

The Western Tradition

By SAVOIE LOTTINVILLE

For a plainsman, there is something challenging and at the same time forbidding about the Rocky Mountains. Here one grows suddenly taller and broader from a spiritual point of view. Here one can look out from the heights upon a flat and slowly crawling world. From these peaks, the true majesty of nature and the wonder of creation seem evident propositions.

I am reminded of an anecdote told by Nicholas Roosevelt, whose book, *A Front Row Seat*, we published. For the same reason that most of us live somewhere in the West, Mr. Roosevelt chose some years ago to join the Westward Movement. He had lived all his life in New York, but Mr. Roosevelt said that, late in life, he began to sympathize with the foreman of the cattle ranch in West Texas belonging to the father of Mrs. Eugene Holman, the wife of the President of the Standard Oil Company of New Jersey. This foreman was an ardent Presbyterian of the old school, as rigid in his standards of conduct as in his morals. Not only was he as fanatically opposed to liquor as Carrie Nation, but he looked upon swearing as a sin, and never himself used an oath or took the name of the Lord in vain. Despite this somewhat stiff attitude, he was highly regarded on the ranch and greatly liked by the children. When Mrs. Holman made her first visit to the ranch after marrying and moving to New York, the old foreman greeted her warmly and, after answering questions about himself and his family, asked her how she liked living in New York. She replied that she liked it very much. For a few seconds he looked at her in silence. Then, with asperity, he said: "I'd rob a bank, if that was the only way I could keep my family from starving. I'd kill a man, if I had to in order to protect my family. But I'll be God *damned* if I'd ever live in New York!"

It seems to me always a mistake when a publisher succumbs to an invitation to speak—especially before an audience of writers or folklorists. And if he takes an assignment to deal with the West and the Western Tradition, he is in even worse trouble. Let me tell you that there is nothing oracular about publishing. We are neither nearer to nor more remote from the feeling

of the common man—I should say, the literarily inclined man—than anybody else. On one side we are supplied by writers, and on the other we supply consumers of the writers' productions. This means, in the baldest terms I can choose, that we are middlemen. And there may be some people present tonight who are old enough to remember that, in the old-time minstrel, the middleman was essentially a funnyman who didn't know it.

But there is one thing of which some of us are thoroughly convinced. "The frontier is a cherished element in our experience as a people." Eduard Lindeman wrote this statement for the *Saturday Review* only a few weeks before his recent untimely death. He suggested that "every American is a potential pioneer. In every American there lies dormant the feeling that he too might play the part of hero. Every American is a latent out-of-door person. . . . The West is 'in our blood.'"

Mr. Lindeman thought in these terms when he was asked to consider the common man as reader. He had no more than made a start towards an answer—which could have taken complex, intellectual form—when he recalled that more books on Western subjects—and more magazine articles in the same field—are sold each year than perhaps in all the others combined. Now, there is an evident reason for this. In the first place, whatever the exaggeration or the misplaced emphasis of Frederick Jackson Turner's thesis about the significance of the frontier in American history, it remains that the West has more profoundly affected our thinking even than our ancient European connection and our inheritance of a Western European humanism. In the second place, this influence has pervaded all levels of our population, from the lowest, or least literate, to the highest, or most literate.

Some months ago, I was asked to address a similar gathering in Texas, which I should tell you is a small state immediately south of the Red River, entirely surrounded by tidelands. At that time Mr. Walter Prescott Webb's new book on the frontier was being widely discussed. And

well it should have been, because it seems to a great many people to be a work of the very first order of importance. But I feel that the frontier of the Webb and the Turner theses calls for still another thesis, and I suspect that if this new one, written from an entirely different angle from the others, is reasonably well done, it will tell us a great deal about ourselves as a nation. For, as I say, the frontier is not merely a pole of synthesis in American history, in accordance with Turner's ideas, nor an economic and social fact of the profoundest influence upon the development of all of western Europe after the fifteenth century, conforming to Mr. Webb's notions, but, from many points of view, the dominant intellectual influence upon the whole of American thinking in the twentieth century.

It seemed to me in Dallas, and it seems to me now, a matter of no small interest that every little kid in the Bowery now carries two cap pistols on his hips. It proves, I think, that Walter Prescott Webb's frontier can move anywhere—yes, anywhere. And at this point I have descended from the highest, or most literate, segment of our population to the kiddies, for whom not even their teachers will put in an exaggerated claim.

