

OWEN WISTER

The Virginian



ENRICHED CLASSIC

E N R I C H E D C L A S S I C

The Virginian



OWEN WISTER

**With an Introduction by
GARY SCHARNHORST**

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In Wyoming territory, pioneers came to test their fortunes—and their wills—in the untamed West. It was a harsh, unforgiving land with its own unwritten code of honor by which men lived and died. Into this wild landscape rides the Virginian, the first—and most compellingly drawn—heroic cowboy in American literature. As enigmatic as he is human, the Virginian epitomizes the mythic figure of a solitary man whose unbending will is his only guide through life. But his deepest beliefs in right and wrong are tested as he tries to prove his love for a woman who cannot accept his sense of justice, even as a betrayal by his most trusted friend forces him to fight against the corruption that rules the land.

The Enriched Classics edition of *The Virginian* was prepared by Gary Scharnhorst, professor of English at the University of New Mexico and editor of *American Literary Realism*. He is the author of, among other books, *Bret Harte: Opening the American Literary West*, and is the editor of *The Selected Letters of Bret Harte*.

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INTRODUCTION

The Virginian is undoubtedly the most famous novel in Western American literary history and undeniably a "fun read." In it, Owen Wister virtually invented the modern Western formula—the conflict between the forces of civilization and lawlessness on the frontier, with the cowboy-hero as the incarnation and mediator of this conflict. The book struck a nerve in the popular imagination. It sold some 50,000 copies within its first two months in print, about 100,000 in its first three-plus months, and it passed through fifteen printings in its first eight months. It was the best-selling novel of 1902, and the fifth best-seller in 1903. As late as 1929 it was still selling at the rate of about 34,000 copies per year and, in all, it has sold over two million copies over the past century. A theatrical version of the story co-written by Wister opened in the fall of 1903 and remained on the road for over a decade, eventually starring a young William S. Hart in the title role. As Wister wrote of the play in 1930, it was "heartily damned by the New York critics, ran for a while in non-Broadway, for ten years on the road, is still played in stock after twenty-seven years." The novel has been adapted to the screen five different times, first by Cecil B. DeMille in 1914, in productions starring such actors as Gary Cooper, Walter Huston, Joel McCrea, and Dennis Weaver. It even inspired a television series

in the 1960s. In all, *The Virginian* has left an indelible mark on American popular culture in general and the Western story-formula in particular. The 1952 movie *High Noon*, for example, is basically a remake of the climactic chapter of the novel, again featuring Gary Cooper as the soft-spoken hero with Grace Kelly in the role of the Eastern schoolmarm.

With a sort of ragged genius, Wister invented a new kind of Western hero, a type of "transcendent cowboy," who reconciles or synthesizes essentially contradictory ideas of East and West. With literally a few strokes of his pen, Wister resolved the old tension between nature and civilization by presenting the West not as a set of natural values antithetical to civilization but as a social environment where the "best men" could succeed and prosper as in Colonial times. Whereas James Fenimore Cooper in his *Leatherstocking Tales* had depicted the American West as an anarchic and uncivilized landscape, and whereas the dime-novels and Beadle yellowbacks by Ned Buntline, Prentiss Ingraham, and Buffalo Bill in the late 1870s had sensationalized the West for purposes of vulgar juvenile entertainment, Wister set his "colonial romance" in a mythological West where the best women and men could rise and prosper as in the earliest days of the Republic. The parallel is explicitly established in the first paragraph of Wister's original preface to the novel: "Wyoming between 1874 and 1890 was a colony as wild as was Virginia one hundred years earlier." Ironically, the author of *The Virginian*, the creator of the modern Western, was scarcely a rugged Westerner in his own right. Rather, in his initiation to things Western he resembled his tenderfoot narrator more than he did the hero. A patrician by estate and conviction, he was to the manor, not the bunkhouse, born.

