peaceful accomplishments contrast sharply with the movie trouble boss who could not make it from horse to train without a fight.

The film is filled with scenes where halting railroad construction through violence is the central focus. The fur trappers want the railway stopped even though in reality railroad officials changed the original northern route of the line through trapping country to a more southern route. Indians want to stop the trains and Indian attacks are a major problem in the film. The historical CPR avoided most of the troubles with the native populations that plagued the American railroads. Van Horne, aided by Catholic missionary Father Lacombe, negotiated with the Blackfoot Indians, the most powerful

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<sup>21</sup> W. Kaye Lamb, History of the Canadian Pacific Railway (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1977), 83.

<sup>22</sup> J.H.E. Secretan as quoted in *ibid.*, 84.

tribe in the area, for a right-of-way. As a sign of good faith, the railroad gave Father Lacombe and Blackfoot Chief Crowfoot lifetime free passes on the railroad and transported all supplies for the mission free of charge.<sup>23</sup> In the film, however, the Indians present a violent threat to the railroad, one that Andrews must meet with more violence.

In the midst of all this conflict, Andrews still has time to fall in love. As in the two American railroad films, the Canadian version also has a romantic subplot. Here the romantic interest is a young woman, Edith Cabot, played by Jane Wyatt, who tries to convince Andrews that he is too violent and should put up his guns in favor of reasoning with the bad guys. The hiatus from violence does not last long, however, because the hero must react to a brawl and gunbattle in the end-of-track saloon. Andrews is forced to shoot the nefarious bartender and close the place down so that the hard working railroad crew can continue laying track.

Besides the over-dependence on violence to move the plot, this portrayal distorts Canadian history. The reality of life in the Canadian end-of-track camps was that saloons and gambling were illegal, no one wore a gun, and the enforcement of law and order was the province of the Northwest Mounted Police. No Mountie is to be seen anywhere in this film. American and Canadian railroad building conditions differed dramatically but filmmakers ignored those differences. The American concept of the violent frontier, conquered by a lone violent hero, continued in American-produced films about western Canada.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 87-88.

<sup>24</sup> Berton, Hollywood's Canada, 211.

In 1975 the Canadian Broadcasting Company and its film division produced a multipart television miniseries about building the Canadian Pacific, entitled The National Dream. The script for the film was based on the two-volume history of the railroad: The National Dream: The Great Railway, and The Last Spike, written by Canadian popular historian Pierre Berton. The major emphasis in both Berton's books and the film series was that the Canadian railway was built by men of vision and economic courage who only resorted to violence at the end of the building process because a rebellion was thrust upon them.

The last episode in the series opens in March of 1885 with the Riel Uprising. The drama depicts this episode of Canadian history as the nation's first war and a test for the CPR. If the government will help the railway company finish the final three unfinished sections of the line, the CPR will take soldiers west to put down the uprising. The most violent part of this series is not the Riel uprising. It is the arduous journey of the Canadian soldiers as they travel by open cargo car, sleigh, horseback, and on foot to Saskatchewan to safeguard the Dominion. The men struggle across a frozen landscape, suffering from frost bite and snowblindness. The emphasis here is on the valor of the men and the need to finish the railway, not the violence they would face in the Rebellion, which by the way took place in May, not December. As a depiction of Canadian history, this film is informative and entertaining. It uses brief vignettes to illustrate the story, but the narrative depends on dialogue rather than action to develop the plot. The most compelling scenes in the film are the sequences depicting the movement of troops west to fight in the Riel

Rebellion. While this depiction did not have to depend on violence, as perhaps an American version would have, it also did not have to be so dreary that the audience ceased to care whether or not the railway ever got completed.

This film points to the fundamental difference between what an audience expects to see in an American Western and what Canadian audiences are comfortable with in a Canadian Western. American audiences seem to expect a Western to be filled with activity. Some of the on-screen activity can actually be a result of the filmmakers edit pacing. For example, the editor may include several cuts within a sequence to indicate the passage of events and to increase the viewers excitement.<sup>25</sup> An example of this would be the frequent chase scenes that often occur in most any formula Western. Canadians seem to be more comfortable with films that feature dialogue and long sequences of visual exposition in which little physical action occurs. In both cases, content of scenes and the pace of editing techniques play a significant role. In most of the American Westerns discussed in this study the length of a shot between edit moves corresponded to the peak of the audience interest curve. By this procedure I mean that the edit shift was made either just at the peak of the moment when the viewer had completely visually explored the image on the screen. He had seen all there was to be seen, interpreted it, and reached the point to move on.

The content of a scene also played a part in the edit decision. In most Westerns, scene content involved movement or action: the cowboy riding his horse across a prairie,

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<sup>25</sup> Karel Reisz and Gavin Millar, The Technique of Film Editing, 2nd ed., (London: Focal Press, 1984), 241-243.

a train speeding across the prairie, cattle stampeding across the prairie, or Indians chasing a wagon train across the prairie. The movement from element to element within the scene could be enhanced by editing cuts that constantly reinforced the movement by changing the perspective of the viewer to the action, such as a wide-angle long shot of the beginning of a chase scene, then a cut to a close-up of a rider's face, then a long shot showing both the rider and his pursuers, all within a few seconds of film run-time at the peak of the interest curve.

Contrast this film viewing experience with one that is used in many Canadian films, one that employs a different approach to content and edit movement. If the scene is allowed to proceed past the peak of the interest curve, viewers often tend to allow their attention to wander as they anticipate the next image. If the scene contains static images, such as two men sitting in a room talking or two Indians watching a river flow by, the viewer can begin to create his own story until an edit change moves the film along. While this example may seem oversimplified, it illustrates some differences in American and Canadian artistic and technological filmmaking techniques.

Another example to illustrate this difference is a more recently Canadian produced film, The Grey Fox (1983), that used the railroad as part of its plot. This venture was not a film about railroad building, but instead the story of a man who robbed trains. The film dramatizes the later life of Bill Miner, known to the Pinkerton detectives who chased him for years as "The Gentleman Bandit." Miner started out robbing stagecoaches and supposedly originated the practice of having those being robbed hold their hands in the air.

“Raise your hands, please,” he said to people as he robbed them. Produced by a joint United States-Canadian production team through United Artists, the film stars Richard Farnsworth as the transplanted American robber who goes to Canada and is changed by the country and the people he meets there.

The film opens in 1901 as Miner is released from the California penitentiary after serving a thirty-three-year sentence for robbing stagecoaches. The world has changed and Miner finds that he cannot cope. He tries to hold down a job while living with his sister's family in Washington State but eventually returns to the only occupation he perfected, highway robbery. With the stagecoach gone, Miner must now learn how to rob trains. He and an accomplice try to rob a train in Oregon, but his young helper makes a mistake and shoots one of the train guards. During his stagecoach robbing career, Miner took pride in never killing or wounding anyone he robbed. But train robbery is different. The robbers confront a more formidable technology. Trains are harder to stop than stagecoaches. The baggage car attendants refuse to give up the cash without a fight. Miner's young helper panics, and amidst the smoke and steam from the train fires blindly into the car, hitting one of the mail guards. Miner is identified as the robber and has to flee the area. He and his accomplice, Shorty Dunn, head north to Canada, settling finally in Kamloops, British Columbia.

The film follows Miner's efforts to blend into his new surroundings, but influences from the past threaten to force him back into a life of crime. He takes a new name, but old enemies are not far away. Miner makes new friends in the community as well. He



meets Kate Flynn, played by Jackie Burroughs, who is a photographer, a feminist, and a spinster. "This is a country in transition," she says, "filled with beauty and despair." This would be a good description of Miner as well. She and Miner strike up a friendship that blossoms into a love affair.

Brief scenes indicate the violence that lies just under the surface of Miner's life: stealing horses, rustling cattle, and getting irritated with Shorty's mistakes. The editing, pacing, action, and dialogue are extremely restrained, and most of the action sequences involving violence are filmed in such low light levels that the audience almost has to strain to stay with the story. Even the sequence that depicts a multiple murder in the Chinese railroad workers camp is almost antiseptic rather than visually graphic. The crime takes place off camera, and all the audience sees is blood stains on tent walls and out-of-focus bodies on cots. Miner and Flynn photograph the scene for the local Mountie, Sergeant Fernie, and after the incident Fernie and Miner become friends. It is the Mountie who finds a way to warn Miner that the Pinkerton detectives are on his trail.

Miner decides that he and his train robbing friends will have to leave Kamloops but they will try for one last train robbery. The robbery sequence again takes place in the dark. The only point of light is the smoke trailing across the black sky as the train passes through the nighttime countryside. The ambient noise of steam and wheels against track makes the dialogue difficult to hear. In terms of execution, this train robbery does not go any better than the one in Oregon; the bandits stop the train but find no money or gold to steal. All they get for their trouble is a bottle of kidney pills and a place on the Mountie's

top ten most-wanted list.

The Pinkertons pursue Miner and the Mounties pursue Miner. The stylized chase sequence is shot in black and white with visual effects to make it look like an old silent film. The filmmakers even include some footage from Porter's The Great Train Robbery. The Mounties do what the Pinkertons could not: they capture Miner and his accomplices and take them back to Kamloops for trial. All three get lengthy prison sentences, much to the dismay of Miner's local friends. The ending of the film distinguishes it from a typical American Western. The three convicted felons are sent off to prison, on a train of course, with the townspeople cheering, a band playing, and flags waving. On-screen script reveals Miner's ultimate fate to the audience. He escapes from prison, leaves Canada, marries Kate Flynn, and presumably lives happily ever after.

The railroad serves as Miner's nemesis. It has come to the West and changed it. According to The Grey Fox, technology made robbery a more violent activity. But nowhere in this film does the audience get the impression that Miner is comfortable with the force needed to steal from trains instead of stagecoaches. He keeps trying to be a nonviolent train robber. Even while trying to evade the Mounties, he seems to respect Canadian law enforcement, a respect that the Canadian audience understands.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Gregory Gutenko, Identification with and Saliency of Violent Media Models: A Comparison between Canadian and American Subjects, Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the University Film and Video Association (June, 1989), ERIC Document Number ED311516. Gutenko conducted a study of American and Canadian viewer responses to aggressive behavior exhibited by television and film characters. "Results from the fifth scene (from the Canadian film 'The Grey Fox') indicated that Canadian males approved of the Mounted Police more strongly on a majority of word variables than American males, American females, and Canadian females."

Building both the American and Canadian transcontinental railroads required long, arduous, violent work. When Hollywood told the story, filmmakers highlighted individual violence and national conflict above the mundane job of building. Robbing trains in an American film was a violent action punishable by instant death at the hands of a posse or a slower one by hanging if convicted by the community. When Canadian filmmakers depicted the railroads they stressed the economic benefits and national pride in a difficult job well done and downplayed the problems.

## CHAPTER 6

### WEATHERED BLOSSOMS:

#### WOMEN, VIOLENCE, AND THE WESTERN ENVIRONMENT

The geography of the American and Canadian West and the experiences of immigrants were similar, but agreement about the region by contemporaries and historians was rare.<sup>1</sup> Differences in cultural values overshadow the similarities in the physical conditions of their respective patterns of settlement.<sup>2</sup> In many historical accounts of United States expansion when Americans moved west observers framed the rhetoric in terms of conquest. They described people going west to carve out a new existence or to conquer the land. Canadian writers offered reasons for western settlement that appeared to be quite different from those attributed to the American western expansion movement. Some Canadian observers such as Carol Fairbanks believed that “eastern Canadians emigrated West because of economic necessity, not greed. Increasing populations in both

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<sup>1</sup> One of the most comprehensive attempts to study the West as a region came from John Wesley Powell, director of the U.S. Geological Survey from 1881-1894. Others such as Alfred P. Brigham and Ellen Churchill Semple studied Western climate and geography as a way of explaining American history and culture. See Brigham, Geographic Influences in American History (Boston: n.p., 1903) and Semple, American History and Its Geographic Conditions (Boston: n.p., 1903).

<sup>2</sup> Gerald D. Nash, Creating the West: Historical Interpretations 1890-1990 (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1991.), 125.

England and eastern Canada needed more space.”<sup>3</sup> The perception in this type of statement being that the Canadian East was more crowded than that of the eastern United States and the main reason to go to the West was to get more space. The reasons for going and cultural approaches to the wilderness of the North American West may have differed, but both American and Canadian settlers faced similar challenges. The mountains of the West presented a formidable barrier not easily penetrated from the east. It took many weeks and sometimes months to cross them. In the exploratory years only the early trappers and prospectors took a living from the Rocky and Cascade Mountains ranges of western United States and Canada. The Great Plains, which stretched from Texas to Saskatchewan, offered a different challenge to settlers. Miles of rolling hills covered in grass beckoned to the farmer. The soil, however, was difficult to till and little wood for houses or fences was available. In the summer the rain fell either infrequently (drought) or too heavily (flood) and in the winter blizzards and ice storms made travel impossible and life precarious. The rivers, often shallow and unnavigable, were full of quicksand and sand bars. And over this vast and often uninviting land the wind blew incessantly. The human story of Western settlement was often violent, and sometimes nature and geography provided a special kind of violence.

Stories of the pioneer’s struggle against the natural elements filled American Western literature and film. In 1925 a Texas regional writer, Dorothy Scarborough, anonymously published a novel of West Texas, The Wind. Eastern critics applauded the

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<sup>3</sup> Carol Fairbanks, Prairie Women: Images in American and Canadian Fiction (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 35-36.

work, calling it "one of the distinctive novels of the year," and "a piece of masterly realism that rings true."<sup>4</sup> Readers in West Texas, however, called it "spurious natural history," unfair even to the prairie dog. They complained that the author was woefully cruel to the main character and to the people of Sweetwater. Texas critics went on to declare: "We have another wait before us for the epic of the cattle days of West Texas: for that is something that 'The Wind' is not."<sup>5</sup> In 1928 Lillian Gish starred in a silent film version of the story. Both the novel and the film presented a graphic and bleak picture of the violence inherent in the weather and geography of the Western Plains and man's struggle against them.

The novel told the story of an impressionable young woman from Virginia who came to West Texas in 1886 only to be destroyed by the natural elements of the untamed frontier. In a rebuttal to her Texas critics, Scarborough pointed out that they had failed to make the distinction between "a novel and a historical treatise," while she had captured the "essential truth of the time and the place." "[The] book," she asserted, "does not represent the East writing ignorantly of the West. It was written by one who was born and brought up in Texas and to whom West Texas is no strange land."<sup>6</sup> Scarborough was not trying to create an epic story of West Texas; she was creating a tale based on her mother's unpleasant experiences in Sweetwater. The novel, the silent film based on it, and the

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<sup>4</sup>"Anonymous to R.C. Crane," Scarborough Papers, The Texas Collection, Baylor University, Waco, Texas, (4A283), all further citations will be noted as the Scarborough Papers.

<sup>5</sup>"Resident of West Texas Comments on the Local Color of 'The Wind', Dallas Morning News (November 22, 1925).

<sup>6</sup>"Anonymous to R.C. Crane," Scarborough Papers, 4A283.

historical record of the Western Plains all present a picture of the violence of nature and its affect on the people who were determined to live there.

Scarborough used the young Easterner, Letty Mason, to tell her story of Texas because the devastation of the drought and other hardships of frontier life were particularly forceful images when described through the naive and faulty perception of a female tenderfoot. "I was trying," Scarborough wrote, "to show the woman's side of pioneer life, because most of the Western fiction had been about men and their struggles."<sup>7</sup>

Women have often been excluded from the history of the American West. Recent historians who tried to reinsert them found that solid research on the experiences of frontier women had often been replaced by lofty but distorting rhetoric and stereotypical images and symbols. For earlier writers it was more convenient to refer to gentle tamers, sun-bonneted helpmates, and hell-raisers than to confront the reality of women and their roles in the settling of the American West.<sup>8</sup> Scarborough not only included women in her story but made them central to the tale. Times were hard for both men and women, and ultimately people succeeded or failed. The stories of those who tried are often what historian, novelist, or filmmaker dramatize. By looking at The Wind both as novel and film, and comparing it to historical accounts of western life, one can confront the violence

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<sup>7</sup> Scarborough Papers, 4A289.

<sup>8</sup> Joan M. Jensen and Darlis A. Miller, "The Gentle Tamers Revisited: New Approaches to the History of Women in the American West," Pacific Historical Review 49 (May 1980): 178-9. These two historians take issue with the way writers such as Dee Brown portrayed women on the frontier.

of western weather and catch a glimpse of the suffering caused by the many droughts that plagued the region during the later years of the nineteenth century.

Scarborough began Letty's story by declaring: "The wind was the cause of it all. The sand, too, had a share in it, and human beings were involved, but the wind was the primal force, and but for it the whole series of events would not have happened."<sup>9</sup> Letty Mason, orphaned and destitute, comes west to live with her cousin Beverley's family. Having led a sheltered life in Virginia, she was ill prepared for the geographic harshness and social isolation of West Texas. On the train between Fort Worth and Sweetwater she meets Wirt Roddy, a gambler and the human villain of the story. Roddy fires her imagination with stories of the hardships of the West--dead cattle, failed ranches, social isolation, and above all, the demon wind. He tells Letty that the wind is evil as it "comes laarupin over the prairie like wild mustangs on a stampede . . . 'tain't human. It's a devil. Seven devils sometimes, when it goes rampagin' round."<sup>10</sup>

The land she can see from the train window appears even harsher to Letty than Roddy's discourse on the weather, and her first glimpse of Sweetwater depresses her more. The town is little more than a collection of unpainted rude structures: no trees or grass to soften the landscape, only sand, everywhere. Scarborough's description of the weather, the geography, and Letty's despair reinforces the picture of desolation and

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<sup>9</sup> Dorothy Scarborough, The Wind (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1925, 1979, 1986), 1, 2.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 24. All spellings are Scarborough's.



hopelessness of West Texas at the height of the drought of 1886.<sup>11</sup> Nothing about her introduction to Sweetwater encourages Letty. The trip from town to the ranch is long and cold, the landscape is uninviting, and the ranch is a disappointment: "Letty watched the prairies stretch out before her, vast reaches of sand covered with bunch grass. . . . The house was a frame shack . . . set in an arid waste with no fence around it."<sup>12</sup>

Even though cousin Bev welcomes her, his wife, Cora, does not. Letty cannot fit into the household because she has no practical skills to offer the family. With some encouragement Letty might have developed the tools to survive as other immigrants had. Observers of the Texas frontier noted that even the daintiest ladies acquired the skills they needed: "Delicate ladies find that they can be useful and need not be vain. . . . Many latent faculties are developed."<sup>13</sup> Letty is more of a burden than a help to the capable

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<sup>11</sup> Sweetwater, Texas, was less than ten years old when the drought hit the area in 1885-87. The Texas and Pacific Railroad controlled most of the land in the area and established the town of Sweetwater on a portion of land officially recorded as "Section 47." Established in 1877, the town got its post office and official name in 1879. In 1880 it became the county seat for newly organized Nolan county. The first buildings in the new county seat were a house and a saloon, both built from lumber brought in by the railroad in June of 1881. By 1883, Sweetwater had five saloons, and the Nolan County population stood at 640. Sweetwater grew and by 1887 the town could boast of several churches, more saloons, hotels, a saddle and harness store, dry goods store, livery stable, schools, one private bank, and a newspaper. County population grew as well, and peaked in 1884 at just a little over 1,230. Unfortunately, the blizzards and drought years greatly affected the growth of the area, and by 1890 the county population had dropped to only 614. The real Sweetwater was a good deal more substantial than the fictional collection of unpainted shacks Letty encounters when she gets off the train. For a history of Sweetwater and the surrounding county see E.L. Yeats and Hooper Shelton, History of Nolan County, Texas, (Sweetwater: Shelton Press, 1975).

<sup>12</sup> Scarborough, Wind, 54, 67.

<sup>13</sup> Mary Austin Holley as quoted in Ann Patton Malone, Women on the Texas Frontier: A Cross-Cultural Perspective (El Paso: Texas Western Press, 1983), 18.

Cora. Cora is a true woman of the West; she not only survives on the frontier, she thrives there. She is what a Texas emigrant writer, Mary Austin Holley, called the "Texas Diana."<sup>14</sup>

Letty tries to please Cora, but nothing she does is good enough. The struggle with Cora and the monotony of ranch life play on Letty's fears, and she becomes even more timid and withdrawn. Just when she despairs of ever enjoying a civilized activity again, a neighboring family invites everyone in the county to a dance. Letty's description of the dance mirrors the experiences of actual pioneers. Fanny Beck, who moved to West Texas with her family in the 1870s, remembered the all-night dances she attended: "Many a night I have spent out on some lonely ranch dancing all night because the distance was too great to get back to town and there was no provision for sleeping at the ranch. . . . There was no love-making, no drinking, no foolish and questionable conversation."<sup>15</sup> The dance offered only a short rest from the reality of prairie life. The refined lady, more comfortable at a dance than on a ranch, had no place on the frontier because only the capable survived. The useless were often objects of ridicule. A cowboy from the Texas Panhandle complained that his sister-in-law, a genteel lady transplanted to the West, was an "extravagant women from the improvident South . . . [who] would make doggies of

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>15</sup> Fannie Beck quoted in Texas Tears and Texas Sunshine: Voices of Frontier Women, ed. Jo Ella Powell Exley (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1985), 186.

three poor calves just because she wanted cream and cake with her afternoon tea."<sup>16</sup>

Cora despises Letty for being useless and yet envies her for being young and pretty. She wants the young girl out of her house, and the only way to achieve this is to marry Letty off. Even on the frontier the true vocation for a woman in the nineteenth century is marriage and motherhood. Cora demands that the girl marry one of the neighboring cowboys, Lige, or his partner, Sourdough. Letty resists the idea of marriage to a man she does not love, but when a winter storm known as a blue norther blasts the frail house, driving Letty into a panic, she finally agrees to accept Lige if he will protect her from the wind.<sup>17</sup>

Her new home on the prairie is more primitive than her cousin's house. The two-room shack has rough planks for walls but is more conventional than a dugout, the makeshift dwelling that many Texas settlers lived in before they built more permanent homes. Some settlers found them depressing and distasteful but other pioneers such as Ella Elgar Bird Dumont considered the whole experience a grand adventure. Dumont described her prairie accommodations almost with fondness: "The ranch house consisted of two large dugouts with no furniture whatever, except bedsteads and some benches. . . . No one expected anything better. The wealthiest cowmen's families lived in dugouts when

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<sup>16</sup> As quoted in Beverly J. Stoeltje, "A Helpmate for Man Indeed, The Image of the Frontier Woman," Journal of American Folklore 88 (Jan-Mar 1975): 30. A "doggie" was a motherless calf.

