

FRONTIER LITERATURE



*Patterns
in
Literary
Style*

FRONTIER LITERATURE

Images of the American West

Edited by

Dan Jaffe

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General Introduction

The history of the American West did not begin when the first wagon train began its journey to Oregon. Nor did it begin with the mountaineers' search for pelts along uncharted and unnamed streams. Even Lewis and Clark were latecomers, instructed by President Jefferson to explore the Missouri River and establish friendly relations with the peoples along its route. Each of those tribes already had a history, a literature, and a rich set of customs. But the story of this continent goes back even further to the ancestors of those Native Americans and to times even before their ancestors—times of great upheavals, times when the sea of grasses was an actual sea. Some of this longer history we learn about from fossils and rock strata, some we guess at, and some has probably been lost forever. *Frontier Literature: Images of the American West* alludes to that history, so readers will understand that we are in midstream so to speak. We do not begin at the beginning, although our first chapter is called "Ancestors." It is important to know that fact. It is what the final selections by Wright Morris and Thomas Hornsby Ferril refer to.

There has been a tendency to view the western frontier from the limited point of view of Anglo colonization. It is the intention of this book to point out the richness of contributions from other sources as well. Throughout the book we have emphasized the roles of Native Americans, blacks, Chicanos, and Asians. We have stressed the part played by women as well. Because so many look west when they try to formulate the nature of the American Dream, it is important to emphasize the varied sources of our western inheritance now because, for so long, those sources were underestimated and ignored. The image of blue-eyed Shane has been our western hero. Our villain has been a savage Sioux or a Mexican bandito. It has given pleasure to the editors to help alter those stereotypes.

This book is a looking back from a contemporary perspective. Among other things it is an attempt to know ourselves by learning how we walked the trails that once were. The thrust of *Frontier Literature: Images of the American West* is chronolog-

ical, metaphorical and symbolic. The book moves forward in time, but it also moves toward a greater awareness of the meanings of our history and our present. Figuratively it echoes the Western experience providing a sense of contrasts between the primitive and the civilized, the wild and the cultivated, the pure and the tainted, the powerful and the victim, the imaginative and the actual. These dramatic tensions are worked out in the chapters that follow. We are concerned in the opening chapter, "Ancestors," with the near history of the area, with a sense of the peoples to whom we are indebted, and with folk materials. In Chapter Two, we shift to the rugged journey west and to the landscape and the promise that the region offered the settlers. Chapter Three extends the themes introduced in Chapter Two, examining further the consequences of the quest and stressing the stubbornness of the pioneers. Chapter Four focuses on the traditional materials of western lore: "cowboy," outlaw, and "Indian." We have tried to provide a new perspective here; these are not TV materials. Once again, we have underlined the interaction between the experience of terrain and weather on the language and character of the participants. This chapter, entitled "Branded," not only suggests the roundup, the "cowboy" experience, ranch and cattle, but also the special way in which the West marks all, homesteader or gunslinger.

Chapter Five deals with growing up on the frontier. We come to a sense of sadness and a sense of amazement seeing how the tough and the sensitive fared. We present examples of the initiation theme where the innocent confront harsh reality and are changed by it. These individual stories also become metaphors and symbols for the maturation of an entire area and by extension a people and a nation. In Chapter Six we look back, marking anew the connections between the present and the past.

Frontier Literature: Images of the American West is a sampling of many kinds of materials: folk stories and legends, newspaper accounts, journals, fiction, autobiography, poetry, and so forth. These samples are pointers toward much more. All of it helps to underscore the courage and skill and endurance required to settle the West as well as the hurts suffered. Some of the great American writers are represented here: Mark Twain, Willa Cather, Gwendolyn Brooks, Hamlin Garland, Loren Eiseley, and Mari Sandoz, to name but a few. We believe a great western literature exists. Much of it cannot be included here, but we hope this book will remind readers of its availability.

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Ancestors

CHAPTER ONE

Many diverse peoples lived on the western frontier, from the Native Americans who were the first inhabitants to the later European and Asian settlers. The combination of these cultures has made our western heritage rich and colorful.

