Origins of a Genre: Early Influences on the Western Before Film

A Thesis Submitted
to the Graduate School
Valdosta State University

in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in History

in the Department of History

April 2023

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BA, Savannah College of Art and Design, 2019

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the earlier influences on the Western genre that are not often discussed when outlining the genre's history. If nonfiction works qualify, the travel journal is perhaps the earliest form of Western entertainment; if Westerns must strictly be fiction, then the adventure novels that these travel journals birthed would be some of the first. While the aim is not necessarily to pinpoint the exact beginning of the Western, it is important to try and define its beginnings for the purposes of demonstrating that the genre has existed for nearly a century before the advent of film. Too often is the entire genre understood and discussed through a selective view defined entirely by Hollywood's Golden Age of Westerns. The films from this era shaped what scholarship considered to be a Western, but since the 1970s, the Western has changed, and the Revisionist mode of Western is the new dominant mode. Histories on the West, however, do not reflect this shift and continue to engage primarily with the Classical West, whereas media studies have engaged with the Revisionist West. This has resulted in a fractured understanding of the genre's history. Influenced by Classical Westerns, scholars dismissed a century's worth of media in favor of what most closely resembled the Western of Hollywood, *The Virginian*. *The Virginian*, however, was not the first to display the characteristics of the Western, nor is the Western completely defined by the Classic mode today. This paper is not the first to acknowledge earlier works of Western fiction, however, it is an attempt to gather disparate ideas on the topic into one cohesive narrative and hopefully encourage further research into the topic.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to offer my appreciation to Dr. Haggard, Dr. Fitzgerald, Dr. James, and Dr. Block for taking the time to be on my thesis defense committee. I not only value the comments and suggestions provided that I feel have brought me to consider my topic in further depth and in new ways than I had previously, but also greatly appreciate the open and productive environment that made discussion feel welcome. I would especially like to thank Dr. Block for her continuous help throughout this process, as without her guidance this would not have been possible. Additionally, I am quite grateful for Dr. Haggard and Dr. Block's patience and willingness to tolerate my confused emails, and to the school for supporting me throughout. I have to admit that writing this thesis was difficult for me, but with the aid of my advisors, professors, and my family, I was able to persevere. I cannot thank them enough.

INTRODUCTION

When I was first presented with the idea that the archetypical cowboy movie was one made up of wholesome black-and-white morality tales, clean, well-intentioned all-American boys, and dominated by straight-laced heroic cowpokes, I was surprised. This structure was nothing like what I understood the Western to be; my Western was one of blood feuds, violence, and bitter, hard-drinking anti-heroes. I knew the cowboy to be crude and, on occasion, cruel. My time studying film at SCAD reinforced this view, and my media history studies through my bachelor's had familiarized me with this version of the Western. Seeing the noble mythical West be dissected and torn down in my later turn towards pursuing the study of American history was never shocking to me- yet so many academic papers I engaged with insisted that it should be. Instead, the world of Roy Rogers and Gene Autry felt foreign; Clint Eastwood had been my cowboy, and John Wayne had always been Rooster Cogburn in my mind. From my perspective, historians were engaged in battle with a titan that had already fallen. Having grown up surrounded by consistent praise for *Tombstone (1993)* as one of cinema's greats, and then having spent the final year of my bachelor's enamored with *Red Dead Redemption 2 (2018),* to hear that the Western was dead and had been so since the 1960s was especially surprising. This was an idea that I had frequently begun to encounter while delving further into my studies. Clearly, there must have been some divide between the historian's perspective of the Western, the media critic's, and my own. If there was such a difference between the fictional Wild West that I knew, and the Wild West as it was understood in the generations before me, how many versions of the West were there? How far did the genre actually go back, and in tracing the origins of the genre, could a more cohesive idea of the Western emerge?

When we think of the Western, we no doubt think of film. Ask anyone to name a Western, and the answers will frequently include the likes of *Tombstone (1993), True Grit (1969), A Fistfull of Dollars (1964),* or *Stagecoach (1939)*. Outside of film, *Gunsmoke (1959)*, *Bonanza (1955)*, or the more recent *Deadwood (2004)* and early seasons of *Westworld (2016)* may be mentioned. Rarer will novels such as those by Zane Grey be named, but most famous Western novels have already been adapted into more well-known movies. When writing this paper the intention had always been to study the origins of the Western, but in doing so I found that the scope of interest was limited in this way. In academia, analysis of the filmmaking styles of John Ford and Sergio Leone, explorations into the politics of John Wayne films, and breakdowns of Western film and television's many subgenres and phases were plentiful. I found that comparatively little has been said regarding the early roots of the genre within the nineteenth century. Studies about this period in regards to the Western are rarely arranged into a singularly dedicated text and are instead relegated to supplemental background context for the real star of the Western- cinema. The perception of the Western is so often defined by film to the extent that even comprehensive histories of the genre frequently begin in the twentieth century with *The Great Train Robbery (1903)* as the moment of the genre's conception; anything before that point receives little more than a passing mention. Certainly, *The Great Train Robbery* is a landmark in cinema history, but its importance to the Western genre itself is far overstated. Pop-history has taken this mindset and only simplified and proliferated it. Because of this, today the genre to both the public and the historian is nearly synonymous with the screen. In this atmosphere, one could be forgiven for thinking that the Western was born alongside Hollywood, when in fact, cinema had adopted the Western because of its already existing popularity. As it stands, there has been a woeful lack of reflection on the early Western prior to the invention of film, and the

current state of popular analysis is inadequate at addressing the evolution of the genre. With the new context of where the Western has come in modern media, there needs to be an updated reflection on the genre without the constraints of one singular era of Western film, and I aim to provide at least the beginnings of that effort. To gain a proper understanding of the West, one must acknowledge that its roots stretch back before the advent of cinema well into the nineteenth century and that the myth of the West was written alongside the genuine history that informed it.

In this first chapter, I will establish some of the concepts required as a baseline for the discussions throughout the rest of this thesis. Before any significant examination of the Western's origins can be done, some parameters need to be set to define what could potentially be considered a Western. Even more so, what is considered the *West* needs to be defined; this is a task that historians have yet to establish an absolute consensus on and has been debated for many years. In examining these different definitions, my thesis will not align with what theory most reflects the West as history, but rather what version is the most applicable to the fictional Western genre. Additionally, some terminology and methodology must be addressed, and prior historiography on this subject must be acknowledged.

In the second chapter, I will cover what are possibly some of the earliest inspirations for the Western, those being the travel journals of the early 1800s. These works, produced through expeditions into the newly-added Louisiana territory, were not explicitly written for the purposes of entertainment. However, from as early as the Lewis and Clark expedition, the publishers of these journals displayed a keen awareness of audiences' tastes and collaborated with artists to ensure that more narratively thrilling scenes would be illustrated for public consumption. Additionally, I will examine the relationship between these travel journals and the artistic movements of the nineteenth century. Themes of the West that are present in the modern Western

can be found to have some of their earliest manifestations in the art of this period and are well worth exploring.

The third chapter surrounds the discussion of the frontier-themed literature that arguably spawned from the travel journal. They carry direct links not only in their inspiration but in the case of some of the frontier-adventure dime novels, even going as far as to borrow both events and "characters" of sorts from travel journal narratives. While travel journals themselves may not present the best contenders for the first Westerns, the frontier adventure offers examples of fictional works explicitly written for entertainment purposes that strongly reflect the themes present in established Westerns. These were fictional works intended to be enjoyed as such. Additionally, the revolution in technology that allowed for such distribution of these works will be explained in this chapter.

The final chapter discusses the work which is generally considered to be the earliest "true" example of the Western, at least in the studies that explore the genre outside of cinema history. Presenting Owen Wister's *The Virginian* as the first Western may give the impression that it backs *The Great Train Robbery*'s range as the general birth of the Western, given that it was released only a year prior, but this point in history was certainly not the start of the genre. While the whole of the thesis's aim is to present glimpses of underrepresented Westerns in the nineteenth century, this chapter will specifically engage with the assertion that *The Virginian* is the first Western on its own terms. The arguments used to establish Wister's novel as the first significant Western of its kind can apply to other, earlier pieces of media, even if one discounts the dime novel as *Virginian* scholars so often do.

By the end of this thesis, I hope to have established that the origins of the genre date far further back than what many so often believe, and that the first "true" Western cannot be so

easily defined. Because of the ever-expanding scope of what are considered expressions of the Western genre in the modern day, it is important to take the opportunity to reevaluate how we engage with the history of the genre.

Chapter I

FOUNDATIONS

While most analysis of the Western genre centers around film and television, there has always been fertile ground for an exploration into the origins of the Western that extends beyond studies of the screen. Despite the opportunity to explore the developing genre's earliest expressions, there are some difficulties that come with engaging with the early modes of the Western. Before the rest of this thesis can begin in full, there are first some key points that need to be addressed: one of which being defining the Western. What exactly is a Western? At first glance, that question seems almost silly to ask. We *know* what a Western is when we are presented with one, almost instinctively. This is a genre so pervasive throughout the collective public consciousness that it is practically known to all people across the world who are active in popular-culture consumption, regardless of age groups or national division. As is often the case abroad, America itself could be considered so synonymous with the Western that its iconography can be used as shorthand to refer to the United States; the symbol of the cowboy to America is as the knight is to England.[1] This genre is so prolific, in fact, that it is accepted as its own separate categorization standing next to other large encompassing categories such as Romance, Action, Comedy, and Crime; truly, the Western is a monolith of pop culture.[2] What exactly then, makes a piece of media a Western? Certainly, there are immediate descriptions that one could offer when asked to define the Western, but as the contrasting opinions of historical and media studies show, those definitions can be drastically divergent. How is it that a science-fiction space drama like *Serenity* and the modernized *No Country for Old Men* are so regularly accepted into Western canon, where the majority of the more appropriately set frontier prairie-living films and

literature, despite qualifying as Westerns, generally are not? Genres and genre boundaries can be tricky things. While defining a genre is a daunting and practically impossible task because of the subjective nature of art and art categorization, one can still isolate key components that are most frequently shared between works considered within the genre. In identifying the arguments around what defines the genre of the Western today, the foundation can be laid for an in-depth discussion of the early phases in which the Western originated.

The nineteenth-century Western was a genre both still in its infancy, and far too early in history to have the label of "Western" applied to it. Though there existed the term "Western" it was purely a descriptive one rather than a genre category. Before the coining of the generic "Westerns" in the *Moving Picture World* magazine in 1912, trade papers categorized Western-themed movies into categories like "military films" or "Indian films" instead.[3] Historian Alison McMahan notes that these films were those we would today consider Westerns, but this could further be applied to media that came before the advent of cinema. After all, the earliest of Western movies derived from dime novels, literature, and the plays that came with Buffalo Bill's Wild West show.[4] The point that needs to be made is that the labeling of early works within the genre has always been a matter of retrospective study, where present conceptions of the Western are projected backward onto earlier pieces of media. In acknowledging this, it seems that even in a study meant to explore the underrepresented history of the Western before cinema, the shadow of Western film has proven inescapable. The use of comparisons to more modern media is inevitable in order to provide a standard against which the developing genre can be measured. Despite the genre being nowhere near the peak prominence it held in the mid-twentieth century, as of the twenty-first century, the Western still exists in countless forms of media. There are volumes of Western films, literature, visual art, graphic novels, video games, sketches, and songs

that continue to be produced to this day; there was even a recent resurgence of Western themes in popular internet culture around 2019.[5] The genre has enjoyed such longevity that it has spawned numerous branching sub-genres and undergone enough evolutions that it has reached the stage of reflective analysis, with Post-Modern, Satirical, and Revisionist Westerns having been in vogue for some time. The very existence of such recursive media implies the existence of some unified idea of 'the Western' that viewers are familiar enough with to recognize the self-referential commentary that this new type of media provides. Given the prominence film has had over the genre's analysis it is easiest to look towards film for an overview of what defines the modern Western, though video games, television shows, music, and books are also valuable as references towards the pop-cultural conception of the genre. Selected examples that are relevant to this study range from the 1930s to the present day.

Generally, Westerns will take place in the American West of the Louisiana Purchase, though there are many which take place or feature scenes in Mexico such as *The Magnificent Seven (1960), A Fistful of Dollars (1964), The Wild Bunch (1969),* as well as Westerns that are set in Canada, though these are generally dubbed "Northerns". When looking at the protagonists of these films, they are generally men who exist on the fringes of society who use violence to enact their will on the world. They could be heroic figures like many of John Wayne's characters, outlaws such as in *The Wild Bunch (1969)*, or lawmen like in *Tombstone (1993).* In terms of scholarly opinions on what makes a Western, media theorist John G. Nachbar believes that a Western does not recreate history, but instead American idealization of history. He points also to David Cawelti as the premier scholar of the Western formula, who in *The Six-Gun Mystique*, characterizes the Western as where "the settler faced the West and, fighting desperately for survival, ultimately tamed and controlled it."[6] Cawelti's study is particularly interesting to me;

not only does he consider *The Leatherstocking Tales* the origins of the Western, he revisits *The Six-Gun Mystique* after the supposed decline of the genre with many new observations that reflect my own understanding of the Western.[7] The second edition of *The Six-Gun Mystique* directly engages with the changes in the themes of the Western, in how within Cawelti's lifetime, the Western turned from an earnest portrayal of heroic values to a self-referential one of critique and parody. What Cawelti is referring to is an idea that has somewhat crystallized in media scholarship- the idea that the Western "died" around 1970. This view is understandable if one judges the Western through its saturation in the media landscape as a whole; there had once been a period between the 1930s and 1960s where Westerns had dominated filmmaking, having consistently made up around a quarter of all films produced in America each year.[8] This period, termed the "Golden Age" of the Western, is generally where many discussions on the Western have centered, as the genre supposedly died once this age came to an end. Critics had heralded this death even at the time, and to this day, many historians and media scholars have echoed this sentiment.[9] Cawelti's belief was that the genre had descended into parody as in *Blazing Saddles (1974),* and that the growing critique of the Western signaled an end for the formula, but he remained hopeful that there was the possibility of an eventual revival.[10] Scholars may not have been saying that the genre had literally ended, but the broad declaration of its death seems to have dissuaded further exploration into the topic.

I would argue that the continued use of the term "death of the Western" to describe the ending of the Golden Age encourages an incredibly limited view on the genre, and essentially excludes a significant amount of Western media, both past and present. Certainly, the Golden Age was an important era for the genre, but Westerns have existed both before and after this time. After the Western's "death", several critically popular Westerns have been released, such as

The Outlaw Josey Wales (1976), Tombstone (1993), Django Unchained (2012), Red Dead Redemption 2 (2018), among many others. The Western has not exactly died; it has merely evolved. Many of the most notable Westerns that the average individual today is familiar with fall within the Revisionist or Post-Modern styles that came after the Golden Age. These are characterized by the referential commentary they provided on the previous mode of Western, and their greater awareness of the failings of the blind American exceptionalist narratives of the previous mode- hence the name Revisionist. Deconstructing the Western, however, does not preclude them from being Westerns themselves. Though these newer entries may have begun as subversions of older media, their popularity among audiences has been able to create a new conception of the Western that has not quite supplanted the Classic, Golden Age tropes, but one that has managed to enter public consciousness just as powerfully. Currently, the essence of the Western seems to lay somewhere between the Classic and Revisionist westerns, at least with the evolution of audience perceptions. In the Classic Western, the cowboy hero is a moral figure who dispenses justice through righteous violence; Revisionist protagonists tend to be colored by moral ambiguity and cynicism.[11]

Many studies appear to define the parameters of what counts as a Western using the tropes and themes of the Classic Western, specifically. This makes a fair amount of sense if one considers that many notable articles and studies on the West were written within the period when the Classic Western was active. From here, any history that does not specifically focus on the study of the genre and instead only on the West tends to echo these ideas as they have little reason to research further into media history. Crossover studies tend to originate from the same period as this Golden Age era, therefore, the ideas of where the Western began and what defines a Western are colored by Classic Western. Bernard DeVoto, historian and notable media critic, as

well as the author of an acclaimed three-volume history of the West, once briefly weighed in on the origins of the genre. Even though one of DeVoto's own books, *Across the Wide Missouri*, was adapted into a 1951 Western film, the contents of the movie would not qualify as a Western by DeVoto's own standards; it centered around fur traders in the 1830s, where DeVoto characterized Westerns through the context of range wars- conflicts that occured in the West over cattle-grazing rights. This of course, centers the cowboy. In an essay in his set of critical articles known as *The Easy Chair,* DeVoto credits Owen Wister's 1902 novel *The Virginian* with the creation of the Western genre, or "horse opera" as he termed it. [12] He, like many notable authors and historians who have written on the Western genre, all wrote from a context in which *The Virginian* had been a boyhood novel for many Americans, and the Golden Age of Westerns ruled the screen.[13] More of this historiography will be explored in the chapter on *The Virginian* specifically, but this bias in historiography towards the Classic Western style is best established now.

Media history also borrows from DeVoto's view of the history of the genre, at least when it leaves the realm of film; the oldest Western that is treated with any significance is generally *The Virginian*. Dime novels, though lightly mentioned as in Steven McVeigh's *The American Western*, still tend to be dismissed from serious history. It seems it was not until Daryl Jones' *The Dime Novel Western* in 1978 that any real thought was given to dime novels as legitimate parts of historical record rather than simply ephemera. Since then, historians such as Henry Nash Smith have written their own pieces on Western dime novels, yet in media history, the dime novel seems to remain relatively unacknowledged. Of all historians, this essay most closely aligns with Richard Slotkin in tracing the lineage of the Western. Slotkin's own impressive three-volume series on the West, *Regeneration Through Violence, The Fatal Environment,* and *Gunfighter*

Nation deals directly with the myth of the frontier through popular culture, though his text is concerned more with the real-world effect this myth had on the nation. The history of the Western and the myth of the West are intimately linked, but they are not the same thing. Despite this, his texts have been an invaluable resource to me in the construction of this thesis.

