



Part Two

SETTLED IN: MANY WESTS

INTRODUCTION

FEWER THAN A DOZEN YEARS after the closing of the frontier in 1890, San Francisco novelist Frank Norris observed: “The Frontier has become conscious of itself, acts the part for the Eastern visitor; and this self-consciousness is a sign, surer than all others, of the decadence of a type, the passing of an epoch.” Like the post-revolutionary writers of the new American republic who viewed America’s colonial past with a determination to build from it a new national literature, post-1890 western writers realized that upon the stories and legends of the Old West, they had to create a new literature for a region with a newly acquired self-consciousness.

By 1960, the West had its new literature. But as late as 1962 in his preface to *A Country in the Mind*, Ray B. West wrote: “The West is still, of necessity, pioneering.” He added that “When a Westerner uses the word ‘pioneer,’ he is not merely creating an image; he is likely remembering his grandfather.” With that self-consciousness about the region’s newness and its frontier days, western writers from 1890 to 1960 resemble in important ways the writers who created an American national literature in the years from 1790 to 1860.

Both groups of authors expressed their strong desire to create distinctive literary works to match the distinctive new character of their culture. Both occasionally indulged in a kind of literary boosterism, boasting their successes and sometimes overrating their more modest achievements. Criticized for such displays or (worse) ignored, both groups resorted to a defensiveness that some outsiders mistook for xenophobia or narrow parochialism. But because they knew they were pioneering, the writers of both groups created works that explore questions of national and regional identity, works of philosophical probing.

One group inspired by nationalism, the other by regionalism, they both sought to make local subjects and scenes the matter of their literature. In pre-Civil War America, industrialization, the Westward Movement, the debate over slavery, and the wars of 1812 and 1846, all had an effect on the writers of the period. In the years from 1890 to 1960, western writers saw the creation of the National Forest and National Park systems and watched as the plains turned into a dustbowl and farmers headed west again for a new start. With massive dams springing up everywhere in the West, conservationists—many of them writers—tried to slow the rush toward “progress.”

But most westerners agreed that a change such as rural electrification was progress, although power lines and growing smog made the price evident.

Economically, however, the West remained a colony of the East. As such vassalage was mitigated by the discovery in the West of vast oil fields and by the development of the new aerospace industry, westerners put aside the populist sentiments of the 1890s, becoming by the 1960s the most conservative of Americans. As in regions and nations in other parts of the globe, however, many of the West's writers did not follow the prevailing political drift of their neighbors. Indeed, in debates over unionization, conservation, land use planning, and environmental protection, the two sides often seemed to be (1) those who recognized more than just a romanticized part of the western past and (2) everyone else.

Almost like people suffering from a retrograde amnesia, many westerners often seemed blind to the lessons of the past, as if they could not see the miles of gravel mounds left by dredge mining, the acres of hillsides eroded by overgrazing, the mountain slopes denuded by clearcut-and-run lumbering. Tantalized by visions of the American dream, such people seemed to believe not in the actual past but in the formula-bound Old West of Zane Grey and Hollywood. The tinsel West of such believers seemed to permit an escape from time: out of the present into the romanticized world of *Riders of the Purple Sage* and into a glorious future untouched by past mistakes and blessed with the infinite bounty of the western cornucopia. In contrast to westerners oblivious to the real past, insensitive to the present, and unprepared to face a future littered with old mistakes, the region's best writers realized a truth expressed by T. S. Eliot in *Little Gidding*:

A people without history
Is not redeemed from time, for history is a pattern
Of timeless moments.

Attempting to recreate the authentic Old West and to describe the actual New West, western writers also tried to understand what the western landscape meant and should mean to the people living in it. The writers of the early republic and the American Renaissance had similar concerns. In *The Scarlet Letter*, for example, Hawthorne recreated timeless moments of the past and placed them in the pattern that bound the American to the Puritan, showing that Americans could not escape history. Yet in seeing western writers of the years from 1890 to 1960 as undergoing on a regional level much of what American writers from 1790 to 1860 had experienced on a national level, one should avoid the reductionist mistake (sometimes made in discussing American romantics, realists, and naturalists) of approaching writers and their works solely in terms of the dominant ideology

or philosophy of a literary movement or period. As Edwin H. Cady has explained in *The Light of Common Day*, to characterize the literature of a period by looking only at its ideas is to miss much, perhaps most, of what makes literature distinctive. Cady says that by considering the mode of sensibility of the romancer, we come “closer to the actual cultural phenomena of the author, the book, and the reader. . .”; and Cady also gives a succinct definition of “sensibility”:

Deeper in the psyche than ideas, perhaps a source for them, certainly a major determinant of our choice of one possible idea in favor of another, sensibility is more than “feelings,” emotion. It connotes tact, a feeling for life, a way of taking events and making experience, a ground for life-style and at last for morality.