<sup>17</sup> A "blue norther" is a Texas term to describe an intense cold front that moves rapidly into an area. It is characterized by high winds, and an extreme and rapid drop in temperature. Often it is accompanied by freezing rain, sleet, or snow.

they first came here."<sup>18</sup>

Life on the ranch was hard. As the drought deepened, large numbers of cattle died. Scarborough's description of the drought-stricken cattle as "gaunt, cadaverous beasts . . . tortured by heel-flies that nagged them constantly, bawling in distress, searching everywhere for food and water," was mirrored in the official state and federal agricultural reports.<sup>19</sup>

In the novel, as in historical Sweetwater, the weather took as great a toll on the people as it did on the livestock and crops. Seasoned settlers struggled and newcomers had little chance of survival. Kansas pioneer Sarah Everett wrote to her sister-in-law in New York. "I am a very old woman," she wrote, "[m]y face is thin sunken and wrinkled, my hands bony withered and hard--I shall look strangely I fear with your nice undersleeves and the coquettish cherry bows." Sarah Everett was only twenty-nine when she wrote

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<sup>18</sup> Ella Elgar Bird Dumont, An Autobiography of a West Texas Pioneer, Ella Elgar Bird Dumont, ed. Tommy J. Boley (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1988), 44.

<sup>19</sup> Scarborough, Wind, 263. First Annual Report of the Agricultural Bureau of the Department of Agriculture Insurance, Statistics and History 1887-88. L.L. Foster, Commissioner (Austin: State Printing Office, 1889), 170. LV. Scarborough's description of the devastated land and dismal conditions was fairly accurate. The damage she described was only the latest in a long chain of disasters for the ranchers and farmers of West Texas. The winter of 1885 was the severest on record. Fences had to be cut to prevent the build up of snow, and cattle pastured on open ranges drifted hundreds of miles in search of grass and shelter. Ninety percent of the sheep in Nolan County died and a large percentage of the cattle perished as well. The winter of 1885 became known as the great "die up of '85." After April of 1885 no rain fell in the area for over two years. County statistics reported to the Texas Department of Agriculture record that by 1887 the county had lost 93 percent of its total crops to the drought which followed the blizzards. County wide cattle deaths at the height of the drought in 1887 totaled 129,962.

those words.<sup>20</sup>

Near the end of the novel, Letty finds herself alone with Roddy as a storm approaches. She rails at him for having put the fear of the wind into her mind and he apologizes, but the damage has been done. As Letty frantically pleads with him, a blast of wind hits the house and blows open the door. "Half swooning with terror of the invisible, the unearthly, Letty flung herself into Wirt Roddy's arms, and clung around his neck as a drowning person would. "The Wind! The Wind! Don't let the wind get me!" "I won't!" he said hoarsely, as his arms closed round her."<sup>21</sup> Letty's final destruction is caused by the man who had inspired her fear of the wind, and from the wind itself. Wirt Roddy is able to seduce her by playing upon her fear of the wind as the storm rages outside the cabin, but in the morning the horror of her betrayal, fear of Lige's reaction, and the social consequences of marital infidelity drive Letty over the edge. She orders Roddy out of her house at gunpoint, and when he tries to take the gun away from her she shoots him. Panic-stricken, she buries his body in the sand drift beside the barn but the body will not stay buried. Unable to face what she has done, Letty flees out onto the prairie to her doom:

There was no mound at all by the wind-break!--only bare ground, and a dead body of a man lying there, . . . So the wind was determined Lige should know! . . . She had known all along that the wind would get her! . . . No use to fight anymore! She would give up. . . . With a laugh that strangled on a scream, the woman sped to the door, flung it open and rushed out. She fled across the prairies like a leaf blown in a gale, borne

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<sup>20</sup> Sarah Everett quoted in Annette Kolodny, The Land Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontiers, 1630-1860 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 174.

<sup>21</sup> Scarborough, Wind, 311.

along in the force of the wind that was at last to have its way with her.<sup>22</sup>

Letty was a proper lady but she was a failure as a pioneer. She did not possess the skills she needed to survive in the West and she never learned them. She had no support system. Other women would not, or could not, help her. Like so many women who found themselves alone on the frontier, Letty experienced a social and physical isolation that drove her farther into despair. The wind finally claimed her! For Letty, the wide expanse of the West Texas prairie was as confining as the bedroom for the unnamed narrator in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper."<sup>23</sup> Both women are victims of the psychological pressures exerted on them by their environment and culture.

In his criticism of the novel, Sweetwater newspaperman R.C. Crane takes Scarborough to task for the last scene. He complains that the only reference he can find to such an incident was the story of an immigrant woman whose husband accidentally shot himself and died on the trail. With no one to help her, she dug his grave in the loose dirt with a butcher knife. The next spring some of the dirt blew away and a passersby found a foot protruding from the grave. The wife, Crane maintained, never had to stay around and see the corpse and then go crazy on the prairie.<sup>24</sup> Scarborough defended her description of the power of the sand from firsthand experience: "I have seen the sand drift enough for a body to be buried in it. I've seen it! And I've seen it swept away by the wind in a few

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 336-37.

<sup>23</sup> Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "The Yellow Wallpaper," The Oxford Book of American Short Stories, ed. Joyce Carol Oates (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 154-169.

<sup>24</sup> Crane, Dallas Morning News, (November 22, 1925).

hours, too. Yes, in the Sweetwater section."<sup>25</sup>

The images of despair and grinding hardship on the Plains and the violence of the weather were also the major themes of the 1928 silent film based on Scarborough's novel. The film, starring Lillian Gish as Letty, presented an unusual project in many ways. Gish read the book, found it intriguing, and after some arm twisting convinced Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer to produce it. As a favor to Miss Gish, Sweden's Victor Seastrom directed the film. Swedish film star Lars Hanson, who starred with Gish in previous films, agreed to play Lige. Filming the movie on location in the Mojave Desert in temperatures of near 120 degrees Fahrenheit was difficult for cast and crew. Gish suffered nearly as much as her character Letty had. She wrote about the experience, saying: "Working on the Wind was one of my worst experiences in film making. Sand was blown at me by eight airplane propellers and sulphur pots were also used to give the effect of a sandstorm. I was burned and in danger of having my eyes put out. My hair was burned by the hot sun and nearly ruined by the sulphur smoke and sand."<sup>26</sup>

Told in a linear narrative structure, from the first scene to the last The Wind visually presents Letty's struggle to survive in the harsh western elements. The film opens with titles that set the tone of the story. "Man--puny but irresistible--encroaching forever on Nature's vastness, gradually, very gradually wresting away her strange secrets, subduing her fierce elements -- conquers the earth! This is the story of a woman who

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<sup>25</sup> Scarborough Papers, "Anonymous to R.C. Crane."

<sup>26</sup> Lillian Gish, with Ann Pinchot, Lillian Gish: The Movies, Mr. Griffith and Me (Englewood Cliff: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1969), 292.

came into the domain of the winds --". Fade to black. A fade-in reveals a train steaming across a barren desert. The scene dissolves to the inside of a passenger car. Letty coyly observes the rest of the passengers as she sits by a partially open window. She glances toward the window only to have sand blown in her face, and rises from her seat as she struggles to close it and block the wind. A tall well-dressed man notices Letty, offers her an apple to replace the one spoiled by the sand and sits to introduce himself as Wirt Roddy. As they talk Letty's eyes are constantly drawn to the window, where the wind-blown sand obscures any view. Roddy seems amused at her reaction to the western weather and her preconceived notions of ranching in Sweetwater. He tells her about the power of the wind, "Injuns call this the 'land o' the winds'-- it never stops blowing here-- day in, day out, whistlin' and howlin'--makes folks go crazy-- especially women!" Even as Letty scoffs at Roddy's warning, her eyes are drawn to the sand blowing against the train window and her facial expression reflects doubt and fear.

The train reaches Sweetwater at night. As Letty steps out of the car, the wind blows against her so hard that she can hardly stand, and she is visibly afraid to leave the relative comfort of the train. Letty's welcoming party consists of her cousin Beverly's neighbors, Lige and Sourdough, who have come to take her to the ranch. Letty clings to Roddy reluctant to leave a familiar face and the safety of the train, but Lige points her toward the wagon impatient to be on his way. As the train pulls away Letty is left alone



with two dirty strangers and the wind.<sup>27</sup> After a brief comic interlude in which the two cowboys shoot for the privilege of sitting next to her in the wagon the journey to the ranch begins.

The film depicts the harsh landscape in uncompromising images of wind-blown sand, wild horses, and desolation. Lige's conversation does nothing to alleviate Letty's fears as he tells her the legend of the North Wind. "Mighty queer--Injuns think the North Wind is a ghost horse that lives in the clouds!" As he talks she envisions a ghostly white stallion galloping into the stormy clouds. When they finally reach the ranch, Letty receives a grand welcome from Beverly, but not from his wife, Cora, nor the three children. As they all sit down for an uncomfortable supper, the cowboys compete for Letty's attention, but all she can see is the wind and the sand blowing outside the window. A close-up shot of the table reveals that even the unfamiliar and unappetizing food has sand in it.

The next segments of the film chronicles Letty's efforts to adapt to her new life, but her obvious Eastern refinements only serve to highlight the crudeness of the Westerners around her. Even when she is with Beverly's family she is constantly reminded of the threat of the wind just outside the house. The film's dance episode provides a graphic look at the community outside the ranch. Letty is the belle of the ball as every man in the hall wants to be her partner, much to Lige and Cora's dismay. When Wirt Roddy appears in the room, Letty rushes to greet the only friend she has made. He

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<sup>27</sup> All scene descriptions and dialogue quoted for this paper are taken from The Wind, produced and directed by Victor Seastrom, distributed by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Pictures, 1928.

and Letty dance while Lige jealously looks on. Both Sourdough and Lige tell Cora that they are going to ask Letty to marry them. They have another "shoot-off," using a stuffed owl as the target, to decide who gets to propose, but the contest ends in a draw. Before anybody can propose, nature lifts its violent head.

A cyclone descends on the town and everyone runs for the storm cellar. Letty, the other women, children, Roddy, and most of the men huddle in the cellar, while Lige and a few other brave men try to board up the hall's windows and brace the door. The town suffers almost no damage from the storm, and as soon as it moves out of town the party resumes. The people at the dance seem to forget the prior danger as soon as they emerge from the storm shelter.

Once the dance resumes Lige and Sourdough propose to Letty, but she thinks they are joking and refuses them both. Cora is not amused. In a reaction so violent that Cora admits that she could kill Letty, she forces the young woman to choose one cowboy or the other to get her out of Beverly's house. Letty tries to avoid marriage to either of the crude ranchers by running away with Roddy, but when she discovers that he already has a wife she is resigned to her fate, and accepts one of the cowboy's proposals. Roddy offered only a brief protection from the wind, but marriage offered sure protection from Cora's wrath. Letty marries Lige, and the audience sees the wedding in a montage sequence that also forecasts Letty's life on the ranch. From the exchanging of rings, a series of dissolves show a tin wash pan full of dirty dishes and dented cups, then an oil lamp on a table surrounded by scraps of food and an empty whiskey bottle, and finally

Letty in a Party dress.

Lige tries to make his new bride feel at home. Through his lingering glances, tender smiles, and tentative attempts to touch Letty the audience knows he loves her, but her lack of response indicates that she is young and inexperienced and does not know how to respond to his feelings. She rejects his physical advances and he storms from the bedroom. Letty frets, the wind blows, and Lige paces. As Letty prepares for bed she is again haunted by the blowing wind as it rattles at the window and blows sand in through the cracks in the wall.

Letty's existence is a constant battle with her fear of the wind and her sense of failure as a wife. Lige's existence is a constant battle not only with the wind and the drought but with his sense of failure as a husband. Letty passively lets the wind wear her down, but Lige will not let the weather beat him. Except for the brief tussles with Roddy, most of the violence in this film is the violence of nature, not man. While the cyclone did not seem adequately threatening, the special effects depicting "the wind" are extremely convincing and violent.

Every exterior shot in this film features more evidence of the deterioration of weather conditions, revealing a landscape strewn with dead or dying cattle. Lige joins his neighbors in efforts to save and market the remaining cattle. Letty tries to help with the round-up but she can not control her horse in the gale force winds and must return to the ranch with Sourdough. As a storm begins to build, the old cowboy feeds her fear by observing, "This is norther weather! When that Satan hoss o' the Injuns starts to snort--!"

Letty begins to envision the white stallion galloping toward her from the storm tossed clouds. Just then Sourdough spots the cowboys bringing an injured man to the cabin. Afraid that it is Lige, Letty rushes to let them in, but to her horror she discovers that the injured man is Wirt Roddy. When Lige returns home he finds Letty nervously attending the unconscious man.

When Lige goes back out into the storm with the now recovered Roddy for another round-up attempt, Letty is left alone while the wind screams around the cabin. Even though this is a silent film, the effect is almost auditory. The sand blows against the windows and seeps in between the cracks in the walls as the door rattles on its hinges. The wind continues to assault the fragile cabin, and its entire frame seems to shutter and sway. Suddenly a window shatters, sending a gust of wind through the broken pane. Letty stuffs a rag in the hole to keep out the wind, only to discover that an overturned oil lamp floor has started a fire in the room, and she rushes to put out the fire. It seems nothing will stop the wind. The graphic portrayal of the power of the wind as it blows against the small house has the audience feeling Letty's terror. She sways with the storm-battered house almost swooning with fear. At the height of the storm she hears a knocking at the door. Frightened, Letty opens it to find that Roddy back at the cabin. The persistent, evil wind and Roddy have become the same danger to Letty and she rushes from the house into the storm but she is blown back to the house and her human nemesis. As the white stallion bucks in the sky she faints in Roddy's arms and the screen fades to black.

The next morning Letty aware that Roddy has been alone with her during the night is wryly amused that Roddy is afraid of Lige's reaction. He tries to force her to leave with him, but she resists. To defend herself, Letty grabs Roddy's gun from the holster on the table. As he attempts to take it from her, Letty shoots and kills him. All she can think to do is to bury his body in the sand outside the cabin, but he will not stay buried. The wind keeps uncovering him. Near hysteria by the time Lige returns, Letty tells him what she has done, but he does not seem to judge her. "Wind's mighty odd -- if you kill a man in justice -- it allers covers him up!" He tells her. In an ending quite different from the novel, Letty tells Lige that she loves him and wants to stay with him, because she has conquered her fear of the wind and has found love on the prairie.

The film visually captures Letty's despair and the forlorn isolation of the West Texas prairie, and Gish gives a moving portrayal of Letty's descent into near insanity. The film uses all the usual imagery of the Western, but the physical landscape, the wind and the sand overpower the usual cliché pictures of steadfast cowboys, sturdy horses, good women, and evil villains. The movie version, unlike the book, had a "happy ender" [Scarborough's term]. The studio executives found the final cut of the film too dark and depressing. Gish had just released The Scarlet Letter, another movie with a tragic ending, and the distribution department of M-G-M felt that the public would not accept The Wind if the heroine died.<sup>28</sup> Because the primary function of this film was to deliver the story to the audience visually, the filmmakers were not concerned with preserving the naturalistic

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<sup>28</sup> Gish, The Movies, 293.

determinism of the novel. In the cinematic version Lige and Letty were reunited to pursue a successful marriage, and Roddy's body stays hidden in the sand of Sweetwater. Both film and the novel are told from Letty's point of view, presenting a picture of the West colored by the perception of an inexperienced young woman who allowed the harsh reality of Western ranching life in the 1880s to overwhelm her. The hostile Western elements embodied by the prancing stallion Letty imagines coming down from the clouds, remain central to the plot. In the novel Letty was isolated and destroyed by the elements, but in the movie version she and Lige were reunited and faced the elements together. The film's artificial happy ending did not really allow Letty to conquer her fears; it only seemed to postpone the inevitable failure. As the film faded to black, Letty and Lige embraced each other while the wind and the sand continued to assail them.<sup>29</sup>

The 1928 film never received the acclaim that both Gish and Scarborough thought it would, possibly because harsh reality may not have appealed to film audiences of that era. Many Americans may have desired even negative stories about people and nature to

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<sup>29</sup> Film criticisms "Exceptional Photoplays: The Wind," National Board of Review Magazine, 3 (12 December, 1928): 9 quoted in George C. Pratt, Spellbound in Darkness: A History of the Silent Film (Greenwich: New York Graphic Society Ltd., 1973), 472-73. Peter Cowie, ed., Hollywood 1920-1970 (New York: A.S. Barnes and Company, 1977), The New York Times (5 November 1928): 26. The reviews for The Wind were mixed. Most critics commented on Gish's acting ability and the dark "atmospheric environment." Few saw it as a true western, preferring to comment on the "realism," the "symbolism," and the "cinematic effects." One critic ended his review with a sentence just as cryptic as the film itself: "What might have become imaginative cinema has been made an obvious movie, no matter what excellent movie it may be."

be displayed less graphically.<sup>30</sup> The depressing scenes of the mid-1880s drought depicted in The Wind seem to be fairly accurate. Rivers and creeks dried up and cattle died by the thousands. As historian W.C. Holden observed: "People began to leave the county. . . . Their credit was gone, there was no work, no sale for what they had, their families were hungry and the prospects were growing more dismal all the time."<sup>31</sup> Writers such as J. Frank Dobie told about the effects of extreme dryness of that era. They pointed out that a drought could not be measured only in terms of dollars and cents, but had to be counted in the effects "upon the inner life" of the pioneer.<sup>32</sup>

One possible reason for Sweetwater's adverse reaction to Scarborough's novel, The Wind, and to Gish's film of it, could be local pride and community attitudes

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<sup>30</sup> W.C. Holden, "West Texas Drouths," The Southwestern Historical Quarterly, XXXII 2 (October 1928): 105. Texas historian W.C. Holden noted that the drought of 1886 was a "landmark year in the history of West Texas." Settlers, he wrote, often referred to things that happen "before the drought" or "after the drought," much the way a Southerner dates events in terms of the Civil War by saying "before the War" and "after the War." The dry spell created the impression that Texas was a desert plagued by wind and drought, an image that was hard to live down.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 106. After twenty-three months the rains finally came, late in May of 1887. The drought ended but the effects would linger for many years, both physically and emotionally.

<sup>32</sup> J. Frank Dobie, Cow People (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 177, 179-80, 193. At the height of the great drought of 1886-87, the Nueces River stopped running and only small water holes remained. As the grass disappeared the cows began to die. A rancher named George West told his ranch hands to cut the horns off of every dead steer they found and to pile the horns next to his woodpile. Before the drought broke, West had collected over three thousand horns, and this tally did not account for the number of animals who had died in the brush and whose carcasses had not been found. "George West used to sit at night on the great mound of horns and scan the sky for a sign of rain." Almost as an afterthought, Dobie adds, "On all sides of his ungrassed land other land-dwellers, women as well as men were watching for signs." No journey, Dobie wrote, no magnificent landscape or great city, can "mean more to an eager traveler than the change felt by a man of drouth-perished soil when rains at last fall upon it."

developed during hard times. In the face of relief efforts, Holden noted that families with the greatest needs often refused help because they did not want to be considered objects of charity. At the height of the 1880s droughts, community boosters reacted with hostility to anything that would reflect negatively upon reputation, heritage, or land sales of the county.<sup>33</sup>

What makes both the novel and the film versions of The Wind so powerful has little to do with the quality of the literature or the cinema. The novel is sentimental and maudlin, and the film is visually harsh and uninviting. The Wind is important because it was a woman's story and one of the few Western stories to question realistically the negative aspects of the Western Myth. It depicts the boredom and the failure many women pioneers experienced instead of providing the popular image of the hero riding off into the sunset.<sup>34</sup> Scarborough's novel asked, "How could a frail, sensitive woman fight the wind? How oppose a wild, shouting voice that never let her know the peace of silence?" Thousands of frontier women answered with the testimony of their lives. Despite the hardships, women as well as men moved west, their experiences mirroring a pioneer poem:

I took my wife out of a pretty house  
 I took my wife out of a pretty place  
 I stripped my wife of comfortable things  
 I drove my wife to wander with the wind.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>34</sup> Scarborough, Foreword to The Wind, xvi.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 3-4, poem identified as a "Benét Poem" quoted in Walker D. Wyman, Frontier Woman: The Life of a Woman Homesteader on the Dakota Frontier, Retold (n.p.: University of Wisconsin, River Falls Press, 1972), 8.



The violence of weather and geography was also a factor in the lives of Western pioneers north of the forty-ninth parallel. Olive Frederickson was one of those who struggled to survive in the Canadian wilderness. Her autobiographical sketch of life in Alberta at the turn of the twentieth century, The Silence of the North, was published in 1972 with the help of a journalist, Ben East. The book was the basis for a 1981 film about Olive and her struggles. Olive's story was just one of the many incredible accounts of pioneer life on the Canadian frontier. A.J. Cotton, a farmer in Manitoba, wrote more of the reality of the pioneering life when he observed: "You cannot be promised ease or luxury. There will be a certain amount of hardship to endure, obstacles to contend with, and privations to overcome."<sup>36</sup> Cotton succeeded on the Canadian prairies and viewed the early years of struggle with a fondness, but said little about how the women of his family contributed to his success. In spite of this omission, the celebration of pioneer life in Western Canada remains central to Canadian cultural mythology.<sup>37</sup> Olive Fredrickson succeeded on the Canadian frontier. Her story reflects the qualities that Canadians believe are the heart of their history and pioneer experience.