Regardless of where historiography places the beginning of the Western, or what style of Western is used be it Classic or Revisionist, a unifying feature of the genre is of course, the West. Perhaps no genre is more tied to its setting than the Western; barring a few examples, the works within the genre are spatially in the American West and northern Mexico, and chronologically within the confines of the "Old West". What exactly constitutes the West, however, is a matter of some debate in academia with no broadly settled definition. Through a questionnaire sent out to members of the Western History Association and Western Writers of America in 1991, historian Walter Nugent found that some defined it by its environment with no agreed-upon physical boundary, others by its myths, and further some by dividing the West up by chronology and geography.[14] Nugent points out that newer western historians have made efforts to disconnect from the Turnerian process by asserting that the West is a place; despite this, much of his survey reflects that process as an idea remains an important part of the West.[15] There was a point in history, however, where the West was whatever lay at the frontier. Geographical definitions are difficult to pin down in regard to this especially. As said by John Faragher in *The American West*, an excellent overview of the history of the region, "...every part of the country was once a frontier, every region was once a West."[16] It is the element of the frontier that appears to be the most important to the Western genre specifically, reflecting in large part the infamous frontier theory of Frederick Jackson Turner.

To those who followed the school of thought as distilled by Turner, the march of civilization across the continent and the frontier defined the West and the American character. The West was a process of civilization's conquest rather than a concrete place. Turner believed that first, a pastoral mode of life would settle in the frontier, then be succeeded by industrial settlement across the whole of the continent, though this did not happen quite as he predicted.[17] In his conception of the West, the land at the frontier was free land whose freedom instilled in the American character both a love for democracy and the nation's cultural identity; the West is what distinguished America from Europe. Turner emphasized that the struggle to survive that the pioneers had faced was formative to America; this frontier progress narrative certainly informed many Western plotlines and characters. The frontier serves as not only a setting for the Western; it informs the major themes, characteristics of Western heroes, and the challenges they face in their stories. Almost every Western engages with the tension between wilderness and civilization as a theme to some degree, and it is on the frontier where this tension is at its forefront. It has been argued before that throughout the whole of Western-themed media that there are only seven core plots repeated throughout the genre. Of course, variations do exist, but much like Joseph Campbell's theory of the monomyth Hero's Journey, essentially all stories in the genre exist as variations on these plots. In *The American West in Film*, Jon Tuska identifies these as the pioneer achievement story, the wanderer/searcher story, the ranch town story, the justice/revenge story, the Indian story, the outlaw story, and the lawman story; all engage with this central struggle on the frontier.[18] The pioneer achievement story is self-explanatory in its relation to the battle over the wilderness, as is the struggle of a ranch town to maintain itself in the frontier. The wanderer and the Indian story deal with those who exist in the wilderness outside civilization, and the revenge, outlaw, and lawmen stories all explore the ideas of justice on the lawless frontier. These

types of stories, of course, were rife with racism given the identification of indigenous lifestyles with barbarity, and whiteness with peace and order. These ideas of civilization and wilderness may not reflect historical realities and may even go so far as to misrepresent history, but they are established tropes within the Western. The historical setting matters less than the frontier itself, in some cases, as the genre of space Westerns like *Firefly (2002)* or neo-Westerns like *No Country for Old Men (2007)* could not exist. Turner's theory on the frontier could be dubious as a historical fact, but its ideas were a reality to the Western hero.

Turner's thesis was not alone in informing these tropes, however; in fact, Theodore Roosevelt's take on the frontier is what most closely resembles the "battles at the edge of civilization" sorts of narratives that this genre revels in. Richard Slotkin places a great deal of emphasis on Roosevelt's take on the frontier in relation to the Western myth, and for good reason. Roosevelt's hero was the "Indian fighter," a man who made the West safe for the civilization that would come to settle it at the sacrifice of his own way of life. His justice was savage, yes, but it was depicted as justified for the sake of the future that was to follow. This conception of the frontier struggle is certainly familiar to anyone who engages with Western fiction.[19] Of course, these theories of the West operated within the values of Manifest Destiny and reduced the role of Native Americans to set pieces or outright obstacles, and as such, historians have long since evolved past Turnerian theory. [20] Though historiography may have finally shaken off the shadow of Turner, the Western genre certainly has not. Naturally, one could look to examples of Indian as villain structure in both dime novels like *Kit Carson: Prince of the Gold Hunters* and Western films like *Stagecoach (1939)* or *The Searchers (1956)*, but this plot structure also manifested through outlaw stories. While the Revisionist Western does not reflect

the values of Roosevelt and Turner so much as the Classic Western does, the genre still remains strongly linked to their theories.

Not only were a huge portion of early Westerns produced during a time when Turner's thesis was still widely unchallenged, the time period that these works are set in typically falls within the boundaries of the frontier as defined by Turner. Many define the Old West and Wild West as having ended in 1890, and though it is often thought that the 1890 census officially declared the frontier closed, this was never an official statement from the government. The census bureau had de-emphasized tracking the frontier but still maintained records of unsettled land; it was Turner who declared the frontier closed.[21] The year 1890 was neither a marker for when the West had become entirely populated nor a signal that the frontier was gone. Regardless of when the frontier had actually closed, its existence and eventual closure remain key to understanding the genre. What happens to the Western when the frontier is no more? The Western hero thrives in the lawlessness of the frontier and suffers for the lack of it; what was considered a triumph for civilization is also the death knell for the gunslinger cowboy. Westerns that deal with the end of the frontier are hardly celebrative of the civilizing force that Western heroes are so often instruments of; instead, these stories and characters are preoccupied with mourning the loss of an era. *The Wild Bunch (1969)* follows a brutal end to a way of life that has become unsustainable, as do both *Red Dead Redemption* games; *Dances with Wolves*, though set in 1860, spiritually falls in the same vein. A Western without the frontier is not free from the frontier and instead is defined by its absence. One of *Red Dead Redemption 2 (2018)*'s most iconic lines is protagonist Arthur Morgan's statement, "...we're more ghosts than people."[22] This may as well be the thesis statement for the entirety of the game's approximately fifty-hour

runtime, and a summation of what the cowboy had become without the frontier that so defined him.

The fictionalization and exaggerations surrounding the American frontier are what most certainly led to the genre of the Western. The interactions between civilization, wilderness, and law on the frontier serve as the unifying elements between the modes of the Western, and as such serves as the crux for studying the development of the early Western genre. By looking at the frontier as the key to the Western, a broader selection of media can be studied for how they contributed to the genre. While the precise point of where the Western was born cannot be determined, there is undeniably a rich history of the genre's origins dating back to the nineteenth century, far before cinema. By looking at the history of entertainment media surrounding the frontiers of the American West, a broader understanding of the origins of the genre can be gained.

Chapter II

VISIONS OF THE WEST

In February of 1862, nearly one-thousand Americans shuffled through the doors of the Tenth Street Studio Building, gathering for the New York venue's first reception of the season. At the time a cultural centerpiece of the American art world, the Tenth Street Studio boasted impressive collections sourced from the prominent artists of the century, this particular exhibition touted a roster of names such as Worthington Whittredge, William Hart, Regis Gignous, and Jervis McEntree, all masters of their craft in American landscape painting. Guests for the evening passed by impressive vistas of the frontier, romantic moments of stillness in the woods, and a cavalcade of grandiose and sublime presences captured in painted light cresting over the horizon. Despite a wide variety of offerings, there was little doubt that the standout debut of the evening was Albert Bierstadt's *The Rocky Mountains, Lander's Peak.* The work presented a stunning view of the eponymous mountains, the essence of an idyllic paradise aglow with opportunity, conveyed in oils and confined in a wooden frame. Bierstadt captured the spirit of the West and then mounted it on the wall, a prize and promise, elevated beyond the natural into the grandiose; this fantastical vision was one that audiences clearly recognized and responded to favorably. This was the exhibition that cemented Bierstadt as the preeminent landscape painter of his generation.[1] His main competition for the title, Frederick Edwin Church, had produced similar works of 'untouched' wilderness, and in fact, most of the other artists within the Tenth Street Studio Building exhibition painted in this particular genre, all men who fell under the loose artistic movement of the Hudson River School.

As artists who depicted the landscapes of the Americas as steeped in a romantic sublimity, those of the Hudson River School conveyed a fascination with the frontier that the American public had cultivated for over half a century before the movement had even begun.[2] The Hudson River School, founded around 1850, was an informal group of artists who are now categorized as such because of their similar subject matter. Though many of these artists focused their scenic paintings around the New York area, particularly the Catskill mountains, the works of the Hudson River School can generally function as a coalescence of the ideas and narratives that would eventually find themselves associated with the frontier. The art they produced contributed to the myth of the West and reflected the ideas already swirling around public consciousness by the mid-nineteenth century. By the time of the Tenth Street Studio exhibition, America had already begun its love affair with the American West; the mythic iconography and the realities of western expansion likely existed at the forefront of visitors' minds as they viewed the artwork available for display. By this point, families had long since begun their move across the continent, the construction of the transcontinental railroad had started barely a month prior, and George Catlin's "Indian Gallery" had been on tour for nearly 30 years. Many among the audience likely grew up alongside the stories of enterprising frontiersman Natty Bumppo in *The Leatherstocking Tales* or could recall tall tales of the likes of Daniel Boone. Where exactly did this widespread cultural interest in the frontier originate from, and what is the earliest point where it can be traced back? Of course, when looking at history, there are myriad contributing factors to consider, where precise origins and exact numbers of influences can never be truly quantified, but it is still possible to narrow a study of the Western as a genre to something a little more direct. At least in terms of what inspired the public entertainment portion of the myth of the West, as in what inspired works such as those produced by the Hudson River School painters as

well as George Catlin's paintings, and Fenimore Cooper's writings, the answer to that is easy to identify. Starting from the early nineteenth century, Western expeditions produced accounts that the public consumed just as voraciously as the artwork that would come to be based on them. The travel journals that were born from these expeditions are what provided artists of the East with inspiration from the West, and it is these travel journals that hold the potential to be considered the foundations of the Western genre.

The travel journal format of literature had always proven to be popular reading; the fact that nineteenth-century exploration narratives had captured popular interest was not surprising, and nowhere near a new phenomenon. Travel narratives have always functioned as a tangential subgenre to adventure fiction and have a rich, fairly understood history when one considers the likes of Marco Polo. What is unique to the phenomenon of interest in travel journals in the 1800s is the central focus on the American West, occurring both within the boundaries of the states and abroad in Europe. Also of note is how these works in question circulated as widespread media that staked their claim in the public consciousness, and the awareness that publishers displayed in designing these works for mass entertainment consumption. These, along with some thematic elements within the narratives, are the signifiers that I will argue distinguish where the nature of the popular travel journal becomes entangled with the history of the Western.

Given the popular culture of the 1800s' curiosity for any content related to the frontier, travel journals produced by expeditions venturing into "unexplored territory" fed directly into that potential market. Though people had long since populated the rest of the continent west of the boundaries of the United States, Native Americans and colonial settlers both, it wasn't until the Louisiana Purchase that Americans on the East coast gained easy and open access to the territory, and with that sudden access, came mystique and curiosity. Expeditions into the West

were not only of interest to mapmakers and scientists, but their findings, as we will explore, were fascinating to the average American, if one is to judge by the sales figures. Though these travel journals in their original forms were not quite what could be considered Western fiction, it can still be argued that these travel journals present the earliest foundations of what would eventually become the template for the Western. In examining these travel journals, one can see not only a public response to Western exploration but a growing awareness from the publishers' view that there was an audience they could potentially cater to. This relationship signified that travel journals served as more than scientific publications; what this meant was that there was a recognition of the entertainment value of the travel journal, and a desire to fill that niche. Even if not Westerns themselves, travel journals served as some of the first sources of Western entertainment and were a key part of inspiring Western-focused art.

When searching for the earliest examples of the travel journal narratives from which the Western arguably sprung, it is an almost immediate instinct to turn to the Lewis and Clark expedition, and for good reason. As perhaps the most well-known set of travel journals regarding American western exploration, at least in the minds of modern audiences, the connection feels quite natural; it serves as one of the best suited to examine as a potential starting point for a variety of reasons and deserves an in-depth exploration. Having become a part of the American creation myth almost as much as Christopher Columbus, the narrative that most American schoolchildren are familiar with is of an adventuring party that Thomas Jefferson sent forth to map the Louisiana Territory in the name of scientific inquiry. Though this grouping of adventurers is usually simplified down to a trio of Meriwether Lewis, William Clark, and Sacagawea, in truth the Corps of Discovery consisted of around forty individuals, including several soldiers, an interpreter, and an enslaved man named York.[3] Additionally, this expedition

was hardly undertaken purely out of curiosity, and rather served as an important part of noting resources and geography for future settlement in a nation's territory that had nearly doubled. More recent scholarship tends to examine these elements in more detail without the centralized "great man" style of focus on Lewis and Clark, but this is hardly the dominant view of the expedition. Regardless of the common telling's distortion of historical reality, this myth is one not only embedded within the cultural sphere of K-12 American education but also in the pop culture of the West. Even setting aside the swathe of edutainment content available, Lewis and Clark today have enjoyed popularity within the Western genre through adaptations to both novels and film. An easy example to offer is Charlton Heston's *The Far Horizons* which slots the expedition neatly into the genre. As an exploration into the Western frontier, a significant landmark in Western expansion, and a journey that held mass public interest during a period characterized by mass-printing capabilities and increased literacy, this expedition easily serves as a key point in the development of the Western.

It is important to understand that modern conceptions about the Lewis and Clark expedition are not necessarily the way the public engaged with and consumed the journals in the early nineteenth century. With the sort of widely known "basic education" status the Lewis and Clark expedition held in the twentieth century; the fraught history of the journal's initial publication often comes as a surprise to the historical layman. There exists today an image of an immediate, wide acceptance of a set of official journals that expanded the nation's understanding of the West through a mapped, scientific perspective that Jefferson's instructions had prioritized; this was not the case. While scholars such as Spencer Snow and Martin Bruckner have thoroughly examined how this discrepancy relates to American ideas about geography and nationalism, such studies stop short of this discrepancy's relevance to America's mode of media

consumption when it came to the expedition. As Snow points out in his article, "Maps and Myths: Consuming Lewis and Clark in the Early Republic," many academic examinations of the impact of the expedition upon American culture rely on versions of the journals that were not published until the early 20th century, and that the revitalization of interest in Lewis and Clark as American icons (at least to the degree that we experience it) came as late as the 1960s.[4] The Reuben Gold Thwaites *Original Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition* that historians such as Bernard DeVoto, John Bakeless, Frank Bergon, and many others tend to cite in their studies of the expeditions in fact did not exist until 1904, a century after the expedition had taken place.[5] As such, projecting this modern conceptualization of the expedition onto Americans who lived so long before it would be folly.[6] Snow argues that the desire of historians to compile the most comprehensive, accurate account of the expedition has obscured the reality of the manner in which Americans initially experienced the journals, especially as many of the earliest published texts have come to be dismissed in academia in the pursuit of this more authentic record, labeled and filed away as a type of apocrypha.[7] There is a sort of academic Lewis and Clark canon that has developed over decades of study, where there are accepted journals composed of those most verifiably accurate to the historical record. Outside of this exists "apocrypha," which frequently find themselves excluded from scholarly study, despite predating the first official Lewis and Clark publication. These works are essential to understand the true reception the journey had among Americans, how the public experienced these releases, and the way that travel journals acted as a form of entertainment media. These apocryphal works could be considered more valuable for their proliferation among the public rather than their adherence to the factual narrative of the expedition. Regardless of their exclusion from the accepted canon, these early

publications provide an important glimpse into understanding the consumption of the travel journals, and their place in forging the myth of the West.

Regardless of the discrepancy between the expedition's modern perception and that of the nineteenth century, the expedition itself was undoubtedly still popular at around the start and end of the century; the misconception lies in what version was popular, and when. In fact, the first publications recounting the Corps of Discovery's journey to reach the public were not those approved by the leaders of the expedition in any capacity. In 1814, Paul Allen and Nicholas Biddle compiled and published a *History of the Expedition*; while this was the first authorized edition of the journals, the other publications that came before it easily outperformed it. With interest in the expedition so widespread, the delayed publication of the Biddle edition by nearly eight years after the completion of the journey led to the successful circulation of several unofficial accounts that managed to shape public consciousness more so than the Biddle edition ever could; popular culture made no discernment for what was the most authorized work, only prioritizing what provided immediate access to the journey.[8] From the very start, Lewis' edition faced competition.

What exactly were these initial works that Meriwether Lewis denounced as "spurious publications' '?[9] In 1807, the expedition received coverage through the release of a pseudonymous British publication from a "Hubbard Lester' ' known as *Travels of Capts. Lewis and Clarke,* as well as the more notable Patrick Gass edition, *A Journal of Voyages and travels of a Corps of Discovery.*[10] Both of these publications were a departure from the carefully curated style of recordkeeping that Jefferson had encouraged Lewis and Clark to maintain while on the journey; Clark's writings about geography, carefully recorded flora and fauna, and observational notes as the purposes of the expedition were foreign to the style of the apocrypha content. Rather

than being assembled as an effort of cataloging and plotting out the newly expanded republic, these unofficial journals were instead more along the lines of narrativized adventures. The Lester edition was largely a work of falsification, composed of pieced-together newspaper accounts and segments borrowing from other expeditions, such as Alexander Makenzie's Canadian journey to produce a functional counterfeit travel journal. Other publishers borrowed from "Lester" to the point that at least eight or nine counterfeit versions of the Lewis and Clark expedition were in active circulation until 1846.[11] The Gass edition at least had the benefit of originating from an actual member of the exploratory party. Bruckner argues that these types of journals put Lewis and Clark in the place of being the precursor to the fictional Daniel Boone's character, helping to popularize the idea of the West with frontiersmen heroes, an observation that is certainly relevant when placed in the wider scope of the fictionalized western wilderness.[12]

Of these early publications, Patrick Gass' journals won the day. By the time it appeared on shelves in 1807, the only updates on the official Meriwether Lewis publication had been the printing of a prospectus announcement and a very messy public dispute between himself and the Gass journal's publisher. As a testament to the work's popularity, the Gass journals found themselves circulated across America and abroad, translated into French and German, with illustrated editions twice published in 1810, and reprinted again in 1811 and 1812, with total releases eventually coming around to six editions in six years.[13] Though some scholars have derided the Gass journals' deviance from the official narrative and the occasional preposterous illustration, this was undoubtedly the way that Americans engaged with the expedition in the early nineteenth century. Publisher Matthew Carey's edition of the Gass narrative commissioned illustrations that selected very specific types of moments to highlight, from which some insight as to what publishers considered worth translating for their audiences can be gleaned. Rather

than providing scientific illustrations of flora and fauna or geography, the Carey publication instead featured scenes such as the explorers shooting at bears, being chased by bears, losing a canoe in the rapids, and holding a council with Native Americans before engaging in combat with them. Together, these scenes share the qualities of narrative excitement; it was a selection that spoke to both what content the average audience was likely to respond to and indicative of the general impression that audiences must have taken away from the expedition.