This first chapter of *Frontier Literature: Images of the American West* looks at the cultures and folklores of the many ancestors who settled the West. As you read, remember that ours is a land of many cultures, and though we often separate ourselves, we are all in debt to each other.

Part A:

Native American

How long people had lived in America was not known until the 1920s. One day in 1926 a black cowhand, George McJunkin, spotted some bones and flint points in Dead Man's Gulch, New Mexico. Archaeologists soon learned that these findings dated from a time when northern America was still in the grip of the Ice Age. They called the flint points "Folsom," named for a town near the site. Now, as a result of further study and discovery, it is believed that bands of men and women came to America as long as 30 or 40 thousand years ago.

The first settlers came in small hunting parties. They followed game across the land bridge that is now the Bering Strait between Siberia and Alaska. They scattered over the face of the continent. The great linguistic families subdivided into many tribes—the ancestors of the Algonquin, Blackfoot, Navajo, Apache, Hopi, Zuni, Cheyenne, Sioux, and many others. Cultures rose and fell. Towns were built and abandoned. European explorers would call the continent the New World, but it was new only because they had not known about it.

When the Spaniards came to the Southwest in the 1540s, they brought the horse and thus changed the life of the native peoples, like the Kiowa, as N. Scott Momaday tells in *The Way to Rainy Mountain*. The Kiowa and other tribes were freed from the land. They quickly evolved into nomadic societies that

became various tribes of what we today call Native Americans. These societies, as *Lame Deer* shows, were very complex. They were made up of visionaries and dreamers as well as hunters and warriors.

Like all cultural groups, the Native Americans evolved their own folklore. Its primary figure was Coyote, and his stories were told all through the West. The stories in this chapter come from the Nez Percé, a mountain people who lived in Idaho, Oregon, and southeastern Washington, and from the Plains Ojibway, the westernmost branch of the Chippewa, who inhabited land near Turtle Mountain in North Dakota. There are also Mexican Coyote tales, but in those stories, Coyote's personality is different from that of the original Indian Coyote. In the middle 1950s, Coyote began to appear in works by American poets of the West. In a sense Coyote has now become the ancestor of us all.

In another Native American folktale, "Butterfly Man," Tolowim-Woman can be viewed as the ancestor of all those who frantically chase an ever-receding illusion. Chasing illusions is a universal human trait, and the West saw plenty of it. The Maidu people, who told the story, lived in the Feather River country of California where many of the forty-niners went bankrupt searching for gold. This theme of pursuing something that is never reached is one of the most persistent in American literature. Long before Herman Melville wrote of Captain Ahab's hunt for the white whale, *Moby Dick*, and long before F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote of Jay Gatsby's dream of a perfect love, the story of Tolowim-Woman was told.

INTRODUCTION

John Fire/Lame Deer is a medicine man from the Rosebud Sioux Indian Reservation in South Dakota. This is how he describes himself:

The wícaša wakan loves the silence, wrapping it around himself like a blanket—a loud silence with a voice like thunder which tells him of many things. Such a man likes to be in a place where there is no sound but the humming of insects. He sits facing the west, asking for help. He talks to the plants and they answer him. He listens to the voices of the wama kaškan—all those who move upon the earth, the animals. He is as one with them. From all living beings something flows into him all the time, and something flows from him. I don't know where or what, but it's there. I know.

In the following pages John Fire/Lame Deer tells what the silences have taught him.

The Circle and the Square

John Fire/Lame Deer

What do you see here, my friend? Just an ordinary old cooking pot, black with soot and full of dents.

It is standing on the fire on top of that old wood stove, and the water bubbles and moves the lid as the white steam rises to the ceiling. Inside the pot is boiling water, chunks of meat with bone and fat, plenty of potatoes.

It doesn't seem to have a message, that old pot, and I guess you don't give it a thought. Except the soup smells good and reminds you that you are hungry. Maybe you are worried that