Olive Frederickson was born Olive Alta Goodwin, the youngest of twelve children. Her family moved from Wisconsin to Alberta in 1909. The reason the family moved north was never made clear to her and she wrote that: "Long ago I was forced to the conclusion that he[her father] sold out in the States and sought new, wild land in Canada

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<sup>36</sup> A.J. Cotton as quoted in: J.M. Bumstead, The Peoples of Canada: A Post-Confederation History (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1992), 115.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

mainly for one compelling reason: he was a heavy drinker, and when he was drunk, his temper, always hair-trigger, was as foul as any I have ever known”<sup>38</sup> By the time the family moved to Alberta most of the Goodwin children were grown with families of their own but they followed Archie Goodwin north anyway. They settled their own homesteads, while Olive’s father never really settled down. As soon as he installed his wife and youngest daughter in a rented house, Goodwin departed for the Lesser Slave region to hunt and stake out a new homestead. He left his ailing wife in the care of nine-year-old Alta, as the family called her, and one of her older married sisters. Only after her mother died of epilepsy did her father return to move his youngest child into the Canadian wilderness with him. She describes her life on the Canadian frontier in fond terms: “Some of the best memories I have of those girlhood years are of climbing on one of our horses bareback and riding to Beaver Creek just for the pleasure of enjoying the beauty of the countryside.”<sup>39</sup> Nowhere in the account of her early years does one get the sense of struggle against the elements that one reads in many of the pioneer diaries written by American women.

Olive met her first husband, Walter Reamer, in 1913 when they were both just children. Reamer’s family story was much the same as the Goodwins, and many other settlers in Western Canada. His father moved the family north from a failed farm in Illinois and they struggled to stake a new claim in Alberta. The Reamers were not good

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<sup>38</sup> Olive A. Fredrickson with Ben East, The Silence of the North (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1972), 4.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 28-29.

pioneers; they knew nothing of the Canadian frontier and suffered the consequences. In the few days that the Reamers spent at the Goodwin homestead, Olive taught her new friend about the wilderness. "He and I spent just about every hour of those four days together, and all that time I was trying to teach him the things I knew."<sup>40</sup> When the family pulled out, Reamer assured her that he would come back when he grew up, and he did.

Over her family's strenuous objections, Alta married Walter Reamer and decided that for her new life she needed a new name. "When I said 'I do' in response to the minister's final question of the marriage ritual that day, I was ready to make total changes and begin a completely new life. From then on I'd be Olive Reamer."<sup>41</sup> Her adventure was only beginning. Olive's married life was even more isolated from the larger Canadian society than her childhood. Her husband led her on a series of adventures and travels that almost killed them both several times. They lived in tents, abandoned cabins, and rented rooms. Walter hunted, trapped, built roads, worked on a riverboat, and even tried his hand at farming. Olive followed her husband, and worked alongside him. She had three children and an exciting life with him, but it nearly killed her, and it did kill him.

The most compelling part of her story is the account of her last winter and spring with Walter in the wilderness. Everything that could go wrong did. They built their first cabin on the wrong side of the river for the best trapping. When they did relocate they did not have enough time before the snowfall to build a proper shelter. By February they were in danger of running out of food. To complicate matters, Olive was pregnant with

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<sup>40</sup> Fredrickson, *Silence*, 38.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

their second child. During that winter they only saw one other human being, an old ailing trapper who stumbled into their cabin one afternoon early in February. That winter in the Alberta wilderness proved to be a test of endurance.

By May, Olive and Walter were able to trap muskrats, a double treasure: they could eat the meat immediately and sell the pelts at the end of the season. They planned to trap until the rivers, now swollen by the icy spring thaw, were navigable again. But fate stepped in once more. While Olive and Walter were out checking their trap lines some of the rifle ammunition exploded in the tent. The resulting fire burned nearly all of their possession and most of their remaining food, but the hardships were not over. On May 10, Olive's old hunting rifle blew up in her face while she was out hunting alone. "I couldn't see farther than I could reach my arms in front of me, so I stumbled on and by some stroke of luck found the cabin."<sup>42</sup> Fortunately, she was not seriously injured and her eyes eventually healed, though she never regained full sight in her right one. Eleven days after the gun accident, out of food and desperate, they finally decided to they had to chance leaving. Ill and weak with hunger, Olive, Walter, and their young child got into a makeshift boat and put out onto the Slave River. Their second daughter was born on the boat and both mother and daughter almost died in the ordeal.

Olive would never go back to the wilderness with her husband again. When Walter went back to the North woods, Olive and her children moved to a homestead in British Columbia. Walter worked the trap line until 1928. Olive writes: "The last time I saw him

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 87.

was just before Christmas of 1927, when he left once more for the North. Our third baby, Louis, had been born that September.”<sup>43</sup> In June of 1928 one of her neighbors brought her the news that Walter had been drowned in Alberta. She was twenty-six, a homesteader and trapper’s widow with three small children, and her story was still not over.

After many years of struggle Olive finally remarried. She married John Frederickson, an old friend from her days in the Alberta wilderness. Olive and John stayed in Western Canada for the rest of their lives. She never really left her pioneer beginnings behind, and remained an accomplished hunter and fisherman well into her elderly years. Her story was much the story of many women who settled in the frontier territories of Canada. She met the wilderness and survived, indeed she thrived: “Much of my life has been hard. The winter and spring on the trapline with Walter were an ordeal almost too terrible to be endured, and those early years at the homestead on the Stuart, when my three children were small, were an endless grind of toil and hardship. . . . Most of all, I think, I like to recall the stillness of the north.”<sup>44</sup>

The film based on Fredrickson’s book captured both the hardships and the triumphs of her life. The Silence of the North (1981), produced in Canada by Murray Shostak, and directed by Allan W. King, starred Ellen Burstyn as Olive, Tom Skerritt as Walter, and Gordon Pinsent as John Frederickson. The Canadian scenery is spectacular and the acting is credible in this rather leisurely-paced film. As the film opens with a shot

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 208.

of the Alberta prairie, titles on the screen and a voice-over narration tells the viewer that this is a “true story.” The viewer first sees Alta (Olive) riding in the back of a wagon, traveling with her brothers and a friend to a local dance. “It’s going to be a fine day,” she says, “because the wind is blowing from the east” and good things happen to her when the wind is from the east. At the dance she gets reacquainted with a childhood beau, Walter Reamer. The two are attracted to each other, but her oldest brother objects to their budding relationship. As her brother tells her, “Walter Reamer’s got a disease that’s gonna kill you, . . .if you go you can forget about ever coming back.”<sup>45</sup> Over the objections of her family, she marries Walter and they head out into the wilderness.

The film moves quickly through the first year of their married life, the birth of their first child, and their move to the north country to work for a road-building company. A scene on a river barge is the first depiction of actual danger from the wilderness. Olive sees a horse and man fall from the barge into the water and drown, but Walter is determined to keep going in spite of the risks. Walter thrives on the hard work of road building, while Olive’s life of pure drudgery is cooking and doing laundry for the workers. He promises to return her to the south when they finish the road, but uses their wages to stake a winter of trapping instead. A close-up shot of Walter’s face reveals his joy in beginning a new adventure, while a reaction shot of Olive’s face reflects her concern for their safety.

They build a cabin and Walter sets the trap lines just as winter closes in on them.

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<sup>45</sup> All film quotes from Silence of the North (1981)Murray Shostak, producer.

The scene shows a wilderness benignly covered with snow on a hospitable landscape. Then Olive comes face to face with a bear that is going after their food cache. This scene is low-keyed and almost comical. Olive rushes out of the cabin shouting and shooting at the bear, but the gun backfires, burning her face and hair. Walter returns home from the trap lines and all the news is bad: the traps are empty, Olive's hair is gone, and she's pregnant. Suddenly a crazed man bursts into the cabin and threatens to kill them. He steals most of their food and guns and does not even leave them any matches. This scene which could have been portrayed with great physical violence was actually restrained. The man is visibly menacing, but he never actually touches either Olive or Walter. He just gestures with his rifle. The violence really lies in the implied results of the break-in: if he takes their supplies, they will die. In all of this hardship, the filmmaker seems to be stressing the settler's survival instinct rather than the violence of the wilderness.

Up until this point in the film, the geography, nature, and weather have not been portrayed as particularly hostile or even dangerous. The bear and the robbery changes both the mood of the film and the visual presentation. Only the small fire in the hearth gives off any light. Olive cannot let the fire go out because they have no more matches, but wind blowing through the cracks in the log walls seems intent on putting out the fire anyway. The howling of the wind is joined by another sound, the howling of wolves. The wolves begin to circle the cabin. They catch Walter's scent and slink off after him. Olive begins to succumb to the winter wind, the wolves, and the hopelessness of her situation, and adds her howls to theirs. Then she decides that she will never be afraid

again. She will master the wind and the winter or die in the attempt. Where Scarborough's Letty lets the wind master her, Olive refuses to give in to the weather. When Walter returns, he brings only a small bird that they cook and eat for Christmas dinner.

They will survive, but it will be difficult. Walter finally has to shoot the dogs because they are also starving. While Olive, Walter, and the baby are outside burying the dogs, the cabin catches on fire and it seems that all is really lost. They gather what is left of their possessions on a small sled and move out into the snow-covered wilderness. The wind blows and the temperature drops, but still they struggle on. The force of the snow, wind, and cold are graphically portrayed. The human figures are barely discernible against the blurred white landscape. Just as they think all is lost, the Reamers reach a small cabin, and a trapper named John Fredrickson takes them in. Walter promises Olive that this will never happen again. He has been tamed. They stay with John until the ice melts and the steamboat can reach his landing. The ice breakup on the Slave River is a visual reminder of the power and majesty of the Northern wilderness.

What this film manages to convey to the audience is not so much the violence of the Canadian wilderness as the sheer effort it took to survive in it, and how men and women viewed the experience differently. She is emotionally and physically worn out, but all her husband can think about is their next adventure. Walter rewards her with a homestead and more hard work. As a pioneer, Olive eventually does rebound. She survives and the farm thrives, but Walter needs a new adventure.



When Walter wants to return to the north to trap, Olive refuses to go into the wilderness again. He goes anyway, leaving Olive to work the farm alone, and with the help of some of her new neighbors she manages to plant and harvest a small crop. One afternoon after the harvest, an old friend, John Fredrickson brings her news of Walter's death. Olive keeps the farm going, surviving by using the skills she developed as a pioneer. The film shows the audience the hardships of pioneering but does not focus on the dangers and violence of nature. Even the moose hunting scene is more about the difficulty of slaughtering on the spot than stalking and killing the animal.

By 1930 Olive abandons the farm and moves to Calgary just as the Great Depression spreads across Canada. She works in a soup kitchen, the children go to school for the first time, and the family again meets their old friend, John Fredrickson. John and Olive become even better friends as he tries to help her and her small family. When Louis, her youngest child, contracts meningitis, John helps the family cope. As she recovers from her grief, Olive's daughters convince her to marry John. The film ends on an upbeat note as Olive observes "the wind is coming from the east." It will be a good life after all!

Unlike The Wind, which focuses on Letty's fear and inability to survive in the West, The Silence of the North emphasizes Olive's courage and adaptability. Pioneer Jessie Saxby wrote that women of that period in Western Canada had no right to encourage their sons and brothers to go away in quest of fortune, if they were not willing

to follow them and share their life.<sup>46</sup> In 1914 Emily Weaver wrote: "I could not help thinking that one quality of the woman that Western Canada needs is courage, and another is resourcefulness."<sup>47</sup>

It is the image of female resourcefulness and courage that seems to distinguish the Canadian from the American view of the frontier. For the most part in American literature and films the woman on the frontier is weak and in need of protection. Historian Susan Armitage observed that "the frontier myth is a male myth, preoccupied with stereotypically male issues like courage, physical bravery, honor and male friendship."<sup>48</sup> Women did go to the American West and became an integral part of the settlement process, and they were a part of the Western myth, albeit a more hidden part. Generally speaking, women and men on both sides of the border looked at the land differently, and they looked at the challenges differently. Where the American pioneer usually saw the land as an adversary, the Canadian settler often saw the land as a valued asset. It is this Canadian perspective that allowed Olive to forget the violence of the weather of the Canadian north and rejoice in the silence of the north woods. In the American view, pioneers such as Letty struggled against the harshness of the Plains and heard only the howling of the wind.

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<sup>46</sup> A Flannel Shirt and Liberty: British Emigrant Gentlewomen in the Canadian West, 1880-1914, ed. Susan Jackel (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1982), 71.

<sup>47</sup> Emily Weaver as quoted in A Flannel Shirt, 223.

<sup>48</sup> Susan H. Armitage, "Women's Literature and the American Frontier: A New Perspective on the Frontier Myth," Women, Women Writers and the West, ed. L.L. Lee and Merrill Lewis (New York: Whitson, 1979), 5.

## CHAPTER 7

### “WHEN YOU CALL ME THAT, SMILE”:

### VIOLENCE AND THE COWBOY HERO

One of the most pressing issues of Western expansion was how to make the land support new migrants. In the twenty years after the American Civil War the expansion of the cattle industry offered one solution. It gave the West food, financial success, and a national hero. For many people the story of the cowboy is the story of the West. In reality the cowboy depicted in novels and films only existed for about twenty years, and even then did not often fit the idealized picture presented in their fictionalization.

Open-range cattle ranching in Texas began during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries with the establishment of Spanish missions.<sup>1</sup> Missionaries, Indian converts, and Spanish soldiers raised cattle for meat and milk. Animals that escaped from mission communities, as well as those abandoned when external pressure caused a shift in policy, reverted to the wild and multiplied. Spanish-herding techniques, such as those employed by Canary Islanders who settled near what is now San Antonio, established the precedent for later Anglo Texans involved in this business.

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<sup>1</sup> Donald Chipman, Spanish Texas, 1519-1821 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992), 140-41. Chipman provides a comprehensive discussion of the early ranching efforts in the San Antonio area. For a perspective of the cattle industry in East Texas see: Terry G. Jordan, Trails to Texas: Southern Roots of Western Cattle Ranching, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981).

By the 1820s Texas settlements extended from the Sabine River to the Lower Rio Grande valley. Although some people practiced cultivated farming, some engaged in ranching. Few markets existed for live animals beyond Texas, even though Texans drove cattle to communities in Louisiana and along the Mississippi River valley, and money could be made from the sale of cowhides and tallow. In the 1850s, Texans drove cattle to California mining camps and Midwestern markets, but failed to generate a great interest in their product. The profitability of the cattle industry changed after the United States Civil War.

By 1865 an estimated 5,000,000 Texas longhorn cattle roamed ranges in South Texas. Beef shortages in the North created such a market for Texas cattle that steers worth three to four dollars a head in Texas brought thirty to forty dollars a head in Chicago. The main problem for the rancher was how to get the cows to market. The answer was the long drive to the railroad. As a result, the cattle industry expanded and the cowboy myth began.

In 1866 the first cattle drive to Sedalia, Missouri, brought both profit and hardship. Those cattle that made it to Sedalia brought a price of thirty-five dollars a head and convinced Texas ranchers that the Long Drive would be successful if they could find an easier route to market.<sup>2</sup> Problems along the trail and a negative reaction from Missouri farmers whose cattle died from tick fever when Texas cattle passed through their region mandated a shift in trails north.

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<sup>2</sup>Ray Allen Billington, Martin Ridge, Westward Expansion: A History of the American Frontier, 5th ed. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1982), 613.

Joseph McCoy, a Midwestern cattle buyer, helped solve the problem. He and an Eastern syndicate convinced the Kansas Pacific Railroad to extend the track westward to Abilene, Kansas. He also plotted a new route, later known as the Chisholm Trail, northward through the sparsely settled Indian Territory. Between 1867 and 1871, Texas drovers herded approximately nearly 1,500,000 head of cattle to the Abilene yards.<sup>3</sup> In the 1870s the cattle industry spread to the Northern Plains. The concentrated effort to kill off the Great Plains bison left the prairie empty and inviting to cattle ranchers. Texas cattlemen Charles Goodnight and his partner Oliver Loving blazed a trail northward through Colorado into Wyoming. Other enterprising ranchers moved the cattle into Montana and the Dakotas, until by the 1880s the cattle industry had spread throughout the Great Plains.<sup>4</sup>

The open-range cattle industry required many acres of grass-filled prairie, a supply of water, and a labor force to manage the herd. From the Southern Plains of Texas to the Northern Plains of Kansas, Colorado, Wyoming, Montana, and the Dakotas, this industry adapted to the land. Problems developed, however, when overgrazing and adverse weather conditions brought doom to open-range cattle ranching.<sup>5</sup> Open-range ranching ended because of a number of factors: market demand for beef encouraged ranchers to breed larger herds, leading eventually to over- production; expansion of herds led to overgrazing of grasslands; depletion of the grass led to destruction of the topsoil and

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 614.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 619.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 627.

turned portions of the Great Plains into drought-prone dust bowls; prolonged periods of drought from 1884 to 1886 followed heavy snowfalls and blizzard conditions in the winters of 1886-87 that killed many cattle on the open ranges; eighty-five percent of the cattle on the Southern Plains froze to death or starved, and cattle on the Northern Plains fared worse. In Wyoming alone, 6,000,000 cattle died in the winter of 1887. A flood of farmers moved out onto the Plains and competed with the ranchers for the land; the invention of barbed wire in 1874 provided a way for farmers to fence the land that reduced the available open range for large ranches. The expansion of railroads made getting cattle to market easier, thus eliminating the need for long drives and reducing the need for herding labor. While it lasted open-range cattle ranching proved to be an economic boon to the West.

The expansion of the cattle industry affected not only the economic development of the Western states but their political life as well. Specialized laws and application of laws that existed in other areas grew out of an economy based on land usage. Land ownership itself became a major issue. The Homestead Acts of 1862 and 1866 governed the disposal of public land, but their terms hindered rather than benefited most Western pioneers. Because they were based on eastern notions of farming rather than the reality of western ranching, the Homestead Acts often prevented pioneers from acquiring the best amount of land for their needs, while allowing land speculators to circumvent most of the regulatory provisions.<sup>6</sup> Bad as the Homestead Acts were, Congress made the legislation

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 637.

worse by passing two amendments--the Timber Culture Act of 1873 and the Desert Land Act of 1877. Both of these laws allowed legitimate settlers to gain control of larger tracts of land but it also encouraged corruption and fraud. In the case of the Desert Land Act, large ranch owners purchased large parcels of land to accommodate their herds, which kept farmers and small ranchers out of the area.

Another major concern in Western settlement was water. Water usage laws based on the English common law principle of riparian rights were common in the Eastern states, but were inadequate for Western conditions.<sup>7</sup> In the early years on the Western ranges, control of the land followed the control of a stream or river. Ranchers staking a claim to one bank of a stream would claim a range right to land adjacent to the stream until he reached his neighbors range right.<sup>8</sup> This custom was legally questionable but honored in the ranching communities. Control of water meant the difference between success and failure. Eventually the federal government and then the individual states began regulating

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<sup>7</sup> Riparian water rights are based the principle that water rights originate from property rights. If your land includes a river, then you have the right to use as much water from that river as you need provided that your use does not harm others. Under this rule the title to the water follows title to the land. See Research Report on Water Rights, <http://ext.usu.edu/agx/Research Reports/WILD/chapt8.html>. All further references to this site referred to as Research Reports. For a discussion of Western water laws see Walter Prescott Webb, The Great Frontier (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1951, 1986), 254-259. An even more extensive discussion of the problem of water in Western areas is included in Walter Prescott Webb, The Great Plains (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1931, 1981), 319-384, 358-430, and 431-452. For an extensive study of water usage in the Southwest, and more specifically New Mexico see: Ira G. Clark, Water in New Mexico: a History of Its Management and Use (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987).

<sup>8</sup> Billington and Ridge, Westerward Expansion, 621.

control of the limited supply of water through the principle of appropriation.<sup>9</sup>

While ranch owners and farmers worried about land ownership and water rights, cowboys paid little attention to such legal distinctions. They were more concerned with everyday living and an occupation that was destined to change. What killed the traditional cowboy's way of life was a combination of the weather, the railroad, and barbed wire. The need for the cowboy diminished but his legend did not.

The mythic cowboy as immortalized in formula Westerns became an important figure in American culture. The cowboy was unique and distinguishable in a crowd and well suited to his occupation. According to cowboy Joseph Nimmo, Jr.,

he is always a man on horseback. . . . The original cow-boy of this country was essentially a creature of circumstance, and mainly a product of western and southwestern Texas. Armed to the teeth, booted and spurred, long-haired, and covered with the broad-brimmed sombrero-- distinctive badge of his calling--his personal appearance proclaimed the sort of man he was.<sup>10</sup>

The cowboy's job was simply to keep the cattle where they were supposed to be or move them wherever the ranch owner wanted them to go. Joseph McCoy declared it to be a dirty, tedious occupation: "The life of the cow-boy in camp is routine and dull. . . . No wonder the cow-boy gets sallow and unhealthy, and deteriorates in manhood until he becomes capable of any contemptible thing; no wonder he should become half-civilized

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<sup>9</sup> Appropriation doctrine of water rights assumes first in use is first in right and requires regulation through permits for water use. It separates the title to land from the right to use water flowing through that land. See Research Reports.

<sup>10</sup> Joseph Nimmo, Jr., "A creature of circumstance," (1886), in Cowboy Life: Reconstructing An American Myth, William W. Savage, Jr., ed., (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1975), 77, 78.



only, and take to whisky with a love excelled scarcely by the barbarous Indian.”<sup>11</sup> The reality of the dirty, cold, malnourished, ignorant, bored, and deadly herdsman was not the picture that captured the imagination of the American public and the rest of the world. A proletarian on horseback, the mythic cowboy became the new American hero. As a creature of the imagination, he represented the possibility of progress and success in the West.

Owen Wister usually gets the credit for creating the first popular literary cowboy hero in his work The Virginian (1902), a book that according to some altered the structure of the Western novel.<sup>12</sup> To the basic Western formula formed from the James Fennimore Cooper’s Leatherstocking series and popular pulp fiction Dime Novels, Wister added two lasting features--the serious cowboy hero and romantic love. Wister considered the cowboy to be the last of a breed, and from an idealistic conception of a freedom-loving ranch hand he fashioned the modern Western hero.<sup>13</sup> The code of conduct this hero lived under was a prairie version of Hawkeye’s forest code. In stories after The Virginian one could readily recognize the modern cowboy hero because he was always truthful, brave, honest, merciful, fun loving, a believer in clean living, a restorer of order, a righter of wrongs, and above all, democratic and individualistic.

The Virginian depicted the cultural clash between the feminine East and the masculine West that resulted in a mutual education for the main protagonists. It

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<sup>11</sup> Joseph G. McCoy, “Anger and bad whiskey urge him on to deeds of blood and death,” (1874), in Cowboy Life, 28-29.