An American Having Struck a Bear but not Killed Him, Escapes into a Tree. United States, 1810. Philadelphia: Printed for Matthew Carey. Photograph. https://www.loc.gov/item/2001699697/. Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-17371

These curated "story beats" of sorts would not be out of place when looking at a work of fiction designed around Western adventure. The manner in which the journals were presented transformed the expedition into something far outside of mere scientific inquiry. Despite this, unlike the Lester publication, the Gass edition did not wholeheartedly lean into sensationalism. The editor of the Gass journals, David McKeehan, was acutely aware of how the presentation of a work could shape the narrative and put a great deal of consideration into how he chose to

present the edited Gass text. The publisher's note that rests in the preface of *A Journal of the Voyages* discusses how there were two routes available in arranging the text, indicating that McKeehan struggled to choose between them. He could preserve the journal in its original state as a straightforward, daily record, forgoing embellishments and leaving much to the reader's imagination, or he could take it upon himself to add narrative flourishes to expand the journal into a carefully crafted story. McKeehan chose the former.[14] McKeehan's musing demonstrated a deliberate choice to maintain a sense of authenticity in the journal, careful to walk the line between fulfilling audience interests and avoiding too extreme of exaggerations; this was something he was quite critical of when it came to other publications. In a particularly scathing response to Lewis in a public battle printed in the *Pittsburg Gazette* over disagreements in publishing the expedition, more insight can be gleaned as to McKeehan's thoughts on what purpose the Gass edition should serve for its audience and the place of sensationalism. He discussed with some awareness that should the rights of the Gass journals have not made it into his hands, but instead to those of "some wag," the stories within could be distorted widely. He cites a potential example for generating drama within the text, discussing how the moment when Lewis had been accidentally shot in a hunting accident could have easily been transformed into a fully intentional murder attempt.[15] Additionally, he went on sardonically to project that Lewis may intend to fill his own account with such exaggerations, "...swelling your work with tales of wonder" as McKeehan put it.[16] While it was true that in his recordkeeping Lewis was prone to Romantic, poetic language as opposed to the more methodical Clark, McKeehan's pre-emptive strike against Lewis' publication was hardly necessary, as it would be heavily delayed.[17] For seven years, the Gass journals endured without challenge from any official account of the

journey, and existed among the public as the premier account of the expedition to the point that it is from the Gass journals that the nickname "Corps of Discovery" was popularized.[18]

In the preface of the Gass journals, McKeehan stated that most of his alterations regarded adding geographical notes, but despite this McKeehan was still keenly aware of what audiences would respond to in a work; regardless of McKeehan's hesitance to exaggerate his publication still altered the narrative into one actively cultivated with the consumer in mind. As stated in his *Pittsburg Gazette* spat with Lewis, "Of what consequence is it to the generality of readers to know how a plant has been classed, to what order, genus, or species it has been confined by botanists?"[19] Readers were not purchasing these journals for the purposes of reading scientific observations; they were first and foremost interested in the mystique of the West, and the appeal of a story. To that end, McKeehan delivered; even if the Gass journals were not as excessively fictionalized as other apocrypha could be, it still made an active choice to tell a narrative perspective of the expedition rather than a broadly scientific one.

When the Biddle edition of the Lewis and Clark expedition was finally published in 1814, the first officially sanctioned account of the journey made it to the public. Though it was preceded by the Gass edition as well as several other apocrypha, Biddle's *History of the Expedition* was the publication intended to be *the* recounting of Lewis and Clark. In several historian's reflections on the expedition, the Biddle edition of the Lewis and Clark story has received consistently high praise; in the introduction to the Bedford series of Lewis and Clark, Gunther Barth writes of the publication's importance: "The best of these histories is that of Nicholas Biddle, whose work towers over all other guides to the Lewis and Clark journals. His *History* is the only book that acquainted nineteenth-century Americans with the explorer's experience as recorded in their journals."[20] Barth outlines how nineteenth-century Americans

were captivated by Biddle's *History*, and while that may be true, in the context of the development of the Western myth, the Biddle edition's relationship with the public is more complicated than first appears.

As mentioned previously, after the conclusion of the journey, the official publication of the Lewis and Clark journals was met with heavy delays. Meriwether Lewis, originally tasked with editing the journals on his return, had begun to engage in land speculation, gotten embroiled in political drama, took to drinking, and generally endured a great deal of personal turmoil that prevented him from fully devoting himself to the task of completing the manuscript. Despite his earlier prospectus announcement and public spat with McKeehan over the Gass journal, he would never finish his work; Lewis died in 1809, believed to have taken his own life.[21] The responsibility of assembling the journals then fell to Clark, who in turn brought the task to Biddle. With the assistance of interviewing Clark through a series of letters and cross-referencing other party members' accounts, perhaps even Gass', Biddle was able to complete his *History of the Expedition*.

The responsibility of having the journals assembled then fell on to Clark, who turned to Biddle. Biddle completed the *History of the Expedition.* [22] While at the time, Biddle's text was considered the most accurate account, it should be noted that this is not the current history of the expedition that we are most familiar with today, nor was the Biddle publication a direct line between Lewis and Clark's experience to the public as some historians have asserted. Unlike the Reuben Gold Thwaites text that has served most scholars as the journal source of the twentieth century, the Biddle publication did not choose to preserve the words of the Corps of Discovery as they were; instead, Biddle made extensive edits.[23] He not only made use of romantic language and narrative flourishes, but tailored the men and mission to his own and nineteenth-century

America's sensibilities. Biddle modified the behaviors and thoughts of Lewis and Clark into those more suitable for Classical heroes, omitted the contributions of nonwhite individuals, struck sexual mentions from the record, and reduced lower-class members of the party to background noise in favor of elevating centralized "characters."[24] Biddle, perhaps to an even greater extent than McKeehan had, adopted the trappings of adventure literature.[25] He too seemed to seize on the same moments of drama that the Carey edition of the Gass journals had; the illustration of the American in the tree is likely the same moment that this 1814 publication turned into a chase sequence. Biddle wrote thrillingly, "the furious animal sprung up and ran openmouthed upon them…before they could reload he was so near that they were obliged to run to the river, and before they reached it he had almost overtaken them: two jumped in the canoe; the other four separated, and concealing themselves in the willows fired as fast as each coil reload: they struck him several times but instead of weakening the monster each shot seemed only towards the hunter, till at last he pursued two of them so closely, that they threw aside their guns and pouches, and jumped down a perpendicular bank of twenty feet into the river…"[26] The chase continued up to the point that the men were able to shoot the bear dead. The tale concluded on the note that it took at least eight balls to kill the creature; in Biddle's story, the men had truly felled a real monster.

Despite providing a narrative filled with excitement, the Biddle publication did not sell particularly well. At this point, the market had been so saturated with Lewis and Clark narratives that there was little room for a new one, regardless of how "official" this one was. Not only had the Gass' account predated it by several years, the numerous counterfeit tales easily filled the niche for sensational adventures unbound by any pretense of keeping to the facts. Additionally, only two thousand copies were published in the Biddle edition's first run, and within that set, so

many copies ended up missing or defective, that only around 1417 or so copies of the publication actually ever existed. Even Clark himself was unable to obtain an edition until around 1816, when he wrote to Biddle about having borrowed one.[27] Barth's assertion that the Biddle edition was popular among Americans was true, but it only applied to the tail end of the century; all the cited praise for Biddle's work tends to source from points after 1890, following Elliot Coues' glowing review in his own 1893 publication of the *History*.[28] Coues words describing the publication as "our national epic of exploration, conceived by Thomas Jefferson, wrought out by Lewis and Clark, and given to the world by Nicholas Biddle," and "the Robinson Crusoe of fact" came at a time after the West has already "closed."[29]

Still, Barth's assertion that Biddle had been ahead of his time in anticipating the Western-centric adventure fiction heroes of the 1830s has some merit. Barth compares the writing to that of Washington Irving's *Astoria* and *Bonneville's Adventures*, and though it is a compelling argument that the Lewis and Clark expedition could have influenced these works of fiction, it feels unlikely that this version of the expedition alone was a dominating factor.[30] Regardless, the collection of Lewis and Clark narratives, apocrypha included, was certainly influential. While the perception of the Lewis and Clark expedition had not yet reached the formatting of a fictional Western, it still displayed the hallmarks of frontier entertainment, as well as provided a wealth of source material for later authors of fiction to build off in the coming decades. Public interest in this sort of Western frontier adventure narrative would persist throughout the century, and while the Lewis and Clark expedition may have specifically served as the first of the American Western travel journal phenomenon, it was not the only expedition of its kind that would contribute to the myth of the West, nor solely the most influential in that regard.

From a broader perspective, the Corps of Discovery existed in the popular culture of the early to mid-nineteenth century followed by names such as Zebulon Pike, Stephen H. Long, John C. Frémont, and John Wesley Powell; all occupied the realm of intrigue that helped visualize the adventurous West, their expeditions having enjoyed waves of interest throughout different points in the century, something that will become apparent throughout this thesis. The travel journals produced from these journeys interact further with the tropes and trappings of what we can now retroactively call a Western, drawing on the same base appeal as demonstrated by the Lewis and Clark apocrypha with their own tales of adventure.

A particularly prominent set of expeditions that were undertaken and published concurrently with said apocrypha were those of Zebulon Pike. While perhaps not a name many may be familiar with today, Pike presented an astonishingly popular figure in the culture of the early 1800s, with his reputation experiencing a fascinating series of ebbs and flows in relevance throughout the century and beyond. Having embarked on both an 1805-1806 journey through Minnesota, and another Southwestern expedition in 1806-1807, Pike accumulated experiences that he published in 1810 under the title *The Expeditions of Zebulon Montgomery Pike.*[31] Though published after the release of the Gass edition of the Corps of Discovery journey, it still preceded the Biddle publication in its introduction to the public at large. Pike boasted in the preface to his journals to have performed the duties of an astronomer, surveyor, commanding officer, hunter, and spy, and emphasized the great dangers and hardships that he had to face for the spirit of enterprise and exploration, certainly a strong hook for a compelling adventure story.[32] The contents of these journals were much like their contemporaries, though in structure they represented somewhat of a midpoint between Biddle and Gass. In *The Expeditions*, detailed logs of weather observations, distance traveled, and records of Northwest trading companies mingle

alongside narratively structured recounting of hunting, braving the cold and river rapids, as well as encountering Frenchmen, Englishmen, and native tribes. Pike even recorded stories told to him to characterize locations he visits. In one entry, Pike writes "...I was shown a point of rocks [Maiden Rock, 400 feet high] from which a Sioux maiden cast herself, and was dashed into a thousand pieces on the rocks below. She had been informed that her friends intended matching her to a man she despised; having been refused the man she had chosen, she ascended the hill, singing her death-song; and before they could overtake her and obviate her purpose, she took the lover's leap!"[33] While only a small anecdote among the sea of much longer and further detailed entries Pike provides, this moment is one that displays what makes *The Expeditions* appealing to readers. These are human moments and stories that color the landscape Pike travels through, rather than being a wholly straightforward presentation of geography or botany. All of these qualities together worked to create an engaging narrative that could certainly sell and sell well it did; *The Expeditions of Zebulon Montgomery Pike* proved popular, and was widely distributed in America and translated into French, German, and Dutch for its circulation throughout Europe.[34] Though the formatting was not quite the romantic prose of literature, it still presented a great influence on American culture as some form of entertainment.

Between the years 1814 and 1833, at least 16 counties and towns were named in his honor as Americans moved westward, with popular interest in his story maintaining for nearly two decades until it peaked around the time of the Mexican-American War.[35] Though Pike's popularity and deep association with the West is undeniable, the nature of how people engaged with his memory throughout the century is somewhat contested by historians; was Pike recognized as a military figure or an explorer, and how long did he remain relevant? Most agree that Pike's memory in the public sphere existed at first as a war hero when he was propelled into

famed martyrdom following his death in 1813 and grew until the mid-century, where it tapered off around the Civil War, "entirely forgotten" in the wake of new heroes that Americans could celebrate, according to Michael J. Olsen in his examination *Zebulon Pike and American Popular Culture*.[36] Olsen justifies this conclusion by noting the lack of content produced involving Pike in the years following the Civil War, explaining that his popularity only re-emerged around the centennial of his Southwest expedition. Supposedly, it was then that he was transformed from a military hero to an explorer.[37] This line of thinking is reflected in much of Pike scholarship, and is true, to some extent. Olsen points out that the rich history of Pike-centered literature all emerges around the early 20th century, rather than the nineteenth.[38] Certainly, Pike hadn't achieved the popularity and eventual staying power of the Lewis and Clark expedition as it is today, but there exists plenty of evidence to indicate that Pike retained more relevance throughout the nineteenth century than many have assumed; prior to the centennial, Pike was thought of not only as a military man but also as a notable explorer. As mentioned previously, in the 1810's *The Expeditions of Zebulon Montgomery Pike* sold well and enjoyed distribution throughout both America and Europe. There are other works that indicated that Pike maintained a reputation as an explorer outside of the direct reception to the travel journal, however. Pike found himself included in A. W. Greely's *Men of Achievement* series in the 1893 *Explorers and Travelers* volume, and he is the subject of an 1894 Colorado College lecture where the speaker erroneously declared him the first to explore the Louisiana Territory.[39] In the 1895 preface to the reprints of his journals, the publishers referred to him as on par with the Lewis and Clark expedition in the hearts of the American people as they embraced the West.[40] I would argue that Pike was not simply a military hero; even if that could have been a dominant interpretation at some points in history, his exploration efforts did not go unrecognized.

Pike then presents a figure who was once popularly celebrated both as a military hero, and associated with the Western frontier. While hardly the rugged character that would come to be associated with the Western, there is still something to be said for his being a popular American icon preceding the dime-novel exploits of frontier adventurers and cavalrymen characters. Pike's characterization leans more strongly into the adventure genre, if anything, but is a step further towards a more action-oriented protagonist than the public perception of the Corps of Discovery. When one considers the later transformation of another travel-journal icon Kit Carson into a Western hero, Pike as a prototypical figure is not too unfeasible. While not a perfect example of a Western hero, Pike does represent yet another link to the travel journal in the lineage of the Western genre.

The Corps of Discovery and Pike expeditions dominated the first decades of the nineteenth-century travel journal's history, then the next to follow in this lineage is the expeditions of Stephen Long and John C. Frémont. Until around the midpoint of the century, these two were some of the most notable among myriad other explorers and frontiersmen who made their way across the continent and contributed to the myth of the West. In his article "Stephen Long's Great American Desert," Richard H. Dillon explored the idea of a continuous chain of travel journals that influenced the perception of the West and examined the Long expedition as an important link that bridged the gap between the Lewis and Clark expedition in the 1800s, and Frémont's in the 1840s.[41] Since venturing through the Louisiana territory Meriwether Lewis had urged that control over the Yellowstone-Missouri junction should be the highest priority for the States, but it took nearly 15 years for Secretary of War John C. Calhoun to commission the Yellowstone Expedition. Initially, Colonel Henry Atkinson was placed in command of the expedition with Major Stephen H. Long assigned to oversee scientific matters.

The expedition began in the spring of 1819, but unfortunately, the journey progressed so slowly that by the end of the season the group had only just made it up river; Congress pulled the funding, and the expedition had instead been reduced to a march that Long would lead from the Missouri to the Rocky Mountains and back. [42] With a failure to map the Arkansas and the Red Rivers, and only about a dozen of the 272 sketches made on the journey ever making it to print, it seemed the Long expedition failed to provide anything of note; it did, however, produce the enduring myth of the "Great American Desert."[43] This was the idea that a significant part of the West was unfit for agriculture, and uninhabitable for settlers who relied on arable farmland. Though the accounts produced by the Long expedition did not appear of much interest to the public as narrative, the idea of the "Great American Desert" was still popularized among the American public. The concept that there existed an impassable barrier to settlement can be traced back through both the Lewis and Clark expeditions as well as Zebulon Pike's, but it was the Long expedition that calcified it in American culture.[44]

There are a few points that can be identified as to why the Long expedition produced this result. For one, the party's exploration was rather limited and provided not much else of note to latch on to. In the Edwin James' 1823 publication of the Long expedition reports, he wrote "In regard to this extensive section of country, I do not hesitate in giving the opinion that it is almost wholly unfit for cultivation, and of course uninhabitable by a people depending on agriculture for their subsistence. Although tracts of fertile land considerably extensive are occasionally to be met with, yet the scarcity of wood and water, almost uniformly prevalent, will prove an insuperable obstacle in the way of settling the country"; this is a rather vivid description of the futility of attempting settlement, at least from a expansionist point of view.[45] James was the party member primarily tasked with producing the report, and was therefore responsible for how the

public experienced the journey. Additionally, if one keeps in mind the importance of visual presentation to the public, there is the matter of the sketches produced and the map. Though artists Samuel Seymour and Titian R. Peal's sketches could have provided a more varied view of the Plains that demonstrated it was more than a dead zone, the limited number of sketches that were published would never have the chance to undo the image of desolation. In the case of the map, the image produced by William H. Swift emblazoned thousands of miles of land with the marker "Great American Desert."[46] Popular journals would take this idea and run with it, disseminating the idea of the Western desert to the point that it became a staple of the West, which caused it to emerge not only in other's expeditions of the region but in fiction as well, in some cases long after it had already been disproven.[47] The Great American Desert had entered history, geography, folklore, and fiction. Even Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's 1887 *Study in Scarlet* fell prey to this misconception in chapters set in the American West. "In the central portion of the great North American Continent there lies an arid and repulsive desert, which for many a long year served as a barrier against the advance of civilization. From the Sierra Nevada to Nebraska, and from the Yellowstone River in the north to the Colorado upon the south, is a region of desolation and silence," Doyle wrote, "Nor is Nature always in one mood throughout this grim district. It comprises snow-capped and lofty mountains, and dark and gloomy valleys. There are swift-flowing rivers which dash through jagged cañons, and there are enormous plains, which in winter are white with snow, and in summer are grey with the saline alkali dust. They all preserve, however, the common characteristics of barrenness, inhospitality, and misery."[48] If one considers many of the more cynical Westerns of the modern era, does this description not ring familiar?