Born in Philadelphia in 1860 and raised in a refined Eastern circle, Owen Wister was a child of privilege. He was the great-great-grandson of Pierce Butler, a delegate to the Con-

stitutional Convention; the grandson of the famed Shakespearean actor Fanny Kemble; and the son of Sarah Butler Wister, a frequent contributor to the *Atlantic Monthly*, and Owen Jones Wister, a country doctor. As a young child Wister was taught to speak French fluently and he came to know such literary celebrities as Henry James, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, James Russell Lowell, W. D. Howells, and Matthew Arnold. Educated at private schools in Europe and New England, he entered Harvard in 1878 and graduated Phi Beta Kappa and *summa cum laude* with a major in classical music four years later. He also established lifelong friendships at college with such men as Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., Henry Cabot Lodge, Henry Adams, and, most important, Theodore Roosevelt.

After graduation, Wister, an aspiring classical composer, set off for a Grand Tour of Europe and a year of study at the Paris Conservatoire. Armed with a letter of introduction to Franz Lizst, the Hungarian composer, he attended the Wagner festival in Bayreuth, Germany, in August 1882. After hearing Wister play an original piece for piano, Lizst declared that the twenty-two-year-old musician possessed "*un talent prononcé*." At the insistence of his father, however, he returned to a job in a Boston brokerage, attended Harvard Law School, and eventually opened a law practice ("a detested occupation," he later admitted). In 1884 he began a novel entitled *A Wise Man's Son*, now lost, that he submitted to his mentor, Howells, for his assessment. But the Dean of American Letters was not much impressed and recommended that Wister never show it to a publisher. "Were it a translation from the Russian," Howells explained, "there would be no objection to such a book; coming from a young American," however, it would be "certain to shock the public gravely" because it was "full of hard swearing, hard drinking, too much knowledge of good and evil, and a whole fig tree could not cover the Widow Taylor." Diagnosed with neurasthenia by his friend

and distant cousin, S. Weir Mitchell, a famous Philadelphia nerve specialist, who prescribed his "rest cure" (or, more properly in this case, the "West cure"), Wister traveled to Wyoming for the first time in the summer of 1885.

The trip was, by Wister's own admission, the turning point of his life. Within a week of his arrival he wrote in his journal that the West would be "simply the true America." Like Theodore Roosevelt, this sickly son of an effete Eastern family recovered his health in the West before returning to his Eastern home and reclaiming his inherited social role. Still, Wister continued to visit the West periodically, some fifteen times in all, until 1900, and he began to publish sketches about the region in 1892. He was never prolific, however. As he explained to an interviewer in 1894,

If you want to know how I write, I must tell you it is done very slowly, and often the stories are written over two or three times. I write first in pencil, and then change, cut out and turn about in such a way that the original draft would scarcely be recognized. As a general thing it takes from two to five weeks for me to write a story of 6,000 to 8,000 words.

His first collection of Western stories, *Red Men and White*, appeared in 1895, and two more books soon followed: *Lin McLean* in 1897 and *The Jimmyjohn Boss and Other Stories* in 1900. In 1898, he married a distant cousin, Molly Channing Wister, the great-granddaughter of William Ellery Channing; they became the parents of six children.

Wister's novel, *The Virginian*, appeared in late May 1902. It was a mosaic of seven stories about the hero he had already published in *Harper's* and the *Saturday Evening Post* ("Em'ly," "Where Fancy Was Bred," "The Game and the Nation," "Balaam and Pedro," "Grandmother Stark," "Superstition Trail," and "With Malice Aforethought") woven together

with a comparable amount of new material. Three of these stories were written from the point of view of the tenderfoot narrator, the other four from that of an omniscient narrator, and Wister did not revise for narrative consistency. The sections that depict the Virginian in naturalistic terms, as when he invites the Reverend Mr. MacBride to "loose his wolf" on him or when he leads the posse that hangs the rustlers, are written from the perspective of the tenderfoot. The sections that describe the Virginian's courtship of the heroine, Molly Wood, are told mostly from an omniscient point of view. So as not to underscore its fractured and episodic nature, Wister changed his original subtitle for the novel, "A Tale of Sundry Adventures," to "A Horseman of the Plains." Much as Fenimore Cooper wrote his Western romance *The Prairie*, set on the plains of Nebraska, while living in a Paris hotel, Wister wrote most of *The Virginian*, set in Wyoming, at his home in Charleston, South Carolina. Or as Philip Durham later joked, Wister was "a Pennsylvanian who sat down in South Carolina and wrote a book about a Virginian who lived in Wyoming." His friend Roosevelt, to whom it was dedicated and who was at the time President of the United States, congratulated the author: "It is a remarkable novel. If I were not President, and therefore unable to be quoted, I should like nothing better than to write a review of it."