<sup>12</sup> Louis Nye, The Unembarrassed Muse (New York: The Dial Press, 1970), 288.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 288, 290.

developed two main themes: the first, a romantic primitive tale told in first person by a sympathetic eastern narrator, and the second, a success story told in the third person.<sup>14</sup>

The romantic primitive story evolved through four major events: the Virginian's first confrontation with Trampas, the villain; Steve's hanging by the posse led by his friend, the Virginian; the Virginian's proposal and acceptance by Molly, the Eastern school marm, and the final showdown between the Virginian and Trampas. Interwoven with the romantic tale was the success story that followed the Virginian's rise from cowhand, to ranch foreman, and finally to independent rancher.

The novel opens as the narrator arrives in Medicine Bow, Wyoming. This opening highlights the differences in eastern and western sensibilities. The first person he meets is the Virginian, a cowhand for Judge Henry's Sunk Creek Ranch. While waiting to be taken to the ranch, the narrator also meets Steve, an old friend of the Virginian, and observes the first confrontation between the Virginian and the villain of the story, Trampas. The altercation between the two men produces one of the most famous Western exchanges. As the narrator watches, Steve and the Virginian join a poker game. One of the other players, Trampas, begins to bait and taunt the Virginian to try and shake his game. The Virginian remains cool and continues to play. The dealer deals the next hand and one by one each player bets until it is the Virginian's turn, but he hesitates. Wister heightened the drama of the moment to its fullest when he wrote:

It was now the Virginian's turn to bet, or leave the game, and he did not speak at once. Therefore Trampas spoke. "You bet, you son-of-a---."

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<sup>14</sup>William Pilkington, Don Graham, ed., Western Movies (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1979), 16-17.

The Virginian's pistol came out, and his hand lay on the table holding it unaimed. And with a voice as gentle as ever . . . he issued his orders to the man Trampas: -- "when you call me that, smile!"<sup>15</sup>

In this pivotal scene, using a technique employed by novelists such as Charles Dickens, Wister illustrates the basic differences between the hero and villain. He describes the Virginian, as "a slim young giant, more beautiful than pictures."<sup>16</sup> The hero uses vernacular speech but crude language, is soft-spoken, and commands attention. He is courteous but not obsequious and has a keen wit but is not cruel in his humor. On the other hand, Wister describes Trampas as "ugly as his voice."<sup>17</sup> He is impatient, overbearing, and, one suspects, a coward. He speaks with a sneer in his voice, and his attempts at humor are mean and spiteful. Both he and the Virginian are cowboys, but the similarities end there. The Virginian succeeds by working hard and becoming the ranch foreman while Trampas turns to cattle rustling.

The Virginian's character sets the example for all the formula Western heroes that follow, not only in their relationship with the villain, but with the heroine as well. Wister's major female character, Molly Starkwood, is the prototype for all the school marms and sweet young ladies from the East who populate the formula Westerns that follow in Wister's tradition. Molly is the embodiment of eastern refinement, but she can survive in the West only after she has been educated through experience. On the other hand, Molly's civilization is essential for Wister's story because the Virginian must be educated too. The

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<sup>15</sup> Owen Wister, The Virginian (1902) (New York: Pocket Books, 1956), 21.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

hero's western savvy must be tempered by eastern culture so that the success story can be told. He can win Molly's hand only after both have been mutually educated.

Molly is not the only eastern character who must learn the ways of the West. The narrator must learn about the West as well. He gets a lesson in western violence and justice when he stumbles upon a lynching. Wister presents the lynching through the narrator's Eastern perspective. Once he stumbles upon the scene the posse will not let him leave. "I did not wish to stay," the narrator says, "but in the face of their needless caution I was helpless." His discomfort is even greater when he recognizes one of the condemned men as the Virginian's friend. "It was Steve! Steve of Medicine Bow! The pleasant Steve of my first evening in the West. Some change of beard had delayed my instant recognition of his face. Here he sat sentenced to die."<sup>18</sup>

The narrator realizes that as the leader of the posse the Virginian will have to hang his old friend. The Virginian taciturnly faces what he must do according to the code of the West, and Steve is ennobled as he bravely faces the violent end to his violent life. The narrator also learns a lesson in bravery as he witnesses the last exchange between the hero and his doomed friend: "'I reckon if every one's ready we'll start.' It was the Virginian's voice once more, and different from the rest. I heard them rise at his bidding, and I put the blanket over my head. I felt their tread as they walked out, passing my stall. . . . [A]ll was silence around the stable except the dull, even falling of the rain."<sup>19</sup>

The hanging haunts both the narrator and the Virginian. As they ride away from

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 274-275.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 278-281.

the place where violence was met with violence, the Virginian tries to explain the West:

Now back East you can be middling and get along. But if you try a thing on in this Western country, you've got to do it well. You've got to deal cyards [sic] well; you've got to steal well; and if you claim to be quick with your gun, you must be quick, for you're a public temptation, and some man will not resist trying to prove he is the quicker. You must break all the Commandments well in this Western country.<sup>20</sup>

The Virginian does things well. He gets a promotion on the ranch and he successfully woos Molly. His story is not an isolated episode, because many cowboys became ranch foremen or ranch owners. The specter of Steve's death and Trampas's part in his friends downfall continues to plague the hero. The novel builds to what has become the standard Western climax--the final showdown between good and evil in the form of a gunfight. In town for his marriage to Molly, the Virginian meets Trampas, and five years of enmity finally comes to a head:

Perplexity knotted the Virginian's brows. This community knew that a man had implied he was a thief and a murderer; it also knew that he knew it. . . . Could he avoid meeting the man? . . . Could he for her [Molly's] sake leave unanswered a talking enemy upon the field? . . . From somewhere in the rear of the building . . . came movement and Trampas was among them, courageous with whiskey. . . . Others struggled with Trampas and his bullet smashed the ceiling before they could drag the pistol from him. . . . "you don't want to talk like that," for he was pouring out a tide of hate and vilification. Yet the Virginian stood quiet by the bar, and many an eye of astonishment was turned upon him.

"Your friends have saved your life," he [Trampas] rang out with obscene epithets. "I'll give you til sundown to leave town."<sup>21</sup>

The hero cannot ignore the challenge, and over Molly's protests he goes out to face the

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 288.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 335-336.

villain. Cowardly to the end, Trampas shoots at the Virginian from the shadows. After Trampas's bullet grazes his arm and wounds him slightly, the Virginian returns the fire, killing Trampas. The Virginian returns to the hotel where he reconciles with Molly, who has learned to accept gunfighting and the code of the West: " 'Yu' have to know it,' he said. 'I have killed Trampas.' 'Oh, thank God!' she said; and he found her in his arms. . . Thus did her New England conscience battle to the end, and in the end, capitulated to love."<sup>22</sup> What the Virginian defended in that gunfight in the street was the code, his honor, and the purity of the hero's image.<sup>23</sup> He secured his bride, his place in the community, and made ranching a little safer. Readers could feel extremely satisfied with the novel's ending.

Wister sold over two million copies of The Virginian, and in 1907 adapted it into a stage play with collaborator Kirk La Shelle. His stage adaptation was used as the basis for a Cecil B. DeMille production in 1914 and other silent version in 1923, directed by Tom Forman. The novel and stage play were also the inspiration for one of the first all-talking Westerns produced in 1929, and a color version produced in 1946. The 1929 film starred Gary Cooper as the Virginian, Richard Arlen as Steve, Mary Brain as Molly, and Walter Huston as Trampas.<sup>24</sup> The film's producer/director, Victor Fleming, was not interested in depicting the cowboy success story of the novel so he created a film with a different emphasis.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 348.

<sup>23</sup> Pilkington, Western, 17.

<sup>24</sup> All explications in the next section are from the 1929 production of The Virginian, directed by Victor Fleming.

The film's plot centered on the love story between the Virginian and Molly, as well as the Virginian's conflict with Trampas, and eliminated the narrator and the success story portion of the novel. As the film opens, the Virginian is already Judge Henry's foreman. He and several of the ranch's cowboys are delivering cattle to the railhead. While he is in town he runs into his old friend Steve who jokes with him about his newfound respectability. The two men go into a bar where a good-natured contest ensues for the affections of a barmaid. Trampas saunters in and attempts to pull the girl over to a table, but she does not want to go with him. The Virginian intervenes and provokes the confrontation, and later, the "When you call me that, smile!" line. The audience sees the confrontation and visually there is no doubt that the black-hatted Trampas is the villain and the white-hatted Virginian is the hero.

The literary Virginian and Trampas were the epitome of the formulaic hero and villain, stereotypes that would set the standards for not only the literary characters, but also the cinematic Western characters who would follow. The film can show the characters rather than describe them. This is an important distinction between the story presented in the novel and the visual presentation in the motion picture; visual symbols replaced literary imagery. Where Wister's literary descriptions enabled the reader to form a mental picture of the hero and his landscape, Fleming's film used visual clues to move the story along. The audience can see the Virginian riding his horse, Monte, across the vast expanse of the Wyoming frontier, and note the determined set of his jaw and the daring glint in his eye. They can see his easy, unhurried gait as he saunters into a scene

wearing his light-colored Western clothes, a formula clue that he is a good guy. They can hear his soft drawl with just the hint of humor behind it. In contrast, Trampas's visual image proclaims him to be a villain. The audience can see his misshapen black hat that throws a shadow across his unshaven chin and his droopy black mustache, his dusty black clothes, tobacco stained fingers, and notice his swaggering walk. They can hear his gruff voice and clipped speech as he snarls insults and laughs cruelly. He is the conceptual and visual antithesis of the Virginian.

The film includes the hanging episode. The difference is that in the film Steve's death sets up the hero's motivation for the final confrontation between hero and villain. Trampas lured Steve into cattle rustling and then left the hapless cowboy to face the posse along while he escaped. Just before he hangs, Steve writes the Virginian a letter with instructions that it be read only after Steve's death. In it he tells the Virginian that he holds no grudge and that he understands that the Virginian was only doing his duty. He leaves his gun, the Western icon of violence, with the letter as a sign of his eternal friendship. During the hanging scene the audience can see the distress in the Virginian's face as he orders Steve's death. Reaction shots that alternate between close-ups of the Virginian's face and Steve's, followed by a close-up of the gun, reinforce the emotional atmosphere of the sequence. The viewer shares the moment of regret over goodness gone bad as the close-up image of the gun prepares the audience for the end of the film.

As in the novel, the gunfight is the climax of the film. Trampas and the Virginian meet in the saloon and Trampas delivers his ultimatum: "This country ain't big enough for



the two of us--Git out by sundown." The two are standing toe-to-toe. As the image alternates between close-ups of each face, the audience sees the deadly determination in both men. The showdown in this early film is not the now classic walk-down of later films, but appears to be a game of hide-and-seek, with the picture cutting back and forth between shots of the Virginian or Trampas walking out of doors, peering down alleys, and looking into windows. When Trampas tries to sneak up on the Virginian from behind, he miscalculates and the Virginian kills him. The reason for the fight is not just defense of the hero's honor or the code; the sequence immediately following the fight scene mitigates those sentimental motives. The camera pans down to reveal that the Virginian shot Trampas with Steve's gun, introducing the element of revenge into the film, a motivation that the novel's hero did not have.<sup>25</sup>

The 1946 version, directed by Stuart Gilmore, starred Joel McCrea as the Virginian, Barbara Britton as Molly, Sonny Tufts as Steve, and Brian Donlevy as Trampas.<sup>26</sup> This film uses Molly and her acclimation to the West as a major plot point. Molly meets Steve and the Virginian as the train pulls into Medicine Bow. Both of them are attracted to her, but she is attracted to the Virginian. The scene shifts to the saloon where Steve and the Virginian good-naturedly argue over which one of them is going to win Molly's favor. The villain, Trampas, is also in the saloon and his remarks about the

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<sup>25</sup> In this movie version Steve is hanged for rustling by a posse headed by the Virginian. The doomed cowboy leaves his gun to the Virginian to show that he bears him no ill will. The Virginian blames Trampas for corrupting Steve and uses the dead man's gun in the shoot-out with Trampas. The gun exchange does not occur in the novel.

<sup>26</sup> The film explications in the next section are from the 1946 production of The Virginian, directed by Stuart Gilmore.

new school teacher are not good-natured. The “smile” confrontation between the hero and the villain takes place when Trampas tries to buy Molly a drink, implying that she is a woman of shadowy reputation.

This film, as does the 1929 production, charts the budding love story between the Virginian and Molly, but focuses more closely on the search for rustlers who have been plaguing the ranchers. As in the earlier film, the visual clues let the audience recognize the formulaic characters; the hero wears a white hat and the villain is dressed in black. The development of Molly in the film serves as a device for showing the differences between the East and the West. Molly looks out of place in her eastern clothes, sounds out of place with her eastern accent, and acts out of place with her eastern mannerisms. By the end of the film her transformation is complete; by then she visually and mentally belongs in the West and is a proper match for the Virginian.

The turning point in the film is the hanging scene. The Virginian and his posse once again catch Steve and the other rustlers because of the fire, and once again Trampas escapes. The Virginian has to turn his old friend over to the hanging party. Steve bravely faces his death and refuses to condemn the man who led him astray. Instead, he goes to his death singing. Steve gives his personal effects to the men in the posse but leaves his gun for the Virginian after tucking a note inside the holster. The Virginian does not want to see his friend die and turns away just as Steve hangs. One of the men in the posse gives Steve’s gun and note to the Virginian.

When Molly finds out about the lynching she decides to return to the East, because

she cannot reconcile her sense of right and wrong with the violence of the West. Molly cannot leave, however, because she is in love with the Virginian. After a brief tussle with her conscience, she decides to stay, and they ride into town to get married. Just as in the novel and the 1929 film, the climax of the film is the gunfight. This version closely follows the description in the novel including most of the dialogue. In a departure from the novel, Steve's gun figures into the final confrontation just as it did in the 1929 film. The Virginian uses Steve's gun in the fight. The Virginian cautiously leaves the hotel looking for Trampas, while the Sunk Creek cowboys keep Trampas's friends from helping him so that it will be a fair fight. Once again this episode is not the classic walk-down. The Virginian cautiously walks through the town looking for his nemesis while Trampas lurks in the shadows. Trampas sees the Virginian and shoots at him from hiding, but misses. The Virginian returns fire and kills him. After the gunfight the film provides no close-up of Steve's gun, nor any dialogue. Molly runs into the street, thankful that her lover survived. The last scene is Molly and the Virginian riding off into the sunset.

The film is about a violent time in Wyoming history. It depicts barroom fighting, cattle rustling, vigilantism, lynching, and gunfighting, and yet little of the action on the screen is actual violence. Characters discuss the violence rather than engaging in it. A great deal of physical movement is shown, but little on-screen visual violence occurs. The necessity for the violence on the Western frontier is explained away for the instructional benefit of the Easterner, Molly. A posse that hangs a rustler is just doing what needs to be done, because as Judge Henry's wife explains, "There are no courts here to do it." The

hero must fight the villain because a man must defend his honor and his good name. No one must call him a coward. The lesson that Molly and the audience learns is that violence is necessary for the taming of the West.

The story of the man with a past trying to make it as a cowboy in the West may have begun with The Virginian, but it reached classic depiction in the novel Shane. Written in 1949 by Jack Schaefer, the novel tells the story of a world-weary gunfighter who tries to change his way of life by becoming a hired hand on a small Wyoming ranch. The story's narrator is Bob Starrett, a young boy who is impressed with Shane and all that he seems to represent. The novel begins with Bob's description of Shane's arrival at the Starrett ranch:

He rode into our valley in the summer of '89. I was a kid then, barely topping the backboard of father's old chuck-wagon. . . . As he came near, what impressed me first was his clothes. He wore dark trousers of some serge material tucked into tall boots and held at the waist by a wide belt of a soft black leather tooled in intricate design. A coat of the same dark material as the trousers was neatly folded and strapped to his saddle-roll. His shirt was finespun linen, rich brown in color. The handkerchief knotted loosely around his throat was black silk. His hat was not the familiar Stetson, . . . It was a plain black, soft in texture, unlike any hat I had ever seen, with a crease in the crown and a wide curling brim swept down in front to shield the face.<sup>27</sup>

By all the formula conventions, this dark man should be a villain, but he is not. All this stranger wants is water for himself and his horse. Bob's father, reported to be a fair judge of men, invites the man to stay: "My name's Starrett," said father. "Joe Starrett. This here," waving at me "is Robert McPherson Starrett. Too much name for a boy. I

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<sup>27</sup> Jack Schaefer, Shane (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1949, 1983), 1-2.

make it Bob.” The stranger nodded again. “Call me Shane,” he said.<sup>28</sup> Both Bob and his father recognize that the stranger is important, and both see change in the future because of him. Bob’s mother, Marian, also sees Shane as an instrument of change, change that may not always be pleasant, but nevertheless exciting. Shane decides to stay and work on the Starrett ranch. He not only becomes important to the family but to the community at large as well. To Bob he is a hero. To Joe Starrett he is a friend. To Marian he is a romantic figure. To the other ranchers and townspeople he is both a savior and a threat.

The major conflict in the story is the trouble between the large ranch owner, Fletcher, and the homesteaders. Until Shane’s arrival, the homesteaders looked to Joe Starrett for their resolve, but he alone could not withstand Fletcher’s campaign of intimidation. Shane’s presence changes the odds. Through Bob the reader comes to understand Shane’s suppressed violence. Shane changes clothes, putting away his dark shirt and pants, exchanging them for sturdy work clothing, and folds his gun and holster into his bed roll. At the homesteader’s meetings at the Starrett home Shane stays in the background, seldom speaking but ever watchful. As Bob notes: “I suddenly realized that Shane was sitting opposite the door where he could directly confront anyone coming through it. . . . He always wanted to know everything happening around him.”<sup>29</sup> The other homesteaders are nervous around Shane for they also recognized his repressed capacity for violence. They also realize that if Fletcher can get rid of Shane they have no hope of holding onto their land. The conscious suppression of violence in this Western

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 35.

novel is jarring to an audience expecting a fistfight on every page.

The novel depicts four confrontation scenes involving Shane. The first involves Shane and Chris, one of the cowboys from the Fletcher ranch. Shane goes into town realizing that the cowboys are waiting to provoke a fight with him, and he also realizes that the homesteaders will give up and desert Joe Starrett if he does not do something. Shane enters the saloon and orders a soda pop, which allows Chris to try to provoke a fight, but Shane will not rise to the bait, and tries to warn the young cowboy off. Chris will not listen and continues to taunt the older man. Finally Shane decides to end the confrontation: "He moved slowly, almost unwillingly, to face Chris. Every line of his body was as taut as stretched whipcord. . . . Chris stepped back involuntarily, one pace, two, then pulled up erect. And still nothing happened."<sup>30</sup> Just as quickly as the confrontation begins, Shane ends it by walking out of the door. Like the "Smile" confrontation between the Virginian and Trampas, this episode held the potential for violence which could be deferred only for a short time. The second confrontation comes as a result of the first.

Because Shane chose not to fight Chris, the young cowboy mistakenly believes that he is a coward. Every chance they get the Fletcher cowhands taunt the homesteaders about pigs, soda pop and their seemly discredited champion. Shane realizes that this tense situation cannot continue, so he goes to town again, precipitating the second confrontation. The fight scene between Shane and Chris takes longer to read about than it

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 53.

probably took to fight. With a few swift moves Shane defeats Chris and breaks his arm, and none of the other cowboys in the saloon is anxious to join the fight. As one barroom observer notes: "It was maybe thirty seconds from the time he grabbed holt of Chris til Chris was out cold on the floor. In my opinion Shane is the most dangerous man I've ever seen."<sup>31</sup> The third confrontation results from the second. The wanton destruction of the barroom and the savageness of the bare-knuckle beating is heightened for the reader because this depiction of violence has been withheld from them for so long. Fletcher's foreman and some of the other cowboys decide to beat Shane to pay him back for Chris' defeat, and as the fight begins in the saloon, it is four against one. Shane holds his own for a while, but then the cowboys overwhelm him. Then Joe Starrett joins the fight, evening the odds. Finally the only cowboy left standing is Red Marlin, and Shane elects to finish him off.

The final confrontation takes place at the end of the novel. After the fight in the saloon, Fletcher realizes that the homesteaders will not leave unless forced, so he hires a gunslinger named Stark Wilson to do the job. Hoping to provoke Joe Starrett into a fight, Fletcher and his hired gun kill one of the other homesteaders. Shane knows that Joe is no match for Wilson, and so he knocks him out. Leaving the unconscious Joe with Marian, Shane puts on his gunfighter clothing, straps on his gun, and heads for town. As he dresses in his gunfighter clothing, Shane becomes a weapon.

Belt and holster and gun . . . were not things he was wearing or carrying. They were part of him, part of the man, of the full sum of the integrate force that was Shane. . . . This was not our Shane. And yet it was. I

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 62.

remember Ed Howell's saying that this was the most dangerous man he had ever seen. . . . Shane said gently, "This is my business. My kind of business."<sup>32</sup>

Bob marvels at the transformation of his hero. He always suspected that Shane was not like other men, but until he sees the transformation from would-be rancher back to gunfighter, Bob never fully understood what the difference was: "He was tall and terrible there in the road . . . He was the man I saw that first day, a stranger, dark and forbidding, forging his lone way out of an unknown past in the utter loneliness of his own immovable and instinctive defiance."<sup>33</sup> Bob realizes that violence can no longer be postponed or mitigated as Shane and the hired gunfighter, Wilson, face each other in the saloon for the final showdown. Wilson dies in the shoot-out and Shane is slightly wounded, but it is not over yet. While most of the men in the saloon look at the fallen gunfighter, Bob watches Shane. Suddenly another shot rings out, and Shane reacts with lightening speed to shoot the man trying to ambush him from the top of the stairs. Bob describes the scene for the reader: "My eyes were fixed on Shane and I saw it. . . . I saw the arm leap and the hand take the gun in lightening sweep. I saw the barrel line up like--like a finger pointing--and flame spurt even as the man was still in motion."<sup>34</sup> Shane turns and leaves the bar, knowing that he will also have to leave the valley because violence has no place in a growing settled community. As Shane explains to Bob, "There's no going back from a killing." As the novel ends, Shane rides off into the sunset,

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 101,102.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 111.



and Bob rides off into manhood. The matured Bob remembered Shane, his gun, and the violence of the West: "I would see the man and the weapon wedded in one indivisible deadliness. I would see the man and the tool, a good man and a good tool, doing what had to be done. . . . He was the man who rode into our little valley out of the heart of the great glowing West and when his work was done rode back whence he had come and he was Shane."<sup>35</sup>

Revered as one of the classic Westerns, Shane became a film in 1952. The motion picture based on Schaefer's novel was directed by George Stevens and starred Alan Ladd as Shane and Van Heflin as Joe Starrett. The film followed the basic plot of the novel, with some differences because of cinematic concerns and others reflected in character development. The story's first casualty was the narrator. In the film the audience must see the action and the character development. The little boy is still there, but now his name is Joey and he is a plot device; the camera follows his reactions to Shane. Visually the film follows the conventions of the Western film. The film begins with a wide-shot of cattle grazing on a vast plain. The frame narrows to a small stream running through a modest ranch yard with a small garden at one side of the small wooden house with mountains off in the distance behind the house. Then the viewer becomes aware of a rider moving towards the house. The audience's first glimpse of Shane, a dusty traveler stopping for a drink from Joe Starrett's well, is not the black clothed character described in the novel. In the film Shane is wearing fawn-colored buckskins and a soft crushed hat,

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 118, 119.

creating a look more exotic than deadly, with the only thing remotely dangerous-- the gun at his hip.