Though the idea of the Great American Desert would persist throughout most of the century, it did not entirely reign supreme over the whole of the conception of the West; after all,

around mid-century, Americans themselves began to settle further Westward into stretches once deemed desert. If Americans fully believed that there was no fertile ground to settle upon, how could they have justified chasing the dream of Manifest Destiny? In fact, the biggest challenge to Long's Desert theory came in the form of yet another travel journal that was released around two decades after Edwin James' publication. 1843's *A Report on an Exploration of the Country Lying Between the Missouri River and the Rocky Mountains* presented an important point in the history of the mythic West because of its rebuttal of the Great American Desert, and in the narrativization of the travel journal format by its literary style. This journal was so popular, it could arguably be seen as "the single most important reason for the sudden spike in western emigration which occurred a little more than two months after it was published."[49]

John C. Frémont, often dubbed "The Pathfinder," underwent several Western expeditions throughout his lifetime, but for the purposes of this thesis the focus is on his 1842 journey that led to the creation of the *Report,* a narrative journey authored by Frémont and his wife Jessie. John C. Frémont is an excellent example of the next steps that follow in the narrativization of exploration. This expedition was sponsored for the sake of surveying and mapping the Oregon Trail, as well as to provide encouragement for Americans to emigrate further westward.[50] By this point in time, the template for travel narratives had already been set and the fact that Americans would be actively engaging with reports was practically an expectation; publishing the journey was a given, but the editing style of the *Report* is what made it particularly unique. Historian Andrew Menard stressed not only the importance of the Frémont expedition being the first to meaningfully challenge the Great American Desert, its contribution to building a Western American identity and influence on Manifest Destiny, but also explained the importance of the medium's style in delivering that message.[51] The *Report* served not only as a travel narrative, but

as a scenic guide, with Frémont himself considering it a "guide-book in atlas form."[52] The experiences that were collected in the *Report* had been transformed through a romantic lens, as a scientific work made literary. The *Report* presents a beauty found in the West that readers responded well to and quiet episodes where the reader can reflect alongside Frémont. On reaching Snow Peak he wrote, "Here on the summit, where the stillness was absolute, unbroken by any sound, and the solitude complete, we thought ourselves beyond the region of animated life: but while we were sitting on the rock a solitary bee (*bromus, the humble bee*) came winging his flight from the eastern valley, and lit on the knee of one of the men. It was a strange place, the icy rock and highest peak of the Rocky Mountains, for a lover of warm sunshine and flowers, and we pleased ourselves with the idea that he was the first of his species to cross the mountain barrier, a solitary pioneer to foretell the advance of civilization."[53] Tom Chaffin notes that it's likely that this moment could have been entirely invented, but it charmed readers nonetheless.[54] The *Report*'s flights of fancy, as Menard puts it, were such that "...nothing could be more contrary to the monotonous aridity of Pike and Long."[55]

Menard insists that contemporary readers made no distinction between elements of the aesthetic and elements of empiricism in Frémont's *Report*; he focuses instead on the quality of writing in the sense that it is able to revitalize the supposed Great American Desert in the minds of the readers.[56] He believes the strength of the *Report* stemmed from avoiding the "elevation" that came with writers like Thoreau and Irving, and that the scenery is described as a recording of what lay directly before its writer.[57] It is in these places where I find that though many historians agree on the literary merits of the *Report*, not all agree on the nature of its stylization or even its creation. Menard's emphasis on the appeal of a first-person witness is especially ironic, considering that according to some, the author of the *Report* may not have been present

herself. Jessie Benton Frémont, John Frémont's wife and an accomplished author in her own right, assisted in the process of creating the *Report* immediately upon her husband's return. Jessie Frémont provided "secretarial" assistance[58] Menard makes no mention of Jessie's contributions. Chaffin, while acknowledging Jessie's hand in authorship, maintains that while she was an active editor, the writings are still fundamentally Frémont's own.[59] If we turn to her own words, Jessie stated "The horseback life, the sleep in the open air, had unfitted Mr. Frémont for the indoor work of writing…after a series of hemorrhages from the nose and head had convinced him he must give up trying to write his report, I was let to try… every morning at nine I took my seat at the writing table and left it at one. Mr. Frémont had his notes all ready and dictated as he moved about the room…then followed the proof correcting, and this too I mastered…"[60] Despite disagreement as to the degree of authorship, I would argue there is little doubt that the *Report* is a collaborative effort, and that it was only together that the Frémonts produced the *Report.*

With one author that dictated his journal after his journey had ended, and another who had not actually embarked on it herself, this arrangement brings into question the relationship between fiction and reality. This is not to accuse the Frémonts of fraud. There is no question as to the fact that the journey occurred and that Frémont's *Report* is reliably faithful to the path the expedition took, but the level of narrativization present, as well as the very requirement of imaginative prose to piece together Frémont's journey blurs these lines by the nature of its presentation. In some ways, the *Report* could arguably be thought of as a form of Western fiction. Much in the ways that many authors turned to travel journals for inspiration and research before writing their stories, Jessie transcribed her husband's notes into an adventure tale. In *Pathfinder*, Chaffin does not hesitate to draw comparisons between the *Report* and contemporary fiction, pointing out that the imagery of the bumblebee as a scout had already existed as a trope

in literature such as in works from William Cullen Bryant and Washington Irving.[61] He also notes the literary similarities to other more explicitly fictional Western adventure tales with Irving's *Adventures of Captain Bonneville* and James Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking* series.[62] There was a sense that the Frémonts understood audience tastes well, and to a greater degree than any other journal that had come before the *Report*.

Travel journals were no longer the only works that occupied the media space regarding the American West. In the time leading up to the mid-century, journals began to share the space with works specifically produced for entertainment. By the 1830s and 1840s, the idea of the West had become entangled with art and popular culture outside of purely governmental surveys and curiosity about the unknown territory. It was no longer enough to simply *go* west; storytelling elements were starting to become a must to maintain reader's attention. Not only was the structure of Frémont's *Report* an excellent indicator of the type of Western story that appealed to the American public over the drier travel journals of decades past, the *Report* also introduced an early icon of Western mythology that presents an excellent example of the archetype that would build into the Western hero. In destroying the myth of the Great American Desert, the *Report* contributed to a new one: the action hero frontiersman. At the time of Frémont's expeditions, Kit Carson was only one of several trappers brought along the journey. Initially, he was by no means a figure of leadership, nor did he possess anything close to the legendary reputation that he would come to have in the decades to follow. Carson had served as a guide for Frémont's first three expeditions, and quickly became a favorite figure to be featured within the reports, which then exposed Carson to the public. That romantic tinge that the Frémont publications possessed imbued Carson with a newfound heroism that would be built upon with time; his successes that followed during the Civil War only helped to boost that reputation further.[63] Trapper, trailblazer,

soldier, Indian fighter, and an idealized moral beacon of true manhood, the people's Carson was cultivated to fill all the requirements for an American icon. Carson served as a true precursor to the dime novel Western protagonist, and his likeness would eventually be poached to serve as a character in them as well.[64] Carson, Daniel Boone, and Davy Crockett were all repurposed from real individuals into characters who could occupy a fictional frontier space. What is important to note here is the direct link between the dime novel phenomenon and the travel journal. Travel journals were not only entertaining in their own right, but also cultivated Western fictional media.

The recorded exploits of frontiersmen, adventurers, and military men and the value of travel journals as reference material directly led to the production of several works of fiction. James Fenimore Cooper's rugged hero Natty Bumppo, though his adventurers were set in the eighteenth-century New York frontier, drew direct inspiration from the travel journal narratives that Cooper consumed himself. Some passages from his 1827 novel, *The Prairie,* were taken from Edwin James' *Account of an Expedition from Pittsburgh to the Rocky Mountains*. He was well familiar with the Biddle narrative of the Lewis and Clark expedition and drew upon both their account and Long's characterization of the region in order to craft the setting for his story.[65] Cooper built his own Western hero in the make of frontiersmen with his adventures drawn from travel journal experiences, but his adventures were not bound to the technical requirements of a surveying party. Bumppo was free to have any adventures that Cooper so wished, and those adventures were received spectacularly well. The expeditions of the early 1800s fed *Leatherstocking*, and *Leatherstocking* likely fed the Frémonts' *Report*. Interestingly, a number of scenes from Cooper's 1826 book *Last of the Mohicans* had been selected for illustration by Thomas Cole.[66] Cole is widely considered to be the foundational member of the Hudson River

School movement, and his selection of subject matter was quite fitting in this regard. Action-packed moments of rescue, murder, and revenge, were chosen for illustration, all against a backdrop of stunning landscapes representative of the movement's grandiose style. From travel journal, to page, to painting, layers of media were created for the sake of packaging the West for the East. A Western character was steadily developing, not only for the land itself, but the type of man who made the journey into it.

Over the course of the early to mid-nineteenth century, artists were engaging with the West; that much is clear. What should be noted is that this was not simply a case of artists interpreting the narratives they consumed from travel journals. As briefly mentioned in the Long expedition, these journeys were not limited to the efforts of military men and surveyors alone; artists were known to accompany parties. The commissioning of an exploratory party would often include artists who were intended to assist in the documentation process of the journey by providing sketches of the landscape, creatures, and plants to be found along the way; but just as often did these artists do more than assist in sketches for research purposes. One well-known example associated with the Old West traveling artist is George Catlin, whose journeys resulted in the creation of his "Indian Gallery," but many of the artists in the Hudson River school count among those who made the trip Westward to create their stunning landscape paintings.

Bierstadt's *The Rocky Mountains, Lander's Peak,* which was displayed so prominently in the 1862 Tenth Street Studio Building exhibition was in fact a product of one such journey. While initially existing as one of the many sketches and notes produced for the sake of the expedition, once the artist returned home, he adapted his research and rendered in oils a work that was made specifically with the intention of exhibition and public consumption. In 1869, he had accompanied a surveying expedition led by Frederick W. Lander, which lent to *Lander's*

Peak the impression that the work was a snapshot of a grand view the party experienced.[67] This is quite similar to the authentic air of the narrativized travel journal, only in visual form. While the painted peak in question did represent a point in the Wind River Range of the Rocky Mountains, interestingly, no such location can precisely be found.[68] If one considers this purely from the point of expedition documentation, this imaginary point could be considered odd, especially in the context of Bierstadt's workflow. Bierstadt and his family were well known for experimentation with early forms of photography and the potential application of it to the process of artwork, with Bierstadt known to have produced both photographs and stereographs while out in the field.[69]

He prepared for his final pieces not only by the creation of several meticulous sketches, but by also taking photographic references; he is even known to have done so specifically during the Lander's expedition. A notice in *The Crayon*, an art magazine, published shortly after his return notes that "Bierstadt has returned lately from the Rocky Mountains to New Bedford, and has brought with him such material in sketches, photographs, and stereoscopic views."[70] With such a wealth of reference and accurate photographs to draw from, why then, did *Lander's Peak* hardly resemble the realities of the Landers expedition when it was practically billed as such?

This contrast did not go entirely unnoticed, even at the time of its debut; Bierstadt faced some criticism for the distortion of reality in his artwork along with some ridicule; Romanticism's eternal critic, Mark Twain, noted that Bierstadt's portrayal of landscapes could be "altogether too gorgeous."[71] This sort of critique tended to be in the minority, at least at the peak of Bierstadt's career at mid-century, where depictions of the West were still a hot commodity. Art, as a medium of communication, is hardly ever meant to be a direct interpretation of the world; this has always been the dividing line between fiction and nonfiction, at least in

intentionality. Artwork directly and purposefully serves as a lens through which the world can be filtered and transformed in accordance with the biases and goals of the artist. These works are molded to deliver a specific message to those who view it. The canvas that received applause in New York, toured the United States and Europe, was widely distributed using print engravings, and was an image of the Rocky Mountains outside of our reality, sold as the real thing. The world saw not the realities of the land, but something truly grandiose and spectacular: a glorious, idyllic version of the American West.[72] In Bierstadt's work, we can see the effects of the travel journal taken to its most extreme and done intentionally rather than through layers of editors for publication. Rather than building romanticization through chapters that made room for the lulls of documentation, this was all the romanticized material compressed into one image. Bierstadt may have ventured West to visit the places he chose to depict, but his choice to obscure it in layers of sublimity and grandeur cuts to the core of what Western content was becoming: deliberate fictionalization.

This may not have been the original intention of Western exploration, but by becoming media, the relationship between publisher and audiences seemed to encourage this transformation. Although in the travel journals the Western had not yet entirely become fiction, it still presented an elevated version of reality that increasingly catered to the tastes of audiences with every new cycle of popular interest, and occasionally, with each new iteration of reprinted editions. As the decades wore on, authors produced travel journals with the awareness that they would come to print, and the knowledge that sketches could be repurposed for display in galleries. When editing and preparing travel journals for distribution, authors and publishers kept audience expectation in mind and toyed with the idea of an overarching narrative. The success of the Gass edition was not only because of the immediacy of its publication, but because of the

active choices to forego the scientific elements of the journey in favor of rawer experiences that audiences could more easily connect to. The illustrated Carey reprint of the Gass journals demonstrates an integration of artwork that centers narrative first, rather than purely visual reference.

The Western, while not yet defined as such, was steadily building into a unique genre that played with the concept of existing as a "true story" which provided a grounding that lent an air of legitimacy, while at the same time steadily presenting more phenomenal elements that appealed to the sensational desires of the public. Elements common throughout successful journals and artworks were motifs surrounding braving harsh but beautiful frontiers, moments where men's hands darted to their guns, daring escapes and battles against man or nature, and the ever-present curiosity surrounding the lives and customs of Native Americans. All of these concepts would later be found in a further distilled form in the wholly fictional Western stories that were to follow, but even in those works the tether to 'reality' does remain. The pieces of media that could fall under the budding category of the Western were historical fiction before it was ever "historical;" they were tied to a depiction of some time and place in reality, just abstracted. Even as the adventure moved on from the travel journal, that element seems to always have remained. Still, a reproduction of reality is not exactly what audiences desired. It could be argued that the decline in popularity of the travel-adventure narrative came when those realities were "fully explored" and no longer a curiosity that could sustain interest on its own in the face of the increasingly adventurous quasi-fiction tales of frontiersmen and works that would fully embrace the nature of storytelling. Separated from a need to convey a strictly truthful series of events, the Western would be free to evolve through the latter half of the century with the rise

of the dime novel, allowing new forms of Western heroes who, while separate from the explorer or military man, still carried on the essence of the adventurer.

Chapter III

FRONTIER ADVENTURES

Consider that you are presented with the following scene and are tasked with guessing what piece of media it originated from. As the sun set over the frontier, a wagon train came to rest; travelers and strangers settled in together as the sky dimmed. They became acquainted with one another as they swapped stories of braving the wild, shared hunting exploits, and bonded over the quickness of their rifles and the truth of their aim. The eldest among them, a rugged and mysterious stranger, wore years of experience on his frame, but his sharpness was unhindered by his age; it was he who sensed the danger before it even arrived. In a flash, the party was ambushed by a band of at least 30 or so Sioux, surviving only thanks to the skills of the stranger, for he knew the natives of the plains and spoke the same language of the frontier as they do. The stranger, unrestrained by the laws of civilization, was their savior. One could be forgiven for thinking the source of this scene was sampled from a Classic Western of the 1960s, or perhaps even a specific John Wayne film would come to mind. Maybe it could have come earlier in Hollywood's history, or even later as a Revisionist Western depending on the exact execution of the concept. Regardless of the precise subgenre it is categorized in, most people would immediately narrow down the options of media to the Western while trying to identify what exactly this story could be. This scene, however, does not originate from a Hollywood film; in fact, it is from the first few chapters of a novel that is not commonly identified as a Western at all. This scene derives from James Fenimore Cooper's 1827 *The Prairie: A Tale*, and while it may contain many of the trappings of a modern Western, it frequently escapes that categorization. Bred from the travel journal and inspiration for the early dime novel, Cooper's

Leatherstocking Tales are a significant work of literature of the frontier that scholars tend to consider to be examples of "Adventure" stories rather than Westerns.[1]

As explored in the previous chapter, around the start of the nineteenth century, America's primary way to engage with the West had been through the consumption of travel journals. These journals, though often enjoyed as stories, were not intentionally created as such; even in the case of individuals such as Frémonts' journals that integrated more literary prose, these accounts were only secondarily produced as entertainment. They did, however, serve as the basis for more deliberate entertainment media to come. Around the midpoint of the century, Americans were no longer engaging with the West through the travel journal alone. Following the several surveying expeditions undertaken through the new territory, Frémont's extensive *Report*, the creation of easily accessible guidebooks for Western migration, the direct encouragement of Americans to move to the territory via the Homestead Acts, and the construction of the transcontinental railroad, the intrigue of "undiscovered lands" that had driven the travel journal's popularity had faded. The consistent wealth of media surrounding the subject of the West, however, makes it clear that the interest in the topic itself had not. In fact, the focus placed on the West seemed to have only grown stronger, simply having evolved in form as America's own relationship with the region did. Frontier heroes who captured the imagination of thousands grew from the seeds of the travel journal, and around them grew ever taller tales about their exploits. Tales about the people and culture of the West emerged in the forms of wildly exaggerated biographies, character-driven book series, and countless dime novels. All of these could be seen as built from the same frontier fixation of the travel journal, but as works that were allowed more freedom to actively engage with the creative process and build new stories within a wilderness preserved in fiction.