A prominent, conservative, public intellectual until his death, Wister nevertheless wrote only one more novel during his career: the virulently racist novel of manners *Lady Baltimore* (1906), set in Charleston. A member of the Harvard Board of Overseers from 1912 to 1925, Wister mentored a young Ernest Hemingway in the late twenties. After reading *The Sun Also Rises*, Wister told a friend, "I don't know any young writer whose style and gift seems to me to approach him. Were I thirty, that's the way I should wish to write." As Hemingway remembered in 1956, Wister "was the most unselfish and most dis-interested and the most loving" writer he

had ever known. "He just thought I was a good writer and he loved *The Sun Also Rises* and I think he had seen me ride a horse or something like that." Wister published two more collections of Western tales after *The Virginian*—*Members of the Family* (1911) and *When West Was West* (1928). He died in 1938, an outspoken and unreconstructed critic of unrestricted immigration, labor unions, educational reform, and the New Deal.

Wister inherited a literary tradition that regarded the Western as a form of social and political commentary. From Fenimore Cooper to Gary Cooper, Westerns often functioned as symbolic melodramas or allegories. For example, the first story Wister wrote with the Virginian as a character, "Em'ly" (1893), about a hen who tries to raise a litter of puppies, was a type of antifeminist parable that satirized "unnatural motherhood." Ironically, at a time women teachers were routinely fired when they married, Wister was expressing an uncontroversial opinion of the abridged rights of women. He also subtly criticized the 1894 Pullman strike, during which he had been stranded in California, in "The Game and the Nation" (1900). In the hero's defeat of the labor leader typified by Trampas in these chapters, that is, Wister decisively sided with capital and against strike organizers such as Eugene V. Debs. But this opinion, too, was not particularly controversial. On the other hand, in his essay "The Evolution of the Cow-Puncher" (1895), Wister infamously decried the "encroaching alien vermin" that "turn our cities to Babels and our citizenship to a hybrid face, who degrade our commonwealth from a nation into something half pawn-shop, half broker's office. But to succeed in the clean cattle country requires spirit of adventure, courage, and self-sufficiency; you will not find many Poles or Huns or Russian Jews in that district." Fortunately, or so goes the argument, Wister muted such extremist views—a racial Manifest Destiny—when he composed *The*

Virginian. The hero at one point is forced to fire a ranch hand with the German surname Schoffner, apparently the descendant of "Huns," and to replace him with Scipio Le Moyne despite his French surname. Yet Le Moyne comes from a family that has been fully assimilated, or as he hastens to assure the Virginian, "us folks have been white for a hundred years." At least at first glance, the novel seemed to be a neutral text or patriotic tale with no overt political subtext, and so it gave offense to neither Democrat nor Republican.

But there is a subtle political subtext. The Virginian possesses precisely those manly qualities Wister feared modern industrial society had repressed. That is, he conceived his cowboy as a cultural atavist, a throwback to the true American aristocrat through whose agency the national character might be revitalized. In Wister's West, the spirit of '76 was alive and well and punching dogies west of Medicine Bow. In *Lin McLean*, Wister had written that "one man has been as good as another in three places—Paradise before the Fall; the Rocky Mountains before the wire fence; and the Declaration of Independence," and he would associate the Virginian repeatedly with the Declaration in years to come. He wrote his friend Hamilton Mabie in June 1902, soon after the novel appeared, that the hero "embodies something I have felt the throb of far and wide in our land—the best thing the Declaration of Independence ever turned out." Five months later, he reiterated the point to Richard Harding Davis, describing his Western hero as a "declaration of indepenence [sic] man . . . who-is-the-best-thing-our-sort-grows." Indeed, the Virginian, who allows that he "used to have to learn about the Declaration of Independence . . . when I was a kid," virtually quotes the document at one point: "All men are born equal," he tells the schoolmarm Molly Stark. Not only does the Virginian echo the most famous single line in the Declaration; not only does he share a common state of origin with Thomas Jefferson and George Washington; he also is associated by name