The trouble with the cowboys starts within the first scene. The villainous rancher, now named Ryker, rides in with some of his boys, threatens Joe and his family and tramples the garden--a sure sign that they are villains. Shane steps in to back up Starrett and gets invited to dinner. Shane's violent past is hinted twice: once when Joey cocks his rifle and Shane goes for his gun, and a second time when a sharp noise in the yard causes him to go for his gun again. The Starretts get a glimpse of the violence behind this seemingly soft-spoken gentleman, but they like and trust him anyway. Just as in the novel, they invite him to become part of their little family.

The four separate confrontations in the novel are condensed in the film. Shane's first meeting with Chris follows the novel's plot, but the second and third fights are combined into one big barroom brawl. While Shane finishes off Chris in thirty seconds in the novel, the fight sequence in the film lasts for over two minutes. After Shane knocks Chris out and refuses to join Ryker's crew, all of the cowboys in the bar jump him. The homesteaders are afraid to help him, all except Joe Starrett who comes to his aid. The fight is a no-holds-barred-break-up-the-place brawl with Starrett and Shane taking on the whole lot and winning, although getting battered and bruised in the process. After the fight, Ryker sends for a hired killer to defeat the small ranch homesteaders; it will be guns, not fists, next time.

Jack Wilson, the hired gun, played by Jack Palance, arrives in town and the trouble

really begins. Wearing dark, dusty clothes, a black hat, black leather belt, and black boots, the hired gunfighter is dressed the way Schaefer described Shane in the novel. Wilson provokes a fight with one of the homesteaders and shoots him down in the street. Starrett realizes that he must stand up to Wilson or lose all his support in the valley, but Shane intervenes. Dressed in his buckskins again, Shane straps on his gun and prepares to go into town in Starrett's place.<sup>36</sup> In the novel Shane simply hits Starrett over the head and leaves him with Marion; in the film, they fight it out all over the farmyard. To protect Starrett, Marion, and their son, Shane resorts to violence before he rides off to face Wilson, Ryker, and more violence. The final confrontation follows the one in the novel. Shane and the gunfighter meet in the saloon. Wilson does not want to fight Shane, but if he is to kill Starrett he has no choice but to deal with Shane first. As Shane walks into the bar the sound the audience hears is the jingle of his spurs. As Wilson rises to meet him, his spurs jingle. Wilson draws, but Shane is faster and kills Wilson. Shane also manages to kill Ryker, who is hiding on the stairs. Shane walks from the bar with Joey following along begging the gunfighter to return to the homestead. Shane knows that he must leave the town and his newfound friends, because as he explains to Joey, "There's no going back on a killing." Once a gunman, always a gunman. The audience accepts the reality

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<sup>36</sup>This scene mimics a robing scene from classical literature such as the one found in Book Nineteen of *The Iliad* by Homer. "Among them Prince Akhilleus armed. . . . Raging at Trojans, he buckled on the arms Hephaistos forged. The beautiful greaves, fitted with silver anklets, first he put upon his legs, and next the cuirass on his ribs; then over his shoulder he slung the sword of bronze with silver scabbard; finally he took up the massive shield whence came a radiance like the round full moon." Homer, *The Iliad* 19. 365, 368-375

that Shane can kill the villain and ride away because he temporarily represented the forces of order. Morality demands, however, that he not benefit personally from the killing. The valley will be peaceful now but Shane will not be there to enjoy it because violence has no place in a settled community.

The story of the cowboy, the gunfighter, and personal justice are central to the American Western, and for many Americans the cowboy is the epitome of the American hero. Canada, however, pays little homage to him. He is out of place in Canadian literature and films that depict the settling of the Canadian plains. Canadian Arnold Davidson observed that Canadian writers “have not produced authentic all-Canadian-content versions of American Westerns because a key ingredient is missing. . . . There was no frontier literature because there was no frontier.”<sup>37</sup> Neither was there a frontier mythology. When the Canadian settlers went west from the late 1870s and into the early 1900s, they generally moved onto surveyed land near a railroad where a professional police force kept them peaceful. In the words of a Canadian pioneer in 1900: “Imagine a West with no hostile Indians, no sun-scorched desert of burning sands, no alkaline plains devoid of vegetation . . . but a West of broad prairies and timbered hills, where both water and feed for horses can be found in abundance.”<sup>38</sup> This was the image of the Canadian Western frontier.

It was the farmer, not the cowboy, who settled the Canadian West. One of the

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<sup>37</sup> Arnold E. Davidson, Coyote Country: Fictions of the Canadian West (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 12-13.

<sup>38</sup> Douglas Hill, The Opening of the Canadian West: Where Strong Men Gathered (New York: The John Day Company, 1967), 252.

first groups to move out onto the Canadian prairies of Manitoba in the 1870s were Mennonites from Russia. The Mennonites proved that farming on the plains was possible and that immigrant groups would be welcomed, but still settlement was sparse and remained so well into the middle of the twentieth century.

Cattle ranching, however, came to Western Canada long before the Mennonites. It began in 1811 with the Selkirk settlers on the Red River.<sup>39</sup> The Hudson's Bay Company sponsored a small group of settlers who hoped to establish a small agricultural concern that could provide locally grown food for the company's trading posts and for expeditions traveling through the area. The group started with a bull and a cow named Adam and Eve and hoped to build a modest but successful herd. Apparently the desired expansion did not happen. Adam wandered away and drowned in the Red River and the cow became more valuable for milk than for meat. In 1821, when Hudson's Bay stockholder Lord Selkirk decided to have cattle in his colony, he contracted with agents in Missouri to send more animals north. By the 1830s the livestock industry was still small, but modestly commercially successful.<sup>40</sup> The Canadian cattle industry spread to the far western provinces in the 1850s and 1860s when gold and silver strikes brought more settlers into the territories.<sup>41</sup> The grasslands of Alberta and Saskatchewan proved to be the best grazing land because of a weather phenomenon known as the chinook. The chinook was a warm, dry, westerly wind that swept down the mountains and across the prairies in the

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<sup>39</sup> Edward Brado, Cattle Kingdom: Early Ranching in Alberta (Vancouver, Douglas & McIntyre, 1984), 27.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 27-29.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 29-31.

midwinter months, melting away the snow and allowing the cattle to graze even in January and February when the rest of the Plains were blanketed with deep drifting snow.<sup>42</sup>

By the 1880s, cattle ranching in Canada grew more profitable and attracted more ranchers just as the industry did below the forty-ninth parallel. Cattle drives from Montana brought some of the new herds northward while other cattle arrived by train from Eastern Canada. Ranching expanded on the Canadian prairies for many of the same reasons it did in the United States: the expansion of the railroad and the extinction of the bison. As Douglas Hill observed, "The 1880s were the great days of ranching, when the industry reached its peak, and hundreds of thousands of acres were sold or leased to the cattlemen, or the horse-breeders, or the few scattered sheepmen. They were also the days of the cowboy in the Canadian West."<sup>43</sup>

The Canadian cowboy was nothing like his mythological American counterpart. The Northwest Mounted Police kept the peace in the area, which minimized the need for personal justice. The cowboy in Canada, usually unarmed, was a working man who did not present much of a model for the mythical hero. He was an employee who worked hard for his money and like many other Western workers found it hard to hang onto his wages. Trail towns, such as those in Montana with liquor, gambling, and women to tempt the cowboy, never really developed in Canada. From traveling gaming wagons vice peddlers found ways to separate a man from his money.

Besides liquor and gambling losses, clothing was perhaps one of the cowboy's

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>43</sup> Hill, Opening of the Canadian West, 246.

biggest expenses. Clothing on the Northern plains was a matter of durability and warmth: wool flannel underwear, a woolen shirt in winter, cotton in summer, and durable pants. Ranch clothing was designed for men who engaged in hard work and needed freedom of movement.<sup>44</sup> The large brimmed hat, so distinctive of the American cowboy, was smaller in Canada, and absent from the Canadian cowboy's hip was the traditional six-shooter. Guns distracted the working cowboy. If a he did own a six-shooter, he usually left it tucked into his bedroll at camp or back in the bunkhouse.<sup>45</sup> In Canada the Mounties, not a gun, were the law of the land. That regional police force usually had the last word as this report about a drunken cowboy's confrontation with the law from the Lethbridge Herald points out:

Here the cowboy was too much for the North-West Mounted Police as, having been permitted to emerge from his cell on some pretext or other he observed a police gun on the wall, possessed himself of it, overawed the constable and issued forth again thirsting for blood.

As it happened, however, the only blood shed was that of the cowboy himself for the constable got his rifle and on the prisoner refusing to put up his hand put a bullet through his arm.<sup>46</sup>

This account is at odds with the traditional American image of the mythical Western hero. Stories of the Canadian West revolved around a different myth. Fiction of the Canadian West developed around themes of a settled agrarian population.<sup>47</sup> Part of what defines both the myth of the frontier and the myth of the garden can possibly be traced back to

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<sup>44</sup> Brado, Cattle Kingdom, 214.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 214-216.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 232.

<sup>47</sup> Dick Harrison, Unnamed Country: The Struggle for a Canadian Prairie Fiction (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1977), 73.

underlying philosophical beliefs of both countries.<sup>48</sup> According to Canadian filmmaker and critic R. Bruce Elder, English Canada developed from a Calvinist philosophy distinct from the secularized Protestant philosophy of the American Puritans. Consequently, in Canada the idea of community remained stronger than the sense of individualism that developed in the United States.<sup>49</sup>

The garden became the metaphor for Canadian Western literature, which could explain why Canadian filmmakers produced few visual representations of what Americans consider the classic Western. Early representations of western subjects in Canadian fiction were European-styled romance adventure novels, such as Annette, the Métis Spy (1887) by J.E. Collins and Lords of the North (1900) by Agnes Laut. Adventure stories such as Red Man's Revenge (1886) by R.M. Ballantyne were aimed at the British juvenile market, but W.F. Butler's Red Cloud, The Solitary Sioux (1882) was intended for an adult audience. Fanciful stories of Indian uprisings and settler's struggles against them were inaccurately, but luridly, detailed in works such as The Devil's Playground (1894), The Prodigal's Brother (1899) and The Rising of the Red Man (1904), all by John Mackie. What all of these works had in common was a sense of adventure rather than history, stressing action but not violence.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Henry Nash Smith, Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950, 1978), 123-250. The last section of Smith's book discusses the myth of the garden and its place in the American Western settlement.

<sup>49</sup> R. Bruce Elder, Image and Identity: Reflections on Canadian Film and Culture (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1989), 51.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 50-55.



Early twentieth-century writers replaced those romantic representations of life on the plains with more realistic novels. The myth of the garden was more sustainable in Canadian literature, and later in film, because it centered on community and lawful order, not an individual's glorified, unbridled violence. One of the most prominent examples of prairie realism was Frederick P. Grove's Settlers of the Marsh, which tells the story of Niels Lindstedt, a Swedish immigrant trying to make a living in northern Manitoba.<sup>51</sup> Settlers tells the tale of man fighting not only the elements of nature but human nature as well. Like Shane, Niels comes into the family as an outsider--but his past reflects a history of failure, not violence. Niels wants success in the West--successful farm and family, but the reality of the Canadian prairie experience is that he will have to suffer disappointment before the land can be conquered. Where the American hero, such as Shane, has too much knowledge of the violence of settlement, the Canadian hero, such as Niels, has too little knowledge of it.

The novel opens with a familiar Canadian setting, a snow storm, and the main character, Niels, and a friend traveling to an isolated farm to dig a well get lost in the storm. The novelist uses weather conditions to reflect or contrast character reactions throughout the story. At several climactic points in the novel, Grove contrasts the human action to the weather. In a tender scene in the book, Niels proposes, unsuccessfully, to Ellen, his long suffering love, as a storm approaches; yet, in the scene that describes

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<sup>51</sup> All explications in this section are taken from Frederick P. Grove, Settlers of the Marsh (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1925, 1966). This work is similar to prairie fiction such as Giants in the Earth by O.E. Rolvaag being published in the United States at about the same time.

Niels' murderous confrontation with Maria, the woman he is forced to marry, and who proves to be a faithless wife, the weather is calm.

Throughout the story Niels works hard for success and is temporarily defeated only by human experiences. Ultimately he finds his success both on the land and with the community. By the end of the novel he finally wins the girl he loved from the first and goes back to his farm. His conflicts have been with the land and individual human corruption, not with the community. His violence has been limited to a personal confrontation with a character who was essentially morally bankrupt. As Canadian writer Dick Harrison noted "[i]n Settlers particularly he [Grove] may have found one of the rare combinations of techniques which capture at once the insistence of brute circumstances on the plains and the dreams of the pioneers, and which respond to both the threat and the promise of the unnamed country."<sup>52</sup>

Canadian prairie fiction found its way onto the screen because it held more meaning for Canadian audiences than the cowboy story. One film, Drylanders (1963), produced by the Film Board of Canada, gives a visual presentation to the world depicted in Settlers of the Marsh.<sup>53</sup> Drylanders presents the story of one family's determination to make a home on the Saskatchewan prairie. As the film opens, Dan, played by James Douglas, and Eliza, played by Frances Hyland, are riding in an ox-drawn wagon moving west when they meet a wagon going east. The man and woman on the wagon are

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<sup>52</sup> Harrison, Unnamed Country, 123.

<sup>53</sup> All scenes explicated in this section are from Drylanders, National Film Board of Canada production, 1963.

exhausted and emotionless. The prairie has beaten them and they advise Dan and Eliza to turn back to Montreal because all they have before them is freezing winters, droughts, and dust-storms. But the newcomers press on to their new farm where a lone stake marks the homestead. Dan sees the farm as it will be, while Eliza and her children see only the endless expanse of prairie. The film presents black and white, documentary style, uncompromising, and uninviting images of the wind-swept Saskatchewan landscape.

As the story progresses, the film is filled with scenes of hard work and imminent failure. Dan and Eliza struggle to build a sod house and plant their wheat. Eliza wants to give up and go home, but, as Dan points out, there is no home to return to; they will have to stay and succeed. As the wheat begins to grow nature steps in and dashes their hopes when a heavy rainstorm turns to hail and beats down the maturing wheat. With the crop destroyed along with their vegetable garden the family runs low on food so Dan decides to ask his neighbor for help. A storm sweeps across the prairie before he can return home, and as he tries to make it back with the food before nightfall, he loses his way in the snowstorm. Eliza puts a light in the window to guide Dan back but the light goes out when Eliza dozes. She wakes to the darkness, relights the lamp and Dan finds his way home.

When spring comes they plant again, and this time the wheat grows and they have their first successful year. They will stay and they will prosper, a true reflection of the myth of the garden. The only violence in this film is the violence of the natural world, the weather, and the uncompromising dryland prairie. The community is not threatened by

money-grubbing ranchers and order is not achieved at the point of a gun. Success is achieved through hard work and family commitment because this community has no room for mavericks.

The film follows Dan and Eliza's family into the next generation as their sons mature, marry, and try to build their own successes. One son, Collin, marries a local girl and continues to work on the farm, while the other son, Russell, heads for the city. As the Great Depression spreads across Canada, many people abandon the land, but not Dan. He will not give up his land as long as he has the strength to struggle on. While he is plowing the fields for another planting, he has a heart attack, and it seems as though he is dying with the land. As he dies, Eliza remembers the early years when they first came to the West and all of the good times they had before the drought. They bury Dan in 1939 just as the rain begins to fall. The drought has broken and the family will begin again. One of the hallmarks of Canadian filmmaking seems to be the more slow deliberate pacing of the action. Because the action in Drylanders is more for exposition than excitement, there is little physicality on the screen in terms of human confrontations. A visual feature of this film that graphically creates an image of the Canadian prairie is the light. With the exception of the night scenes such as the one in which Dan gets lost in the snowstorm, the scenic light is extremely bright allowing the filmmaker to contrast the brightness of the light with the grimness of the task of pioneer survival. This film does not celebrate either the myth or the image of the American frontier, but it does illustrate the Canadian myth of the prairie as garden.

When Canadian filmmakers try to fit the classic cowboy story into a Canadian mold, the result is often uneven and sometimes disastrous. An example of just such a calamity is a film that was distributed under three different names: The Last Gunfighter, Hired Gun, and The Devil's Spawn (1959).<sup>54</sup> The film starred Don Borisenko, Tess Tory, and Jan Shannon in the major roles and managed to run for well over sixty minutes without actually naming the characters. It was difficult for viewers to tell the time period depicted as the filmmaker provided few visual clues in the costuming, hair styles, or dialogue. It was a film that used all of the conventions and clichés of an American Western but with some unintentionally ludicrous results.

The opening sequence begins with a lone man on horseback riding up to a ranch house. He dismounts, ties his horse in the corral, and looks toward the house while he checks his gun and smokes a cigarette. Two men come out the house and move toward the lone rider. They all draw guns, and the newcomer shoots one of the men from the house then gets back on his horse and rides off into the snowy landscape. This may be a Western, but it is a Canadian Western, so snow will be ever-present.

The next scene shows the gunman riding up to a run-down trading post. A man in a shabby coat is sitting on the roof playing a guitar in the winter wind. The gunman goes inside and orders a drink at the bar. The gunman regales the bartender with his exploits as a gunfighter and his family background: his mother was an Indian, his father an itinerant preacher, and he has wandered about the land as a hired gunfighter. One of the other bar

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<sup>54</sup> All scenes explicated in this section are from The Last Gunfighter (Hired Gun, The Devil's Spawn), Dairy Productions, Lindsay Shonteff, producer/director, 1959.

patrons gets up and challenges the gunman to a fight. The two of them face-off in the dingy bar and the gunman draws his weapon first and kills the unlucky challenger. The gunman expresses his regrets at always having to shoot people and offers to pay for the burial. After a rather pointless graveside scene, where three people stand around the open grave, the gunman gets on his horse and rides off onto the northern Canadian prairie. A jarring jump-cut to the next scene, where a man is loading a shotgun as the gunfighter rides up to his house, has no visual or dialogue references to help the audience decipher the plot line. The man with the gun confronts the gunfighter/rider who convinces him that he only wants hay for his horse, not trouble and for no apparent reason, the farmer invites the gunfighter to stay for dinner. This scene echoes Shane's entrance to the Starrett ranch, but the little boy is missing. All during dinner the farmer's wife, a former saloon singer with a sharp tongue and a roving eye, keeps making advances toward the gunfighter, while the farmer, using a bad American southern accent, tells the gunfighter all about his troubles with the cowboys of the neighboring large ranch. The farmer offers the gunfighter a job and a room in the barn. The next morning the farmer's wife goes out to check on the sleeping gunfighter, and in this scene the dialogue is inane and the action is nonexistent. The wife makes advances to the gunfighter but he rejects her. A close-up of her face reveals her emotional reaction to the rejection. If he does not respond to her overtures she means to make trouble for him, and when she tries again, he does not resist too strenuously. As the camera pulls in for a close-up of his face as she leaves the barn, the viewer is probably supposed to imagine that he feels sorry for betraying the farmer, but

his facial expression does not quite convey that emotion or sentiment.

Immediately after the seduction scene in the barn the filmmaker employs a jump cut and shifts the action to the gunfighter back at the saloon in the snow. The bad cowboys ride up; the audience knows that they are bad because they are all dressed in black and they even kick their horses. They all crowd into the bar and noisily order drinks. Suddenly, a young farm boy rushes in and challenges the cowboys to a fight because they have defiled his sister. He is no match for the cowboys, and as they surround him the audience knows its not going to be a fair fight. The farm boy dies from multiple stab wounds--after all he is only a farmer and as such does not rate a gunshot. The bad cowboys ride off and the gunfighter takes the dead boy home to be buried.

The gunfighter goes back to the farm where the farmer's wife tries to convince him to run away with her, but he refuses because he does not want to offend the farmer. When the farmer returns home, his wife makes him think that the gunfighter has taken liberties with her against her will, and then the two men exchange blows. This time the gunfighter refuses to kill to defend himself. He knocks the farmer unconscious and rides off into the snow. The farmer's wife is really angry now, because not only did her husband survive the fight, but her intended lover rode off and left her. She convinces the farmer to go after the gunfighter and avenge her honor. From the scene in the farmyard, the film once again abruptly jump cuts to the snowbound saloon. The gunfighter drinks steadily but is still able to defend himself in a barroom fight where he shoots three of his attackers, but by the time the farmer arrives his gun is empty. The two men meet outside the bar and the

farmer calmly kills the gunfighter with a shotgun and then rides off into the snow. The last scene is the dead gunfighter lying face down in the snow holding his empty gun.

This film depicts a continuous stream of senseless violent acts and seemed more a parody of what the producers thought an American Western ought to be. The characters were even more one dimensional than the average American B Western, the dialogue was stiff and often did not advance the plot. In addition, the amateurish camera work, uninteresting scenery, and monochromatic color did not offer much visual appeal for an audience. I am convinced that the reason this movie was released under so many names was that the producers were trying to fool audiences into thinking that each title represented a different film.