Today, many of these works are grouped into the genres of either "Adventure" or more specifically "Frontier." Are frontier-adventure stories really something that can be so clearly separated from the Western, or could they perhaps be considered a potential subgenre of the Western rather than considered something else entirely? I would argue that these frontier stories are worth revisiting with the perspective that at least some among them could serve as examples of the earliest writings within the genre of the Western. At the very least, they present significant elements to which the Western genre owes its existence. Considering thematic elements, subject matter, social ideas, and their nature as pieces of entertainment media, these frontier tales are those which could fit neatly within Western canon. While they may not have once been previously considered such, with our evolving perspective of what the Western is outside of the 1960s Hollywood Golden Age, the frontier-adventure novel is a valuable resource in tracing the origins of concepts that have persisted throughout nearly a century of Western media.

Before being able to explore in depth the frontier-adventure story, it is important to understand the nineteenth-century revolution in print media that allowed the genre to flourish. Though briefly acknowledged in the previous chapter in relation to the travel journal's distribution, a more thorough examination is required to explain how the sheer breadth of media production in this century became possible. Technological innovations at the start of the nineteenth century and the continued innovations that persisted throughout drastically shifted the way Americans could interact with media. Of immediate importance was the invention of the steam press, which allowed easy automation of print, so much so that in 1814, London's *The Times* had called it "...the greatest improvement connected with printing, since the discovery of the art itself."[2] Though this was quite the claim, it does not sound so outlandish when one looks at the statistics, especially regarding the States. By 1830, the United States had around 900 large

newspapers in circulation, twice as many as Great Britain. Only a decade later, census records had found that the number had grown to 1,631, and by 1850 the number had more than doubled to 2,526, not even considering the publications of small-town weekly presses.[3] It is important to understand, however, that this was not achieved solely through the automation of the press. Between 1814 to 1850, the "penny press" may have allowed for the prices of print media to drop to around a penny, hence the name, but this was not only because of production costs being slashed. Advertisers capitalizing on this new medium contributed in large part; with active funding from advertisements, publishers were able to afford to lower the sales prices of their prints. This, combined with the United States' lack of taxation on the press, helped encourage this printing boom within the republic especially.[4] Additionally, with federal policy subsidizing newspapers through the postal system, the invention of machine-made paper, cheaper investment costs, and further innovations brought by the communications revolution, there was an ease of distribution that print media had never seen before.[5] Continuing throughout the century, the further construction of elaborate canal networks, railroads, and telegraph lines significantly streamlined the sharing of information and transportation of goods, which created a time ripe for true popular media to be sold to a new reading public.[6]

This revolution was what made the travel journals' impact on public culture possible, as naturally, print publications would not be limited to publishing newspapers and academic pursuits alone. The printing of entertainment media was just as much if not more so a function of the new marketplace. Before the penny press, books and publications were more expensive and oriented only toward the elite of society. The automation of the press had not only lowered the barrier for production but had also functionally democratized literary tastes; publishers began to appeal to the interests of the wider public, however sensational they may have been in nature.[7] In

addition to its role in expanding entertainment literature, visual art also became easier for the general population to view. The invention of the lithographic process near the start of the century allowed for abundant editions of prints to be reproduced from singular master copies which could be sold separately or included in the text of other printed works.[8] It was this new technology that made the exciting illustrations in the Carey edition of the Gass journals possible. Providing lithographic illustration was not only limited to visual aids and figures; explicitly fictional works received much the same treatment.

Clearly, several factors had aligned to create a suitable environment for widespread popular fiction to thrive. Existing within the timeframe of this revolution in print was a revolution in literature known as the American Renaissance. This was a movement that began roughly in the 1830s stretching to the end of the Civil War that could be thought of as an extension of the Romantic movement, bound tightly with Transcendentalism.[9] Though centered largely around New England writers, thematically the movement grappled with isolating a national spirit for the country as a whole; some of these authors turned toward the frontier to do just that. Both Washington Irving and Fenimore Cooper were considered part of this movement, and when it comes to the Western, Cooper's contributions to these ideas are of particular note.

While he is perhaps not as widely remembered today, there is one character in fiction who had become practically synonymous with the frontiersman; this titan left a great impact on American literature as a whole, and his influence can be felt throughout nearly every facet of fiction to do with the frontier ever since his introduction to the public.[10] James Fenimore Cooper and his creation, Natty Bumppo, are recurring names in the history of both the travel journal and frontier entertainment, and for good reason. Cooper's series *The Leatherstocking Tales* holds an immeasurable amount of significance regarding the formation of the tropes of the frontier at the

start of the nineteenth century, tropes that not only remained recognizable throughout the later iterations of the frontier-adventure but those that can be identified within modern, definitive Westerns. Of the five books in the *Leatherstocking* collection, however, only *The Prairie* takes place in territory added to the American republic by the Louisiana Purchase. Bumppo's adventures were works of historical fiction from the point of their conception, set nearly a century prior to the time in which Cooper resided; Leatherstocking himself braved the frontiers of the eighteenth century rather than those of the nineteenth, sharing a setting that was common among the paintings produced by the Hudson River School. Much like those artists, despite primarily producing works centering around the former frontier of New York, the context in which Cooper understood and experienced that frontier was through expansion into the West. With the first run of his series initially published between 1823 and 1841, these texts were created well after the Lewis and Clark, Pike, and Long expeditions had already been undertaken. Cooper was known to have directly borrowed from the Lewis and Clark narratives, using them not only as research for the setting of *The Prairie* but also incorporating moments whole from the journals into his work and embellishing them, such as making his characters hide under a buffalo skin to escape a prairie fire.[11] Travel journal inspiration was utilized throughout the series. It could be argued, at least in a metatextual sense, that the themes grappled with throughout *The Leatherstocking Tales* series as a whole were those reflective of America's relationship with the Louisiana Purchase, rather than those themes being limited to the singular book that took place within the territory. If the Western films of the 1970s have received thorough analysis as Vietnam allegories, then why can't *The Leatherstocking Tales* be seen as commentaries on the American West?[12] Fiction is very rarely solely about the events within the confines of the pages and is instead almost always reflective of the events and attitudes of the

world that authors lived in. This is hardly a radical assertion in media studies and it exists as a baseline understanding in media analysis, and its application is valuable here.[13]

What then could Cooper have been expressing about the Western frontier? Throughout the series, the frontier and the people who resided in it were directly linked, and although characterized as wild and dangerous, were presented in a manner that went beyond simple savagery or an obstacle to overcome. The specific way in which Cooper wrote those characters and their relationship to the environment extended these books beyond the typical Adventure novel's plot, as they engaged with concepts specific to American expansion and American Romantic schools of thought. Cooper, and those like him, could read into the wilderness a manifestation of God and the pinnacle state of the individual. "The lake seems made to let us get an insight into the noble forests…" says Leatherstocking, "...and land and water alike stand in the beauty of God's providence!"[14] The sublimity that the Hudson River School was so devoted to capturing in oils was much the same one that Cooper wished to convey through text; in both, one can detect the marks of the transcendentalists. Cooper, though not a Transcendentalist himself, still shared much in common with them in the way that he engaged with writing the frontier.[15] In many ways, Cooper presented an early glimpse into the ways that these concepts would come to be explored in later detail mid-century. The ideas of *Leatherstocking*, the Hudson River School, the American Renaissance, and Transcendentalism all generally engaged with a similar theme: a "softer" Manifest Destiny.

Manifest Destiny should be a familiar enough concept to those who have spent even a marginal amount of time studying American history. Originally coined in 1845 as a justification for the acquisition of the whole Oregon territory, this label eventually came to apply to the prevalent mindset of nineteenth-century America which called for the country's expansion across

the whole of the continent.[16] Though undeniably nationalistic and built upon a sense of entitled superiority, historians have debated if the idea could be essentialized to a rationalization for imperialism, an expression of nationalism, or a manifestation of racism, but Manifest Destiny cannot be so easily simplified.[17] Some, such as Thomas R. Hietla believe that the term is inadequate in conveying the racial and economic dynamics present in the movement; others such as Samuel J. Watson feel that too little has been said in terms of the active military arm of this imperial conquest.[18] This was an ideology that was so presently diffused throughout the country that different facets of it could be expressed in a multitude of ways. Many of these cultural facets have ended up labeled under the Young America Movement, which was both a political faction of the Democratic Party and a philosophical mindset between the 1840s to 1850s that centered around American exceptionalism, capitalism, and the search for an American identity.[19] Personally, I believe the discourse around Young America falls short of properly examining the themes in the artistic elements that fall under its label. Both the time period and the movement's typical scope are too limited. As Robert W. Johannsen wrote in *Manifest Destiny and Empire*, Manifest Destiny derived "its meaning and significance from the cultural environment of which it was a primary ingredient."[20] Johannsen stressed that the concepts and ideas behind this mindset had long existed before its coining in the 1840s and could be seen as the results of a combination of the mystical expressions of Romanticism with the consequences of technological and economic advancements in the century.

The role Romanticism had to play in Manifest Destiny is important to note; the artistic "arm" of this movement was capable of far more varied expression than one mode of unquestioning American dominance. Romantic expression of Manifest Destiny is just as foundational to the Western myth as the political side. The artwork produced during this time,

both visual and literary, could engage with Manifest Destiny in a way that could be both condemnation and reinforcement at once. Some Romantic works tied to the American Renaissance, the Hudson River School, and especially Transcendentalism were not uncritical expressions of American dominance. Rather than an approval of American industry or expansion, those in these movements marveled at natural landscapes and contemplated the elevation of the individual rather than the nation. However, these movements also could treat the conquest of America as a foregone conclusion, and the individual that could be actualized in the wilderness was always white. America's Manifest Destiny could on the one hand revel in the nation's push into the "wilderness" while its artists lamented the loss of the frontier. Certainly, there were parts of Romantic expression that could demonstrate American pride and superiority, but they also captured a pessimism about the march Westward; A few scholars have examined this conflicting presentation of Manifest Destiny in the arts.[21] Thomas Hietala uses as an example George Catlin, who rejected the ideas of Native American inferiority and policies of removal but also believed in the nation's expansion as part of a divine plan.[22] When it comes to the poet Walt Whitman, historian Henry Nash Smith has well analyzed Whitman's body of work as a champion of Manifest Destiny, and the different phases in how he engaged with the idea. In particular, he has a dissection of the final lines of an 1860 poem, a question reading "but where is what I started for, so long ago? And why is it yet unfound?[23] This search for meaning in the West, the place of American identity, the individual in the wilderness, and the tension between the frontier and settlement can be felt in many Westerns today. When it comes to the relationship between civilization and wilderness, this was a central theme in James Fenimore Cooper's work.

The divide between civilization and wilderness, as presented by Cooper, was a complex one where one side did not carry any significant virtue over the other; while in support of the

Republic, civilization's total conquest over the land was not ideal. Society could present a corruptive and destructive influence. In the very first of the Leatherstocking series, *The Pioneers*, Bumppo grapples directly with the despoiling of nature at the hands of white settlers and tries to assert his "savage dignity" in the face of society.[24] This opposition to the ways of contemporary American civilization was arguably a cornerstone of Leatherstocking's character. This form of Romanticism that assigned divinity to nature in this manner is not something that many would readily associate with the Western today or even the Westerns that emerged towards the end of the nineteenth century, by reframing the concept slightly we can see what elements persevere to become core to the themes of the genre. The relationship of man to the frontier, the duality between civilization and wilderness in both the land and the individual, and the ephemeral idea of a great "natural law" are themes present in varying degrees in nearly all Westerns; these themes can largely be attributed to the frontier-adventure. Cooper himself even directly acknowledges the presence of these ideas in certain editions of *The Deerslayer.* In his added preface, Cooper clearly outlined his intentions and the process he had behind creating the character of Bumppo.

Leatherstocking, the Deerslayer, the Trapper, Hawkeye, or whatever sobriquet Bumppo is assigned depending on the novel, has always been a character who embodied the frontiersman archetype. This archetype had already existed in oral traditions and folk legends, if one considers the early legends surrounding Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett, but it was Leatherstocking who truly typified it for the nineteenth century. Cooper denied any direct inspirations as the "original" model of Bumppo, but the influence of Boone and Crockett certainly informed his creation.[25] He simply refined the stories that came before into a singular defining character. Bumppo was a white man of the wilds who carried the supposed ideal combination of qualities that resulted

from the mixing of these two conditions, intentionally written as a moral figure that the audience was meant to admire. To Cooper, Leatherstocking was the imagined perfected state of the individual. As he explains, "He is too proud of his origin to sink into the condition of the wild Indian, and too much of a man of the woods to imbibe as much as was at all desirable from his friends and companions… to use his own language, his 'gifts' were 'white gifts' and he was not disposed to bring on them discredit."[26] Bumppo was intentionally written as a man liberated from the temptations that came with white civilization, free from greed and corruption, imbued with a masculinity honed from survival on the frontier, who maintained a theoretical dignity that placed him above the native.

The concept of an intrinsic white superiority was not an uncommon mode of thinking throughout the nineteenth century, but there was a divide between those who believed in the idea of a "noble savage" versus an animalistic one; Cooper aligned himself with the former. Bumppo was not notable for his Indian-killing abilities, but instead for his talent at emulating and befriending them while navigating a middle path where he could embody the aspects of the wilderness without dipping into savagery himself. He may have bonded with other white men through the quickness of his aim and the skill of the hunt, but he never delighted in killing. Hawkeye kept no "plunder," and instead only hunted for his own sustenance. He knew nature so intimately that he could distinguish from the faintest sounds the hoof steps of buffalo or riders and saw good in each leaf and every mountain top. Bumppo wandered alone, but when he chose to spend his time with society, he brought to them this wisdom that he had learned, and in essence brought this wisdom to the reader as well; at least, that seemed to be what Cooper had intended.[27]

We have seen this romanticized ideal replicated, critiqued, dissected, and reconstructed throughout several Westerns in recent memory. In the protagonist of *Shane,* we see a skilled gunman who wants little more than to be left alone, returning to violence only when forced. In Owen Wister's *The Virginian,* the titular character is a skilled cowboy who, while a crack shot, displays admirable restraint until his nemesis Trampas forces his hand. For examples of this type of character who exist outside of society, one only has to turn to outlaw characters such as John Marson and Arthur Morgan of the *Red Dead Redemption* franchise; both may be at their best outside of civilization, but they still display moral character that elevates them above the others in their gang. When simplified, it comes to a core theme of the Western; it has been an enduring and recurring concept that the West presents a crucible where man can find himself distilled to his most elevated state- or his basest. In the Western, existing at all in the frontier is transformative in nature. Presented as a place separate from the confining rules and the support of society, stories on the frontier tend to imply that those strong enough to venture into a place without the structure of civilization position themselves to reap the benefits of exerting one's pure will. *The Prairie* draws attention to a more specific facet of this idea where the dichotomy of civilization and wilderness is directly linked to law and lawlessness; this is something that may be a little more familiar to consumers of the modern Western over more abstract ideas of transcendental discovery. Cooper writes a conversation between the Trapper and a young emigrant woman as such:

> "Why then do you venture in a place where none but the strong should come?" he demanded. "Did you not know that, when you crossed the big river, you left a friend behind you that is always bound to look to the young and feeble, like yourself."
> "Of whom do you speak?"
> "The law- 'tis bad to have it, but, I sometimes think, it is worse to be entirely without it. Age and weakness have brought me to feel such weakness, at times. Yes- yes, the law is needed, when such as have not the gifts of strength and wisdom are to be taken care of."[28]

And again, in a conversation between a squatter and the Trapper:

> "...I have come, old man, into these districts because I found the law sitting too tight upon me, and am not overly fond of neighbors who can't settle a dispute without troubling a justice and twelve men; but I didn't come to be robb'd of my plunder, and then to say thank'ee to the man who did it!"
> "He, who ventures far into the prairies, must abide by the ways of its owners."
> "Owners!" echoed the squatter, "I am as rightful an owner of the land I stand on, as any governor in the States! Can you tell me, stranger, where the law or the reason, is to be found, which says that one man shall have a section, or a town, or perhaps a county to his use, and another have to beg for earth to make his grave in? This is not nature, and I deny that it is law. That is, your legal law."
> "I cannot say you are wrong," returned the trapper, whose opinions on this important topic, though drawn from very different premises, were in singular accordance with those of his companion, "and I have often thought and said as much, when and where I have believed my voice could be heard…"[29]

In both *The Leatherstocking Tales*, in frontier adventures like it, and in the Western, there exists the concept of natural law and the law of civilization. These are separate and often in conflict with one another, but they both exist to fulfill the needs of different types of people. The strong who survive in the frontier can survive outside of the law of civilization, and therefore can forge their own in accordance with their natural law. Implicitly, this function is often shown as more effective than governmental law, or in ways portrayed as an inevitability because of the isolation of the frontier. Personal codes of conduct are frequently legitimized as natural and a necessity for achieving justice. In *The Leatherstocking Tales*, given his status as the moral center of the work, Bumppo's endorsement of the strong man's natural law is Cooper's endorsement. Even if Cooper's ideas on Manifest Destiny and the dominance of America across the frontier are somewhat tempered, the sentiment of the frontiersman's romantic natural law and the tension between civilization and the wilderness draw from the same well. The romantic frontier adventure and fawning transcendental portraits are still a justification for conquest, only that they

find in the West the potential for white self-actualization rather than capital. Leatherstocking's natural law is not all too different from the violent law of the gunslinger-cowboy.