How has this interesting and startling business come about? Frankly, I don't think anybody knows. We can only try to rationalize a development that clearly contains its own special kind of vitality. My guess may be as good as yours, so here goes.

There is nothing basically different in the American historical tradition from the European—not until the West begins to be an irresistible attraction to millions. We emigrated to the New World in the seventeenth century, but so did the Dutch to South Africa. We settled a wilderness and created the institutions of a simple society. But this happened much earlier even in Europe itself. We fought wars, won a war of independence, and consolidated ourselves into a nation. All of this happened to Switzerland not much earlier. We blundered politically, industrialized our economy, formed alliances, and developed a political

tradition. But this, too, had occurred elsewhere.

When men moved, however, into the vast, unknown lands of the West, beyond the eastern mountains and across the middle prairies, the heroic tradition had its start. This required a special kind of courage and daring. It struck resounding chords in every mature human capable of thinking and of feeling the exciting attraction of unknown lands beyond—which is a simple definition of the frontier.

Have you ever been lost—really lost—in the wilderness? The experience was common in an earlier day. The knowledge gained from it produced in countless Americans of the early nineteenth century a profound respect for men of the stripe of William Clark and Meriwether Lewis, Antoine Tabeau, Louis Papin, Sir William Drummond Stewart, George Frederick William Ruxton (who loved the country now embraced by Colorado as few of the explorers could), Jim Bridger, Bent, St. Vrain, and all the many others of a hardy crew. These were the people who had no dread of silence produced by limitless space, and they did not especially fear the Indians, who often proved their natural enemies. I think there can be no doubt about it. These were *real men*.

For a nation which has almost completely abandoned its classical roots, there may be no point in suggesting that precisely such adventures induced in Romans an attitude nowhere else apparent during ancient times. This is clear from the doings of Caesar in Gaul and the record of the Germans written by Tacitus. But if you don't care for this perspective upon our own development, take a look at the parallel development, at almost precisely the same time as our Westward Movement, in South Africa—the great trek of the Boers. Some excellent novels have been written about it, notably those of Stewart Clothe.

But despite all of these parallels and even ancient examples, ours is the unique experi-

ence, because it has affected a greater area and vastly more millions of people. It has carried over in our thinking, our daydreaming, and our writing from a period of simplicity to a period of extraordinary complexity, when a man can invade an untouched wilderness in a jeep one day and retire from it in good order the next. As I have suggested, it is, and probably will remain, the single most vital part of the American tradition. In the future its strength may, indeed, increase rather than diminish.

As most of you know, there were four elements in this earlier, heroic tradition: the mountain man (whom I consider the greatest of *natural* Americans), the explorer, the military man, and, finally, the Indian, who preceded all the rest and either guided the late-comers or disputed their progress through the lands beyond the frontier. The period of greatness of these men extended roughly from 1800 to 1860. For the most part, their exploits were detailed in a variety of more or less serious books, published mainly in New York, Philadelphia, and in New England.

After 1860 (which, by the way, is a strictly arbitrary date for purposes of this discussion), we get a distinct break with the events of the preceding half century. Our romantic hero gets out of buckskin and fur cap and begins to look like today's cowboy—working cowboy, I mean, not the California or drugstore kind. The frontier proper has begun to invade the lands of the far west—the mountains and valleys of Colorado, Wyoming, Utah, Montana. I am not interested for present purposes in discussing the people who made up the vanguard of the frontier. I am interested only in two types who are chiefly responsible for what we now call the "Western" story—the badman on horseback, on the one hand, and his opponent, the man of law and order, on the other. (The fact that there were

simultaneously a lot of good-looking women mixed up in the course of events, can be taken for granted but not overlooked.) But the badmen who provided the basis and occasion for all the action that took place were social manifestations—they were predators and could not have appeared until society itself appeared. They were never more numerous than they are, relatively, in our society today, but they were striking and highly efficient—as anyone who has read Dimsdale's *The Vigilantes of Montana* and Mercer's *Banditti of the Plains* will fully appreciate.

Out of the new drives occasioned by the close of the Civil War, we got a frontier society. Out of the new and cheaper printing processes after 1865, we got the book of reminiscences and the dime novel built around the badman and his virtuous opponents. Thus, today, the most appealing element in our Western tradition is not the great and admirable mountain man, but figures perhaps best represented by Billy the Kid.

