

that the origins of the myth can be clearly defined, indeed, can be dated with some precision. The Western myth was not some organic growth, mysteriously arising from the depths of the collective American unconscious (though indeed it ended there). It was deliberately invented by a relatively small number of mostly identifiable people with specific purposes in mind. It was they who focussed attention on the last phase of the conquest of the wilderness and they who made the cowboy a mythic hero. Their invention was then marketed with all the resources available in a market-oriented society. It succeeded beyond the inventors' hopes, for they struck a chord which immediately reverberated in the national psyche and which has continued to resonate down the years.

Chapter One

History through the Looking Glass

If we understand this part of our history, we will better understand how our people see themselves and the hopes they have for America.

Ronald Reagan, 1983

In March 1983 President Ronald Reagan took time off from affairs of state to open an exhibition, organised by the Library of Congress, entitled 'The American Cowboy.' His decision caused no surprise, not just because the press now and again liked to remind Americans of his brief career as a Western film star. Reagan himself had made very clear that he believed Americans should return to those older values which traditionally had been associated with America's pioneer heritage, values which somehow came especially out of the West. He was never to express it more clearly than in his address at the exhibition:

If we understand this part of our history, we will better understand how our people see themselves and the hopes they have for America. Tales of Wild West men and women, from Kit Carson to Wild Bill Hickok, to Calamity Jane to Annie Oakley, are woven into the dreams of our youth and the standards we aim to live by in our adult lives. Ideals of courageous and self-reliant heroes, both men and women, are the stuff of Western lore... Integrity, morality and democratic values are the resounding themes.

Mr. Reagan did not of course, strictly speaking, understand this part of America's history. If he had, he would hardly have chosen such a pantheon. James Butler Hickok was a cold-blooded killer who spent most of his time gambling and chasing prostitutes. Martha 'Calamity Jane' Canary was a sad transvestite alcoholic, an inveterate liar who was reduced to exhibiting herself as a sideshow freak. Phoebe Anne Oakley Mozzie was entirely the creation of showbusi-

ness; the tiny trick-shot star was born in Ohio and had never been in the West when she joined Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West show. In that gallery, Kit Carson stands alone as a remarkable figure. But no more remarkable than many of his contemporaries: Carson's public fame does not derive from his real-life exploits as a trapper and scout. Just like Hickok his heroic status was created by flamboyant journalism, reverent biographies and dime novels – the first two as much fiction as the last.

Yet in another sense Reagan understood American history very well indeed, for tales of the Wild West are part of Americans' folk-memory. Reagan knew that for three generations Americans had chosen to invest one particular episode in their past with an extraordinary significance, had turned the nineteenth-century frontier into the source of special American virtues and made its inhabitants into figures of legend. Reagan was simply demonstrating that he was one of those who, as British writer Jenni Calder has put it, 'believe in the legendary West not as historical fact but as historical force.' Reagan knew his words would strike a deep and resonating chord in the collective unconscious of America, would evoke an immediate, emotional and approving response. He was invoking the myth of the West.

Americans have come to regard the conquest of the Western wilderness as defining, in some special way, their characteristics as a unique people. Taken as a whole, that belief might be summarised as follows:

America possessed a unique resource which ensured a unique destiny; she faced to the West an empty continent. This vast area of free land offered the opportunity of independence to whoever could seize and use it, Easterner and European immigrant alike. The land was a wilderness; it was savage and cruel, like its aboriginal inhabitants the Indians – but it was potentially bountiful. In this land of terrible grandeur, nature was not so much an enemy as simply untamed: like the wild horses of its plains, it had to be broken to use. First the trails had to be blazed, Indians forced into retreat, the land opened. This was the work of the frontiersmen. But behind the frontiersmen came the pioneers, the farmers who took the free land, fought the wilderness and brought civilisation. In successive waves of an advancing tide, this process swept inexorably across the continent.

This immense challenge was met not by society as a whole, nor by corporate enterprise, nor least of all by government: the West was won by individuals. Imbued with a hardiness of spirit, pioneers were forced to rely upon themselves. To be sure, the pressures of frontier life imposed

the need for co-operation within the community, but to a degree of the individual's choosing and within a milieu of equality. And as frontier communities arose, pioneers expressed their egalitarianism in creating basic democratic forms of government. Thus democracy was reborn again and again on the frontier and as the settlement advanced the democratic ideal suffused throughout America and became indelibly printed on the national consciousness.

The winning of the West was a time when issues were clear, when the endless and often shoddy compromises imposed by civilised society were temporarily in abeyance. Right and wrong, good and evil, were reduced to elemental simplicities. Problems without precedent required immediate solutions and, so that civilisation might replace savagery, those solutions sometimes involved an unprecedented level of violence. The extinction of the Indian menace, control of lawbreakers, the imposition of order within which freedom and independence could flourish – these things were achieved by force. The time of clear-cut issues was also the hour of the gun.

The frontier therefore brought forth men of extraordinary stature, men possessed of courage and skills to meet and overcome the dangers, so that the West could be made ready for the advance of civilisation. Thus the archetypal American hero is the frontier-tamer. Even those who put themselves beyond the law might become folk heroes, for if authority was arbitrary law might serve interest, not justice, and the outlaw appear just another rugged individualist.

In the last decade of the nineteenth century the conquest of the wilderness was completed and the frontier declared closed. Thus ended a crucial era in American history. The effects on all America could not however be erased. The frontier experience permanently shaped the American character: hardy, optimistic, egalitarian, impatient of intrusive authority. Above all, it defined America's core values: individualism, self-reliance, democratic integrity. For the future, the West had created a transformational process. In retrospect, the West was inspiring, dramatic, romantic – and wild.

This, give or take some elements, can be considered the received wisdom on the significance of the West. It had many sources: it drew on a variety of widely-held notions, not necessarily connected, which had started to coalesce in the 1890s, it was fed by writers and artists, supported by Westerners themselves and it was extended, developed and transmogrified by the media. Its early respectability owes a good deal to the work of the historian Frederick Jackson Turner. Whatever else it may be, it is not history. That is to say, as an interpretation of America's past it tells us less about the nineteenth-century West

than it does about how twentieth-century Americans have chosen to think about themselves. Reality, in so far as historians can reconstruct the past at all, was otherwise.