Of course, Cooper was not the only individual writing about the West in the early nineteenth century, he was simply one of the most notable. A culture of literature that focused on the West had been steadily building alongside the travel journal, and though still in its infancy, it was becoming enough of a niche to attract some attention as a particular categorization of literature. While this categorization had more to do with the setting than a thematic grouping, this could still be considered a proto-Western genre of sorts. In 1832, the first literary periodical west of Ohio, *The Illinois Monthly Magazine,* had rebranded to become *The Western Monthly Magazine*.[30] With contents curated by founder James Hall, this magazine centered entirely around collecting poetry, short stories, news, advice, and essays all pertaining to anything to do with the region; it was not Western media as in the modern Western, but it was Western media in the geographical sense. Hall was an accomplished writer of fiction and an influence on the frontier genre in his own right, but the founding and success of the *Western Monthly* indicated that there was a larger pool of talent interested in the subject as well as a belief held by its contributors that the relevance of the West would only grow stronger with time. As was expressed in a message to the reader that prefaced the very first issue, the approach of this publication was one not only meant to enrich America culturally through exploring the facets of the West but to preserve Western history for the future historian; writing Western fiction served as a patriotic effort.[31] Prior to even the coining of Manifest Destiny there was a consideration as to America's expansion into the West serving as a point of pride and national identity as was seen echoed by the *Leatherstocking* series and works like it that engaged in Western-themed literature from the start of the century towards the 1860s.

Despite this 'noble' sentiment, this sort of literature still tended to cater to the sensational. In the decades following the first travel journals, content surrounding the West steadily increased on an almost exponential curve around mid-century. Alongside volumes of exaggerated pioneer biographies, writers of this period were, as historian Daryl Jones argues, churning out poorly written, melodramatic, and highly derivative works about the West, as evidenced by the success of titles such as John Esten Cooke's *Leatherstocking and Silk* (no relation to Cooper).[32] There was no shortage of Western-themed stories, and no want for an audience either. Media consumption in general was on the rise. Considering the technological advancements in both printing and distribution, it was a ripe time for popular media to be sold to a new reading public. As was recorded for the first time in the 1840 census, the general population of Americans over 20 had an illiteracy rate of 22%, with the white population claiming only 9%; though the surveying process could be considered questionable by modern census standards, it was still indicative of a significant potential audience.[33] Between the 1840s and 1890s, popular fictional narratives were primarily circulated in three major forms: the story paper, dime novel, and the cheap library, all roughly variations on the same concept. Of these, the dime novel is where our focus lies.

The phenomenon of the dime novel is a fascinating chapter in media history on its own, but it is of particular interest in relation to the history of the Western; the studies of each subject are inseparably linked. Even if frequently excluded from the Western lineage in media studies centered around film, there is no shortage of historians who would dub many of these dime adventures Westerns, nor are there many who would deny them the categorization if pushed on the subject. Especially towards the end of the century, dime novels present a point in the development of this media where they could be easily termed a Western in retrospect. With the

dime novel, it is not much a matter of *if* they are Westerns, but instead that their importance tends to be overlooked. These were short stories that were typically thrilling, simplistic ephemera made for quick and easy consumption; mass-produced and cheap to purchase, they were not particularly notable or high concept works of literature, but they were never intended to be. Regardless of their mediocrity and status as a means of profit generation rather than artistic expression, they are still an essential part of understanding the history of the Western genre. From their genesis, some of the most popular subjects that they explored were tales of the frontier, pioneers, Indians, and Indian fighting; the very 'first' dime novel published under that label happened to fall under this category.[34] The novel in question was Beadle and Adam's *Maleska: The Indian Wife of the White Hunter;* the title alone gives one a good idea of the contents. Within the first few months after its publication, *Maleska* sold approximately 65,000 copies; Beadle and Adams had a hit, and would maintain that stride until near the end of the century.[35] As a testament to their success in defining a new medium, the term 'dime novel' in fact is a genericization of the Beadle and Adams releases' brand name.

Whether 'official' dime novels or not, this medium of literature began featuring clever, crack-shot, frontiersmen who reigned as popular heroes, bearing generic rugged names such as Old Bull's Eye, Scouting Dave, and Old Rube who all existed in that romanticized state between wilderness and civilization. Unsurprisingly, real public figures were quickly absorbed into this mode of storytelling, used almost as readily available stock characters who were altered to suit the dominant archetype of the frontier hero. *Leatherstocking's* inspirations of Boone and Crockett were revived in the mold of Bumppo, with Timothy Flint's best-selling 1833 *Biographical Memoir of Daniel Boone* kicking off a reinvention of the man that best suited the demands for the frontiersman character.[36] Soon, the fictionalized Boone began to star in his own dime novel

adventures, or as a guest character to others, featuring in titles such as *The Backwoods Brothers, The Backwoods Belle, The Wood King, The Big Hunter, The Wolf Demon,* and countless more. Kit Carson was not free from the Leatherstocking treatment either, with first biographers working to transform him into a morally elevated, righteous icon; he was a man, who as one of these writers had put it, "...enjoyed, above all things else, the communings of his own spirit with the silence, the solitude, and the grandeur, with which God has invested the illimitable wilderness."[37] Carson would then go on to appear in entirely new sets of fictional adventures, some originating from those who claimed to have once been in his band of trappers, and others who did away with the pretense of authenticity entirely as to produce ever more sensational dime novel stories. In these dime novels, he became "...famous hunter and adventurer of the Great West… leader of Frémont's celebrated expedition- Kit Carson! The hero of prairie and forest, the prince of backwoodsmen…" which only swelled his myth further.[38] The Leatherstocking mode of frontiersman, however, was not to last. It is perhaps through these "stock characters" of Boone and Carson that we can most easily see the growing divide in the portrayal of the hero of the West.

The romanticized frontiersman version of Carson competed with yet another version of his character that was published throughout the nineteenth century. There were two archetypes of the frontier hero which seemed to have cyclically warred with each other for dominance over decades of Western media history. This division seemed to hinge, at least initially, upon the reigning views white Americans held of Native Americans. Though both major types of heroes tended to represent a 'superior' man, they diverged where one was portrayed as a friend to the Indians who drew his strength from understanding the natural world, whereas the other was an Indian killer who used his power to battle for dominance over the land. In that same vein, the

way the novels portrayed the Native Americans split along the different facets of the frontier hero. In the dime novel, there were typically three paths that depictions of Native Americans could take. In one, there was the route of the "noble savage," in which Native Americans were portrayed as a spiritual and honorable people despite their "nature". The second route was to simply depict entire tribes as bloodthirsty, vicious animals. The third option was an alternative to both, though more a variant of the "noble savage" trope; a sharp divide was created between "good Indians" and "bad Indians," though both sides were flat and stereotypical. Stories about the "good" frequently fell into paternalistic white-savior narratives, where "bad Indians" featured as easy stock villainous characters that could be slaughtered mercilessly to generate excitement. The critiques so often leveled at the Classic Westerns of the 1960s in their stereotypical and offensive depictions of American Indians were hardly pointing out anything new to the genre; the dime novel exploited these ideas to the extreme generations ago. The tropes that would come to plague the cinematic Western genre had already been well-established in the years before Hollywood.

The frontiersman story that followed in the style of Leatherstocking typically took the noble savage route, but we can see examples of how the expressly negative portrayals manifested in these works as well. *The Leatherstocking Tales* themselves frequently engaged with the idea of good and bad natives, in which those categorized as good generally aligned with whatever benefited the white characters; on occasion, they'd be portrayed sympathetically as victims to white civilization. The faults of Americans were rarely ever more than vaguely gestured at. Few solutions were ever offered outside of accepting the new order of the world while lamenting the loss of the old one or simply standing by to wait for the actions of compassionate whites. To take any other actions outside of these would be too far outside of the simplistic formulas that

appealed to the masses. Where “the Pawnee and white men are brothers,” the Sioux were instead a “band of beings who resembled demons rather than men.”[39] Cooper’s Native Americans generally were a mystical people with a deep understanding of the earth, made for loyal friends, and possessed almost supernatural abilities when it came to wilderness survival, but were still portrayed as a base, superstitious, and susceptible to instinctual drives. Though Cooper and his like seemed to believe that Native Americans could be ‘improved’ by the influence of Christianization, there still seemed to be a notion that there was something innately flawed with the race as a whole. Regardless of the inability or honor assigned to a tribe, they were still considered to be inferior beings. In *The Prairie,* Cooper details his thoughts in a note, out of character, about ‘half-breeds’ which he defined as men born of Indian women by white fathers. As he states, “this race has much the depravity of civilization without the virtues of the “savage"; given that Cooper considers the mixing of blood to produce the worst of both races, regardless of socialization, it seems that per this thought process inferiority was considered genetic- regardless of Indian honor.[40] Additionally, *The Prairie,* despite showing some consideration in regards to white society’s abuse of tribal nations, ultimately portrays white intervention as a benefit, operating off of the idea that Indians had once dwelt in hostility with one another in generational feuds before the American republic restored peace to the land. There is meager lip service paid to the realities of exploitation, in the form of a question posed by a chief. “The earth is very large…” he says, “...why can’t the children of my great white father never find room on it?”[41] This question is never sufficiently answered by any of the characters, nor Leatherstocking himself. Our hero dodges the question when he replies, insisting that the white man and the native are friends.

When moving to the dime novel, the pattern displayed is much the same. Beadle and Adam's first dime novel, *Maleska*, explicitly condemns bigotry and is almost entirely centered around the injustices done to the main character by a white civilization that rejects her. Despite being in large part about the prejudices white people hold against Native Americans, it generally reaffirms stereotypes and treats Maleska's fate as an inevitable tragedy rather than a state manufactured by society. Gentle Maleska is shown to be rejected and outcast from her own tribe as well because of their (fictional) barbarous traditions; sympathetic characters such as Maleska and the chief subvert their culture rather than acting as representatives of it. Even then, they are portrayed as victims of issues that stem from their blood. Maleska herself remains wild and simplistic, whereas her son William, despite being raised as a white man and having no contact with the cultural heritage of his mother, is still prone to fits of anger and impulsivity. Maleska only finds peace by abandoning her tribe but living on the edges of civilization as a hermit that just barely interacts with it, and her only salvation comes in Christ as she knows that she will be reunited with her white husband in the afterlife. The miserable end of both characters leaves behind an unfortunate implication that the mixing of races and cultures is doomed to failure, at least on the side of the Native Americans. In the dime novel, the white frontiersman was free to enjoy the boons of the wild, but civilization could never truly save the native. Even then, dime novels would not always be this generous towards the portrayal of Native Americans.

Kit Carson, whom his biographers practically cast as Natty Bumppo, stood in stark contrast to the popular Kit Carson of the dime novel. Beginning with Charles Averill's 1849 *Kit Carson, The Prince of the Gold Hunters,* and continuing through several Beadle and Adams publications, a trend emerged of Carson manifesting as an Indian-fighting gunman. The mountain man explorer version of Carson did not wholly dominate his fictional persona; instead,

the Carson of the Civil War and of Navajo removal was at the forefront. As Henry Nash Smith points out in *Virgin Land*, these new stories, though owing to the standardized elements set by Cooper, emphasized Carson's prowess and courage without any of the mystical or genteel elements that previously defined the frontiersman figure.[42] Likewise, Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett were modified from philosophical frontiersmen to men who could hardly last five pages without being drenched in blood; their legacies were modified to suit what the American public wished to read about, and violence was certainly the easiest to sell. Once real individuals, now characters, Boone, Crockett, and Carson could be molded into the reigning ideal of the leading man up until they lost ground to figures such as Buffalo Bill, whose flashy characteristics required significantly fewer modifications.[43] Which version of the fictionalized man that Carson himself best resembled is still a subject highly up for debate among historians, but it is irrefutable that the icon Carson took on a life of his own that easily overshadowed his inspiration. The meeting between the real Kit Carson and the dime novel Carson was hardly a pleasant one. A moment is recounted in his autobiography, where Carson joined in a party arranged for the rescue of a Mrs. Ann White from a band of Utes and Apaches; they, unfortunately, arrived too late. "In camp was found a book, the first of the kind I had ever seen, in which I was made a great hero, slaying Indians by the hundred and I have often thought that as Mrs. White would read the same and knowing that I lived near, she would pray for my appearance and that she might be saved."[44] Reality and Carson had significantly diverged, more than once. Between the enlightened frontiersman and the rip-roaring Indian killer, it was the latter that would dominate going forward. The Western did not require the frontiersman himself to thrive, only the aspects that made him appealing which could easily be repurposed. The tropes this model established were here to stay, and even as the frontiersman's relevance faded the

characteristics the dime novel assigned to him persevered in the gunslinger, cowboy, and outlaw hero.

If one's goal is to examine the genre of the Western, what then, was the purpose of such emphasis on literature that is widely considered to be a separate genre of its own? As was hopefully demonstrated by outlining the relevant tropes of the frontier-adventure story and the diverging path of the frontiersman-hero throughout media, the lines between the frontier genre and the Western genre are far blurrier than may first appear. Additionally, it must be said that the distinction of these genres is something applied retroactively and that this divide was not necessarily categorized the way that it is now. Historically, and even in historiography, some individuals have argued to place the frontier adventure as a part of the American West and the Western- the dime novel, even more so.

As evidenced by publications such as the *Western Monthly Magazine,* there were already well-recognizable groupings of similar plots, characters, and conventions being circulated in the early nineteenth century, to the point that people were already taking note of tired and reused tropes that were plaguing the fledgling genre. Both Daryl Jones and Clarence Gohdes with their studies in 1978 and 1965, respectively, point to an 1858 speech given by William T. Coggeshall as one of the first attempts to define the Western as a genre. As early as 1858 in *The Protective Policy in Literature: A Discourse on the Social and Moral Advantages of the Cultivation of Local Literature*, the popular Western was summed up as follows: "Tomahawks and wigwams, sharp-shooting and hard fights, log cabins, rough speech, dare-devil boldness, bear-hunting and corn-husking, prairie flowers, bandits, lynch-law and no-law-at-all miscellaneously mixed into '25 cents novels', printed on poor paper and stitched between yellow covers, represent the popular idea of Western Literature."[45] The claims that many historians today occasionally

reference about the appearance of the "Western" as a genre category first featured in an article in the 1912 *Moving Picture World* magazine are applicable only to the world of film more than to the whole of the genre. Writing about the West clearly had already developed a defined form and was being termed Western Literature, but despite this, the larger body of historiography of the Western genre has been inconsistent about what is featured within and what parts of Western media are worth touching on. As established, most modern discussions of the Western typically begin with *The Great Train Robbery* and film history; there still exists the understanding that the traditions of the genre had already been cemented before the screen, but few ever care to elaborate. The precursor to the film Western that is given the most attention is of course, the dime novel, but even its relevance was up for some debate until more relatively recent studies.

Daryl Jones argues that those who study the early Western have concentrated efforts almost exclusively on works before 1860, then skip forward to *The Virginian* and all other works occurring after 1902, skipping the period of the dime novel entirely.[46] Written in 1978, Jones' *The Dime Novel Western* terms the period between 1860 and 1900 'the forgotten era', believing that the dime novel which "indisputably, is a Western," goes underrepresented largely because of their status as cheap ephemera and literary mediocrity.[47] Jones points out that before the 1950 publication of Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* that scholars hadn't even begun to consider the relevance of the dime novel as historical documents- and even then media studies about the Western itself hardly touched on them.[48] Jones and his contemporaries' attempts to bring the dime novel Western to light must have been successful, as just under a decade later Michael Denning in *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America* would go on to lament the excessive association between the dime novel and the Western. Denning, in contrast, believes the dime novel to "conjure powerful

images in American culture" tied to "tales of the west in the adventures of Buffalo Bill and Deadwood Dick", and feels that the cultural focus on the Western overshadows greatly the genres of romance and mystery that too made their home in the medium.[49] In all fairness, while the Beadle and Adams publications were not the end-all-be-all of the dime novel medium as a whole, they were largely dominated by Westerns despite Denning's reservations. When a survey was undertaken of the contents of the collection, Philip Durham found that nearly three-fourths of them were about the frontier, and over half of them centered around the trans-Mississippi West.[50] The dime novel Western was a ubiquitous category for a reason. Despite this, media studies still tend to be inconsistent in the attention paid to the dime novel as a precursor, or as an example of Western fiction itself.

If one forgives the Wikipedia mention, as of 2022, the page for "The Western (genre)" contains no mention of the dime novel or the frontier adventure underneath the "History" subsection, beginning instead with Edison's silent film recordings of Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. The "Literature" subsection makes reference to *The Virginian* as the first of the Western.[51] When looking at the page for "Western fiction" as linked from the literature section, in the pre-1850 section there is singularly mentioned *The Leatherstocking Tales*, and in the 1850s-1900s section only four total sentences about the dime novel.[52] Regardless of the website's scholarly merit, Wikipedia easily represents broad public conceptions of history, and offers potentially the most up-to-date measure of what the common beliefs about history are. Even Steven McVeigh's *The American Western*, for what a commendable source it is as an exploration of the genre's historical influences, ignores nearly all popular literature of the nineteenth-century save for an honorable mention of Bumppo, again singling out *The Virginian* as the first Western there was. McVeigh's arguments for excluding *Leatherstocking* and many other works in part

come down to the geographical approach of the setting in the New York frontier. However, this is a point that could be easily countered; in pop culture, there exist modern and widely accepted subgenres of the Western such as the Space-Western, and in a historical sense the Turnerian mode of thinking about the West requires only that the frontier exist. It is already a contentious discussion among historians how to classify the West, be it place or process, and should we land on the side of process as many Westerns tend to do, then it should not be difficult to include *Leatherstocking* and the frontier novels among them. While in *The American Western* Stephen McVeigh notes that "Western literature is as slippery a term as it is elastic," his proposal of dividing literary categories on an axis from "popular" to "serious" being a determinant for what is worthy of analysis, resembles closely Jones' critique of how frequently scholars exclude the dime novel.[53] McVeigh does exactly this in his comprehensive study on the American Western. To dismiss an entire century of literature, popular literature at that, simply because it was poorly written, lacked 'intellectual' themes, or did not draw praise from critics, I believe to be folly. Thematically, the frontier-adventure novel and the frontier dime novel contained elements strikingly similar to what we would term Westerns today, and by all means, seemed to be considered to be part of a genre much like it by those who existed within the nineteenth century. Why, of all pieces of West-centered media that were created, is *The Virginian* held as the Western standard?