There is no need of crying in our beer over the question whether Billy, who was by every objective test a cold-blooded killer, as reckless of human life as an insane person could be, should have been transformed in two generations into a kind of Robin Hood of the West. As one of the best students of Western letters suggested to me recently, we are powerless in this department. Billy has acquired an aura of glory which added time seems only to embellish the more. He has, in fact, become a folk hero. We get his story and the stories of Wyatt Earp, Wild Bill Hickock, the Daltons, the Younger Brothers, and a good many others, told over and over again. And I have no doubt that, a century hence, when the horse and its successor, the Ford V-8, have become only distant and disputed memories, Clyde Barrow and Bonnie Parker, who probably wouldn't have known which end of a horse to approach, will have a status superior to that of William Bonney, known as Billy the Kid.

But even publishers must adjust themselves to the transformations produced by story tellers and the public which approves their work. Beginning this fall, the Press which I represent will offer a whole collection of books entitled the Western Frontier Library. Mr. E. DeGolyer, whom many of you know as an authority on, and collector of, Western Americana, will be general editor in fact, but on his insistence, not in name. We have agreed upon a formula which seems sound to us—the more blood the better. But everything must be true and reliable—in fact, from those classic, eyewitness accounts first published sixty or more years ago but now much neglected.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

After graduating from the University in 1929, Mr. Lottinville was appointed a Rhodes Scholar to Oxford and from that ancient institution received his baccalaureate degree in 1932 and his master's in 1939. He came to the University of Oklahoma Press in 1933 and was appointed its Director in 1938. In recognition of his distinguished services to letters and to publishing, Southern Methodist University conferred on him the honorary degree of Doctor of Literature in 1952. This address was delivered at the Rocky Mountain Folklore and Writers Conference, Denver, on July 16, 1953.



As Mr. DeGolyer suggests, "What modern-day writer of fiction could be so prodigal of his materials as to squander a hundred lives in a single book? And to balance accounts, who has been so bold as to stretch a score of necks?" But these are precisely the things that will be seen in the first item in the new library, a cloth-bound and jacketed edition of Professor Thomas J. Dimsdale's *The Vigilantes of Montana*—which, by the way, will be sold, along with all other items in the Library, for a mere two bucks.

When I think of folklore, which is the other half of your program this week, I remind myself that there has always been a question in my thinking whether writing should have been invented. Without glyphs, syllabaries, and alphabets, we should have been spared some very bad times—and bad writing—in the twentieth century. And I don't think we would have been any worse off insofar as the best inheritance from our past is concerned.

A quiet and gifted folklorist, Paul G. Brewster, revealed this to us a few months ago when he let us publish his *American Nonsinging Games*. We discovered from his book that games that youngsters play in Denver, Seattle, Omaha, and even New York City, have come down to them almost unchanged from times as remote as Aristotle's—and all through the simple but tenacious medium of oral recounting. This is true also of the first and greatest book of the Americas, the *Popol Vuh*, from Maya times, and the great Homeric epics, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. We gave first English publications to the former, but not to the latter.

As I have attempted to outline this evening, the combination of what actually happened in our Western past and the folk and dime-novel embellishment of it from the sixties onwards is the richest resource of the writer. I don't care particularly whether he is a historian, a biographer, a novelist, a short-story writer, or a plain, hard-working bibliographer like Ramon F. Adams, whose monumental bibliography of "literature" about Western badmen entitled *Six-Guns and Saddle Leather* will shortly issue from our Press. And I should be very happy if the person who decides to cultivate this rich field is a folklorist, for the folklorist, above all others save the novelist, must be a person of imagination, of sound taste, and of story-telling genius. In fact, the folklorist who can't tell a story had better not have been born.

For the past twenty-five years, those of us who have spent our waking hours at the University of Oklahoma Press, have contrived to place a heavy emphasis upon this

great combination of history, letters, and folklore. Out of the experience have come some pointers which may be useful to you as writers and folklorists. Let me give them to you and at the same time provide some illustrative examples:

First, there is the matter of point of view in dealing with the Western tradition. I place it in this order because, as we see the problem from the vantage point of a publishing house, it is more honored in the breach than in the performance. There is not one point of view in dealing with any non-fiction subject. There may be as many as a dozen. But to make the discovery that there are so many requires an indispensable imagination and an equally indispensable energy. Let's take two examples from two widely separated fields: history and folklore:

Do you remember the opening lines of Bernard DeVoto's *Across the Wide Missouri*? "To the American pioneer," he wrote, "the word 'prairie' meant a place without trees but with a soil so rich that planting it might be, as the Big Bear of Arkansas said it was, 'dangerous.'" And then, contrasting the prairie with the lands beyond the Missouri, Mr. DeVoto noted a change—a somewhat terrifying change, in fact, from the well-watered country east of the Missouri. "Something of this change," he said, "may have been due to another word, 'savanna.' It was a word of poetry and power. A savanna was of the mind only, of the mind's edge, of fantasy. It suggested meadows in sunlight, groves beside streams, something lovely and rich and distant."