Was America's experience in meeting an empty continent and conquering a wilderness unique? Only in the sense that no two concatenations of circumstances can be identical, for comparisons can be made. The Victorian British, who were fascinated by the West and visited it in droves, were unimpressed with American claims of special qualities, the democratic impulse and heroic supermen. After all, British colonists had settled Canada, Australia, New Zealand and parts of Africa without too much fuss. Tsarist Russia's conquest of Central Asia and the settlement of Siberia was carried out at the behest of an autocracy and by military force but it was nevertheless a remarkable achievement.

Individualism may have existed in the West, but it did not flourish. The post-Civil War trans-Mississippi West was, according to the received wisdom, the arena for individual enterprise – in, for example, mining and cattle-ranching. The hardy lone prospector and placer miner rarely had any long-term success. Of the 100,000 hopefuls who poured out in the Pike's Peak rush of 1859, 50,000 never reached their goal and half of the remainder returned home immediately. Those who discovered a fortune usually failed to keep it: Henry Comstock sold his part-claim in the Nevada lode named after him for \$11,000 in 1859; it ultimately produced \$3 million. But the producers were usually not lucky or more determined individuals. Men like John Mackay and James Fair, two of the bonanza kings of the Comstock, were among those who represented mining as big business. Pursuing veins into deep mines and extracting precious metal from complex ores required technology and capital and these were available only to corporate enterprise. Effective exploitation meant industrialised mining and that demanded a disciplined labour-force, so that the typical Western miner by the mid-1870s was not a grizzled prospector with a shovel and a mule but a wage-labourer earning \$3 a day.

Cattle-ranching followed a similar pattern. Raising cattle on the open range appeared to offer the perfect opportunity to combine the Western promise with the Puritan ethic: minimal overheads and eager markets (offering profits of over 30% on investment) should have guaranteed success for small men who believed in hard work and thrift. Examples can be found: John Iliff was a failed Pike's Peak miner who quit early, arrived broke in Wyoming in 1862 and in ten years built up a herd of 40,000 head. Just like mining, the beef bonanza however was dominated by corporate enterprise. Eastern

corporations (and thus absentee owners) rapidly established an oligopoly and ruthlessly exploited the advantages of size and wealth. Some of the largest and most successful of the cattle enterprises were not American at all. The Prairie Cattle Company, which controlled 5 million acres of range in Texas, Colorado and New Mexico, was Scots. So were the XIT, Matador and Espuela [Spur] ranches in Texas, with ranges of 3 million, 1.5 million and half-a-million acres respectively. In Wyoming and Colorado the phrase 'cattle baron' was not a metaphor: the sons of the English aristocracy managed ranches for London-based companies whose boards of directors were filled with the peerage. Small wonder that the British were unimpressed with claims of a unique American achievement in the West.

The giant cattle companies, American or British, sought to maximise profits by efficiency and cost-cutting. The former often involved controlling water rights and safeguarding pasture; contrary to popular belief, ranchers were more likely to fence off range than farmers. Cost-cutting meant, among other things, keeping wages low for a dependent labour force. Thus the cowboy, central protagonist of the romantic drama of the West, was an itinerant wage-labourer, overworked and badly paid, without home, security or prospects. Few ever managed the great leap from drover to cattleman and the opportunity diminished further with the catastrophic collapse of the cattle boom in the late 1880s. Thereafter success depended even more heavily on access to capital and the application of sound business methods.

Most of those who achieved success in the West were, like as not, astute businessmen who diversified their interests with an eye for every opportunity. So far from resenting the presence of government, they sought to exploit it and often depended on it. Territorial, state and Federal government offices were useful prizes, while contracts to supply Indian reservations and the army were seen as a resource like the land itself. The notorious Santa Fe Ring, a combine of politicians, lawyers, traders and cattlemen which sought to monopolise business in New Mexico in the 1870s, was merely the most prominent example of a commonplace arrangement which made good business sense.

The role of corporate enterprise in the West stands uneasily with the proclaimed virtue of self-reliant individualism. It also belied the image of a phoenix-like democracy. Politics were quickly controlled by wealth and the power wealth brought. Montana by the end of the century was effectively in the hands of the Amalgamated Copper Company, which directly or indirectly employed over half the men

in the state. Such power could be used with arrogant indifference to law: in 1892 the Wyoming Stock Growers' Association hired a private army of gunfighters to end the rustling threat they believed to be posed to their interests by the small ranchers and farmers of Johnson County. When the outraged locals rounded up the invaders, the cattlemen successfully appealed to Washington for the army to rescue them. Well might it be called the cattle kingdom, for it was not a republic.

Nowhere was the image so far from an often brutal reality than in the farmers' West. The great march of sturdy pioneers certainly took place, but not with the results that the received wisdom accorded it. The 1862 Homestead Act, for long regarded as the magic key to farmers' settlement of the Great Plains, offered a quarter section of 160 acres free, on condition that it was settled and worked for five years. The Act did not throw open the West to agriculture. It offered 84 million acres, but this was a fraction of the total available, for much of the best land had already been granted away: 213 million acres to railroads, 140 million to the states, 175 million reserved to Indians. Never was the Homestead Act the principal means of settling Western land: in the 1870s 300,000 homesteads were registered but 1.3 million new farms emerged on land which had been acquired from other sources. Speculators exploited loopholes to acquire the best sites and chicanery abounded. Semi-honest farmers might deviously acquire several quarter sections in order to use the extra as collateral for bank loans to raise capital. The image of the restless pioneer, forever moving on (so happily described in the *Little House* books of Laura Ingalls Wilder) could disguise an uglier practice. Contemporaries knew many 'chronic settlers' who filed for a quarter section, promptly raised a bank loan on its assumed value and equally promptly pocketed the money, abandoned the land to the bank and filed again under an assumed name elsewhere, to repeat the process over and over.

Long-term, farmers did not conquer the wilderness of the trans-Mississippi West; at best they wrested brief periods of prosperity from it, at worst they were conquered by it. The key to farming west of the 100th. meridian was water. There average rainfall dropped to 20 inches per year or less, and to 12 inches beyond a line roughly following the Kansas-Colorado and Nebraska-Wyoming borders. Farmers fooled themselves into believing they would find the 30 inch rainfall and lush lands of the Mid West on the Plains and they were encouraged by promoters – railroads, speculators and even government. For a decade between the mid-1870s and the mid-1880s nature fooled them too, for a freak period of heavy rain occurred. In 1887

a severe drought heralded the return of aridity; in 1894 only 8 inches of rain fell on a large part of the Western grasslands and the 1890s saw an agricultural catastrophe, as a result of which possibly as many as 200,000 settlers abandoned the West.