Chapter IV

THE VIRGINIAN, THE COWBOY, AND THE “FIRST” WESTERN

When it comes to identifying the “first Western” among laymen and those who discuss the genre in countless online articles, the answers tend to first go to the film *The Great Train Robbery*, and on rare occasions, they refer to short recordings made by Thomas Edison. This choice, as has already been discussed, is a particularly limited view of the Western and confines the genre to the medium of film alone. Though this may perhaps be a new phenomenon of the digital age, it is still a widespread enough belief to choke off most other media from these discussions. In previous decades, however, people seemed to understand that books were an essential part of the Western. If we ask what was the “first" Western if we consider books, we might get a different answer. In narrowing the scope of the question to that of Western literature, the number of media in consideration is paradoxically broadened, and the answer to “what is the first Western?” instead consistently shifts to Owen Wister’s *The Virginian*. Spaced between one another by only a year, *The Great Train Robbery* and *The Virginian* were released in 1903 and 1902 respectively; these choices give the impression that this minute distinction indicates that the start of the twentieth century served as the moment of the birth of the Western. *The Virginian*, after all, is frequently proposed as the gold standard when it comes to the first true work of its kind. Nearly every resource that studies the genre in a way that does not exclude non-film media finds it essential to at least reference the work, or even go as far as to feature it heavily in the analysis. Even in the study of dime novels allusions are made to *The Virginian*, and it is so frequently credited with the creation of many tropes of the Western, including that of the cowboy

hero, that its place as the “first” Western goes unquestioned. This is true at least in the public sphere, which will be covered in greater detail later in this chapter.

With such a widespread acceptance of the idea that *The Virginian* is the first Western, one would assume that there is a solid foundation for why it is considered the genre-definer. In recent years, however, as is natural in the progression of historiography, it has become clear that this is not so much of a unanimously accepted or well-founded position as it first appears. With the context of the pop-culture Western's evolution from the Classic to Revisionist broadening the definition of what audience standards consider to be a Western, it is perhaps valuable to revisit the arguments initially made that place *The Virginian* as the original template, rather than simply accepting its place in the history of the Western genre as immutable fact. There is a decent argument for the inclusion of dime novel fiction in Western canon. What are the exact qualities that make *The Virginian* so uniquely Western compared to a *Beadle and Adams*? Why does *The Virginian* present the earliest cutoff for Western fiction, and is it a distinction that should be maintained in media analysis going forward?

Owen Wister's *The Virginian: A Horseman of the Plains* was conceived of as a series of connected episodes exploring the life of the titular Virginian, recounted by a questionably omniscient narrator who is meant to be a friend of the central figure cowpoke. If one is familiar with the approach Conan Doyle used in Dr. Watson to Sherlock Holmes, then it's easy enough to understand the narrative framing device of the audience surrogate that is employed in *The Virginian*. Through this unnamed Easterner, questions could be posed to the Virginian directly, in which he could explain the ways of the West, his lifestyle, and introduce concepts that otherwise could not be brought up naturally within the story. The Virginian encountered elements that would become staples of the Hollywood Western, such as Indian attacks, wrangling horses,

playing cards, and even having a shootout against a dastardly rival. Through the Eastern "tenderfoot's" narration, a story of Western values, manhood, and romance is slowly laid out for the audience, at least through the lens through which Wister understood it.

Owen Wister had always maintained a fascination with Wyoming's land and people, having penned not only short stories based on the region but also through his early visits when he kept detailed notes of his experiences. He had once written that he had always struggled to keep a diary save for in the cases of his Western expeditions, where he kept journals full of faithful details about "pack horses, camps in the mountains, camps in the sage-brush, nights in town, cards with cavalry officers, meals with cowpunchers, round-ups, scenery, the Yellowstone Park, trout fishing, hunting with Indians, shooting antelope, white tail deer, black tail deer, elk, ear, mountain sheep- and missing these same animals."[1] These details of Wyoming's scenic trappings proved to be useful in the writing of Western fiction, but at the time of taking these notes, Wister stated he had no real purpose in doing so, with no grand aim to actually write a Western novel. These records, however, were reflective of his interests and what was to come, and as Wister put it, "...was driving Wyoming into my blood and marrow, fixing it there."[2] Despite not particularly aiming to write any Western fiction, Wister did spend a great deal of time thinking about the subject. Both he and his colleagues often lamented what they perceived to be a lack of any serious authors of Western fiction; it was on his fifth visit to Wyoming in 1891 that Wister finally decided to remedy that problem himself by penning *Hank's Woman* and *How Lin McLean Went East*. These works were then revised and revisited in combination with a few of his other short stories, *Balaam and Pedro* and *Em'ly*, through which a rough outline of the Virginian character had started to take form.[3] Wister's exploration into Western writing did not begin with *The*

Virginian; rather, it seemed that *The Virginian* had unknowingly become the final culmination of his earlier forays into the genre.

It was only with the urging of one of his close friends, Theodore Roosevelt, that Wister finally took the writing of *The Virginian* seriously. Between several letters of correspondence, Roosevelt discussed his enjoyment in reading Wister's previous stories and praised the elements of realism provided in them in contrast to the average fare of sage-brush literature. Roosevelt stated, "...you have done for the plainsmen and mountain men, the soldiers, frontiersmen, and Indians what nobody else but Bret Harte and Kipling could have done, and neither of them have sufficient knowledge to enable them to do it even had they wished."[4] Quite high praise, especially as Roosevelt himself was no stranger to the world that he described in his letter. The president known for his Rough Riders not only spent time "roughing it" himself on the frontier, but he was a historian of the West long before that; some scholars even go as far as to credit him as the first American writer to take the cowboy seriously.[5] His praise of Wister, therefore, came with some gravity. He too believed that there was a need for a piece of literature that would finally, accurately, portray the spirit of the West and that this task carried a great amount of importance. With Roosevelt's critiques and affirmations in his pocket and Wyoming on his mind, Wister completed *The Virginian*, and first published it in 1902 headed by a brief dedication to the 26th president himself.

Though the last cowboy novel that Wister would ever write, *The Virginian* proved to be a phenomenon as a standalone work. For at least six months after its release, *The Virginian* was a bestseller, performing highly both financially and critically. As Orwin Rush detailed in "Fifty Years of *The Virginian*", to say the novel was popular would be a vast understatement. In the first eight months, it was reprinted fifteen times, thirty-eight times by 1911, and sold widely both in

America and abroad.[6] Within two years after its publication, a dramatization opened on Broadway that ran for a decade. *The Virginian* then took to the screen in the medium of film, both silent and talking.[7] Those more familiar with the Classic Westerns of Hollywood may even recognize the character from the 1962 NBC television series starring James Drury, notable for being the third longest-running Western TV program, just behind *Bonanza* and *Gunsmoke*.[8] Having left such an impressive mark on the Western genre, it does seem only natural that scholars sought to explore the work's historical and cultural relevance, and that it would be considered a titan among its peers.

Finding the source of the original claim of *The Virginian*'s "first" status in media history scholarship has proven difficult. The assertion that *The Virginian* presents the first Western is one that finds itself repeated as a fact that warrants no further explanation or attribution; it is simply accepted as a baseline truth to the genre in places where this claim appears. As with ideas that exist in the pop-cultural space, information is often disseminated without citation. Listings on Amazon, Biblio, and AbeBooks frequently tout the book as the "seminal" or "first true" Western as part of its key selling points in their summary blurbs, with Barnes and Noble's listing going as far as to subtitle it "The First Cowboy Novel Set in the Wild West."[9] Caveats to this uniform claim may include a brief mention of the dime novel or an increased emphasis on the cowboy aspects of the story, but essentially the importance placed on *The Virginian* as the genesis of the Western remains the same. These, of course, are not scholarly sources and instead are simply reflective of the current state of public understanding on the topic today. Interestingly, in the realm of scholarly discourse, arguments and assertions surrounding the importance of *The Virginian* as the first Western typically follow the rise of the Western in film media, chronologically speaking. Certainly, there had always been critical discussions in the decades

after the novel's publishing that lauded Wister's creation as a cultural cornerstone; there is an excellent collection arranged on behalf of the *Bibliographical Society of America* by their editor Earle F. Walbridge of critical assessments of *The Virginian* from 1902 onwards that highlighted the growing discussion surrounding the novel. However, it does seem to be that it was not until around the 1950s that the claim of "first" began to enter the discourse on *The Virginian*. It appears as if it coincided with the rise of Hollywood Westerns that the reflection of the novel's status as the original model for the genre began in all earnestness.

N. Orwin Rush's piece celebrating the 50-year anniversary of the work explored the circumstances behind the writing of *The Virginian*, its central character, the story's geography, and appeal to the American public. Rush proudly declared that it had "...faithfully represented the West," and "...is a classic of American fiction and American life," though he stopped short of asserting that the novel was the first of its kind.[10] Only a year prior, in an introduction to a 1951 reprinted edition of *The Virginian*, novelist Struthers Burt credited Wister as "the first to put that most popular of all our folk-heroes, the American cowboy, into fiction." Burt stated that though many of these tropes are laughably familiar to modern audiences, at the time, "*The Virginian* was considered an extremely daring novel."[11] Though this preface was mostly a rumination on authorship, Wister, and Burt's personal interaction with him, Burt did point out that the climate surrounding the novel's publishing made for fertile ground for its success. By 1890, the "closure" of the frontier made the topic ripe for imagined nostalgia, the Spanish-American war had in part boosted an increase in national pride an interest in national identity, and a growing discontent against materialism and the "tyranny of wealth" had been rising in a way that made the simplicity and individualism of the cowboy ranch-life ever more appealing.[12] These are certainly

good explanations for the appeal and staying power of *The Virginian,* but as an argument as to why this made the novel unique among its peers, it is somewhat wanting.

Perhaps one of the earliest claims as to *The Virginian*'s status as the genre-defining Western comes from historian and prominent essayist Bernard DeVoto. As a notable scholar with a focus on the history of the American West and a recipient of the Pulitzer Prize for History in 1948, DeVoto provides an analysis of *The Virginian* that is worth examining, especially with the context of his being capable of great influence in his field. Published in his 1995 *Harper's* column, "The Easy Chair," *Birth of an Art,* DeVoto assigns most of the credit for the Western's creation to Wister, and not necessarily in the most positive light. As DeVoto puts it, "It is the climax of the fantasy that has kept the cowboy story from becoming serious fiction. No doubt it is implicit in the myth of the Old West and somebody else would have invented it if Owen Wister hadn't. But he did invent it and the literary historian can trace it to a simple caste snobbery."[13] The Western, as characterized by DeVoto, was a flat genre with simplified "good guys" and "bad guys" that sprung from characterizations and tropes within *The Virginian*, that can, in turn, be traced back historically to the Johnson County War of 1892; in fact, he is certain that nearly every Western since has had some connection to it.[14] This class conflict between wealthy cattlemen' hired guns and Johnson County's small ranchers was an incident in Wyoming's history whose violence warranted the intervention of the military, and had even at the time attracted the sensational eye of the media; it's understandable that DeVoto drew the connection. At the time of DeVoto's essay, *Birth of an Art*, fictional works in circulation such as *The Rustler (1949), Shane*, and *True Grit (1969)* had also drawn inspiration from the event, which certainly could have bolstered DeVoto's assertion that the Western owed its tropes and very birth to the Johnson County War and *The Virginian* both. It was not an uncommon thought amongst

historians that the event provided the historical basis for depictions of the West as violent, wild space, so DeVoto was not alone in this sentiment, but was he correct?[15] As an event taking place in the 1890s, the Johnson County War hardly resides within the typically accepted time frame of the "Wild West", nor does its scope encompass all other Western staples. While it was certainly influential, inspiring not only *The Virginian,* but also the novel *Shane* and film *Heaven's Gate (1980)*, the Johnson County War served as only one of many possible Western stories, and a late example at that.

DeVoto argued that the character of the Virginian provided the template for the Western hero, a "cowpoke righting wrongs, doing justice, avenging injury, triumphing over perils, eradicating evil, and shooting people. Shooting bad people. Shooting Johnson county 'rustlers'; that is, quite uncultivated persons who have small land-holdings and small herds."[16] Additionally, the Virginian makes for an excellent distillation of the *type* of cowboy protagonist, visually. His belief was that Wister was writing apologia for these Gentleman cattlemen by presenting their ideals packaged in the form of a working-class hero who prioritized their interests above those of his kin; the Virginian was a humble man of good manners and natural justice, but his preference for peace came in the form of maintaining capitalist order. DeVoto's argument that this character set the standard followed by Westerns to come, regardless of the inclusion of the class commentary angle, is echoed in many other scholarly analyses of *The Virginian*. Neal Lambert carried forward the analysis of Wister's fictional hero, though to a much less critical degree than DeVoto. Rather than portraying the Virginian as a vessel for the interests of cattlemen placed in a cowboy mold, he saw the character as a unique combination of contradictory value systems as he operated as both frontiersman and gentleman, and that "with this figure, Wister created a cultural symbol that involved both our notions about a beneficent wilderness and our commitment to the

values of civilization, and by articulating the important part of his own and his country's imagination, Wister reached the level of myth."[17] Lambert briefly made some reference to Leatherstocking when it came to this idea, but he spoke of *The Virginian* as if it was the ultimate distillation of the core concept, with Bumppo's earlier demonstrations of those traits minimized. Still, we come again to this civilization-wilderness, Eastern-Western dichotomy as central to the Western. Lambert certainly seemed to believe so, determining it to be at the center of *The Virginian* and the subsequent Western hero, where the Virginian was the positive elements of each side of the dichotomy unified in one man, committed to a personal code of virtue rather than the law, and what it means to "be a man".[18] Given that Lambert's article "Owen Wister's Virginian" was published in 1971, it made sense that he valued these characteristics in a setting, in a cowboy, and in a Western. Lambert writes with the context of having years of Classic Hollywood Westerns to reference, which admittedly generally follow the same path as *The Virginian* when it comes to their heroes. By the point of historian Daryl Jones'critiques about the way the Western was studied in *The Dime Novel Western*, it seemed that there was already a solid block of "interpreters who credit Wister's *The Virginian* with resurrecting the Western from the murky realm of sub-literature…"[19] Critics and scholars had drawn a clear trajectory: it began from the Johnson County War, coalesced in *The Virginian*, then spawned the cowboy hero and the Western.

Was such a character so truly unique to *The Virginian* that it did not ever previously exist in media? Certainly, the civilization-frontier dichotomy these critics highlighted is an element that seems instrumental to the Western, but is *The Virginian's* handling of this theme so different that it stands out from the frontier adventure and dime novel adventure stories of the nineteenth century? Much of the praise of *The Virginian* centers around the cowboy and characteristics

established through comparisons to the Classic Hollywood Western combined with its popularity as a piece of media, but Western media is far more expansive than the Classic mode of Hollywood Western. Interestingly, many of these claims do imply a hazy background of pre-existing Westerns but emphasize that *The Virginian* is the first "cowboy" story or that it is the first Western of any *literary merit*. There has been perhaps a simplification of the argument made as ideas pass from historian to history, and through the public over the course of decades. The exact wording may have changed, however, the core of the argument has been maintained; many deem *The Virginian* the first worthwhile Western to consider in terms of genre.

"The first worthwhile Western" is, of course, an incredibly subjective categorization. For something more tangible, one could look at the qualities that *The Virginian* possesses that have caused scholars to dub it unique, and then interrogate those elements in comparison to those that preceded it. Perhaps the easiest point to address first is the matter of *The Virginian*'s popularity and scope of influence. A large part of the credit that Orwin Rush assigned to *The Virginian* was the sheer number of sales, adaptations, and popularity that the novel experienced, used as evidence to justify its importance.[20] The same could be said of the early nineteenth-century travel journals and frontier adventure novels. As previously discussed, travel journals fundamentally defined how Americans engaged with the West, and some were so popular as to reach international audiences. The works that built off these journals such as *The Leatherstocking Tales* experienced no shortage of sales and spawned a century's worth of imitators. In the same way that Rush can gesture to adaptations of *The Virginian* proving its influence, so too can one point out how Fenimore Cooper's *Last of the Mohicans* enjoyed life as a stage play in the 1870s, had three silent films produced, a serial created in 1932, and finally the famed 1992 Hollywood film.[21] Though no individual dime novel stands out among the others, as a whole

Western-themed dime novels enjoyed great circulation among the general public. The metric of sales figures and popularity alone are not enough to determine what makes a work a truer Western than another.

What about approaching *The Virginian* thematically? The Virginian himself is given much credit for setting a precedent for the Western hero. No name is ever actually assigned to the man, and throughout all his adventures in the novel, he remains anonymous. In some ways, this could lend to the ability for himself to be built into an archetype for the cowboy heroes to follow; if the Virginian was more of a collection of ideas than a man, never imposing too much of himself in his story, then he could be easily become "the hero" who appears in thousands of works that followed in his footsteps. He was rough, honest, and honorable, but indebted to a certain type of masculinity that led him to return an insult with gunfire if his honor was ever impugned. It is quite likely that Roosevelt held some influence in Wister's choice to make a cowboy the representation of these ideals, even if indirectly. Roosevelt was fond of presenting the Western experience by framing the life of a cowboy as some democratic ideal as he had once espoused in his 1913 autobiography, but even in his earlier works as a historian, he was fond of the concept.[22] Roosevelt presented the differences of the cowboy class in almost racial terms, while of course, ignoring the actual racial diversity of historical cowboys in favor of the now archetypical white male figure. The cowboy as originating from indigenous *vaqueros* and the prominence of African Americans, Mexicans, and Native Americans within the profession were never considered; for Roosevelt's dedication to the "reality" of the West, he ignored fundamental parts of it. To him, the cowboy was a representation of a progressive refinement of a class of people; tribal Indian hunters gave way to the "superior" cowboy, trapper, and Indian fighter.[23] The cowboy was a moral good, and a representation of both masculinity and America itself.

