

COMMENTARY

The Virginian (1902)



Owen Wister

(1860-1938)

“This tale of the cowpunchers of the Wyoming cattle country during the exciting 1870s and ‘80s is chiefly concerned with the adventures of a handsome heroic figure known only as ‘the Virginian,’ his chivalry and daring, and his successful wooing of Molly Wood, a pretty schoolteacher from Vermont. The celebrated phrase, ‘When you call me that, *smile!*,’ is one of the many colloquial expressions with which the book is peppered.”

James D. Hart

The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83) 794

“Owen Wister began with short stories of ranch life, collected in *Lin MacLean* (1898) and *The Jimmyjohn Boss* (1900), and followed them with *The Virginian* (1902) which, in spite of some romantic goings-on that [Realist cowboy Andy] Adams would have scorned, has held its place as a literary milestone. It is still immensely readable, full of action and humor, and the ring of authenticity. Wister’s ear for lingo was unusually keen, and he had apparently absorbed ranch life through his pores. ‘When you call me that, smile!’ is still standard for young Americans playing cowboy, and the situation between the buckaroo and the schoolmarm has become stock equipment for horse opera. But the book from which many horse operas derive has a dignity and strength not shared by its imitators. Adams, [Henry] Lewis, and Wister made the cowboy a respectable character for serious literature...Their performance has not yet been bettered. All came when local color as a coherent movement had about played itself out; all owe as much to the honest Realism of [Edward] Eggleston as to the flossy melodramatics of [Bret] Harte.”

Wallace Stegner

The Literary History of the United States, 3rd edition
(Macmillan 1946-63) 872

“One of the steadfast best sellers in American literary history, *The Virginian* has sometimes been described as the ancestor of the Western. The scene is Wyoming in pioneer days. The hero, who remains unnamed, provokes the enmity of a local bad man named Trampas. In a poker game Trampas accuses the Virginian of cheating and impugns his ancestry. Instantly the Virginian’s pistol is drawn and lies on the

table before him; thereupon he launches what has become the world's most hackneyed retort: 'When you call me that, smile.' Trampas backs down. Later the Virginian rescues a New England schoolmistress from a stagecoach that has been marooned in high water by a drunken driver, and eventually they get married. The climax is a pistol duel between Trampas and the Virginian in which Trampas is vanquished, the scene constituting the first 'walkdown' in American literature.

Wister, a fanatical admirer of Theodore Roosevelt, had gone to Wyoming for his health at Roosevelt's suggestion and began writing stories set in that locality. He dedicated *The Virginian* to Roosevelt, many of whose traits and ideals resemble those of Wister's hero. Actually Everitt Cyril Johnson, once a fellow ranch hand with Wister, claimed to have been the original for the Virginian. But according to Wister himself, in a preface to the sixteenth edition of his book (1928), the hero was a combination of several persons he had known in Wyoming.

Wister's book undoubtedly had a deep influence on the writers of Western stories, plays, film and radio scripts, and the Virginian became the prototype of all cowboy heroes. The novel was dramatized in 1903 and was performed for ten years on the road and in New York, thereafter in stock. Several film versions have also been made. Walter S. Campbell (Stanley Vestal) says of Wister: 'His work suffers more than most books by short-time visitors into the region from the fact that it was all a spectacle to him, and therefore he could not quite come to grips with or understand the life about him.' But this superficiality did not prevent the book from selling more than 2 million copies within fifty years after its publication."

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962) 1183-84

"Michel-Guillaume Jean de Crèvecoeur and Owen Wister express two quite different attitudes toward the frontier and frontiersmen. Crèvecoeur, living when Ohio and Kentucky lay on the edge of civilization, described the near anarchy and dirty depravity of back-settlers, the first men to occupy a wilderness. Wister, on the other hand, writing twelve years after the U.S. Government declared that the frontier no longer existed, remembered the cowboy as the last frontiersman, a vanished but romantic figure. The tension between these two attitudes pervades much of American literature.

Another tension, or at least a difference of emphasis, exists between Whitman's apostrophe to the pioneers—to the strong men and women who could conquer a continent—and Robert Frost's more complicated 'salvation in surrender' to the land 'vaguely realizing westward.'" [Another contrast is between the myth originated by Wister that the West was won by solitary heroes like *The Virginian* and the Realism of Wallace Stegner, quoted above, who emphasizes in his fiction and nonfiction that the West was won not by solitary heroes but by groups of individuals cooperating with each other.]

Philip Durham and Everett L. Jones, eds.
The Frontier in American Literature
(Odyssey 1969) 2

"The novel for which Wister is best known today is *The Virginian* (1902) in which the anonymous hero is partly based on Theodore Roosevelt. It is a book that the President greatly admired when it appeared. Roosevelt read Wister's stories as they were published in magazines during the 1890s and commented on them to the author. That Wister took his friend's criticisms seriously enough to act upon it is evident from an incident that occurred after the publication of 'Balam and Pedro' in *Harper's Monthly* (January 1894). In that story he described a brutal scene in which a rancher becomes so enraged over the inability of his tired horse to travel well on the trail that he gouges out one of the animal's eyes with his thumb, an act that brings the righteous ire of the Virginian down upon him with 'sledge-hammer blows of justice.'

Horried by Balam's viciousness, Roosevelt urged Wister to excise the description when he incorporated the story in his novel, and the author reluctantly did so. If the suggested revision thinned out the realism with which Wister intended to display life on the frontier—with its cruelty as well as its nobility—the change may well have assured a larger commercial success for *The Virginian* in that the more

delicate segment of the marketplace would have been shocked by the episode in its original form. By the time Roosevelt died in 1919, he had achieved nearly mythic stature for Wister.”

Karen L. Rood, ed.
American Literary Almanac: From 1608 to the Present
(Facts on File/Bruccoli Clark Layman 1988) 216-17

Michael Hollister (2015)