

INTRODUCTION



Walter Van Tilberg Clark

(1909-1971)

Walter Van Tilberg Clark stands at the head of a small group of writers who in the first half of the twentieth century elevated fiction about the American West from formula to literature. In 1917, Clark's father moved the family from Maine to Reno, Nevada, where he had been appointed president of the University of Nevada. Young Clark grew to love the life of the Old West. In 1927, Clark entered the University of Nevada, where he earned a B.A. and an M.A. in English. While there, he spent much of his time writing (mostly poetry) and studying ancient literature, philosophy, and contemporary poetry, particularly that of Robinson Jeffers, whom he imitated in his own verse. He earned a second M.A. in English at the University of Vermont. In the early 1930's, Clark married Barbara Morse, and a year later they moved to Cazenovia, New York, where Clark was to begin five years of teaching at the local high school. He wrote intensively, despite heavy teaching and coaching duties, and published in a national magazine for the first time. It was also during this period that Clark began writing fiction in earnest.

According to Clark, *The Ox-Bow Incident*, his best-known novel, had started as a parody of formulaic fiction about cowboys, 'horse operas,' but with Nazism a growing horror in Europe and war looming, the story became a fable of Fascism, dramatically exploring the themes of justice and demagoguery. The story opens in the fictional Bridger's Wells, a sleepy town near the Sierra Nevada. News comes that cattle ranchers have killed a local cowboy. Angry debate ensues, and a natural leader organizes a vigilante posse; even those who doubt the legality or morality of this action go with the group. They set off as a late snowfall turns the landscape into a vision of harsh contrasts, with black cliffs and white ground. Nature itself seems to oppose the expedition. The posse eventually hangs three suspicious-looking men; returning to town, however, the group discovers that no crime has been committed at all, and each vigilante must face the fact that he has given in to the mob's impulse to follow any strong leader and thus, is party to murder.

In 1945, *The City of Trembling Leaves* was published. It is the story of Timothy Hazard, a would-be composer in Reno. Structured like a symphony in its recombinations of themes, the novel reveals the artist's troubled quest for a vocation. Among these themes are misbegotten young love, mature love, the dissolution of a family, and, as in all Clark's novels, the monitory influence of the wilderness on human dilemmas. After 1950, Clark published little, although he continued to write steadily. Critics refer to his 'silent period' and suggest as its cause the increasing demands of teaching at the University of Nevada and other institutions, his method of revising by completely rewriting, and the massive project of editing a

frontier journalist's diaries. For all that, Clark probably failed to publish for the very reasons that his early works were successful. He scrupulously searched for truth in life. As Clark wrote in a letter to his son, Robert, writing was to him a means of discovering what to feel and believe about life. That discovery seems to have become increasingly difficult as Clark saw life in the West change rapidly following World War II.

Clark's main theme was civilization, and the West was his raw material, as fellow Westerner Wallace Stegner has written. Clark sometimes philosophizes at length, but his talents for suspense and description still make his fiction among the most gripping by regional writers. When he died in Reno in 1971, despite two decades without a major publication of fiction, he was held in the highest esteem for having rescued Westerners from being portrayed as gunslingers and for having illustrated their ambivalent role in the development of the American character.

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"Walter Van Tilberg Clark"
Cyclopedia of World Authors II
(Salem 1989) 347-48