with each of these Founding Fathers. That is, the historical models who most influenced Wister's conception of the Virginian were both Presidents and Virginians in fact. The titular character, who is otherwise given no "handle" in the novel, is addressed as "Jeff" on a scrap of paper by his old friend Steve. And the tenderfoot narrator elsewhere describes the spelling in letters he receives from the Virginian as "little worse than George Washington's." After the hero humiliates the saddle tramp Trampas with a tall tale about frogs, moreover, his future wife, Molly Wood, who has the same initials as Martha Washington, defends him by arguing that "it wasn't that George Washington couldn't tell a lie. He just wouldn't. I'm sure if he's undertaken to he'd have told a much better one than Cornwallis."

More explicitly than any other device Wister employed, Molly's atavism illustrates the correspondence in the novel between the founders of the Republic and their heirs on the frontier. A direct descendant and namesake of the Molly Stark whose husband had "battled so bravely" during the American Revolution that he had sent "his name thrilling down through the blood of generations of schoolboys," Molly regresses in the course of the romance until she becomes a virtual reincarnation of her grandmother. Even before Molly leaves New England for her new home in the West, her great-aunt at Dunbarton tells her that she is "getting more like the General's wife every year." The day of her departure, she is distinctly characterized in atavistic terms: "If the ancestors that we carry shut up inside us take turns in dictating to us our actions and our state of mind, undoubtedly Grandmother Stark was empress of Molly's spirit upon this Monday." "Independence and Grandmother Stark" shine in her eyes as she is en route to Wyoming, and "Grandmother Stark flashed awake deep within the spirit of her descendant" the first time the Virginian comes courting at Bear Creek. Once settled there, Molly hangs a miniature portrait of her grandmother at

twenty—her own age—on the wall of her cabin. In the spirit of her ancestor, Molly rescues her lover after he has been left for dead and nurses him back to health. During the ordeal, she “appealed to Grandmother Stark for support and comfort across the hundred years which lay between them.” As he recuperates in her cabin, the Virginian detects their resemblance. “You’re cert’nly awful like her,” he whispers to the portrait on the wall. “In this way,” as John G. Cawelti concludes, “Wister suggests that the West is not entirely a new cultural experience, but a rebirth of the revolutionary generation’s vigor.”

Like Jefferson, the author of the Declaration, in chaps and spurs, the Virginian is also a rustic natural-rights philosopher, a natural aristocrat and proponent of agrarianism who grounds his thought on the principle of equality. He repudiates the modern perversion of that principle which holds that all men are created equal in talents—equality in that sense “is a great big bluff,” as he tells Molly. The Virginian endorses the notion of equal opportunity, not equal reward. “I know a man that works hard and he’s gettin’ rich, and I know another that works hard and is gettin’ poor,” he explains to the “lost dog” Shorty. “I look around and I see folks movin’ up or movin’ down, winners or losers everywhere.” The phenomenon is simple: Those who succeed are better equipped to exploit opportunities than those who fail. On the frontier no less than in the Colonies a century earlier, inequalities among men and women mirror differences in natural endowments. The narrator, who knows the Virginian harbors opinion on the idea of equality “as strong as mine,” summarizes the point in chapter 13: In the Declaration of Independence

we decreed that every man should thenceforth have equal liberty to find his own level. By this very decree we acknowledged and gave freedom to true aristocracy, saying, “Let the best man win, whoever he is.” Let the best man

win! . . . That is true democracy. And true democracy and true aristocracy are one and the same thing. If anybody cannot see this, so much the worse for his eyesight.

Much as the Virginian embraces the principle of equal opportunity, he epitomizes the "true aristocrat" whose innate superiority entitles him to rise to a position of prominence and social authority.

Upon meeting the Virginian for the first time, the narrator recognizes that "the creature we call a *gentleman* lies deep in the heart of thousands that are born without chance to master the outward graces of the type." He realizes that in the cowboy often "sat hidden a true nobility." Later, he notes, the Virginian "felt himself to be a giant whom life had made 'broad gauge,' and denied opportunity." Fortunately, of course, the Virginian's fears are unfounded. The "cut-and-dried aristocracy" of "little men artificially held up in high places, and great men artificially held down in low places" had been abolished by the Declaration. Endowed with gifts and opportunized to rise, the Virginian gradually proves his mettle in the course of the novel, rising from uneducated hired hand to deputy foreman to foreman to, in the end, Judge Henry's partner and one of the most important men in the territory.