Just as a distinctive—though not unique—American sensibility grew and manifested itself in the works of pre-Civil War American writers, so a western sensibility—distinctive, not unique—developed, becoming more pronounced in the period from 1890 to 1960. It was present in the westerners in the generation of American writers which Cady says was “held together by one thing: all felt and responded to, were perhaps tempted by, though none consistently or definitively committed himself to, the sensibility of a naturalist”—a generation that included the western writers Frank Norris, Willa Cather, Jack London, and Ole Rølvaag. Younger by a decade than those writers, Robinson Jeffers came closest to a thoroughgoing naturalist’s point of view. By the 1920s, however, Jeffers and other western writers had also adopted a distinctive mode of apprehension that Max Westbrook calls Western realism (“Conservative, Liberal, and Western: Three Modes of American Realism,” in *The Literature of the American West*, ed. J. Golden Taylor).

Two other modes of apprehension—which Westbrook calls Liberal realism and Conservative realism—preceded the Western. The fundamental distinction between the two earlier modes and the newer regional one, as Westbrook explains, is that “in profane realisms the conscious mind is primary; in Western realism the unconscious mind is primary.” Western realism is usually a large part of the western sensibility, of which there are varying degrees as is also true of the sensibility of romancers, realists, and naturalists. Its vastness and its mountains prompting the writer to see life in the scale of geological time, the western landscape is the greatest source of the western sensibility. The record of millions of years written on the canyon walls of the West and implied by the ocean-like expanses of its plains and deserts suggests the relative puniness of the conscious human mind and the greater power of an unconscious mind moving in accord with the ele-

mental rhythms of the earth. Not all western writers have been sufficiently moved by that suggestion to accept the primacy of the unconscious, but even those who are exceptions reveal a western sensibility in their approach to human history. With its origins in medieval Latin poetry, the *ubi sunt* motif is obviously not unique to western American literature, but when western writers deplore the eclipse of a golden age by a crass modernity, their laments have distinct reference to the special conditions of frontier life in the western landscape.

However much it was characterized by Western realism and by an expression of the *ubi sunt* motif, the western sensibility from 1890 to 1960 was generally that of the "square," the term that Wallace Stegner used in his essay "Born a Square" (1964) to refer to "a certain western innocence, even dewy innocence, in the teeth of the modern world" (*Conversations with Wallace Stegner on Western History and Literature*, p. 123). Almost twenty years after the publication of that essay, still convinced that "squareness" marked the western sensibility, Stegner said:

The kind of western writer who writes modern literature immediately abdicates as a Westerner, and the kind who sticks to the western attitude is likely to be considered a little backward by the modernists. That dichotomy does persist. There are certain western writers who share common characteristics. . . . You could tell it partly by subject matter, of course, but also by manner and attitude. (*Conversations*, pp. 123–24)

Beginning in the 1950s but especially after 1960, western writers younger than Stegner began to exhibit what Stegner maintains is impossible—a western sensibility tinged with modernism—but there are few, if any, exceptions to Stegner's dictum among western writers of his own generation.

In manner and attitude, that generation did not adopt the bohemian and avant-garde style of many modernists, nor did they run in packs. We think of writers such as Robinson Jeffers, Vardis Fisher, and Walter Van Tilburg Clark as loners or mavericks, stubbornly refusing to shift with the winds of fashion. And because they did not parade in the latest literary fashions, they were often, as Stegner points out, either misunderstood or ignored. But even long residence in the East could not etiolate that fundamental westernness in a Willa Cather or a Bernard DeVoto or a Mari Sandoz.

A shared sensibility apparent in western writers does not, however, mean that those of the period from 1890 to 1960 are a homogeneous group. "Most of the great West," as Gerald W. Haslam has explained, "was so var-

ied that variety itself seems to have been its major characteristic. We are faced with a semantic dilemma: we say West, and consequently search for common characteristics, when in fact we must deal with *Wests*" (*Western Writing* p. 4). To cope with that dilemma, this part of *A Literary History of the American West* is divided into four sections, each focusing on one of the West's sub-regions. Each sub-region has its own distinctive landscape and history, and a glance at titles of representative western literary studies shows that each sub-region has developed its own body of literature: *California Classics* by Lawrence Clark Powell; *Guide to Life and Literature of the Southwest* by J. Frank Dobie; *The Literature of the Middle Western Frontier* by Ralph L. Rusk; and *Rocky Mountain Life in Literature* by Levette J. Davidson.

So distinct are the West's sub-regions, in fact, that a few observers have contended that the larger region does not exist, there being no cohesion between the sub-regions. A brief consideration of the lives of a few western writers dispels that notion. Although most authors seem primarily concerned with only one western sub-region, a surprising number of writers in the years from 1890 to 1960 lived in two or more of the sub-regions, and most western writers were familiar with the works of contemporaries from other sub-regions. Counting Clarence King and Helen Hunt Jackson among her acquaintances, Mary Hallock Foote lived in and wrote about Colorado, California, and Idaho. The next significant Idaho author, Vardis Fisher, was a professor for a few years at the University of Utah. A student in one of Fisher's classes, Wallace Stegner had traveled with his family from Iowa to homesteads in North Dakota, Washington, Saskatchewan, Montana, and Wyoming; and since 1945 he has lived in California, where as director of Stanford University's Creative Writing Program he has taught students who are now themselves noted western writers, among them Larry McMurtry of Texas and Ken Kesey of Oregon. A Nebraskan, Willa Cather wrote some of her novels about the Southwest; and Frederick Manfred's *Siouxland* extends from his home in Minnesota to the Rocky Mountains. We find a Montanan, A. B. Guthrie, Jr., writing an introduction to Lewis H. Garrard's *Wah-To-Yah and the Taos Trail*, and a Texan, J. Frank Dobie, writing introductions to Helen Hunt Jackson's *Ramona* and Archer B. Gilfillan's *Sheep, Life on the South Dakota Range*.