The answer appeared to be irrigation – but the costs were soon proved to be immeasurably beyond private resources. Pressure then built up to push the Federal government into a rescue operation and the result was the Reclamation Act of 1902. The costs of federally-sponsored irrigation projects were meant to be recouped by government land sales and charges to farmers, but the costs had, inevitably, been vastly underestimated and by 1923 less than 12% had been recovered. The Reclamation Act was a government support and bale-out operation; it made a mockery of claims of self-reliance and can be regarded, as some have termed it, the beginnings of the welfare state in the United States. The gadarene stampede of pioneer settlers into the West did not produce a prosperous agrarian democracy. Indeed, economists' analyses suggest many would have done better if they had stayed in the Mid West and East.

By the 1890s, those who controlled water rights dominated the Western economy and its society in the same way that business moguls did in the East. Speculation, fraud and a keen eye for taking advantage ensured that by the turn of the century over 80% of land beyond the Mississippi was owned by non-farmers. All in all, pioneers in the West had entered a very high-risk game: in addition to extremes of heat and cold, the devastating effects of hail, insect plagues and drought, they were at the mercy of market forces and ill-equipped to ride the roller-coaster of fluctuating costs and profits. By the last decade of the century success already belonged to agribusiness; like mining and ranching, the future lay, not with the hardy individual, but with large-scale, industrialised enterprise.

Legends may have made heroes of frontier-tamers but the raw material for these images needed a good deal of reshaping. The motley collection of adventurers, entrepreneurs and ruffians who comprised the elements of the leading edge of the advance into the West – hunters, trappers, scouts – were simply men who for one reason or another had chosen high-risk occupations. This should not diminish appreciation of their courage but few of them would have seen their lives as romantic until they were persuaded of it by what they read about themselves. The same is even more true of the cowboy, whose hard and precarious livelihood as a rural wage-labourer should have offered little in the way of material for the creation of the last and most influential of the actors in the pageant of the West. As for lawmen, once settlement had begun, most of the

West was rarely so disorderly that law officers had to present heroism as a job-qualification. On the contrary, the job, no more and no less onerous than today in small communities, was usually competed for and formed part of the local political patronage system. In potential trouble spots like the cattle railhead towns, citizens moved quickly to establish a proper police force – Dodge City had a uniformed force by 1881. As for outlaws, with the exceptions of the James brothers and perhaps the Doolin-Dalton gang, where special circumstances prevailed, all were detested and hounded by the communities on which they preyed.

Just how violent the West was has been a matter of considerable debate among historians. It has become fashionable to argue that it was not particularly violent at all – killings in the Kansas cowtowns averaged less than two per season in their heyday. Recent work has suggested that a good deal rests on how the statistics are presented; figures for mining townships in the Sierras in the 1860s and 1870s indicate a murder rate, on the basis of deaths per thousand of population, comparable with that of New York or Detroit in the 1980s. Rampant outbreaks of criminality were occasionally met with vigilantism – a vigilance committee controlled Virginia City, Montana Territory, between 1863 and 1865 and popularised the term 'vigilante'.* One analysis counts 210 vigilante movements in the West between 1849 and 1902. But vigilantism was not an invention of the Wild West: it had its roots in colonial times and followed settlement across the Appalachians into the South and the Mid West from the 1790s to the 1850s.

The present state of historical debate suggests that at certain times and in certain places, the West was indeed pretty violent. But this did not make it extraordinary: taken as a whole, the United States seems to have been in general a rather violent society in the nineteenth century, particularly so after the Civil War. Vivid, if not statistical, evidence is found in any issue of *Police Gazette*, a popular and sensational New York weekly which lovingly reported every crime it could find, North, South, East and West. Judging from its lurid pages, copiously illustrated, Americans of every kind and class, from street thugs to politicians, bludgeoned, stabbed and shot each other at the drop of a hat. Of course, it has been argued that such widespread violence percolated *back* from the frontier and eventually became a dubious aspect of the 'frontier heritage.' A different reading of the evidence suggests violence in the Eastern cities was one of the results of the instability created by mass immigration, coinciding

* Despite the publicity given to the San Francisco Vigilante Committee of 1856, the term does not appear to enter widespread use until the late 1860s.

with rapid native population growth, urbanisation and industrialisation.

Whatever else the West was, it was not a land of simple choices and clear-cut decisions; its pressures and problems may have been different from those in the East (in many cases they were indeed similar) but they were just as complex. Moreover, the vision of the received wisdom obscures or ignores what does not lie within its focus. For a start, that vision is white and in essence Anglo-Saxon. It pays no attention and gives no credit to the Spanish-American contribution to the winning of the West. When in 1848 two-fifths of Mexico was lost to the United States by war, the new Mexican-Americans of the Southwest and California were settlers whose experience rested on another and older conquest of the wilderness. The role of blacks was unrecognised until the belated 'discovery' of black cowboys in the 1960s; the tragic fate of the blacks who emigrated to Kansas in the 1870s, and the record of those Western states which passed legislation aimed at preventing black settlers in the 1850s and denying them voting rights in the 1870s, form no part of the saga of the West.

The Indian of course does. But by the time he had stopped oscillating between the roles of noble savage and fiendish redskin which public opinion had assigned him, he had become dehumanised. Much of the story presents the Indian as alien, implacable and irredeemable, an aspect (perhaps the most fearsome aspect) of the untamed land to be conquered by the march of progress. Though Westerners often seemed to imply it was their preferred solution, genocide however was not an option adopted at any point by the government of the United States. When, as the authorised version of the winning of the West evolved, it reversed its position and solemnly regretted the treatment of the Indians, it ignored the long-term implications of the historical evidence. The dismal record of broken treaties obscures the fact that treaties were consistently the preferred method of regulating Indian-white relations. That is to say, those relations rested on law and ultimately, as the last twenty-five years have shown, Indians could invoke their treaty rights (over fishing, land and water) finally to advantage. If it is responded that this is small comfort and that the law offered little hope of justice to Indians a century ago, neither did it to Eastern workers seeking industrial injury compensation, labour union activists – or small ranchers fighting the high-handed illegalities of the Wyoming Stock Growers' Association.