With this film as an example of an attempt at a Canadian-produced Western, it is not hard to understand why few were filmed. Besides being a truly inferior film, it failed on another level. American filmmakers could make good Westerns and they could make mediocre Westerns, but what they all had in common was a sense of the American frontier myth and the knowledge of how to depict the elements of that myth. What was missing in The Last Gunfighter, in terms of the Canadian point of view, was present in Drylanders-a sense of the national Western myth of the tamed garden. The best Canadian Western writers, and by extension Canadian filmmakers, succeed by challenging the ideology of the popular American Western and by creating alternative models that worked for their national mythology and concept of how the West was won.



## CHAPTER 8

### TIN STAR AND RED COAT: VIOLENCE AND LAW AND ORDER

The idyllic motion picture image of the peaceful prairie and the sleepy western town was an illusion, because the empty tranquil prairie was neither truly empty nor totally tranquil. A close look at the small apparently peaceful towns that dotted the western territories revealed that they experienced many of the same problems that plagued eastern cities: crime and lack of economic resources. Reality, however, was not what the western novel or film stressed. The town was not usually the center focus of the action. The usual setting for an American western was on the prairie, in the desert, or in the mountains, anywhere but in the town. When the story featured a town it functioned as a backdrop or counter point to the story's action. Ranchers and cowboys came into town to sell their cattle, get drunk, or get women. Settlers came into town to get supplies, to ship their crops, get drunk, or get a woman. Towns survived as long as settlers and cowboys had spending money.<sup>1</sup> Towns often developed near mining strikes, railroad construction, army forts, or trading posts. If the people could make a living there the town survived and grew, even if the railroad builders or the army moved on.

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<sup>1</sup> Jenni Calder, *There Must Be a Lone Ranger, The American West in Film and in Reality* (New York: Taplinger Publishing Company, 1975), 63.

The formula Western town was usually a collection of drab unpainted buildings located on either side of a dusty or muddy street. The buildings represented the icons of civilization and often included a saloon, a general store, a blacksmith shop, a hotel, and, of course, the jail. The town was where the sheriff or the marshal lived, but not necessarily where law and order lived. Law and justice in an American Western town were relative and both could be quite savage in a western film. In an American Western novel or film justice was often dispensed by the lone marshal, or sheriff, or any individual acting for the community, and formal courtrooms were not usually part of the formula. In most of these small western towns an appointed or elected sheriff or marshal maintained law and order. The lawman and his tin star became one of the most enduring images of the western novel or film.

In nearly every American Western novel or film, filmmakers present scenes where the sheriff, or the character who represented him, had to confront the bad guys. When the hero met the villains in a town, he could act as the representative of the threatened and frightened community. The boundaries of the town intensified the necessary violence by confining it within a smaller space, thus restricting the hero's ability to act.<sup>2</sup> This type of scene also pointed to the individual nature of law and order on the American frontier. Even if the character were a sheriff, his power over the community was tenuous. The pattern of American western settlement limited the power of organized law enforcement, because settlement often out-paced the formation or implementation of organized

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 71, 73.

governments. Realistically, the town lost its frontier status when law and justice were confined inside the courtroom.

In most literary and cinematic American Westerns, establishing law and order results in a situation that leads to a violent confrontation. Three western films that illustrate the violence of American frontier law and order and the relationship of the ad hoc lawman to the western community are High Noon (1952), The Man who Shot Liberty Valance (1962) and Unforgiven (1992).

High Noon (1952), produced by Stanley Kramer, directed by Fred Zinnemann, starring Gary Cooper and Grace Kelly, has become one of the most widely recognized American western films. This film is interesting for a variety of reasons, one of them being the diverse critical reaction to the film upon its release. The other point of interest for this study is the film's portrayal of physical violence. High Noon is either, depending on the critic you read, one of the best or one of the worst westerns ever filmed. Film critics such as Robert Warshow faulted the film for what he termed the inclusion of a social drama that artificially isolates the hero from the community. He further maintained that the film's ending was pathetic rather than tragic.<sup>3</sup> For him the film violated the mythic rules of the classic western. Another critic, Andrew Sarris, based his criticism of the film mainly on stylistic points. Initially, he said, Zinnemann took a realistic approach to the story, but then violated it in the unrealistic shoot-out at the end of the film. As he observed: "if Zinnemann had wanted to sustain his realistic approach, he could have had Cooper mow

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Warshow, "Movie Chronicle: The Westerner," The Immediate Experience (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, 1962[1954]), 149.

his assailants down with a shotgun.”<sup>4</sup> For Sarris, the film was too contemporary and anti-historical. The history aside, the main fault Sarris seemed to find with High Noon was that Howard Hawks did not direct it. Critics Robert Parrish and Michael Pitts called it “overrated” and asserted that “some of the pretentiousness of the storyline and the conventions used in the character relationships do not hold up.” Parrish and Pitts further pointed out that the film had to be reedited before it was released. To make it more exciting the filmmaker added Tex Ritter singing the title tune at lulls in the storyline to carry the viewer’s interest until the action resumed.<sup>5</sup>

Some international critics, such as Harry Schein, took a more philosophical approach when he categorized the film as a political allegory of Cold War America. He pointed to Marshal Will Kane as the embodiment of America, the Miller gang as the threat of international communism, the marshal’s wife, Amy, as United States isolationist sentiment, while the townspeople mirrored all of the nations of the world who watched the United States opposing Communism alone in Korea.<sup>6</sup> For Schein, the film represented the America of the 1950s not the 1870s. One last political interpretation involved seeing the film as a reflection of the McCarthy era. This viewing was in part prompted by the behavior of Carl Foreman, the script writer, who left the United States after House Un-American Activities Committee hearings in 1952. In an interview he gave in 1958,

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<sup>4</sup> Andrew Sarris, “The World of Howard Hawks,” Focus on Howard Hawks, ed. Joseph McBride (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1972), 58.

<sup>5</sup> James Robert Parrish and Michael R. Pitts, The Great Western Pictures (Metuchen: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1976), 133-134.

<sup>6</sup> Don Graham, “High Noon,” Western Movies, ed. William T. Pilkington and Don Graham (Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 1979), 52.

Foreman maintained that the film was “an investigation of fear as it affects the community rather than one individual.”<sup>7</sup> Critical interpretations aside, the film must be judged on what is actually on the screen for the viewer to see. For purposes of this discussion what I am most interested in is how the film used violence as an integral part of the story.

The opening image of the film is a man alone in an obviously western landscape sitting under a tree. Two men ride up to join him and the three then ride toward a town in the distance as the theme song tells the story. The first image of the town is the church, and then the frame changes to include the street, and then people. Intercut with the arrival of the three strangers is the marshal’s wedding. Thanks in part to the title song, the audience knows the basic plot within the first ten minutes of the film. The three gunslingers, Ben Miller, Jack Colby, and James Pierce have come to town to wait for the noon train that is carrying a fourth killer, Frank Miller. The four plan to kill the marshal, Will Kane, because he sent Frank to jail four years earlier. None of the town’s people will help the marshal; actually, they all, including his new wife, urge him to “get out of town.” Kane refuses to go, and thereby sets up the showdown at the end of the film. What makes this film so controversial a western is not the plot but how the plot is developed.

The western theme of the lone man having to save the town was not new nor was his appeal to violence to solve the problem original. What was different in High Noon was the subversion of the expected. In many ways, Will Kane resembles other western heroes

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<sup>7</sup> “An Interview with Carl Foreman,” Sight and Sound, (Summer 1958): 220.

such as *The Virginian* and *Shane*, both of whom must by the end of their stories face the villain in a final moment of violence to preserve law and order. In all three stories and films, the hero's trial is personal as well as civic, and in all three the hero has a female character either to impress or instruct. Kane's problem is a little more complex; he not only must face a bitter enemy, but an unworthy town as well. It is quite clear from the beginning of the film that the townspeople do not want the marshal to stay and face the Miller gang. The people present at Kane's wedding practically force him into his buggy and out of town, but he cannot escape his sense of duty and his fatalistic sense of destiny. He tells them that he must stay and face Frank Miller; to face him now, or face him later--either way the showdown is inevitable.

The entire film becomes a prologue for the final ten minutes of violence, and several flashes of violence lead to the climactic showdown. For example, when Kane walks into the saloon to try to enlist new deputies some of the men at the bar are making jokes about him. His frustrated response is to knock one of them to the floor. The fleeting sense of satisfaction in being able to do something is reflected in Kane's face. But his sense of duty reasserts itself and his face registers disgust at his momentary lapse of fair play. After this confrontation, Kane's isolation from the townspeople increases, and in a moment of despair he goes to the livery stable to saddle a horse and get out of town. His former deputy, Harvey, played by Lloyd Bridges, urges him to go so that the former deputy will be free to save the town and get the marshal's job he has always coveted. Kane reconsiders his position, shakes off his doubts, and refuses to leave: "Seems all that

everybody and his brother wants is to get me out of town," he drawls. "Don't shove me, Harve, I'm tired of being shoved." Harvey misreads Kane's resolve and tries to force the older man on to his horse. Kane resists and the two men fight. Kane beats his former deputy senseless, and leaves him in the stable to recover. Again, however, the physical violence is a release that Kane almost immediately regrets.

The final ten minutes of the film is the shoot-out sequence. The sequence begins with a close-up of Kane, then the camera pulls back with an aerial dolly shot that leaves him alone in the street, dwarfed by the town's buildings. This shot is followed by a quick cut to the train station as the train pulls in, whistle blowing. Frank Miller gets off the train, greets his gang, and heads toward town with the other gunslingers.

Even after the train arrives the townsmen refuse to confront the Millers, preferring to hide behind closed doors and shuttered windows as Kane faces the determined killers alone. Realistically, the only chance the marshal has against them is to eliminate them one by one. In the first exchange, Kane kills Ben Miller and then retreats to the livery stable. He manages to shoot Colby from the hay loft, leaving only Pierce and Frank Miller. When Miller and Pierce set the stable on fire, Kane escapes with the frightened horses and takes cover in the saddlery shop. Miller fires at him from the street while Pierce tries to get around in back of the building. Suddenly, Pierce is shot in the back through a broken window by Amy Kane, the marshal's new wife. In spite of her Quaker beliefs, she is the only one to come to Kane's aid. Frank Miller rushes into the building, takes Amy hostage, and moves into the street to confront the marshal in the building on the opposite side. "All

right, Kane,” he shouts, “Come out or your friend here will get it the way Pierce did.” “I’ll come out,” Kane shouts, “Let her go.” “Soon as you walk through that door!” returns Miller. “Come on . . . I’ll hold my fire . . .” The two men face each other in the street with Amy between them. Suddenly she reaches back and claws at Miller’s face, and as he thrusts her aside Kane shoots him dead. Kane and Amy embrace in the street as the towns people begin to crowd around them. Kane helps his wife into a waiting buggy and then reaches for his badge. He removes the star from his vest and tosses it into the dusty street. Then he and Amy drive out of town without a word or backward glance.

The physical representation of violence in High Noon is minimal. The most violent scenes are the one-punch fight in the saloon and the brawl in the stable. The final shoot-out is almost sanitary in comparison to the two fight scenes. The Miller gang gets killed, but they do not suffer death throes or even outwardly bleed, and even when Kane gets wounded, he does not appear to bleed. Considering the basic premise of the story, the restraint in the presentation of physical violence, is startling and contributes to the film’s visual impact.

High Noon is elegantly filmed and edited. In techniques that would become common place in television production, Zinnemann used extreme close-ups of the main characters in key scenes with reaction shots of others in the scene. This technique provided the audience with visual representation of each character’s emotional response displayed on his or her face. In nearly every shot a central image fills the frame, often showing an extreme or medium close-up of one or more actors. Even the few scenes that



focus the audience's attention on the scenery shorten the scope of vision and eliminate the usual sweeping vista shots one would expect in a western film. The film is paced so that the few scenes that do contain open acts of violence are almost a welcome relief from the tension of waiting for the noon train. It is my contention that critics who focused on trying to determine the ideological meaning of the film, rather than looking at it as a cinematic construct, tended to obscure the visual reality of the film. Critical controversy aside, High Noon visually represents an almost non-violent image of western violence.

In 1962, Paramount Pictures released The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance, another western film about a violent showdown in a western town. Produced and directed by John Ford, the film starred John Wayne, Jimmy Stewart, and Vera Miles. This film did not seem to inspire the controversial critical reactions of High Noon, even though observers noted that it was not a typical Ford western. This appraisal could be, in part, because of the change in the political climate of the United States by 1962, and partly because, atypical or not, it was a John Ford western.

In this film the hero comes from outside the community and the villain is a resident. Ford critic J.A. Place saw the film as Ford's attempt to show how civilization changed the west and quelled the violent tendencies. "The themes of The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance," she wrote, "are those which have concerned Ford from the very beginning of his career--Eastern versus Western values, transforming the desert of the west into a garden, and creating through progress a society in which law and order are not

determined by a gun.’<sup>8</sup> In essence, Ford’s Liberty Valance uses the story of the establishment of law and order in the town of Shinbone to represent the whole national experience.

In many ways, either consciously, or coincidentally, scenes in Liberty Valance often either parody or contradict similar ones in High Noon. The film opens with the arrival of a train. A tall, well-dressed man, Ransom Stoddard, played by Jimmy Stewart, and his somberly dressed wife, Hallie, played by Vera Miles, get off the train and are met by a shabbily dressed man, Link Appleyard, played by Andy Devine. This unlikely trio is going to the funeral of an old friend, Tom Doniphon. A local newspaper man spots them, recognizing Stoddard as a United States senator, pursues him to get the story of why a senator would attend the funeral of the town’s bum, until Stoddard finally agrees to tell him the story.

The film cuts in flashback to Rance Stoddard’s arrival in the West many years before on a stagecoach. Three masked men stop the stage at gunpoint, open the strong box, and rob the passengers. A lady passenger does not want to give up her broach, the last present from her dead husband, but one of the robbers roughly pulls it from her blouse. Stoddard tries to protect the woman, but gets punched, and pushed for his interference, and the leader of the hold-up gang, Liberty Valance, played by Lee Marvin, then whips Stoddard senseless with a silver-handled whip. Valance sends the coach on its way and leaves Stoddard to die in the desert. The violent nature of the robbery and the

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<sup>8</sup> J.A. Place, The Western Films of John Ford (Secaucus: The Citadel Press, 1974), 216.

sadistic pleasure Valance seems to take in beating an unarmed defenseless man sets the tone for the rest of the story. Luckily for Stoddard, a local rancher, Tom Doniphon, played by John Wayne, finds him and takes him into town. Stoddard wants Valance arrested for his crimes but Doniphon takes a more western view. "Out here," Doniphon says, "a man settles his own problems." His Eastern law degree is useless in Shinbone; Stoddard will have to learn about law and order in the West.

The town of Shinbone looks like the typical western frontier town. The major attractions are the saloon and the restaurant, at least they are the two places where most of the action takes place. The audience also gets to see the newspaper office, Tom Doniphon's ranch house, and Shinbone's main street. This town has no stable authority figures--the doctor is a melancholy drunk, the newspaper editor is a verbose drunk, and the marshal is a bumbling fool. While the town's leaders may deplore Liberty Valance's violence they feel powerless to stop him. At the beginning of the story, the two strongest characters seem to be Doniphon and Valance and neither has any official standing in the community. As local hero and local villain they seem to be reflections of each other. While both are ranchers and gunfighters, Doniphon uses force to establish order, Valance uses force because he can.

Throughout the film the possibility of violence is always present, and the characters talk about it even when no visual representation is on the screen. Doniphon repeatedly counsels Stoddard to get a gun or get out of town. Whenever Valance appears in a scene his use of violence is usually excessive. In many scenes he is so out of control

that he becomes almost a caricature of evil rather than the embodiment of it. His two partners are also depicted as psychotic rather than just cruel. The villains are violent people, but Ford's direction keeps their violence somewhat distanced from the audience. The viewer knows that Liberty Valance is whipping someone, but what the viewer sees is him bringing the whip down on someone off camera. We see the results but not the immediate reactions of the victim. Most of the violence in the film leading to the final confrontation between Valance, Stoddard, and Doniphon involves the whip.

The final confrontation between Stoddard and Valance takes place in the main street with the townspeople watching. Valance must kill Stoddard or lose his hold over the community, and Stoddard must face down Valance or leave the community. Doniphon is the unseen participant in this showdown. Valance fires at Stoddard and misses, and when Stoddard shoots back at Valance, so does Doniphon. It is Doniphon's bullet that kills Liberty Valance but it is Stoddard who gets the credit.

As a result of the shoot-out, Liberty Valance is dead and the community is saved. But, Tom Doniphon loses both his love, Hallie, and his respected position in the community to Stoddard, because he committed his act of violence in secret. Stoddard becomes the hero, gets the girl, the fame, and community respect, all because of an act of violence he did not really commit. When Stoddard finishes telling his story, the newspaper reporter realizes that the community probably would not accept the truth about the man who shot Liberty Valance and tears up his notes. His comment to the younger reporter with him has become the definitive statement not only about the events in this film, but in

the Western in general, "This is the West, sir -- when the legend becomes fact, print the legend."

Clint Eastwood's Unforgiven (1992) is another film in which violence centers on a confrontation in a western town, and offers an uncompromising look at the violence and grit of the West, as opposed to the idealized version presented in most formulaic westerns. Critical analysis labeled the film a revisionist Western, largely as a result of the depiction of the characters in the story. By the criteria for western historical revisionism established by historians such as Richard White and Patricia Nelson Limerick, Unforgiven does present a picture of the myth of the west, along with the failures of the myth and the marginalized groups of western expansion. Harvey R. Greenberg, Professor of Psychiatry noted that "with terrible rigor, Unforgiven asserts that our attempts to wrestle existence into a semblance of order will inevitably be undone by the savage instincts lurking within our natures, as well as by the coolness of Nature at large to our small purposes."<sup>9</sup>

The characters in this film are familiar to the audience, but each represents a slightly twisted version of a classic formula archetype. Cowboys, Quick Mike, played by David Maucci, who disfigures a prostitute named Delilah, played by Anna Thompson, and Davey Bunting, played by Rob Campbell, who holds her down during the attack are not the fun-loving cowboys of The Virginian. Frances Fisher's character Strawberry Alice, the aging prostitute who posts the bounty on the cowboys to make them pay for their atrocity, bears no resemblance to Cherry Malotte in The Spoilers. Eastwood plays Will

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<sup>9</sup> Harvey R. Greenberg, "Unforgiven," Film Quarterly vol. 46, no. 3(Spring, 1993): 56.

Munny, a retired gunfighter with two small children to raise and a failing pig farm. He needs the bounty money for his children, and is not a physically appealing hero when we first see him chasing the pigs through the mud. Jaimz Woolvett plays the Scholfield Kid, a near-sighted gunfighter wannabe who brings Munny in on the bounty hunt, and is not the kind of partner Munny would have chosen. Morgan Freeman, the token minority character in the film, plays Ned Logan, Munny's old partner, turned farmer. He also needs the bounty money. Richard Harris plays English Bob, an aging aristocratic killer also after the bounty, whose reputation is greater than his talent. Gene Hackman plays Sheriff Little Bill Daggett, a sadistic tyrant who controls the town of Big Whiskey, Wyoming with an iron fist. His brand of law and order impinges on the mythic western notion of individual freedom, as he makes everyone give up their guns when they enter his town. In Daggett's town, only the law is armed and dangerous. Both Logan and English Bob move the action along either by their death or disgrace and they both function as foils to Munny and Daggett. The last major character in the film is a traveling novelist, W.W. Beauchamp, played by Saul Rubinek. The only thing he knows about the West is what he reads in his own Dime Novels. The film actually becomes a series of character vignettes as the major characters explain to the audience how they came to be the way they are. Eastwood's portrayal of the aging Munny is perhaps the most interesting. As one critic noted, "It's a portrait of a hero past his prime, the lone outlaw humbled by age. . . . Though the thrust of the movie is that killing is hard, that every bullet is a wound to the

killer's own soul, the men that Munny guns down seem to die pretty easily."<sup>10</sup>

The film opens with a long shot of a man digging a grave by a tree with the sun setting in the background. On-screen titles reveal the story of Munny's past, his marriage and his wife's death. After the fade to black the next scene is a long shot of a town nestled at the base of a snow capped mountain. More on-screen titles proclaim it to be Big Whiskey, Wyoming, 1880. The scene dissolves to a dark street in the rain, followed by a jump-cut to the interior of a bedroom with two people having sex in the bed, which prompts the face-slashing scene. In first few minutes the action moves from grave digging to a graphically violent scene where a young prostitute gets her face slashed by two drunken cowboys. The sheriff treats the slashing incident as though it were a property dispute, awarding damages, in ponies, to the house's proprietor, Skinny, but nothing to the girl who was disfigured. The other women in the house react to this miscarriage of justice by pooling their money and offering a \$1000 bounty for anyone willing to come and kill the two cowboys. The remainder of the film concerns the men who try to collect the bounty.

The film's plot features a series of violent actions beginning with the face slashing and continuing on to the final brutal climax. In an effort to stop the bounty hunters, the sheriff and his deputies engage in unprovoked beatings and other random act of violence themselves. The supposed "meaner-than-hell, cold-blooded damn killer," Munny, is less violent at the start of the film than the forces of law and order. Actually, he has forgotten

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<sup>10</sup> Hal Hinson, "Unforgiven," The Washington Post, (7 August 1992).

how to shoot, and spends some time in the first half of the film practicing with his six-shooter while proclaiming that he is not like he used to be, and denouncing his past violent life.

The implied violence during much of the film is in many ways more prevalent than the actual depiction in the opening minutes. For most of the first hour of the film, with the exception of the opening, the violence is reported rather than shown. The Scholfield Kid tells the audience that he is a killer, and when we finally see him kill the experience seems to end his career before it really gets started. The scene on the train bringing English Bob to town contains a heated discussion of the recent Garfield assassination that ends in a pheasant shoot, not a shoot-out between the arguing passengers. Bob tells the reporter all about his violent past exploits, but when he gets to town it is the sheriff who is the dangerous man.