Now, it is both my good fortune and my misery to see somewhere between 750 and 1,000 nonfiction manuscripts a year, but most of them, if you will allow me to paraphrase, start off something like this:

"In 1833 the Western frontier lay beyond the Missouri River. To this rocky and arid region were to emigrate in the next forty years many thousands of venturesome Americans. They needed land."

And at this point, ladies and gentlemen, what we need is imagination and a rudimentary sense of prose style. Comparisons are always invidious, as we have repeatedly been told. My purpose in presenting Mr. DeVoto side by side with John Doe is not to point up the already well-known fact that Mr. DeVoto can write, whereas Mr. Doe can't, but to indicate that the indispensable base of all writing is ideas. "They needed land." Of course they needed land! But they needed something else worse, and that, as Mr. DeVoto suggests, was of the mind and spirit. To repeat the obvious, or to fail to look behind the obvious and find the true and the exciting, is to fall into a

Miltonian pit of the banal and the mediocre.

To carry this problem one step nearer its solution, let's take the state of Kansas, which is a near neighbor but can't rise up and defend itself in this meeting. If you were going to do a long essay on Kansas, or even a book, how would you get off dead-center and make a start? It's a big, flat, wheat-growing state, loaded to the gunnels with Republicans, and it produced John Brown, Carrie Nation, William Allen White, and that now nearly forgotten but estimable gentleman, Alf M. Landon. The principal streets in its small towns are so wide that even Mickey Mantle would have some trouble throwing from one side of them to the other. It's clean, efficient, self-reliant, and has produced the greatest succession of small-town newspaper editors in the history of our country. So what?

Carl Becker wrote an essay on Kansas about 1910 which is, and deserves to be, one of the high points in American interpretative writing. Instead of fooling around with such facts as I have given you above, Mr. Becker addressed himself to an idea. It occurred to him in one of the most obvious of places, and under the most un-intellectual of circumstances. When the train that was carrying him across the state stopped at a small water-tower station, from which he could see only two converging lines of rails in the distance, and two converging lines of sunflowers beside them, to break the monotonous miles of wheatfields, a couple of young ladies got down from a day-coach in which they were riding, and looking out over those miles of wheat and those two converging sets of lines of rail and drooping sunflowers, exclaimed together, "Dear old Kansas!"

I think you can guess the questions which Mr. Becker asked himself: "What's so dear about old Kansas?" and "What makes young ladies think this way when there are a lot of romantic problems still unsolved, even in Kansas?"

Let me repeat, there are a dozen ways, at least, of looking at any nonfiction undertaking. The question is simply to find a satisfactory one and go after it. There are also certain universals for which every writer of fiction or nonfiction must strive if he is to surmount mediocrity. These center around character—whether of an individual, a state, or an era—motive, and moral problem. The locality, the society, the cultural institutions are secondary to them, but—and this may be the most important thing I shall have to say tonight—but the milieu in which these universals occur is

just about all that justifies another assault upon them. If this were not so, we should be able to rest content with the really good books that have been produced anywhere, at any time, in the past. This is why the West, its easily identifiable mood, its attitudes, and its history, become so important to anyone who proposes to write.

Some years ago, when Paul Scars wrote a book on the cyclical pattern of Western climate and all that it has done to us, I, among many others, told him that the writing was much out of the ordinary. He seemed pleased, but he reminded me that he had been *thinking* about the subject for fifteen years, and that it was, therefore, no trick to write the book, once he had set himself to it. I have underscored the word *think* here, just as I have underscored *ideas* at other points. It is less than useless to approach a typewriter unless you have done some thinking, and in the course of it have put a few ideas to work.

You will recall that I promised you an example from folklore. There is a school of thought which says that the task of the folklorist is merely to record. If a little synthesis goes on, too, that must be considered strictly incidental. I am sorry not to be able to second this opinion, for to do so would reduce the problems of countless aspiring writers on folklore subjects. But, ladies and gentlemen, it just ain't so. The gathering and writing of folklore exacts of its successful practitioners something of the same imagination I said is indispensable to the nonfiction writer, and a considerable portion of the narrative flair which is standard equipment for the short-story writer or novelist.