Despite its long acceptance as a statement of fact, a great phase of history did not come to an end because the Superintendent of the

Census mentioned, in passing, in his 1890 report that there was no longer a moving line of frontier settlement. History rarely offers examples of such startling discontinuity. New mining booms, the opening of the oil fields, the boost to farming by the Reclamation Act, each offered fresh opportunity in the West, while the problems too persisted into the twentieth century. The profound *influence* the conquest of the wilderness was deemed to have on American history derived from the emphasis placed on viewing it as an era with clearly defined limits. The origin of that emphasis, the insistence on a symbolic moment for the 'end of the West,' lies in the actual emergence, in codified form, of the cluster of images and ideas which accorded such primal significance to the frontier experience.

Those images and ideas about the West, its heroes and its meaning are, in terms of impact, America's greatest contribution to twentieth-century culture. And they are a genuine cultural artifact. They are not the distilled wisdom of the historical experience of the United States: they were invented to serve a specific purpose at a particular time. They were produced in response to the doubts and fears of America in the two decades on either side of the turn of this century. What is remarkable is the way they have transcended the reasons for their manufacture to impose an extraordinary and pervasive grip upon the imagination of succeeding generations.

Reagan was merely the latest, not the first, president to draw on the Western 'heritage' - politicians generally have confidently evoked it for most of this century. Western novels, though no longer maintaining the extraordinary output of the years between the two World Wars, retain an enthusiastic readership for a formula with few variations. The Western film has been the single most popular film genre produced by Hollywood; estimates vary, but perhaps a total of 7,000 Westerns have been made since the first true narrative Western, the *Great Train Robbery* in 1903. By the early 1980s it was usual to hear that the Western movie was dead - film critic Pauline Kael had said it as early as 1974; output in the 1990s suggests the funeral was premature. The dominance of Western series on TV in the 1950s and 1960s (48 in 1959) was a significant cultural phenomenon; it is worth noting at least one cable station in the U.S. is still devoted exclusively to Westerns. Even if films and television are set aside, one test remains for the residual vitality of the appeal of the West: advertisers continue to rely confidently on its magnetic effect. This did not begin with Leo Burnett's invention of Marlboro Man in 1954. Western icons sold whiskey, tobacco and canned foods from the 1870s, and a century later their general use, which now included everything from automobiles to cosmetics, coincided with a boom in

Western fashion clothes. In 1990 Budweiser's campaign put beer back on the range.

Perhaps most interesting, the image of the West has reached beyond the United States to other cultures, other nations who have not shared America's historical and cultural determinants - and generated a sympathetic and enthusiastic response. That image, and the beliefs which underpin it, are, in the precisest use of the term, a modern myth.

Chapter Two

Myths And Heroes

The story of the West is our Trojan War, our Volsunga Saga, our Arthurian cycle, our Song of Roland.

Thomas K. Whipple, 1943

In the end, myths become part of the language, as a deeply encoded set of metaphors that may contain all the "lessons" we have learned from our history, and all the crucial elements of our world view.

Richard Slotkin, 1975

Sooner or later, virtually everyone who has written about the West refers to 'the myth.' Forty-five years ago Henry Nash Smith subtitled *Virgin Land*, his seminal study on nineteenth-century popular ideas about the West, *The American West in Symbol and Myth*. Robert G. Athearn chose to call his summation of sixty years' thinking about the West's history *The Mythic West*. Bernard de Voto identified collective popular attitudes to the West as not only the most enduring but the finest of America's myths. Russell Martin has entitled his uncritically affectionate review of the evolution of the cowboy *The Enduring Myth of the Wild West*. Joe B. Frantz and Julien E. Choate in *The American Cowboy: the Myth and the Reality* aver 'the range rider is a myth, but he is a myth possessing a living and present reality in the American folk mind.' Western fiction, writes James K. Folsom, reiterates a 'myth or fable.' Will Wright has analysed the Western film as a vehicle for a modern functional myth. Linking movies and history, Jenni Calder begins by saying: 'The West is loaded with myth.' This list could be extended indefinitely. The difficulty is, few of those who use the term (with the exception of Wright) give much idea of precisely what they mean by 'myth.'

None of these writers is implying that the received wisdom on the West is some sort of popular fallacy, or a general falsification of the

historical record. (Even if this were so, it would not make the United States remarkable – most nations have at some point adjusted their past, usually to justify the present.) When writers on the West refer to myth, they usually mean something else entirely: they intend an analogy with the great stories of the older cultures. As Thomas K. Whipple put it, 'The story of the West is our Trojan War, our Volsunga Saga, our Arthurian cycle, our song of Roland' – epic tales of gods and heroes, struggles and quests. Why, one might well ask, should Americans want a Homeric version of their history? Carl Sonnichsen suggests that it all grows out of 'a natural and normal hunger for a heroic past,' arguing that 'Any group with a thousand-year history has these things provided, but the American is a new-comer and not yet completely at home in his vast country. All he has is the mythical West, and he needs it desperately.'

This is difficult to take seriously. For a start, the argument that the Western myth is a response to a national yearning for a tradition is circular: it springs from the deep-seated American belief that a new and unique culture emerged in the United States. But *that* belief is itself part of the Western myth – that what made America unique was exemplified in the conquest of the West. More important, for the last century-and-a-half Americans have demonstrably *not* been seeking a tradition. Foreign observers, like Alexis de Tocqueville, from the early days of the Republic were constantly to comment on this. At the end of the century, prominent Americans agreed. William Dean Howells remarked in 1897: 'There is no past for us, only the future.' Eleven years later, back from a twenty-year exile, Henry James wrote: 'What was taking place was a perpetual repudiation of the past, so far as there is a past to repudiate.' Americans seemed to have taken Ralph Waldo Emerson's advice, when he argued back in 1836 that they should reject history and take only nature and experience as guides. There were perfectly good reasons for this attitude. Everything in America seemed new; the problems were new, there were no precedents, so the past had no valid lessons to offer – as Abraham Lincoln put it: 'As our case is new, so we must think anew, and act anew.' Moreover, the pace of change was recognised as extraordinary, so that tradition, desirable or not, was irrelevant. James Fenimore Cooper (first literary creator of the Western hero) in 1838 spoke for each succeeding generation when he said: 'We are a nation of change.'

