



Part One

ENCOUNTERING THE WEST

INTRODUCTION

IN THE LAST LINES of “Axe Handles,” the western poet Gary Snyder writes:

And I see: Pound was an axe,
Chen was an axe, I am an axe
And my son a handle, soon
To be shaping again, model
And tool, craft of culture,
How we go on.

The craft of culture in the American West, as in any land, is not limited by provincial examples, for as Snyder’s poem demonstrates, those who practice a craft can look to any culture for their models. Yet because most artists encounter their first models close to home, the first part of *A Literary History of the American West* begins with the stories told in and the reports about the Old West. There are also chapters surveying the history of those genres brought to the West before 1890 but not well rooted here until after the Second World War. In short, the first stage in the literary history of the West is the literature of the frontier. The history of every literature, of course, begins with such a stage. That is how we go on.

In 1890, when the U.S. Census Bureau announced the closing of the frontier, the *belles-lettres* of the American West were still in a nascent state. Nevertheless, the roots of western literature are centuries old. Although many computer-age westerners may be unaware of the West’s rich pre-twentieth-century heritage, most contemporary western writers draw upon it for subjects, themes, and characters. Western literature written before 1890 is to the West what pre-1800 literature is to America.

Every literature begins with such a seedtime, which can be profitably studied both for its own sake and for what it reveals about the work that grows from it. The seedtime of western American literature began with the oral tradition of people who had arrived in North America thousands of years ago. Europeans, after encountering the West and its inhabitants,

added letters, reports, diaries, and journals to the West's literary heritage. That literature of early encounters proceeded in stages: Spanish and French before 1800; then, starting with Lewis and Clark, American exploration up to the Civil War; and scientific cataloguing of the land and the natives from the end of the Civil War into the new century. From the time of first settlement, Europeans and, later, Americans began to write about the West in the various genres of European literature. And even before American settlement in the West, a western literary criticism had started to grow.

The first of those disparate sources of western American literature is the oral tradition of the Native Americans. It probably began with the arrival of people on this continent some 30,000 years ago. When people began to paint pictures of bison upon the cave walls at Lascaux in Europe, other humans were telling stories about giant bison in what is now the West. American Indians had sung the glories of the land centuries before Columbus sailed; some of their songs and stories survived and now inspire many contemporary western writers. With that oral tradition this literary history begins. A tradition so apparently far removed from our usual notions of *belles-lettres* may seem an odd beginning, but the reader should recall that European literature began with the oral tradition which culminated in Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

Into that European literature came reports of the lands that Columbus and his sailors had reached. Long before the Lewis and Clark expedition, western wilderness acted as a lodestone for explorers and philosophers. As Howard Mumford Jones explains in *O Strange New World* (1964), the earliest European immigrants arrived in America with preconceived, conflicting notions about the wild new lands: they had heard (1) that the wilderness was a new Garden of Eden and (2) that it was an earthly hell. Perhaps the noble natives would freely give you mountains of gold; but if you stayed in the New World's strange wild vastness for too long, you might degenerate, losing all your civilized traits and sinking to the level of the cannibalistic savage. (Europeans often forgot that their own civilization offered examples of behavior that made a cannibal look kind.)

One of the first Europeans to encounter the West, Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca traveled with three companions through parts of the Southwest in the 1530s, and his narrative of their adventures appeared in print in 1542. After Cabeza de Vaca came other Spanish explorers: Marcos de Niza (1539), Coronado (1540), Rodriguez-Chamuscado (1581), Espejo (1582), Castaño de Sosa (1590), and Humaña-Bonilla (1594). To the reports of their expeditions were added accounts of early Spanish settlement, beginning with Juan de Oñate's expedition in 1598. The year when Santa Fe was founded, 1610, also saw the publication of the poetic chronicle *History of New Mex-*

ice by Gaspar Pérez de Villagr , followed in twenty years by *The Memorial* of Friar Alonso de Benavides.

Only Sir Francis Drake's brief voyage along the California coast in 1579 antedates the Spanish presence there; and before the end of the American Revolution, a string of Spanish missions extended as far north as San Francisco. Spanish descriptions of California and French accounts of the upper Midwest had been written decades before President Jefferson sought to purchase the Louisiana Territory. However prosaic and derivative one considers the early Spanish and French reports and chronicles of their western experiences, they nevertheless have what Randolph G. Adams calls "the charm of the primitive, not only in expression but in the format of these old books." In his chapter, "Reports and Chronicles," in the *Literary History of the United States* (third ed., rev., 1963), Adams adds that the principal appeal of such early accounts "lies in the fact that they present the feelings of the man who was there at the time the event took place and not what some later interpreter, however learned, may have felt" (pp. 38–39).