Once the characters reach the town, the talking is over and the violent action begins. Everyone, even the so-called heroes, act in what could rightfully be defined as a cowardly manner, and the viewer, if he were expecting the usual Western action, might find it hard to identify with any of them. Daggett seems to be the focal point for violence—he initiates it, or provokes it in others. For example, Munny is ill when he reaches town, and cannot offer much resistance to the sheriff when he comes for his guns. Daggett beats Munny, not because he needs to, but because he can.

When Munny, Ned, and the Kid finally do kill Davy, the first of the cowboys, they do it from ambush, not in a classic walk-down, fast-draw confrontation. It is a sloppy kill,



not worthy of their old reputations. Ned misses Davey but hits his horse; pinning the hapless cowboy beneath the fallen animal. Munny has to finish him off and Davy, gut-shot, dies a loud, slow, lingering death. Ned decides that a return to killing is not for him and leaves his two partners to head for home. Munny and the Kid will have to kill the second cowboy without him. In an appeal to the Westerns of old, the Sheriff forms a posse to hunt down Davey's killers before they can claim their reward from the prostitutes. Cowboys from the ranch capture Ned as he tries to travel south and they deliver him to Daggett. As Daggett tries to make Ned reveal the whereabouts of his accomplices with the town looking on, Munny and the Kid are closing in on the second cowboy. The Kid finally gets his kill, shooting Quick Mike in the outhouse at close range. The entire sequence is edited in a parallel montage, with cross-cutting between Daggett whipping Ned, Munny and the Kid at the ranch, and the prostitutes listening to Ned's torture. The sequence ends with Munny and the Kid just outside of town waiting for their money. They learn of Ned's death from the prostitute who delivers the bounty.

Ned's death is the catalyst that brings back the killing instinct in Munny. The old gunfighter rides into town to confront his friend's killer. Munny kills Skinny because he has exhibited his friend's corpse in front of his saloon. Daggett protests that he has shot an unarmed man. Munny's reply is, "Well, he should have armed himself if he was gonna decorate his saloon with my friend." He shoots Daggett and his deputies as they attempt to draw their weapons. The mortally wounded sheriff cannot believe that he has been bested. "I don't deserve this; to die like this," he gasps, "I was building a house."

“Deserve’s got nothing to do with it,” replies Munny. “I’ll see you in hell, William Munny,” Daggett returns. “Yea,” mutters Munny as he finishes the sheriff with one last shot. He truly is a killer again, but the audience gets a sense that he sees no glory in this violence, and will live with regrets until he dies.<sup>11</sup> The film ends where it began, at the grave on the hill in Kansas at sunset. According to the titles Munny disappears into the west, just another legendary gunfighter.

In an American western film the good are allowed to kill with impunity and the bad are punished because the audience recognizes that their actions fall within the conventions of the genre. The good in High Noon and The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance are clearly defined. It is less clear who the heroes are in Unforgiven. All three films deal the community’s perception of violence, law, order, and individualism, but they differ in which of these elements they stress. In general, American formula Westerns reflect the ideal individualism of the western settler, who took his own law with him when he moved west, at least until the territory, state, or national government caught up with him.

In contrast to the American model, Canada’s law enforcement agencies after the formation of the Confederation usually preceded the advance of settlement. Canada developed its western territory partly to take advantage of the vast resources and partly to prevent American expansion northward. When the new confederation government developed a settlement plan for the land it acquired from the Hudson’s Bay Company, it instituted a homestead surveying system similar to the American model. The closeness of

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<sup>11</sup> Desson Howe, “Unforgiven,” The Washington Post, (7 August 1992).

the American western territories with their free homesteads made it almost imperative that Canada adopt a similar system to encourage settlement of the Canadian West.<sup>12</sup>

Canadians allowed for future access to adjacent land either through a preemptive claim or outright purchase, which was a contrast to the American experience. This innovation gave farmers the opportunity to expand to adjacent land holdings in future years without having to commit to expansion when they filed on their homesteads. The government also used the building of the Canadian Pacific Railroad (CPR) as a ploy for attracting settlers to the area. The CPR and the government also offered land to settlers along the right of way, much the way the American railroads did. But Canadian innovations to the railroad land system included blocks of land reserved for Indians, half-bloods, and other groups. In an effort to attract foreign-born settlers, the Canadian government established exclusive reserves for groups such as Mennonites and Icelanders in 1873, 1874, and 1875.<sup>13</sup>

The main concerns of the Canadian government seemed to be establishing a land allotment system that could compete with the United States for settlers and finance the railway at the same time. The Canadian system demanded more national control over their territory: law and order would not be left to the settlers but rather provided for by the government. Historians often point to the contrast between American violence and Canadian order when discussing the western settlement patterns of both countries. As Canadian historian Desmond Morton noted, "while Americans, reputedly, were electing

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<sup>12</sup> James M. Richtik, "The Policy Framework for Settling the Canadian West, 1870-1880," *Agricultural History*, 49(4) (October 1975): 617.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 621-626.

sheriffs, summoning the U.S. Cavalry and filling the graves on Boothill, Canadians were establishing law and order with the aid of a few hundred men of the North West Mounted Police.[sic]<sup>14</sup> Canadian officials believed that they could not afford an American kind of West. They feared that the monetary cost of United States-style Indian wars would retard the pace of settlement and deplete resources, so their peace keeping force had to handle things differently. Canadian Prime Minister John MacDonalld conceived of a force that could combine both military and police duties: “a force capable of anything, from firing a cannon to achieving racial harmony, all for a dollar a day and a three year enlistment.”<sup>15</sup> By the time that the Mounties arrived in the western territory, the Indian wars in the United States were either over or nearing the end, and the Plains Indians in Canada were looking for a way to co-exist, not battle, with the settlers moving into their areas. The Mounted Police sought to establish and maintain the peace, quite a different mandate from that of the United States Army whose job it was to subdue the hostiles.

The reality of life as a Northwest Mounted Policeman did not always match up with the mythology that surrounded the force. Examination of events reveals that, like their American counterparts to the south, they were not always treated well by their government; some of their members were even cowardly, and sometimes they were at odds with both the white and Indian communities. However, the relative uniqueness of the force enshrined them in the hearts of the Canadian people, and by the turn of the

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<sup>14</sup> Desmond Morton, “Cavalry or police: keeping the peace on two adjacent frontiers, 1870-1900,” *Journal of Canadian Studies* (Spring 1975): 27. See the citation in Chapter Three referring to the spelling of “Northwest” versus “North West.”

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 28-29.

twentieth century national observers credited the Royal Canadian Mounted Police with making the Canadian West the last best West.<sup>16</sup> Andrew Malcolm explained the unique legacy of the Mountie as a reflection of Canadian culture: “In view of Canadians’ more reverential attitudes toward authority, the Mountie has played a special role in Canadian history, especially locally. Over the years he has been chief law enforcement agent, but in the provinces that contract for the RCMP to be provincial and local police, he also became an unofficial judge, mediator, father confessor, and quiet uncle.”<sup>17</sup>

History treated them well and for the most part so did literary works. Many first hand accounts of Royal Canadian Mounted Police service became best sellers. Works such as Sir Cecil E. Denny’s The Law Marches West (1890, 1972), A.L. Haydon’s The Riders of the Plains (1910), and Dick North’s The Lost Patrol (1911,1995) showed the Mounties in Canadian historical context and presented exciting stories. The image and the history of the RCMP did not fare so well in the movies. It was the mythic always-gets-his-man Mountie that usually made it to the silver screen, not the unexciting, plodding policeman. Several early silent films, most produced by American film companies, that depicted the mythic Mounties included: Bloodhounds of the North (Gold Seal, 1913), The Honor of the Mounted (Gold Seal, 1914), The Measure of the Man (Rex, 1915), O’Garry of the Royal Mounted (Vitagraph, 1915), Until they Get Me (Triangle, 1917), The Heart of the North (Quality Film Productions, 1921), Tiger Rose (Warner Brothers Pictures, 1923), and The Code of the Scarlet (Charles Rogers Productions, 1928). The

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>17</sup> Andrew H. Malcom, The Canadians (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992), 96.

contrast between literary works and films depicting the western American lawman and the Canadian Mountie points to a major point of difference between two countries that share a common language and border, but not a mythology.

Three fairly well-known films from the 1940s and 1950s that portray Canadian settlement and the role of the Mounties were actually produced by American film companies and for the most part starred American actors. They are important to note here because they depicted western Canada as if it were an extension of the United States, and audiences, sometimes even in Canada, did not question either the history or the depiction.<sup>18</sup> The first is North West Mounted Police (1940)[sic], produced and directed by Cecil B. DeMille, in which Gary Cooper, Madeleine Carroll, Paulette Goddard, Preston Foster, and Robert Preston starred.<sup>19</sup> The second is Pony Soldier (1952), directed by Joseph M. Newman, with Tyronne Power, Cameron Mitchell, and Robert Horton in title roles.<sup>20</sup> The third is Saskatchewan (1954), directed by Raul Walsh, with Alan Ladd, Shelley Winters, J. Carroll Nash, and Hugh O'Brien as lead actors.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Pierre Berton, Hollywood's Canada, the Americanization of Our National Image (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1975). The main point of Canadian historian Pierre Berton's criticism of Hollywood films using the Canadian west as subject matter was that the screen writers and directors ignored the historical facts and just recreated the American western experience in a Canadian landscape. He further asserted that the films distorted Canadian history and culture.

<sup>19</sup> Based on the novel R.C. Mounted Police, by Canadian writer R.C. Fetherstonhaugh this film was released under different titles including North West Mounted Police, Northwest Mounted Police, and The Scarlet Riders

<sup>20</sup> Based on a story by Garnett Weston this film was released under two titles: Pony Soldier and MacDonald of the Canadian Mounties.

<sup>21</sup> Based on a story by Gil Doud, this film was released under two titles: Saskatchewan and O'Rourke of the Royal Mounted.

North West Mounted Police is set in Saskatchewan around the time of the second Riel Rebellion. The main character is, of all things, a Texas Ranger named Dusty Rivers, played by Gary Cooper, who has come north to Canada to recover a stolen Gatling gun. He joins forces with Sergeant Jim Brett, played by Preston Foster, a Mountie who is trying to stop the Métis and the Cree Indians from joining forces in the uprising. Both of them are looking for the gunrunning villain named Corbeau, played by George Bancroft, and his sidekick, Duroc, played by Akim Tamiroff, who are causing all the unrest. A subplot in the film is the romantic rivalry between Brett and Rivers for the affections of April Logan, played by Madeleine Carroll. April's brother, Mountie Ronnie Logan, played by Robert Preston, is romantically involved with Louvette Corbeau, played by Paulette Goddard, the daughter of one of the uprising leaders. The film basically looks like a 1940s Hollywood western, but the northwoods scenery and the color of the uniforms indicate that the action is taking place in Canada. On-screen depiction of physical violence is almost nonexistent. A few fistfights, Ronnie's death scene, and the mostly long focus shots of what is supposed to be the battle of Duc Lake are the extent of it. The Ranger and the Mountie Sergeant do manage to defeat the gunrunner, destroy the Gatling gun, and calm the Indians. As a story of the Riel Rebellion, it is pure Hollywood fabrication. Canadian historian and artist Charles Jefferys, commenting on just how much DeMille changed history, wrote, "Only a genius could have evolved from historic facts such a masterpiece of misinformation."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Charles W. Jefferys, "History in Motion Pictures," The Canadian Historical Review (9 December 1941): 11.

The action in Pony Soldier is set a little later in the Métis/Cree Rebellion and a little farther west than the previous film. Basically it is the story of Duncan MacDonald, played by Tyrone Power, the district Mountie who is sent into the area to convince the Cree not to join the uprising. The film does glorify the myth of the lone Mountie being able to keep order in the district by sheer force of personality. MacDonald is so in tune with the native tribes that he adopts an orphan boy named Comes Running and has a Cree woman named White Moon as his love interest. Much of the action resembles the plot line of any number of Hollywood Westerns with only the scenery and the dialect changed. In true Hollywood fashion the hero does prevail, the Indians agree not to make the great white queen angry, and decide not to go on the warpath. Once again filmmakers offer little visual depiction of violence and majestically stray from the reality of the historical Métis/Cree Rebellion.

Saskatchewan is set supposedly in Saskatchewan just across the Montana border sometime after Custer's massacre. Mountie Inspector O'Rourke, played by Alan Ladd, is in the area to convince the Sioux either to go back to the United States, or at least stop inciting the local Indians to rebellion. While on patrol he and his half-blood scout named Batouche, played by J. Carroll Nash, come across a band of Indians attacking a wagon train and join the fight, driving off the Indian attackers. The wagon-train survivors include an American marshal named Smith, played by Hugh O'Brien, and his prisoner, an unjustly



accused murderer, Grace Markey, played by Shelley Winters.<sup>23</sup> Most of the action involves O'Rourke's efforts to calm the local Indians, avoid the hostile Indians, and protect Grace from the unwanted advances of marshal Smith, who turns out to be the real murderer. Once again the depiction of violence is minimal. The attack on the wagon train is loud but not visually bloody. The most graphic violence is the confrontation between O'Rourke and Smith who exchange a few punches before the Mountie is forced to shoot the dishonest marshal. The story and the visual depiction could easily be transported anywhere in the American West without much alteration, even the Canadian scenery was wrong for the story's setting.<sup>24</sup>

One Canadian-produced film that depicted the Mounties and their relationship to the local community was a 1973 production entitled Alien Thunder.<sup>25</sup> This film follows the efforts of a Mountie sergeant to apprehend his partner's killer. The opening sequence of the film shows two Indians killing a cow. The Indian leader, Almighty Voice, played by Gordon Tootoosis, is arrested and jailed in the RCMP stockade. While Sergeant Dan Candy, played by Donald Sutherland, is off drinking, Almighty Voice escapes. Candy's partner, Sergeant Malcolm Grant, played by Kevin McCarthy goes after him alone.

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<sup>23</sup> Berton, Hollywood's Canada, 106-107. No historical evidence that Indians in Canada attacked wagon trains. No settlers moved into this area until after the formation of the RCMP in 1874 and settlers did not travel west in Canada in wagon trains.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 16, 108. Even though an on screen message proclaimed that the events in the film were based on actual events and that it had been filmed in the original locations, the events depicted never happened and the location depicted in the film was Alberta, 300 miles west of where the story is supposed to take place. Fort Walsh was in the Cypress Hills which looked nothing like the Canadian Rockies.

<sup>25</sup> Alien Thunder was also released under the title Dan Candy's Law.

Before Candy and the other Mounties can join Grant, he confronts the Indian and is killed. Almighty Voice escapes out into the preserve [reservation] and the Mounties retreat to their fort to bury their comrade. The remainder of the film recounts Candy's single-minded manhunt as he tracks his partner's killer down, which is a depiction of the he-always-gets-his-man myth.

The look and pace of this film distinguish it from American-made movies. The visually the film is extremely dark, and in many scenes the action is obscured because of the low lighting. Many of the edit shifts are jump cuts, constantly pairing one scene to another scene that is visually unrelated, making the story hard to follow. The film becomes a series of isolated images rather than a connected montage. Much of the center portion of the film is a long chase sequence that is visually uninteresting. Except for the occasional changes in scenery, little actual action occurs in this chase. The scenes primarily consist of Candy riding across a prairie in the spring rain or in the winter snow, entering the Indian settlement and tearing the place apart looking for Almighty Voice, with the fugitive Indian slipping out unseen into the surrounding countryside and returning to the village when the Mounties leave.

The portrayals of Indian characters is interesting and quite different from that of an American western. The Indians speak in their native languages and the costumes appear to be authentic as does the depiction of everyday life on the preserve. Because the native tribes in Canada had less cultural destruction than did those in the United States, the native tribal cultures survived to the present, enabling the filmmakers to include real

Indians acting in culturally authentic ways.

Portrayals of Mounties in this film also differed from their treatment in American films. Donald Sutherland plays Dan Candy with an over-the-top emotionalism that works well in a character who is conflicted and frustrated by a situation he cannot control. He feels guilty because of his partner's death and frustrated because his commander will not allow him to bring the fugitive in under his own methods. He also has to deal with his attraction to his dead partner's widow. Dan Candy is an unhappy character, and is not the typical film-Mountie that most audiences expect given the previous Hollywood depictions.

The film portrayals of the upper command levels of the RCMP show them to be either out of touch with the local conditions or pompously overconfident of English-Canadian superiority. Instead of letting Candy bring the fugitive in alone, the commander mounts an all out assault on the Cree Indian settlement where Almighty Voice hid during the chase. The charge is fruitless, wasteful, and militarily stupid. The artillery barrage that follows the charge shows an excessive use of firepower that is noisy, overly destructive, and unnecessary for apprehending the fugitive. By the end of the sequence, both the RCMP commander and Almighty Voice have been shot, and the village has been virtually destroyed. The ending becomes a fiasco of violence, with no satisfying conclusion to the tragedy. The government prevails, the Crees are destroyed, but the Mountie victory seems flawed. Those in the Canadian community who understand the absurdity of the situation are saddened by the outcome rather than elated, because in the end, the whole community loses.

One of the major differences between this Canadian western film and an American western film was the pacing of the action. Alien Thunder rambled along at a leisurely pace. Often scenes had no visually physical action and might consist of a long slow camera pan across the landscape or a medium shot of two characters who just looked at each other for several seconds with no dialogue. Or the scene could depict a long shot of Candy riding across the Plains, with a jump cut to him riding across some other portion of the Plains. As previously noted, the use of lighting was also different. Although one of the hallmarks of the western landscape was the brightness of the light, much of this film was photographed in such low light that scenes often had a claustrophobic feeling.

Another major difference between this film and an American Western was the sound. The soundtrack music was often louder than the dialogue, making it more noticeable than in an American production where the music usually tends to blend unobtrusively with the visual image. Even when the music was not noticeable, dialogue levels were often so low that the viewer had to strain to hear the words. A Canadian viewer would probably note the same differences in cinematic style but would react differently to them. An American viewer expects movement, light, and certain sound qualities in a formula Western action movie. When the viewer confronts a film that should look and sound familiar, but does not, he or she can sometimes feel somewhat dissatisfied with the experience.

The American sheriff with his tin star has come to represent the isolated individualism of American Western law and order. He was often an individual drafted

from within the community or an outsider who could be dismissed when his usefulness ended. His power and prestige were always tenuous and temporary, and if he made a mistake it was his alone and did not reflect on the community. Above all, he was expected to meet violence, or the threat of violence, with violence.

On the other side of the border, the red-coated Mountie was a representative of the national government. He was expected to keep law and order within the community with a minimum of violence. His power and prestige came as a result of being part of the larger group of national policemen but operating at the local level. The community expected him to do his job with a minimum of fuss and bother and to avoid violence whenever possible.

The American formula Western almost always demands a violent solution, while the Canadian film often accepts limited violence, but would prefer a more peaceful solution. As one Canadian observer noted: "One side of the border has a policeman for a hero, a red-coated Mountie. The other celebrates mavericks. One country believes father is always right; the other may put a bullet in father's head."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> June Callwood, Portrait of Canada, quoted in Malcom, Canadians, 328.

## CHAPTER 9

### CONCLUSION

In 1956 President Dwight D. Eisenhower gave a television and radio interview; he was noticeably uncomfortable until he began to talk about his concept of patriotism:

I was raised in a little town of which most of you have never heard, but in the west it's a famous place! It's called Abilene, Kansas. We had as marshal for a long time a man named Wild Bill Hickok. If you don't know about him, read your westerns more. Now that town had a code, and I was raised as a boy to prize that code. It was--meet any one face to face with whom you disagreed. . . . If you met him face to face and took the same risks he did, you could get away with almost anything, as long as the bullet was in the front. . . . you live after all by that same code, in your ideals and in the respect you give to certain qualities. In this country, if someone dislikes you or accuses you, he must come up front. He cannot hide in the shadow. He cannot assassinate you or your character from behind, without suffering the penalties of an outraged citizenry.<sup>1</sup>

American politicians and businessmen have often used western metaphors to appeal to the public, urging us not only to read our Westerns more, but watch our Westerns more and believe our Westerns more. One reason for this mandate is that the values and social messages of Westerns, whether literary or visual, seem to be firmly embedded within the basic tenets of American culture. Eisenhower and other Americans equate this so-called Western code with patriotism and our cultural identity. Since the advent of the formula Western, thousands of people have bought and read Western novels and have paid money

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<sup>1</sup>Eric Barnow, The Image Empire: A History of Broadcasting in the U.S. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 18.

to view Western films. Many more popular culture consumers have watched them at home on their televisions as Westerns dominated the programming schedules for over fifteen years in the 1950s and early 1960s. For much of our national history, the Western has been a most dependable formula for novels, films, and television, guaranteed to sell a sponsor's product, or fill theater seats.

Americans will probably always treasure the Western because it is an art form that many of us believe is uniquely tied to our culture. The Western formula, both in its literary and cinematic expressions, portrayed a simplified world in which virtues such as courage, integrity, pride, and honor prevailed within an unambiguous, uncomplicated society where success and failure could easily be identified and measured. The formula Western encouraged the popular frontier image of the United States, placed great emphasis on individualism, and highlighted a conflict between the individual's morality and the law of the state, and in the process helped to create the quintessential American hero.

Western novels, films, and later television, created a landscape for the hero, promoted the ideal of open options, and supported the belief that honest men could succeed at whatever they tried. Readers and viewers measured a Western hero by what he accomplished on his own because he lived in a world in which his personal efforts assured his survival. The hero could justify the individualism reflected in his private violence because, even as he pursued his individual goals, he acted in defense of the community. He succeeded because he possessed what Ralph Waldo Emerson termed "self-reliance": "Your genuine action will explain itself and will explain your other genuine actions. Your

conformity explains nothing. Act singly, and what you have already done singly will justify you now.”<sup>2</sup> Self-reliance presupposed that the individual acting on his own was better suited to meet the demands of life in America than was the collective action of the community. Thus, the American hero attuned to nature could be successful for himself and society. The true Western hero possessed the qualities necessary to conquer the frontier and yet to serve the community when needed, and because the self-reliant hero stood for the entire community, not just for himself, his options became unlimited.