Nevertheless, the story of the conquest of the West is persistently spoken of as if it were like the stories of ancient and tribal cultures which explain how the world got to be the way it is. This makes it the sort of myth which, Mircea Elaide tells us, '...narrates a sacred

history; it relates an event that took place in a primordial time, the fabled time of the "beginnings." In her justly acclaimed study of the West, *The Legacy of Conquest*, Patricia Nelson Limerick affirms that 'every human group has a creation myth,' which she defines as 'a tale explaining where its members came from and why they are special, chosen by providence for a special destiny,' to which white Americans are no exception for 'their most popular origin myth concerns the frontier.'

This reads too much like another version of the yearning-for-tradition argument. Setting aside what Professor Limerick means by a 'human group,' the fact is that, as the anthropologists would recognise such a concept, no post-primitive society has produced an origin myth. Why should it? New societies emerging in the last several hundred years are the products of political transformations of one sort or another, and they are therefore heirs to long-standing cultural and social forces. For the United States, the time of the 'beginnings' as a nation was the Revolution and white Americans know where their origins lie – they came from Europe. A nation may at some point conceive a sense of specific purpose (*la mission civilisatrice française*, the vanguard of international communism), rhetoric may proclaim it a destiny and history adjusted to support it. But such ideas remain in the realm of propaganda and political slogans. Taking its cue from Professor Limerick, a recent summary of revisionist histories of the West in *U.S. News & World Report* began: 'It is our Book of Genesis. Our legend of Romulus and Remus. The story of the frontier is America's myth of creation.' It is not. And present-day Italians, citizens of a nation-state born a century after the U.S.A., are unlikely to think much about Romulus and Remus; American Christians and Jews still have the Book of Genesis.

If the great story of the West is not a creation myth, what kind is it? For myth is not a term to be used lightly: its study is an academic battleground. Why societies generate myths and exactly what purpose they serve has been a matter of no small conflict among anthropologists, psychologists, sociologists and literary analysts. It is not yet clear who is winning and non-combatants enter this battle zone at their peril. Consensus accepts that myths have functions beyond explaining origins. Bronislaw Malinowski says of tribal societies that 'Myth fulfils in primitive culture an indispensable function: it expresses, enhances and codifies belief: it vouches for the efficiency of ritual and contains practical rules for the guidance of man.'

Primitive myths thus serve as a vehicle for transmitting to each generation what the society believes is essential to the way it works,

including its values. It does this symbolically through stories, and a great deal of attention has been devoted to the narrative structure of myths, in part to understand their origins. However the myth-stories originate – and debate on the problem continues to flourish – some of them do appear to derive from history, that is to say, myths take bits of history and turn them into legends which illustrate the force of the myth's central ideas. They also seize on legends which have arisen quite independently; like the gravity-well of giant stars, myths pull in elements wandering in local space and absorb them.

It is tempting to use all this as a description for the myth of the West. In America, a set of past experiences became a model for the present and future because Americans chose to see in them something crucial. Over time, stories illustrating those experiences were turned, through endless repetition, into legends which became unchallengeable because they 'proved' the propositions of the myth. The themes of the myth percolated into society until they ended up as conventions, universally accepted. Thus Richard Slotkin, in the introduction to his own version of the Western myth, argues: 'In the end, myths become part of the language, as a deeply encoded set of metaphors that may contain all the "lessons" we have learned from our history, and all the crucial elements of our world view.'

A problem with this argument is that many of the anthropologists insist that myths exist only in primitive societies. Primitive man has myths, we are told, because he does not have a recorded history to explain the past nor science to explain the world. On this basis myths, we would assume, disappear as a society becomes more sophisticated, becomes 'modern.' Currently however one of the more fashionable ways of looking at myths in primitive cultures, deriving from the work of, among others, the anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss, offers a different perspective. This view sees myths as performing a specific and very important function: they are a way of dealing with the conflicts societies produce for their members. Such conflicts might be as simple as the clash between human desires and social rules, or as complicated as a rift between the ideals of religion and the practicalities of experience. Thus stories of struggles and quests, gods and heroes act out the conflicts symbolically. Whatever the conflicts may be, if they are rooted deep in the culture, myths will emerge to provide reassurance.

If this is valid for primitive cultures, it is difficult to see why it should not be equally so for modern ones. Societies with a perfectly well-developed sense of history and an analytical approach to understanding the physical world seem to go on producing elaborate

stories to explain away their conflicts. In such cases, with all due respect to the anthropologists, we might as well call them myths. They are most likely to arise as a means of dealing with a fundamental contradiction which compromises the core-values of the society, the sort of conflict which causes a persistent dilemma in the collective unconscious. There is in fact a spectacular example of exactly this sort of functional myth, one which lasted four hundred years in European culture and whose themes are still entirely familiar – the Arthurian myth.

The Arthur of history is hidden in mists like those which closed around the craft which carried the Arthur of legend to Avalon. The basis for medieval beliefs about this sixth-century figure was a mixture of legends and folktales and poems. But from the early twelfth century to the late fifteenth the Arthur story was taken up, elaborated, and structured until it was the myth of the age. This was certainly remarkable but is not inexplicable. By the twelfth century, European society faced a serious problem. The feudal warrior class, originally raised to defend the realm, was now privileged, idle, quarrelsome, armed and dangerous. To bring it under some form of social control, chivalry was invented. But to reprogram the warrior class more was needed than a code of conduct; what was required was a vivid and compelling example, validated by history. The Arthurian legends were ready and waiting to be adapted to this purpose. So twelfth-century English chroniclers, like Geoffrey of Monmouth, purporting to write history, produced the mighty king who founded a new order of knights. Thirteenth-century French poets added the Holy Grail quest and then the Round Table. Other stories, which had arisen far apart in time and place, were sucked in, like those of Gawaine, Tristan and Iseult, and Percival. At the end of the fifteenth century, Thomas Malory recombined all these elements into a single great version.