Significantly, this "son of the soil" achieves both social status and self-fulfillment as a landowner. In effect, that is, the Virginian subscribes to the agrarianism of Jefferson. If freehold estates were readily available, Jefferson believed, small yeoman farmers would be both economically and politically independent. Close contact with the soil enables such farmers to be virtuous or, as Wister's narrator observes, "They live nearer nature, and they know better." The Virginian also admits to Shorty that as a young ranch hand he had misspent money he won at cards, but that he carefully invested the money he earned: "The money I made easy that I *wasn't* worth, it went like it came. I strained myself none gettin' or

spendin' it. But the money I made hard that I *was* worth, why, I began to feel right careful about that." He "took up land along a creek that never goes dry and proved upon it." When Shorty attributes his success to sheer luck, the Virginian sternly retorts: "Who stopped yu' taking up land? Did it not stretch in front of yu', behind yu', all around yu', the biggest, baldest opportunity in sight? That was the time I lifted my finger; but yu' didn't." His freehold guarantees him dignity and a place in society.

Like George Washington, moreover, the Virginian is a paladin of justice and a defender of property rights. When he leads a posse that captures and hangs two cattle thieves, for example, he reenacts the role of Washington as commander in chief of the Continental Army. As Judge Henry (an apparent reincarnation of Patrick Henry, patron of both Jefferson and Washington) remarks, "I'd make him lieutenant-general if the ranch offered that position." When cattle begin to disappear from local herds, the Judge predictably commissions the Virginian to track down the rustlers. He later must console the distraught Molly, explaining that in Wyoming "the law has been letting our cattle-thieves go for two years." When government fails to protect the rights of a sovereign citizenry, the outraged people "must take justice back" into their own hands "where it was once at the beginning of all things. Call this primitive, if you will. But so far from being a *defiance* of the law, it is an *assertion* of it—the fundamental assertion of self-governing men, upon whom our whole social fabric is based." As Wister retells the story, John Locke is on the side of the vigilantes. The posse he leads represents the community acting in concert against injustice. The execution of the outlaws represents a rebirth of moral vitality. Certainly Wister did not regard their hanging to be an outlaw act: as the Virginian subsequently insists, he "never killed for profit or pleasure."

For the record, the issues joined in the so-called Johnson County War in 1892 were not nearly so neat as Wister repre-

sented them in the novel. As Helena Huntington Smith explains in *The War on Powder River* (1966), the small ranchers, mostly sheepmen and grangers, believed the cattle barons and their “regulators” were trying to drive them out of business by restricting their ability to graze their herds on public land. Yet according to the cattle barons, specifically the members of the Wyoming Stock Growers Association, the small ranchers and their allies were little more than cattle rustlers. Predictably, Wister sympathized with the cattle barons, many of them his friends, in their guerrilla class war against the ranchers.

The climactic episode in the novel, the Virginian’s showdown with Trampas on the main street of Medicine Bow, also epitomizes the conflict of forces joined in the American Revolution. The bishop of Wyoming, among others, understands “that Trampas was an evil in the country and that the Virginian was a good.” Compelled by a code of personal honor that puts his marriage to Molly at risk (“Can’t yu’ see how it must be about a man?”), even as Washington felt duty-bound to accept command of the Revolutionary Army, the Virginian kills the villain in a street duel and restores order to the town. Caught in a conflict of love, duty, and honor, the Virginian does not hesitate. The code of masculine honor takes precedence over other obligations. The Virginian confronts Trampas fearing that the defense of his honor will cost him the woman he loves. Of course, all ends happily: Molly overcomes her moral compunction and capitulates to love. She marries the hero the next day, and together they watch the sun rise over their bridal camp the morning after that—appropriately, on the Fourth of July. Symbolically, at least, the nation has been renewed and a new era of peace and prosperity inaugurated by the close of this political parable.

In the final chapter, the Virginian seems well on his way to fame and fortune. “When I took up my land, I chose a place where there is coal,” he brags to Molly’s great-aunt at Dun-