What Adams says of the early European reports and chronicles is also true of early American accounts of encounters with the West. The first official American inland exploration was the Lewis and Clark expedition (1804–1806), and the journals of that expedition have not only the charm and appeal of the earlier European reports but also the interest of early attempts at scientific measurement and classification. Moreover, *The Journals of Lewis and Clark* are to western American literature what William Bradford's *Of Plymouth Plantation* is to early American literature: one of the major sources of a tradition. Adding volumes of reports to the growing American knowledge of the West, other major government explorers included: Zebulon Pike (1805; 1806; 1806–07); Stephen H. Long (1819–20); Charles Wilkes (1838–42); Joseph N. Nicollet (1839–40); and John C. Fremont (1842–43; 1846–47; 1848–49). The government also published reports of the transcontinental railroad surveys of 1853–54.

All the early western explorers faced the same challenge: writing about the vastness and strangeness of the West in a language they had learned back home, a language suited mainly to the cultivated and more familiar lands of Europe and the East. The efforts of the early explorers made easier the task of post-Civil War scientists such as Ferdinand V. Hayden, Clarence King, John Wesley Powell, George M. Wheeler, and Walter P. Jenney, who were all engaged in the work of scientific investigation and mapping. Even the incredible wonders of the Grand Canyon came to be more accurately described in the works of Major Powell and Clarence Dutton, as Wallace Stegner explains in *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian*.

Besides that language of scientific accuracy, writing about the West

also included a new boisterous lingo of hyperbole added by the mountain men of the fur trade. Fur companies entered the West soon after the Lewis and Clark expedition, and from then until 1840 (the year of the last mountain man rendezvous), fur trappers and traders traversed the West, creating a new culture that was a mixture of and allied to American, Indian, Canadian-French, and southwestern Hispanic cultures. Long after the last rendezvous, the mountain men influenced the West; and the list of twentieth-century novels about the early fur trade is a long one.

Only a few decades after the beginning of the western fur trade, other businessmen entered the West. In 1821, William Becknell pioneered the first venture along the Santa Fe Trail. Mexico's achievement of its independence had made possible the opening of the Santa Fe Trail; and Mexican independence and American settlement in Texas led to Texan independence in 1836.

The Year of Decision, as Bernard DeVoto called 1846, and the next few years after it mark another great divide in western American history. The Mexican-American War, the Mormon migration, and the Gold Rush, followed by statehood for Texas, California, and Oregon, provided enough history, enough colorful new jargon, enough fantastic characters to keep any country's authors busy for generations. Much of that history repeated itself in the mining booms and the waves of immigration of the next four decades, not to mention the Indian Wars, the building of the railroads, and the era of the great cattle barons and cattle drives.

So rich, in fact, is the history of the Old West that a great part of western literature continues to focus on that epic time. Aware of the danger of such an exclusive focus, Wallace Stegner has called upon critics and readers to avoid defining as western only that literature which depicts Old West history of the white male. In "History, Myth, and the Western Writer" (*The Sound of Mountain Water*, 1969), the best essay yet written on the development of western fiction, Stegner says that it is difficult to identify many characteristics that are true of all, or even most, of western fiction, because "a number of things happened to block the organic cultural growth the West had a right, from the experience of the rest of America, to expect." Those inhibiting forces included the West's great environmental and ethnic diversity; the flood of pulp fiction whose formulas froze "the most colorful western themes and characters" into simplistic petrified myths; constant immigration; late and irregular development; and a citizenry that have always been "notably migrant." "Fearing the loss of what tradition we have," says Stegner, "we cling to it hard, we are hooked on history." As a result:

The typical western writer loves the past of his native region, but despises the present. In a way the dichotomy between past and

present is a product of two forces, generally embodied in characters frequently encountered in both western fiction and the Western: the freedom-loving, roving man and the civilizing woman.

As some of Stegner's own histories explain, however, the western frontier was not entirely barbarous. The old axiom that literature does not flourish on a frontier did not hold true for all of the West. As Franklin Walker's literary history of early San Francisco shows, the Forty-Niners had scarcely left their sluice boxes before the likes of Bret Harte, Ambrose Bierce, Joaquin Miller, and Mark Twain had made the Bay Area a literary center that could for a time rival all but a few of the centuries-older cities on the eastern seaboard. Universities had been founded and periodicals such as *The Overland Monthly* established almost before the western frontier had emerged from its adolescence. By 1890 when the massacre at Wounded Knee ended the Indian Wars, universities in California, Colorado, Oregon, Washington—in fact, in almost all the western states—were already fixtures of western life, many of them having passed their twenty-fifth anniversaries.

Although the frontier had ceased to exist in many areas beyond the hundredth meridian long before 1890, that year is the divide between the Old West and the New. The region had emerged from its territorial days, and it faced the approaching twentieth century with a rich and colorful past. The West now had a considerable body of frontier literature, pioneering efforts that constitute the first stage of its literary history. When we compare that first stage with what came later, the following lines by Walt Whitman apply:

These are of us, they are with us,
 All for primal needed work, while the followers there in embryo wait
 behind,
 We to-day's procession heading, we the route for travel clearing,
 Pioneers! O pioneers!

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