Something more has to explain the extraordinary potency and vitality of the Arthurian cycle than its use as a back-up for chivalry. Of course, the subject matter was romantic and escapist and attracted medieval writers who were looking for a subject for vernacular literature. It had clear political uses. Geoffrey of Monmouth's twelfth-century version was a deliberate attempt to create for post-Norman Conquest England a great and unified past to lend prestige to an upstart dynasty. The myth offered an idealised blueprint for feudal kingship (Edward III had his model for the Order of the Garter); fourteen years after Malory had written his comprehensive version, Caxton published it – no accident then that Henry VII, with a shaky claim to the throne he had seized in 1485, should promptly

name his son Arthur as a crude piece of propaganda. But these are secondary effects – Arthur's name was a talisman because people believed the myth.

More important than all these was the myth's ability to touch a great contradiction at the heart of medieval society: a religion which enjoined peace and a rejection of worldly rewards and a political and social structure which encouraged neither. The myth presented a great tragedy: Camelot is destroyed by a cancer, born of human weakness, and the quest for the Holy Grail does not save it. Just as the noble promise of the Arthurian new order founders on men's inability to live up to their ideals, so medieval society feared the gulf between its ideals and its practice. Yet the myth was an invention. Its creators took a piece of the past and peopled it with characters who exemplified the qualities the *present* wanted to see. It dragged in other legends and made them serve the same purpose. Above all, its creators cut the stories free from the sixth century of history and set them in a *timeless* world, so that the myth could be re-interpreted again and again in images of the present.

The story of the conquest of the West, as it had emerged by the first decade of the twentieth century, was precisely the same sort of myth. It was not a creation story, nor was it the American version of Homer. Like the Arthurian myth, its raw material lay in fragments of history and accumulated legends, it was fuelled by writers seeking a vernacular literature and a public seeking escapism. It was legitimated by historians and turned to immediate political uses. But it was invented out of a need to solve a great cultural dilemma, a fundamental conflict between tenaciously held ideals and a reality which defied them. This conflict emerged in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and had become critical by 1890.

The idea of the West had always been involved in a special relationship with the American dream – that belief in the good society, in a special mission and in a destiny unique among nations. The dream began with the Puritans' faith that their covenant with God would guarantee their escape from the cyclic rise and fall of all previous societies in history, a fate consequent on man's sinfulness. They would escape it provided they kept their society simple and pure. This faith merged into a political creed a century-and-a-half later for those who founded the new nation: through its great experiment in republican government America would escape the evils which were ingrained in the Old World – laws and institutions which enshrined privilege, a society which rested on class-distinction and a civilisation decadent and corrupt.

The Republic of Virtue could not rest only on pious intentions

and the Constitution. Fortunately providence had endowed the United States with a fail-safe factor – an empty continent. Thomas Jefferson explained: free land meant free men, westward expansion guaranteed the spread of a property-owning democracy, a society dominated by yeoman farmers, independent of means and therefore of judgment. Others saw that it offered further advantages: it would drain the poor and discontented from the crowded East and it would provide an immense supply of cheap food from an agricultural heartland. The Great West was America's guarantee of her special destiny. By the 1840s that destiny had become 'manifest,' a pre-ordained expansion westward. The power of these theories as propaganda was in inverse proportion to their relevance to the real world. Jefferson's free farmers fought to enter the market economy, where naturally, like everyone else, they became prisoners of market forces. The frontier was never a real safety-valve for the urban poor (most lacked the capital and knowhow for Western farming) and plenty of contemporaries feared that 'manifest destiny' was a cover for imperialism.

The nature of the West itself was for some time a matter of debate. For example, what effect did life in the wilderness have on those who chose it? One view had long claimed that contact with the wilderness inevitably depraved human beings until, without the restraints of civilised society, they became as savage as the beasts among whom they dwelt. On the other hand, ideas stretching back to biblical roots held that the wilderness purified and redeemed where civilisation ultimately corrupted. This notion had taken on new force with Rousseau's paeans of praise for the life of nature and had become an article of faith for the Romantic movement. By the mid-nineteenth century its most influential spokesman in America was Henry Thoreau, though many writers had persistently argued that only in the wilderness could the pristine virtues flourish. This obviously fitted neatly with the political value of the West: it was a moral and spiritual resource as well as a vital national asset. Needless to say, those who advocated these theories did not practise them; even Thoreau carefully interspersed his ostentatiously simple life in his cabin at Walden Pond with quick trips back to the city for civilised company.

The trans-Mississippi West posed the geographical equivalent of this debate. Early exploration, like the expeditions of Lieutenant Zebulon Pike in 1805-6 and Major Stephen Long in 1819-20, believed it had found the Great American Desert. Of the Plains, Long wrote: 'I do not hesitate in giving the opinion, that it is almost wholly uninhabitable by a people depending on agriculture for their

subsistence.' This bleak vision was dispelled by later explorers and the settlers who followed them from the 1840s. By the 1870s it had been replaced by the equally fallacious but potentially more dangerous idea that the West would prove a vast and bounteous garden of plenty.

The prevailing viewpoint eventually came to see the settlement of the West as one of the most dramatic proofs of America's commitment to 'progress.'

For the vast majority of Americans who felt no urge to migrate into the wilderness, watching the conquest of the West allowed a smug patriotic satisfaction because it apparently demonstrated progress in action. This attitude was visible as early as the 1780s, when settlers spilled over the Appalachians into the Ohio Valley, and just increased with time. In an age before mass entertainment, the frontier was also the best spectator sport available. Journalists seeking subjects to illustrate the great march of progress, often followed by writers of heroic biographies, produced men they, not history, selected to lead that advance. Popular writers also turned to the West. The success of the novels of James Fenimore Cooper in the 1820s and 1830s encouraged a torrent of cheap adventure stories in the next two decades; with the advent of dime novels after 1860 the torrent became a flood.

In his famous analysis of the United States, written in the late 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville thought, because the new nation was recording history as it was being made, the American past would never be cluttered with legends. For once his insight failed him, for here he underestimated the American ingenuity he admired. Both journalists and fiction-writers took real-life figures and turned them into creatures of fantasy. Inevitably, it became impossible to separate reality from make-believe, even if an eager public had the slightest interest in doing so. Journalistic excess was credited as truth, repetition turned stories into folktales, wish-fulfilment made legends. Not centuries after their death, but within their lifetimes Daniel Boone was the torchbearer of civilisation in the wilderness, Kit Carson a superhuman scout and Jesse James the American Robin Hood.