American Westerns were also inextricably linked to violence, a violence that the general public expected but tried to ignore. “One of the well known peculiarities of modern opinion,” Robert Warshow wrote, was “its refusal to acknowledge the value of violence.” He further asserted that “willful blindness” toward violence encourages hypocrisy and fails to reduce brutality in our culture.<sup>3</sup> The image of a single man wearing a gun has become a most visual promoter of American Western values. He was the lone hero who lived in a world of brutality, believed in force, but practiced self-restraint could resort to violence when frontier conditions demanded--he was Shane riding to the rescue.

One problem with the depiction of violence in the Western, whether in literature, film, or television, was that viewers often perceived fictional force as public reality. Rather than look to society for the causes of extreme behavior, critics often blamed it on

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<sup>2</sup> Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson, ed. Stephen E. Whicher (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, company, 1960), 153.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Warshow, The Immediate Experience (Garden City: Doubleday Company, 1964), 104.



the artistic depictions of what Americans were already doing; thus for some, the effect became the cause.<sup>4</sup> A more subtle danger in the Western lay not in its portrayal of violence but in its power to promote the Western experience as the American experience and to offer it as the most acceptable interpretation of the culture. This tendency can produce problems with far reaching consequences. As Richard Slotkin noted, “a people unaware of its myths is likely to continue living by them, though the world around them may change and demand change in their psychology, their world view, their ethics and their institutions.”<sup>5</sup>

The Western myth lives on, and Americans still tend to hold on to the image of the years when “men were men and women were women,” a time when all one needed to be successful was a horse and a gun. Psychologically, the West belongs exclusively to Americans--the open range is ours, simple justice is ours, the capacity for direct action is ours, clear moral choices are ours, or at least they are ours within the myth embodied by the formula Western. Whether the West was in Wyoming, Kansas, the plains of Spain, or even outer space, the Lone Ranger will ride again and again, because to Americans the truth of the West seems not to matter as much as the legend. As the newspaper editor in

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<sup>4</sup> Much attention has been paid to the depiction of violence in media and its effects on viewers. Studies such as R.K. Baker and S.J. Ball, Mass Media and Violence: A Staff Report to the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence, (Washington DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1969), and D.S. Barry, “Screen Violence and America’s Children,” The Journal of the Writers Guild of America January, 1993: 16-19 illustrate some of the literature on the subject.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Slotkin, Regeneration Through Violence (Middleton: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), 45.

The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance put it: “When the legend becomes fact, print the legend.”

The American myth does not work so well for Canada. Historian Andrew Malcolm maintained that “Canadians can agree on a very few things; perhaps the vital importance of hockey in the world, the belief that Canada’s Rocky Mountains are prettier than the Americans’ Rockies, and the efficacy of leaving Canada at least once every winter for the sunshine of the American South or tropical islands. Canadians, however, can always agree on who they are not--namely Americans.”<sup>6</sup>

While many Canadians know who they are not, many are confused about who they are. One of the most dominant themes in Canadian studies seems to be the search for identity. This Canadian constant state of searching differs significantly from the American cultural model that assumes an identity by virtue of conquering the wilderness. So one should not be surprised when writers and filmmakers unsuccessfully portray Canadian events and Canadian characters framed within an American cultural setting. Canadian Western history demands a different myth and a different artistic treatment. Films that truly reflect the Canadian frontier experience highlight communal rather than individual accomplishments and make clear that violent behavior threatened progress.

The formula Western American hero did not work well as a model for the Canadian hero, in part, because American Westerns encouraged behavior that contradicted the Canadian concept of national order. Canadian frontier stories focused on expansion

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<sup>6</sup> Andrew H. Malcolm, The Canadians (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1992), 69.

through organized activity, i.e., groups of people coping with the land.<sup>7</sup> This cultural reality produced a significantly different body of literature and films distinct from the American Western. Novels such as Settlers of the Marsh(1925) and films such as Drylanders (1963) told stories of people within a community struggling with the land. For reasons discussed earlier, the Canadian film industry grew slowly after the early years. The two-part documentary about the Canadian film industry from its beginnings in 1886 to 1953, Dreamland (1974) and Has Anyone Here Seen Canada? (1978), detail what happened. According to this film, Canadian filmmakers often turned to producing the documentary instead of trying to replicate American, British, and French films. Films such as The Pioneer Canadian (1901), a promotional film designed to encourage farming immigrants to move to the prairie provinces, were considered far more authentically Canadian than some of the films using Canadian settings but produced by American companies. One of most well known of these early Canadian films was Nanook Of the North (1922), discussed earlier in this study, and a film that many critics feel defined the standard for the modern documentary style.

Documentary filmmakers often claimed to discount mythic treatments as they sought to depict events accurately for instruction rather than entertainment. Unfortunately for the Canadian documentary film industry, a significant portion of the viewing audience apparently wanted action, or romance, not education. While Canadian filmmakers exhibited documentaries about life along the Canadian Pacific Railroad to a small but

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 144-45.

respectable audience, American filmmakers released epics depicting the violent building of the road to eager movie-goers. As the more exciting fiction drew in audiences on both sides of the border, viewers often misread the fiction of American movies as the reality of Canada culture and history. Canadian officials tried to address the American movie assault by limiting the number of foreign films exhibited and requiring that a certain percentage of Canadian films be played in movie houses on the same bill. These corrective efforts failed. Films produced to meet the quotas, or so-called Victoria Quickies, were produced in Canada, with Canadian actors and Canadian scenery, but the story lines and action were pure Hollywood and did nothing to counteract the cultural misinformation.

An element usually found in American Westerns, but absent from many Canadian Western films was the appeal to violence in problem solving. Most Canadian productions depicted violence as the last resort in conflict resolution rather than the preferred course. It is not my contention that violence is absent from Canadian society. Canadian governmental statistics indicate that a certain level of violence exists in modern Canadian society and has been present in the country throughout its history.<sup>8</sup> Canadian Western novels and films generally do not attempt to deify the violent act or the perpetrator of such acts within a cultural myth. As a result the artistic production favors the pastoral story more than the violent plot of the average American Western. According to some critics such as Peter C. Newman, Canadians often cannot distinguish their story from the

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<sup>8</sup> Note statistics from the Canadian Bureau of Justice, Statistics Canada, n.p. and The Liberal Party of Canada Red Book, 1996, 1997, 1998., 84.

persuasive Hollywood version, and this misinterpretation feeds the cultural identity crisis. Other Canadian observers such as Robert Fulford fear that American mass culture threatens to produce a kind of cultural asphyxiation.<sup>9</sup> Others hold out more hope for Canadian resiliency. As Canadian novelist Rudy Wiebe observed, “Stories create a people . . . and Canadians are creating their own stories.”<sup>10</sup> The resurgence of the Canadian film industry since the 1950s has produced some fine Canadian films well outside of the Western genre that differ remarkably from mainstream Hollywood productions. The Film Board of Canada did much to encourage the production of Canadian films and exerted a powerful influence over both style and content. Since the 1960s independent filmmakers increased production of films for both French-Canadian and English-Canadian audiences. Some of the films discussed in this study, such as the Film Board’s Drylanders and independently funded Silence of the North, were products of that national cinematic rebirth.

Canada continues to develop a stronger national identity in part because Canadians have an easier time than Americans remembering the distinctions between the two countries. While they may not like everything about their neighbor to the south, most Canadians realize that a certain degree of interaction is inevitable: only about 12 percent of Americans live within 100 miles of Canada, but about 80 percent of Canadians live within 100 miles of the United States border. Approximately 70 percent of Canadian

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<sup>9</sup> Malcom, The Canadians, 139.

<sup>10</sup> As quoted, Ibid., 146.

imports and exports involve the United States, and Americans control three-fourths of Canada's foreign investments.<sup>11</sup> The two countries share the world's longest undefended national border that extends 5,524 miles from the Atlantic to the Pacific. Every year over 70 million people cross the border, and since 1871 more than 6 million immigrants have moved peacefully between the two countries.<sup>12</sup>

Despite this physical closeness, the two countries developed distinct national cultural values and myths. The Canadian cultural identity rested with its ties to a land so vast that it seemed to defy human imagination. In the words of Canadian writer Sheila Egoff, "We aren't good at fantasy in this country. It's the same problem that we have in film; we're better at documentaries. Our own landscape is too large and anonymous for us to feel comfortable with putting names to it."<sup>13</sup>

Even though the two nations share a border they do not share a cultural myth. While Americans openly seek to level diversity, Canadians purport to embrace it. One nation seems to glorify the gunslinging loner, the other a national policeman. Part of the reason that individualistic violence of the American Western does not work well in a Canadian Western may be that Canadians believe they have a better community solution.

The American formulaic Western told stories in which righteous people triumph over easily identifiable enemies. Virtues such as courage, integrity, pride, and honor prevailed within an unambiguous uncomplicated society where success and failure could

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 151, 52, 53.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 145.

easily be measured, a world where might really did make right. The appeal of the formula Western lay primarily in its potential for wish fulfillment as it gave expression to a desire for freedom, a need to escape from organization, and a justification for violence. While Canadians may feel more comfortable with their stories in their own literary and cinematic format, Americans will probably always treasure the Western because, in the words of Texas songwriter Willie Nelson, "Our heroes have always been cowboys."

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## FILMOGRAPHY

### SELECTED FILMS LISTED IN CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER OF PRODUCTION WITH ANNOTATION

1900s

The Great Train Robbery (1903) Producer/director, William S. Porter, Edison Company.

This film is often cited as a milestone in film production. The plot follows the commission of a train robbery from the beginning of the holdup to the final capture of the villains. The film's chase narrative set in a Western landscape became a standard and comfortable story line for many filmmakers.

1920s

Nanook of the North (1921) Producer/director, Robert Flaherty, Sponsor, Revillon Frères Canadian National Film Archives (NFA). Documentarian Flaherty promoted Nanook as a film that told the story of Eskimo [Inuit] tribal life before contact with Europeans. Many of Flaherty's techniques have become standard practice in documentary film production.

Iron Horse (1924) Producer/director, John Ford, Twentieth Century Fox. Silent film that tells the story of the construction of the Union Pacific Railroad. The story focuses on the efforts of one man to keep the track laying proceeding while trying to solve the murder of his father. Many of the scenes from this work have been used as the basis for more recent films about railroad building.

The Wind.(1928). A Victor Seastrom Production, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Picture, Director, Victor Seastrom. Silent film based on Dorothy Scarborough's novel of the same name. The film tells the story of a young girl from Virginia who moves to Sweetwater, Texas just at the height of the 1885-1886 drought. Unprepared for Western life the girl is destroyed by the harsh elements.

The Virginian (1929) Producer, Louis D. Lighton, Director, Victor Fleming, Paramount Pictures. Early film adaptation of the Owen Wister novel, The Virginian. It tells the story of a cowboy's rise from ranchhand to ranch foreman. The film features many of the types of characters that were already part of the literary Western, such as the Eastern schoolmarm, and the black-hatted cattle-rustler.

## 1930s

Secret Patrol (1936 Victoria Series) Kenneth Bishop Company director: David Selman (NFA) One of the quota films produced in Victoria to meet Canadian government regulations . The plots of these films were fairly similar, and many of the same actors appeared in the films. The basic plot revolved around some threat to a western Canadian community either as a result of the encroachment of a logging or mining company, or some problem with ranches in the area. The villain is usually the banker, mine owner or logging boss and the hero is a Mountie. The setting and actors may have been Canadian, but they had the look of an average B Western.

Stampede (1936 Victoria Series) Kenneth Bishop Company, Director: Ford Beebe (NFA). Quota film.

Death Goes North: A RinTinTin Picture. (1937 Victoria Series) Warwick Pictures, Producer, Kenneth Bishop, Director, Frank McDonald (NFA). Victoria Quota film with a twist. This film features a dog, RinTinTin, as one of the main characters.

The Trail-Men Against the Snow (1937) Booth Canadian Film Ltd., Hudic Pictures Director: Archibald Belaney (Grey Owl). (NFA). The film follows Grey Owl journey as he goes to his winter hunting cabin. The print I viewed at the Canadian National Archives was of poor visual quality. The one visual image that comes through is the snow.

Union Pacific (1939) Producer/director, Cecil B. DeMille. This film revisits the plot of John Ford's Iron Horse. The script was based on Ernest Haycox's novel Trouble Shooter, and follows the efforts to build the American transcontinental railroad. The emphasis for most of the story, however, was on a side story. The love triangle involving the Trouble Shooter, the engineer's daughter and the gambler eclipses the railroad building at times.

## 1940s

North West Mounted Police (The Scarlet Riders) (1940) Paramount Pictures, Producer/director, Cecil B. DeMille. American produced film depicting the events surrounding the Riél rebellion. The main character is of all things a Texas Ranger, who goes to Canada in search of a fugitive from American justice. This film pays scant attention to Canadian history.

The Spoilers (1942) Producer, Frank Lloyd, Director, Ray Enright, Charles K. Felman Group, Universal Pictures. Film based on Rex Beach's novel of the same name. The film tells the story of the plot to defraud many of the individual miners out of their claims in the Nome, Alaska, gold rush. This adaptation focuses more on love triangle between the saloon owner, played by Marlene Dietrich, the hero played by John Wayne and the villain played by Randolph Scott.

They Died With Their Boots On (1942) Warner Brothers Production, director: Raoul Walsh. A highly fictionalized account of George Armstrong Custer's military career and the events leading to his last battle at the Little Big Horn.

The Virginian (1946) Producer, Paul Jones, Director, Stuart Gilmore, Paramount Pictures. A remake of the 1929 film based on Owen Wister's novel.

Whispering Smith (1948) Paramount Pictures, Producer/director, Mel Epstein. Film based on Frank Spearman's novel of the same name. The film follows the efforts of a Railroad detective to end a series of railroad accidents and robberies that are costing the railroad company time and money. Alan Ladd plays the title character in this film, his first color Western.

Canadian Pacific (1949) United International Pictures, Producer, Nat Holt, Director, Edwin L. Marin. American produced film that purports to depict the building of the Canadian Pacific Railroad. The films stars American actors and looks remarkably like a remake of Union Pacific.

1950s

High Noon (1952) Producer, Stanley Kramer, Director, Fred Zinnemann. Considered by many to be a classic Western. The film tells the story of a retiring marshal who is forced to defend an undeserving town from four outlaws on his wedding day. The visual values, use of sound and plot pacing of this film set it apart from average Westerns produced during the same period.

Pony Soldier (MacDonald of the Canadian Mounties) (1952) 20th Century Fox, Producer, Samuel G. Engel, Director, Joseph M. Newman. American produced film that tells the story of the efforts of one lone Mountie to stop an Indian uprising around the time of the Riél rebellion. Tyrone Power looks great in the red uniform.

Shane (1953) Producer/Director, George Stevens, Paramount Pictures. Film based on Jack Schaefer's novel of the same name. The plot of the film follows the efforts of a gunfighter to put aside killing and settle down in a ranching community. It is also the story of the conflict between the small homesteader and the large rancher.



The Far Country (1954) Director, Anthony Mann, Universal-International Pictures. Film set during the Yukon gold rush. Depiction of the difficulties of the travel to the gold fields is fairly well done, but other features such as the reliance on vigilante law in Dawson, a Canadian outpost, is less believable.

Saskatchewan (O'Rourke of the Royal Mounted) (1954) Universal Pictures, Producer, Aaron Rosenberg, Director, Raoul Walsh. American production with Alan Ladd playing a Mountie who has to keep the peace in his district. To do this he must convince Canadian Indians not to join forces with trouble-making American Indians who have crossed the border after the Battle of the Little Big Horn. He must also compel Sitting Bull to either behave nicely in Canada, or go back to the United States. In addition to these tasks, Ladd's character also has to save Shelley Winter's character from the unwanted advances of Hugh O'Brien's character.

The Last Gunfighter (Hired Gun, Devil's Spawn) (1959) Dalry Production, Producer/director, Lindsay Shonteff. (NFA). Canadian production that tries to emulate an American Western, and fails on several levels. It tells the disjointed tale of a gunman who tries to give up killing, but ends up dead in the snow. It has visual and plot references to *Shane*, but fails to make good use of them. This film never actually becomes more than a series of disjointed scenes.

1960s

The Days of Whiskey Gap (1961), Producer, Roman Kroitor. National Film Board of Canada (NFB). According to the Film Board's description of this film, it is a "rousing tale of the North-West Mounted Police, brought to life in a rare collection of Photographs and artists' sketches." It is a thirty minute documentary film depicting the early history of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, with a young school age audience in mind.

The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance (1962) John Ford Productions. Producer/director, John Ford. A film that explores the relationship between legend, truth, and community in the American West, it tells the story of how one violent act can change the course of several lives. Solid performances from Jimmy Stewart, John Wayne and Lee Marvin make this film one of the most remembered of Ford's later films.

Drylanders (1963). (NFB). Producer: Peter Jones, director, Don Haldane. Feature length production of the National Film Board. This film depicts the struggles, triumphs and failures of settlers in the Canadian West.

Selkirk of Red River (1964) Docu-drama. (NFB) Producer, Peter Jones. Film Board production that depicts the pioneer story of the Earl of Selkirk and the formation of the Red River Settlement.

Ballad of Crow Foot (1968) Producer, Barrie Howells. (NFB). Ten minute short film exploring Indian culture of the Canadian West by using still photography, native music and native poetry.

1970s

The Great Canadian Train Robbery, (1970). CBC Films documentary, Producer/director, Donald Cameron, Executive Producer, William Harcourt. (NFA). Documentary film broadcast on Canadian television examining the history of the Canadian Pacific Railway.

Little Big Man (1970) A Millar-Penn Production, Director, Arthur Penn. Film based on Thomas Berger's novel of the same name, irreverently explores the history of the American West through the eyes of 121-year old character named Jack Crabb. According to the film, Crabb was Wild Bill Hickok's drinking buddy, Buffalo Bill's friend, and the only white survivor of Custer's Last Stand. The film is an anti-establishment look at American history produced during the Vietnam Era.

The Great Massacre: Etokapo Entispa (1973) CJOC - TV Producer: D. Dietrich, Horvie Stevenson (NFA). Thirty minute documentary depicting the early development of the Canadian West, covering in part, the Riel Rebellion and Métis culture in Alberta.

Alien Thunder (Dan Candy's Law) (1974) Onyx Films, Producer, Marie-José Raymond, Director, Claude Fournier. Film is based on the true story of the two-year manhunt for a Cree Indian who killed a North West Mounted Police sergeant. Its pacing, visual images and the restrained use of violence sets it apart from American Western films.

Dreamland - A History of Early Canadian Movies 1886-1939 (1974) Great Canadian Moving Pictures Company, (NFB), Producer, Kiwan Cox. (NFA). Documentary exploring the early days of Canadian filmmaking. This film is especially important because the filmmaker was able to preserve many images from the cinematic efforts that no longer exist as an entity. Very useful film for teaching Canadian film history.

The National Dream (1975) CBC Films Production Producer/Director: James Murray.

A multi-part documentary broadcast on Canadian television depicting the building of the Canadian Pacific Railway. The basis for this film was the history of the railway written by Pierre Berton.

Mclains of Hudson's Bay ( no credits, no date) (NFA). Only a fragment of this film is housed at the Canadian National Archives. It apparently was a film about the fur trade. In the brief clip that I saw actors in stereotypical Indian costumes were being beaten by a white sea captain in a dispute over the price of fur pelts. There was no sound so I could not follow the dialogue. The film appeared to contain all of the typically Canadian scenic elements—snow, forests, dog sleds, and Totem poles. At the end of the clip, credits listed the Hudson's Bay Company as technical advisor.

Call of the Wild (1972) Producer, Arthur Brauner, Director, Ken Annakin, UPF, Izaro Films, MGM, Océana, CCC Filmkunst Production companies. An internationally produced version of Jack London's novel of the same name. This film, like many of the other versions focused more on the human characters, leaving the Dog, Buck, a minor character.

Has Anybody Here Seen Canada? A History of Canadian Movies 1939-1953. (1978) Great Canadian Moving Pictures Company, (NFB), Producer, Kiwan Cox. (NFA). Sequel to Dreamland, this film charts the developed of Canadian film after 1939 and the formation of the Film Board of Canada. It points to the struggles of the industry to complete with films from the United States England and France. Visually the film presents clips from many films produced during World War II, and the early cold war years.

Riel (1979) CBC and Green River Production, Producer, John Trent, Director, George Bloomfield. (NFA). Canadian production detailing the life and rebellions of Louis Riél. The long length and confusion of characters sometimes makes this film difficult to follow, but it does present a thoughtful account of the era and is useful to depict the history of the period.

1980s

Canada Vignettes (1980), (NFB), Executive Producer, Margaret Pettigrew. Series of one-minute films depicting life on the Canadian frontier settlements.

Old Fort Walsh (1981) (NFB), Executive Producer, Robert W. Coe. A Thirty-minute film that examines the relationship between the Cypress Hill Massacre at the Farwell's Trading Post and the establishment of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police force in Alberta.

Silence of the North (1981) Producer: Murray Shostak, Director: Allan Winton King (NFA). Film based on Olive Frederickson's autobiographical book of the same name. It tells the story of survival on the Canadian frontier.

Framed In Time (1982) (NFB). Episodic film that features segments that include the frenzy of the Klondike gold rush, the life of the first woman doctor to practice medicine in Canada, life in Halifax, and a grocery store in Winnipeg. The common thread is that each episode is set within its historical context.

The Grey Fox (1982), Mercury Pictures, Producer, Peter O'Brien, Director, Phillip Borsos. A joint American-Canadian production that tells the story of an American train robber who goes to Canada and is changed by the people he meets.

The Painted Door (1985) (NFB) (poor print quality). Film that depicts the hardships of the Canadian prairie settlers.

Medicine Line (1987) Co-produced - (NFB), English Program, Prairie Center and CBC. Ten-minute film depicting the dramatic Canadian meeting of Mountie Major James Walsh and Sitting Bull just after the Battle of the Little Big Horn

1990s

Son of the Morning Star (1991), Producer: Preston Fischer, Director: Mike Tobe. Republic Pictures Home Video/Facets Multimedia, Inc. Film is a made for television film based on Evan Connell's biography of George A. Custer. This violent rendition of the Custer story presented a less idealized, and more emotionally troubled Custer than earlier films.

Unforgiven (1992) Warner Brothers, Producer/director, Clint Eastwood. This revisionist Western tells the violent tale of brutality and retribution in the old West. A retired gunman returns to his life of violence to claim a bounty, and comes in conflict with a brutal sadistic sheriff.