Over in Arkansas, Vance Randolph probably hasn't stirred out of the Ozarks in twenty years. But he came into those hills with an awfully good head and a sound pair each of eyes and ears. He has been using all three with very satisfying results, according to all of us who enjoy such rich and inexhaustible fare as *We Always Lie to Strangers, Who Blowed up the Church House?* and *Down in the Holler: A Gallery of Ozark Folk Speech*. Not all of these books were published by the University of Oklahoma Press—only the last, which came out during the spring.

The range, importance, and very large audience achieved by these books disposes, I think, of that constantly recurring question, What shall I write about? The necessary materials for writing lie all about, in boundless profusion. The Chancellor of this University and his able collaborator, Forrester Blake, saw in the Rockies a fine folklore opportunity, and they pursued it

in the book, *Rocky Mountain Tales*, which we published some years ago. A slightly different angle is provided by a book produced on or about Colorado and the Rockies more than a century ago—George Fredrick Ruxton's *Life in the Far West*—which has proved a precious resource to everyone from Hiram Martin Chittenden, who wrote *The Fur Trade of the Far West*, to my good friend, A. B. Guthrie, who wrote *The Big Sky*. When, some years ago, I asked a couple of reputable historians about republishing this book they shook their heads in dissent and said, "No, it's a compound of fiction and folklore." But your state historian, LeRoy Hafen, is a man who knows a reputable piece of work when he sees it. Said Mr. Hafen, when I asked him whether he would prepare an introduction and notes for a new edition, "Sure!" Mr. Hafen may actually have said, "Surely," but he went right ahead and did the job anyway. A lot of people have since discovered the enormous color, the authentic lingo, and the exciting life of the mountain man which have been preserved in this book. Nothing else that we have done at Oklahoma satisfies us more.

Now, a final word on the subject of what is snob and what is not snob.

There has been a disposition everywhere in America for more than thirty-five years to overemphasize research at the expense of writing, particularly lively, gifted, and imaginative writing. It has been said, not unjustly, that almost any duffer can break into print by assembling a batch of obvious statements abundantly supporting them by footnotes. This is true even of the West as a subject area. If there is any place that doesn't lend itself to the banal and the pedantic, the West is it. Therefore, in the most candid terms possible, I urge you to do two things: (1) if you have any gift at all in writing, try it out on the West, and be not dismayed by any palaver concerning "contribution," "advancement of knowledge," or "new data." (2) Accepting the fundamental premise that, in nonfiction, what we want is fact, not fancy, be not afraid to undertake a first-class work of synthesis. I mean by this, the utilization of the countless writings which have appeared over a period of a century and a half concerning this enormous and exciting region. Coupled with it and indispensable to its success, is a fresh, informed, imaginative point of view.

Remember Kansas, which got its sunflowers from Colorado in the first place. A writers' conference blew them over there! What I'm suggesting is that you blow some first-rate writing down Oklahoma way. We'll just up and publish it.

The Status of Women in Egypt

By BERNICE G. DUNCAN

The Middle East has become a focal point of interest because of the changes which are taking place there and because both the West and the East, speaking from the politically ideological standpoint, would like to gain the position of dominant influence in this geographically strategic location. Leaving international affairs and world problems to the political scientist, I turned my attention while I was in Egypt to internal and domestic problems which I feel intellectually more able to cope with. Thus, during the nine months spent in Cairo last year I followed with interest the considerable newspaper publicity, meetings, and speeches concerning the progress that is being made by the women of that country to secure more freedom, more independence, improved social, economic and legal status, and political recognition. That sounds like a big order, and it is, especially considering that the fight must be waged by a very small percentage of the women. Not many of them have yet secured enough independence, or have broadened their interests sufficiently, to be able to take an active part in the movement. But those who are doing so are earnest and well qualified and are winning converts among the better educated and more intelligent women. Theirs is a stiff battle but they have made considerable progress in a short space of time. Egypt has an increasing number of women doctors, lawyers, medical technicians, radio personnel, and teachers, including some at the university level.

Equality, inheritance rights and other legal rights, and social freedom were not unknown to the women of ancient times in Egypt. We have the proof of this in old documents, statues, tombs, and inscriptions wherein we learn that women, particularly upper class women, shared in many privileges which their husbands and brothers enjoyed. Furthermore, fixed property (houses, land, herds, etc.) might be held by women; even the kingdom could descend through the female line, and ancestry was traced much further back through the mother than through the