Thus from the beginning of the new nation an extraordinary complex of ideas about the West was imbedded in nineteenth-century Americans' thinking about themselves and their future. On this ground, it might well be thought that these ideas amounted to a myth in their own right. Indeed, Henry Nash Smith, whose *Virgin Land* first really opened up this subject, has unhesitatingly said that they did. But he defined myth as 'an intellectual construction that fuses concept and emotion into an image.' This is a convenient umbrella

under which to group a lot of popular notions which, as Smith emphasised, 'sometimes exert a decided influence on practical affairs.' But on that basis any widely held cluster of ideas and images qualifies as a myth and from there it is only a short step to Roland Barthes's unhelpful remark that anything can become a myth.

If myths are seen in terms of the function they perform, a different picture emerges. America's thinking about the West for most of the nineteenth century was a mixture of half-baked philosophy and political theory, enlivened with folktales and literary fantasy. These notions related to a continuing process: the role of the West in maintaining social stability and guaranteeing 'progress.' The block of ideas which appeared at the century's end were quite different. These took as their starting point the belief that the traditional role of the West was finished, and that this in itself was a tragedy. They concentrated not on the long story of successive settlements of the West, but on one - and recent - episode, the cattleman's frontier. The basic intention of these ideas, like the Arthurian stories, was to look *back* for a model for action - they looked to the past to redeem the future.

This would suggest that the new construct grew out of a widely-held perception that something had gone dreadfully wrong with the present. It is in fact easy to demonstrate that the *myth* of the West arose out of a crisis which exposed a contradiction at the heart of America's self-image. In the thirty-five years following the end of the Civil War, a huge industrial economy emerged, cities mushroomed and immigration added 11 million to a population which doubled in size to 75 million. Such growth brought problems: unregulated business exploitation of the market, vast disparities of wealth, violent labour disputes. Particularly alarming was an agricultural depression which brought farmers, including those in the West, to organised political protest. To the paranoia which lurks never too far beneath the surface of American political thinking, the Republic of Virtue was under siege from within, the American dream was turning into a nightmare.

Of course, most of this was just an exaggerated reaction, faced sooner or later by all modern societies, to the implications of becoming an urban-industrial nation. But other modern societies were not stuck with America's value system. The real crisis was in the minds of many Americans, who saw a frightening conflict between how they conceived their country and what it had become. All the evils which characterised the wicked old world, which the United States had so confidently expected to escape, seemed to have re-emerged. Yet American core-values were enshrined in agrarian idealism -

self-reliant individualism had underpinned the structure of government and the political process. These values had encouraged laissez-faire policies, a rejection of the need for welfare legislation and suspicion of the role of government in general. But now these values seemed irrelevant: only the power of the state seemed able to hold disruptive forces in check, forces which were beyond the control of the individual. The many Americans who thought like this were filled with nostalgia for another America, where things were simple, and life uncorrupted and free.

In former decades, optimists would have looked to the West as the magic escape route from the impending disaster. But the old fail-safe factor had proved to have built-in obsolescence. It did not need the Census Report of 1890 to announce that the frontier was, in effect, closed: it had become obvious that the days of limitless free land were over. Besides, the West was already irretrievably shaped by the same forces which were contaminating the rest of the nation and was suffering from a major agricultural depression. This in itself had yet more alarming implications: if the old logic was correct, progress had brought its own nemesis - the advance of civilisation had destroyed the purifying power of the wilderness.

In essence, America appeared to be faced with the choice of rejecting a future which her own commitment to progress had wrought, or abandoning her value system. The smart move at this juncture would have been to meet the future with pragmatism, not an outworn creed. Since however nations do not usually junk their value systems with a shrug of the shoulders, nor give up economic growth by choice, this dilemma cried out for a myth to resolve it. It seems inevitable from today's standpoint that this myth should be centred on the West. Not the real West of the 1890s of course - that was not a solution, it was part of the problem - but a West of the imagination. The reasons for this are not difficult to detect.

For a start, Americans had been saturated with images of a land where the borderline between fact and fantasy was as unclear as the frontier between savagery and civilisation, so just about anything might be believed about the West. Then, nostalgia for the lost wilderness and the end of the frontier became bound up with nostalgia for a simpler America. This did not happen by accident: it was engineered by a handful of key figures each of whom was a deliberate and self-conscious myth-maker. They focussed attention not on the West in general, but on the last, most recent frontier and, ignoring everything which did not fit their inspiring vision, they portrayed it as the arena where all the old values fuelled heroic endeavour - a world of chivalry, honour, courage and self-reliance. This inspired

propaganda was made respectable, even while it was being produced, by an historical hypothesis which confirmed what the propagandists had implied: that the frontier experience had permanently shaped the American character. This was particularly good news, for it meant that the *idea* of the West was immortal. In effect, the myth-makers had said: 'There. In that place and that time, it was the way it should be. Now it is gone for ever. But all is not lost. We carry within us its spirit, so it will continue to flourish if we let it. Now all we have to do is to go on retelling the story to keep us on the right track.'

All this obviously has some striking similarities with the Arthurian myth – a noble era, its tragic loss, a model for action. And neither of course grew naturally out of the fertile soil of the folk-mind, as one supposes ancient and tribal myths did – both were deliberately invented. Of course, the first medieval myth-makers reached back six hundred years for their material; they called up shadow history, their protagonists, if indeed they had ever existed historically, had outlines so fluid they could be reshaped at will. This left the inventors confident that their inventions were pretty safe from direct challenge. The first American myth-makers were trawling a past scarcely more than a decade old, so the history of the West was still being written when the myth began. Their protagonists therefore had substance (a great many were still alive!), yet they unhesitatingly wove a fabric of fantasy. Moreover, the creators were for the most part not Westerners – from start to finish the West of myth was invented by the East. On any sensible assumptions this should have meant the myth died stillborn – but instead of challenging the fantasies, the real West enthusiastically subscribed to them.