In the same way that Natty Bumppo of *The Leatherstocking Tales* represented a collection of values esteemed by the writer of the work, the Virginian could perhaps embody the core of the cowboy hero; also, the world that the Virginian resides in not only complements these traits, but they also demonstrate other tropes of the West. Certainly, the events of the novel and its protagonist lend themselves to the trappings of a Classical Western, with the Virginian potentially serving as a John Wayne type of character, or so it would seem at first. The cards, shootouts, ambushes, and cattle that frequently define *The Virginian* in many scholarly analyses are certainly elements of the novel, but are they core to the central plot? Not necessarily. In truth, the story seems far more concerned with the romance between the Virginian and his paramour, Miss Mary Wood, than it is at all with gunplay or cattle thievery. I would go as far as to argue that *The Virginian* on whole is not a Western with elements of a Romance, but instead serves more as a Romance that is set in the West. Nearly every major plot development, from an ambush by Native Americans or the Virginian's rivalry with Trampas, are only valuable as story beats in the way that they circle back to their effect on the couple's relationship. The one major Western theme that the novel does directly grapple with is inseparable from the romance; the civilization versus frontier conflict is expressed through the clashing of the Eastern Mary and Western Virginian. The way that Wister tells it, one of them must eventually submit to the other, and it is the Virginian who ultimately bends. The Virginian is not a rough cowboy whose stubborn charm eventually wears down the walls of a city girl, but instead the subject of change himself.

Aside from its setting, this civilization and frontier tension is the novel's strongest thematic tether to the genre's lineage, but just as DeVoto alluded to, the *Virginian* generally settles on the side of society rather than the wilderness. Nearly every element of the story seems

tailored toward expressing this idea. In many ways, this is more reflective of the ideas of Manifest Destiny than the Transcendentalist-touched frontiersmen novels. While Neal Lambert believed *The Virginian* stood with Cooper's *Leatherstocking* as a symbol of the national experience in the West, the difference between them is that *The Virginian* abandons that West for what Wister dubs "perfections only latent in civilization."[24] Additionally, despite Lambert's (and potentially Wister's) belief that the Virginian represents more of a neutral archetype, the character has a far more concrete personality than critics typically give him credit for. The Virginian is no pure stoic but is rather a mischievous sort; Wister draws frequent attention to his youth, and it's from his age where his 'wildness' mostly stems, not only from expressions of frontier violence. Episodes in the Virginian's life tend more towards antics like tricking a chicken into raising a stone and swapping babies' swaddling at a get-together take up far more page space than shootouts ever do. In this sense, the Virginian can be presented as flawed with room for growth, but he never steps too far into anything morally questionable; Wister does not condemn him or his Western code, even if he makes decisions that he ultimately regrets. Moments where the Virginian encounters a moral dilemma always portray him as in the right, despite how his choices may pain him.

The action that receives the most moral discussion is of the Virginian's participation in a lynching; though the Virginian himself is troubled over executing a former friend, he never questions the idea that it had to be done. It is instead the job of Mary to question the righteousness of the act, but in conversing with Judge Henry, it is argued through the judge that the act was a necessity in the frontier. "We are in a very bad way, and we are trying to make that way a little better until civilization can reach us" Henry had explained, "The courts, or rather the juries, into whose hands we have put the law, are not dealing the law…and so when your

ordinary citizen sees this, and sees that he has placed justice in a dead hand, he must take justice back into his own hands where it was once at the beginning of all things."[25] There is a justification presented for this act, but also an argument for the necessity of the arrival of civilizing forces. Mary serves as the embodiment of this civilizing influence, packaged with the construction of her schoolhouse which signaled a major demographic and cultural shift in the little frontier town. It is true that women did play a large part in the move West, but their role in "taming" the frontier has been generally portrayed in a limited manner in both pop culture and historiography. According to Margret Walsh, throughout most historiography, people followed the Turnerian theory of Western movement, one that excluded women's participation. Historiography has only recently come to acknowledge that the West cannot be explained without women.[26] Women had gone West and made lives for themselves not only in the family unit, but they also worked independently as entrepreneurs running boarding houses, saloons, and laundries, and they could find other careers as sex workers, missionaries, and translators.[27] They were hardly absent or late arrivals post-conquest and were instead an essential part and active participants in settlement and American expansion. However, as a concept, women on the frontier were not mutually exclusive with Turnerian theory, nor the works that adhered to that view of Western settlement. Women were able to fit into the Turnerian scheme within the sphere of domesticity; women, when viewed as morally superior homemakers, could civilize men and the wilderness both.[28] This is the approach *The Virginian* takes. Mary Woods comes to the frontier at the same time as wire and fences and does just as much work to "civilize" Sunk Creek and the Virginian himself, encouraging him to make himself into something presentable to Eastern sensibilities.

In doing this, the Virginian moves from a laborer to something closer to the gentleman cattlemen side of the Johnson County War. He rises through the mystical meritocracy, and through DeVoto's class analysis could be considered to have become part of the new aristocracy; he purchases land and invests in coal, moves that apparently present a sign of his intelligence above his peers. In chapter 13, the Virginian even goes as far as to chastise and lecture Shorty, a fellow cowhand, about working hard and putting money into the bank and investing in land; Shorty had missed this opportunity and the narrative referred to him as a "lost dog" for it.[29] This hardly feels like a celebration of the Wild West that one would typically assume to stem from the "first Western", and while *The Virginian* does offer an interesting take on the civilization versus wilderness dichotomy, it is certainly not the version of such that spawned the many Western archetypes of the outsiders, loners, and vengeance seekers. That right certainly seems to go more to the action-obsessed dime novels of the decades prior, or perhaps even on some level, to Leatherstocking.

Is *The Virginian* the first to use the cowboy or rogue gunslinger? Victoria Lamont of *Westerns: A Women's History,* points out otherwise. Published within the same year as *The Virginian* was Frances McElrath's *The Rustlers*, which was a novelization of the very same Johnson County War that *The Virginian* took inspiration from. Why could it be that *The Virginian* is solely pointed to then, if another similar book existed? Lamont establishes that women were quite active within the Western genre from between 1880 to 1940, and that many of these authors remained mostly invisible because of writing in a genre which came to be known as a denigrated form of low-brow fiction; by the time Westerns had become more popular and legitimized, marketing had already divided genres up into gendered categories. "Women's Literature" was then considered something separate- leaving the default Western genre to be considered

masculine dominant.[30] This became so well cemented in popular thought, that even by the point of the 1980s where scholars were re-examining the genre from a feminist lens, they had classified popular Westerns as a masculine genre created in backlash against women's sentimental "domestic Westerns." This was equally misleading; women played as much a part in the writing of popular adventure and gunslinging as men did in writing sentimentality and domesticity into the Western.[31] In fact, not only was one of the most prolific authors of the serial Western, B. M. Bower a woman, but a woman had also written perhaps the first cowboy novel.[32] The first known cowboy novel, discounting the dime novels, was published in 1889, thirteen whole years before *The Virginian*.[33] Written by suffragette Emma Ghent Curtis, *The Administrix* is nearly an inverse of *The Virginian*. Mary Madnau, a schoolteacher, tries to civilize the cowboys of the West with morals and manners, but ultimately fails as she and other women fall prey to predatory men. When Mary's husband is lynched for charges of cattle-rustling, it is Mary who takes it upon herself to seek vengeance; adopting the guise of a cowboy named Mose, she enacts righteous violence upon her husband's killers and the men who had sexually harassed her.[34] Mary sees more action in this book than The Virginian ever does; where his sundown duel with Trampas lasts a mere two paragraphs and is the final loose end before the Virginian can happily be wed, Mary's rampage is detailed for nearly an entire chapter, her fury only quelled by a rain of gunfire. Perhaps *The Virginian* can lay claim to the mode of Western showdown that lasts but a moment, but Mary Madnau owns the vengeance ride just as much as Wyatt Earp.

The influences that helped to define the cowboy archetype and the tropes that surrounded him, of course, are not limited to a list of literature's firsts. The context in which works like *The Administrix* and *The Virginian* were created was one of an America that was wholly fascinated with its own mythology, inundated with all manner of entertainment media regarding the

Western frontier. By the 1890s, there had been nearly a century's worth of buildup of American-West themed content, such as the travel journal, frontier adventure literature, and the dime novels which had emerged based on those frontier adventurer stories, featuring characters such as *Leatherstocking*, Kit Carson, and Daniel Boone. At this point in history, the cowboy already became a familiar enough figure in American pop culture, owing not only to the Johnson County War and other small range-wars like it but also to the 1890 census prompting romanticism about a disappearing way of life.[35] The cowboy had already begun featuring more prominently in the dime novel from around 1885, though his characterization was far more varied than the Hollywood Western would ever have him; the cowboys of the dime novels were united only in their profession.[36] It was Prentiss Ingraham, perhaps the most prolific of the dime novelists, who began to introduce the heroic cowboy; Ingraham was also the one to write more than a hundred stories about perhaps one of the greatest popularizers of American Western entertainment.[37] His hero was, like Kit Carson, a fictionalized version of a real man.

William "Buffalo Bill" Cody had first been recognized through journal write-ups that were born by leading tourists and gentlemen hunters on trips out West[38] His real start to fame, however, came in 1869 when dime novelist Ned Buntline created a sensational and exaggerated retelling of the man's life in "Buffalo Bill: The King of the Border Men.", which would then come to be followed by many more sequels in the years to come[39] Unlike Kit Carson, Cody took quite well to his fame and was quick to capitalize on it, playing a large and active part in constructing his own mythos. He had begun to appear in plays dramatizing the frontier, such as *The Red Right Hand, or, The First Scalp for Custer*, directly aligning himself with figures who had already become part of American folklore.[40] Such was his popularity that Buffalo Bill became the protagonist of more dime novels than any other character, real or fictional with the

possible exception of Jesse James.[41] These novels or small appearances on the stage, however, are not what Cody is primarily known for today. Running for more than 30 years between 1883 to 1916, Buffalo Bill's Wild West was one of the largest, most popular, and most successful businesses in commercial entertainment. It presented itself as a program both for entertainment and education, featuring animated scenes depicting pioneer and frontier life in the Wild West, with Native American performers, cowboy tricks, and gunplay showmanship with the likes of Annie Oakley. It built its claim to authenticity by featuring historical figures that were publicly recognized, such as Sitting Bull and Geronimo, as well as individuals who had fought against the cavalry, and units of the US Cavalry themselves.[42] This, in many ways, is the same as how the adventures tied to the travel novel could be sold as factual; some have even likened the experience to an evolution of Catlin's Indian Gallery, only grander and more sensational in scope.[43] The show was an influence not only on the United States perception of its own identity, but it helped to define it overseas as well as the show toured not only through North America but through Europe.[44] In the edited version of Cody's autobiography, Frank Christianson asserts that Cody was united with "contemporaries Frederick Jackson Turner and Teddy Roosevelt in transforming the American frontier…" in what Richard Slotkin dubbed the "*mythic space* [that] began to outweigh its importance as a real place."[45] Slotkin deemed that from 1885 to 1905, Cody's show was "the most important commercial vehicle for the fabrication and transmission of the Myth of the Frontier."[46] Surely, when it comes to the whole of Western entertainment, Buffalo Bill's Wild West show should receive consideration as a large part of the birth of the genre's themes and archetypes.

Conclusion

To point to *The Virginian* as the first Western is easy. It allows for a straightforward and clean lineage to be created for the Western, which is simple to follow, as if the genre could be viewed as a progression from one step to another until it reached its truly realized form in film. When one considers the decades where the majority of the claims from *The Virginian*'s status as the first "worthwhile" Western originally stem, the generation that made this claim existed in a time where they could have both grown up with *The Virginian* as a piece of popular, childhood literature, and been adults when witnessing the peak of the Classic Hollywood Western.[47] Even in trying to avoid bias, scholars will always write based on the context of the world around them; *The Virginian* was available to them as an example of Western entertainment media, both "new" in terms of the television adaptations, and old in that it set an important precedent for this type of Western writing. The dime novel, until studies around the 70s, were hardly even taken seriously as a historical artifact, let alone an important part of media history. Despite their ephemeral nature, dime novels presented an important influence on popular culture and helped to create an environment where *The Virginian* could be written to begin with. Roosevelt and Wister themselves had acknowledged works of Westerns such as these, even if they had dismissed them as worthless literature. The Western clearly predated Wister's novel, but his novel is the only one that is regularly singled out because of its popularity and reputation as having literary merit, as opposed to its contemporaries.

It is true that in scholarship *The Virginian*'s status as "first " does come with some caveats, but the function is largely the same. This mindset has caused several studies to stop at *The Virginian* when it comes to viewing early influences in the Western genre and dismiss other worthwhile precursors. In his study on the Western genre, Steven McVeigh does just that. While he believed that there could be arguments made for other "novels of the West, even other novels

about cowboys," he ultimately decides that it was "Wister's formalization of the cowboy character, in terms of speech, manner, dress, and skills, that lie at the heart of what the Western would become in the twentieth century."[48] Once again, it is the standard of the Classic Hollywood Western that is considered the benchmark for judging the genre's history as a whole- the type of film available when the critical reflections on *The Virginian* as the first true Western were written. The Western, however, over the past several decades, has proven to encompass far many more storylines and character archetypes than the Classic era ever could. The Virginians' wholesome mischief, honor code, and upholding of elite cattleman's class status quo could certainly suit characters such as John Wayne's in *McLintock!,* but could he be the template for the cynical wanderer in the Dollars Trilogy, or display the themes of violence or revenge as in *Tombstone* or *The Wild Bunch*? So many works that are considered staples of the Western genre deal with themes and tropes that are more reflective of a work such as *The Administrix* and the dime novels that preceded Wister's *The Virginian*. When we apply the label "the first Western" to anything, it is a retroactive classification based on the genre as we know it exists today, and the genre's existence may require a rethinking of what should be included in its foundational influences.

This does not mean that *The Virginian* does not deserve its due credit; when critics deem it the first "worthwhile" or "literary" Western, they are referring to the fact that Wister's novel did represent a turning point in the genre. *The Virginian* was important in sparking a great deal of interest in the Western as respectable literature and a worthwhile pursuit for authors to invest in, and it did pave the way for at least a type of popular western story. But it was only one singular type that no longer reflects the genre as a whole. Was it influential? Certainly, but to call *The Virginian* the first worthwhile Western to consider does a great disservice to the study of Western

media, and the women and men whose work had preceded it. Not only this, but it negates a good century of history that led up to creating the environment where *The Virginian* could even come to be made. If one wants a full picture of the Western genre, then perhaps *The Virginian* should not be considered the "first" any longer. Instead, it should be looked at as a point in which the form of the genre had shifted; a key point in the timeline, rather than the very start of it. Current scholarship of the Western falls prey to one of the shortcomings of historical study as a whole: the desire to create a clean, linear progression between great moments and great men that allows for reading a clear evolution forward. We know that this is not the case, and it is important in both the history of the West, and the history of the Western, to acknowledge the wide-reaching web of influences that shaped the way we understand these topics today.

CONCLUSION

Despite the difficulty in defining where the precise point that stories of the frontier became Westerns, it is evident enough that West-themed entertainment has a long and storied history that extends far past *The Great Train Robbery* and *The Virginian* both. From as early as the travel journal, Americans had been voraciously consuming content about the newly added Western territory, and creating art to reflect that interest. Even as early as this point, thematic works pitting civilization against the frontier were being made in the form of Hudson River School paintings, and the publications behind the travel journals began to emphasize certain elements of their narratives towards appealing to broader audiences. While these journals themselves may not have been Westerns, from these journals came the frontier adventure novel and dime novels both. These stories of the frontier featured original characters such as Hawkeye or borrowed figures like Kit Carson or Daniel Boone in action packed adventures of braving the wilderness or battling with Native Americans. These dime novels expanded into military heroes and cowboys as the years progressed and are considered by some to be the first Westerns, though other historians place the marker at *The Virginian*- which was released only a year before *The Great Train Robbery*. I have argued that even in discounting the dime novel from the running, there exist novels prior to Wister's *Virginian* that go unrepresented because of the neglect for the history of women authors. It seems largely that the standards for what was considered a true Western was defined by a literary bias against cheap works like the dime novel, and a definition of the Western entirely informed by the Golden Age of Western cinema.

The lineage of the Western continues to be paradoxically both well understood by historians such as Richard Slotkins, and poorly represented in the case of media studies. The

dividing line seems to be how individuals define the Western, and that definition so often seems to fall to histories created within the context of the Classic Western alone. The genre today is not only cowboys, and not only basic morality tales or expressions of American superiority. As the Western has evolved, it becomes more important to acknowledge the roots of the genre as the previous parameters for the Western become ever less applicable. The origins of the Western started almost as early as Americans began to move Westward, and it developed alongside the myth of the frontier. While this thesis is not the first to say as much, I aim to have brought a condensed collection of these ideas forward and argued for others to reexamine the genre from a more updated lens. If America is so often defined by the Western, perhaps it is time that we better understand where it came from.

ENDNOTES

Chapter 1

1. This is especially common in Japanese media. For an amusing example see *Ninja Sentai Kakuranger.* 1994. Season 1, Episode 3. “American Ninja " Directed by Tarou Sakamoto. Aired March 4, 1994. The eponymous ‘American Ninja’ is just a cowboy; the reason for which is never addressed, besides him growing up in America.
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