Clearly, there is a *West* in addition to the sub-regional *Wests*. Moreover, from 1890 to 1960 writers from all of the West's sub-regions shared a common burden as well as a common sensibility. Because formula novels about the West received the tag "Westerns," the region's other writers had to write under the shadow of Zane Grey and his legions. Wallace Stegner explains that "A principal problem of living in the West is that you get labeled as a limited regionalist"; and he adds:

I don't like to be called a western writer, simply because it's a limiting term, a pejorative term like "local colorist." But I certainly am not objecting to being thought of as a person who comes from the West, as a writer who comes from the West, and who writes from the West. "Western writer" is likely to make you sound like Louis L'Amour. (*Conversations*, p. 132)

To understand how "Westerns" have influenced the development of western literature, keep in mind Stegner's statement and then imagine what might have happened to American literature if at the beginning of the nineteenth century a flood of formula novels about America had been labeled "Americans" and the formula writers themselves had come to be spoken of as "American writers." Suppose *The Scarlet Letter* and *Moby-Dick* had been dismissed as simply two more "Americans" (*Moby-Dick* did sink into half a century of obscurity in this country because it was at first regarded as simply an adventure story). Even with no such onus attached to the literature of the American Renaissance, professors of American literature had to argue for years in order to gain a place for their courses in the English curriculum along with the study of British literature.

Western American literature not only had to proceed under the penumbra of the pejorative label "Western," but it also had to cultivate the same territory that Hollywood and television rode roughshod over. Such negative connotation applied to an entire region has created a strange milieu in which the West's literature is written, read, and studied, for the region's best writers simultaneously try to create a distinctive regional literature but to avoid the regional label, whereas the formula writers perpetuate the old romanticized version of the West and do all they can to have the regional label applied to them and their works. As a result, the West has two major cultural currents: the tradition of the formula "Westerns" and the anti-tradition, works by those western writers who want to create a western literature but who also want to avoid classification as western writers. The tensions between these two major currents and the influence they have had upon each other have yet to be adequately understood.

What we do understand is that a substantial body of first-rate western American literature was written during the seventy years after the frontier ceased to be a continuous line. At the same time, immigration into the region continued, shifting the population balance from the East to the West, and the region became more industrialized and increasingly dependent on technology. Many writers warned that the consequences of such rapid growth and change could be dire, but few westerners took them seriously, and so most were unprepared for the cultural, moral, intellectual, and environmental crises of the 1960s and 1970s. Those years of crisis were to the

West what the Civil War had been to the North and the South: a profound shock to their sense of cultural identity. Settled in since the 1890s, westerners found themselves unsettled in many ways by the events of the 1960s.

The western sensibility survived the shocks of the sixties and seventies, but not without being altered. Westerners felt a new sense of loss—like the *ubi sunt* laments but more urgent—for now it seemed that we were losing our memory of the past as well as its glories. Lyman Ward, the narrator of Stegner's *Angle of Repose*, spoke for many westerners when he said: "This present of 1970 is no more an extension of my grandparents' world, this West is no more a development of the West they helped build, than the sea over Santorin is an extension of that once-island of rock and olives. . . . I am on my grandparents' side. I believe in Time, as they did, and in the life chronological rather than in the life existential. We live in time and through it, we build our huts in its ruins, or used to, and we cannot afford all these abandonings" (p. 18).

The fear that westerners had abandoned their past was caused mainly by the upheavals of the Vietnam era. But the escapist nature of the popular "Westerns" and the reluctance of the non-"Western" western writers to be identified with the traditions of the region also played a role in making people like Lyman Ward feel that the West had turned its back on its own past. As the essays in this part of *A Literary History of the American West* demonstrate, western history and literature are still being studied, the anarchy that Lyman Ward feared has not come to pass, and the West—with most of its old problems and some new ones—is still here.

If the West is still here at the turn of the century, if we are fortunate enough to escape nuclear annihilation and ecocide, then we will be able to look back on the second major stage in the development of western American literature as a seventy-year period when western writers, having settled in to the sub-regions, explored the new regional identity. To understand adequately the achievement of those authors who wrote during the years from 1890 to 1960, we will each have to conduct our own search, leading, if successful, to the individual enlightenment that comes as the fulfillment of the cultural process. As T. S. Eliot wrote in *Little Gidding*:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

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