

## SECTION II

### *The Written Donnée of Western Literature*



## Introduction

**B**EFORE ITS MAJOR SETTLEMENT, the West was crossed by a succession of explorers, fur trappers, merchants, soldiers, European noblemen, and eastern health seekers. So many of these sojourners wrote about their western adventures that their accounts make up a sizeable body of literature, most of it entertaining and some of it quite well written. In his chapter on that literature, J. Golden Taylor explains that those adventure narratives are the source for much later western literature. It bears repeating that *The Journals of Lewis and Clark* are the headwaters of western American literature in the same way that William Bradford's *Of Plymouth Plantation* is one of the fountainheads of American literature. And just as Nathaniel Hawthorne read Cotton Mather, so twentieth-century western writers seeking inspiration and substance for their novels have turned to the works of Francis Parkman, George Frederick Ruxton, and Lewis H. Garrard.

Our perception of western literature can be sharpened not only by studying the early adventure narratives, but also by examining later accounts of western experience. To that end, there are chapters in this section on "The Military" and on "Lawmen and Outlaws." From each of these studies, as well as from Barre Toelken's earlier chapter on western folklore, emerge several axioms about the relationship between western American life and literature.

First, western themes and jokes can be traced to prototypes that were venerable among the Greeks and Romans. Second, the literary treatment of a historical theme or a folklore motif changes with variations in social thought and attitudes. As Kent Steckmesser notes in his chapter on "Outlaws and Lawmen," before 1900 Billy the Kid generally entered the literature only as a consummate villain, but after the turn of the century, he was resurrected as a noble and persecuted demigod. The shift in the literary treatment of Billy seems to coincide with the closing of the frontier and the onset of rapid technological acceleration. Third, the rise of western myths calls forth a crusade of historians and novelists who live to debunk the myths in order to rescue their Holy Grail (i.e., Western Fact). Finally, wit-

nessing the clash between the forces of Myth and the armies of Fact, a third type of writer suggests the relative, pluralistic, shifting bases of truth. The western mind begins to recognize the historical process, and that recognition is expressed in increasingly ironic, modernistic forms. Even the legions of formula writers have sometimes shown an awareness that the Western is no monolithic, unshifting myth or fact, but a combination of both that varies with one's perspective.

Other types of frontier writing have helped awaken us to that more complex view of western experience. Letters, diaries, journals, autobiographies, and biographies provide the basis for much western fiction and poetry. Although few of these sub-genres have been studied as they have developed in the West (Michael Koury's chapter on the military is a first attempt at such a study), a number of recent books on pioneer women use letters, diaries, and journals as evidence. Western writing in the areas of history, anthropology, archaeology, and social protest also often influences the literature, yet we have no historical survey of any of those forms as they evolved in our region. Some idea of how many hundreds of western books have been written in these sub-genres can be gathered by reading the chapters on "History and Interpretation," "Biography and Autobiography," "Archaeological and Anthropological Writings," and "Narratives of the Cattle Country" in *Southwest Heritage* (University of New Mexico Press, 1970) by Mabel Major and T. M. Pearce. The output of such books as are listed in those chapters by Major and Pearce is as voluminous in the West's other sub-regions as it is in the Southwest.

Studies of those other sub-genres could aid us in better understanding western writing of the "middle ground," to use the term that Wallace Stegner applies to writing that falls somewhere between fiction and history. "I defend the middle ground," Stegner says, "as one who has strayed there several times—in *The Preacher and the Slave*, *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian*, *The Gathering of Zion*, and *Wolf Willow*" ("On the Writing of History," in *Western Writing*, ed. Gerald Haslam [University of New Mexico Press, 1974], p. 27). Stegner is not the only western writer who has explored the middle ground between two genres. George R. Stewart's *Storm, Fire, and Sheep Rock*, Wright Morris's *The Home Place*, N. Scott Momaday's *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, Mari Sandoz's *Old Jules*, Richard Brautigan's *Trout Fishing in America*, and Leslie Marmon Silko's *Storyteller* are other examples of western writing that combines several genres or explores the territory between them.

Literary works of the middle ground provide strong evidence of the value to the literary historian of studying western works that might not be classified as *belles-lettres*. Even so early a western book as Mark Twain's

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*Roughing It* (1872) relies on even earlier books such as *The Vigilantes of Montana* (1866) by Thomas J. Dimsdale. Since our response to a work of literature is conditioned by what we bring to that work, some knowledge of the West's written *donnée* must necessarily help to shape a response to a work of western *belles-lettres*, resulting in an aesthetic experience which is different from the response of a reader ignorant of the extra-literary background.

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