In general, Americans as myth-makers showed a good deal of ingenuity. The medieval writers took a realm facing chaos and gave it an order of chivalrous knights to show the future how peace and harmony might reign. Americans took the problems of getting cattle to market and a class of agricultural labourers as the role models for the generations to come. The speed with which the Western myth took hold is testimony to American knowhow. The Arthurian myth began in the twelfth century, and it developed over four hundred years; the Western myth began in the 1890s and was in definitive form in twenty. It had however certain advantages. Images of a fantasy West had been broadcast by modern media – newspapers and a publishing revolution which created mass-produced literature. And from the start the Western myth received its biggest impetus from showbusiness. Medieval peasants, if they could escape for a moment from the crushing drudgery of their daily round, might sneak a glimpse of chivalry in action at a tournament. In the last

fifteen years of the nineteenth century, *millions* of Americans saw the pageant of the frontier in Buffalo Bill's Wild West. Above all the Western myth had the cinema. The film industry seized on the myth, amplified it and added to it.

The crisis of the 1890s which produced the myth eventually, in the natural course of events, faded away. The myth, obviously, did not. Some of the reasons for this are fairly clear. In the 1920s and 1930s it looked as if it had become tied to the business cycle – the myth flourished in the decade of prosperity and waned in the Depression. In actuality it had suffered an inevitable fate: it had become locked into politics. It was appropriated, in the name of self-reliant individualism, by those who for their own motives were defending laissez-faire and remained to be invoked by those who claimed the nation's health rested on roll-back of the power of government – as Ronald Reagan amply demonstrated. But this was only possible because echoes of the myth never ceased to reverberate in the nation's unconscious, for each new set of problems tested the American Dream, and the Dream was shored up by the myth. A piece of insignificant history had been given an awesome role: the trick had been to change the West into a timeless world on which images of the present could be endlessly reimposed. As numberless public figures were to say, from the prototype cowboy film star Tom Mix to the poet Archibald MacLeish, the West became a country of the mind.

Chapter Three

Manufacturing Images

That thar might be true but I hain't got no recklection of it.

Kit Carson, on being shown the cover of
a novel featuring him in heroic pose.

The Only Real Novelty of the Century. The Amusement
Triumph of the Age. The Romantic West Brought East in
Reality.

Press release for Buffalo Bill's Wild West, 1887

The West was where anything could happen. For most of the nineteenth century it was a land of infinite possibility, not because its immense resources could be exploited with ease – it was soon found they could not – but because it was a stage on which some of the nation's more important dreams could be focussed. No matter what the real West was like, it was invested with qualities, attributes, inhabitants and events which were largely the products of imagination. Partly this was because it just stayed remote. Despite their interest and pride in it, the West was where most Americans chose not to live. True for the nineteenth century, this is still true: the tier of states bisected by the Continental Divide, Arizona, New Mexico, Utah, Colorado, Idaho, Wyoming and Montana, has today a combined population not much larger than New York City. It was also because a West of the imagination was packaged and marketed by four generations of astute image-makers, playing on public gullibility for their own ends. Americans were sold the idea that the conquest of the wilderness was the visible proof of their commitment to progress, of their manifest destiny, of their unique society.

To this extent the conquest of the West provided moral and patriotic satisfaction and escapism in much the same way that the Empire did for the British. From armchair comfort, the Victorian public admired the advance of 'dominion over palm and pine' and

congratulated themselves on taking up the white man's burden. The Empire was also a constant arena for vicarious excitement. The conquest of distant lands and their savage inhabitants became standard fare for adventure stories and, when projected eventually by the yellow press, stimulated what one contemporary called 'spectatorial lust.' Some parts of the Empire, like darkest Africa, were still being explored late in the century and were therefore fair game for the imagination. Who knew what might be found in the interior? The gorilla was first brought to the notice of the outside world in 1847 (by an American missionary). When H. Rider Haggard published *King Solomon's Mines* in 1885, it was still possible that Africa might contain an unknown tribe of fierce warriors, complete with hideous customs and sitting on a diamond mine.

But the West was only very briefly darkest America. In 1800 knowledge of the whole area west of the Mississippi was extremely vague. It was not an unknown land, for it had been penetrated and traversed by Spaniards, French Canadians and agents of the British Hudson's Bay Company – it was just unknown to Americans. (Native Americans of course knew it very well indeed.) Shortly before President Jefferson dispatched Lewis and Clark to explore the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, the skeleton of a prehistoric mastodon had been discovered in upstate New York. Since no current scientific theory held the possibility that creatures could become extinct, it was not unreasonable then to suppose that the unknown West might contain roving herds of mastodon. Yet long after government-sponsored explorations, like the expeditions of Lewis and Clark in 1804-6, Pike in 1805-7, Long in 1820, after the fur trappers had explored the Rockies and found the routes to the Pacific shore, even after John Charles Frémont in the 1840s stole the trappers' credit and publicised himself as The Pathfinder, the West remained mysterious. Settlement did not change this much. There were sufficient Americans in Oregon by 1846 for the United States to push Britain into accepting a boundary at the 49th. parallel, the Mormons founded Salt Lake City in 1847, miners had chased strikes in Colorado and Nevada in 1858. But their experiences did not become a part of public knowledge to the point where they took on a humdrum familiarity. The West was not a place but a set of ideas.

Two of those ideas, mutually contradictory, engendered a serious debate for much of the first half of the century, when settlement spilled over the Appalachian Mountains into the first West of Kentucky, Tennessee and the Ohio Valley. Was the West the savage land, to be tamed so that civilisation could maintain its ordained progress across the continent? Or was it a vital spiritual resource, a land of

freedom uncorrupted by the moral decadence that civilisation brings? The cultural historian Henry Nash Smith has drawn attention to how profoundly ambivalent attitudes to the frontier were – but it is well to ask, who held these attitudes? Certainly not Westerners, who simply saw themselves pursuing opportunity and besides, frontier settlers were utilitarians who despised theorising. Publishers found that in the West there was very little interest in books about the frontier – a trend that was to continue until the 1880s – and literacy in the West was much lower than in the East; fewer than 4% of the population of Kentucky were receiving a school education in 1840. The debate about the West was largely conducted by writers and intellectuals, most of them Easterners. The authors who saw the spirit of Rousseau striding about the West in buckskins and carrying a long rifle were affecting a fashionable romantic pose. Eastern readers pretending sophistication presumably brooded about the implications; others, reflecting national optimism and simply seeking escapist literature, were less interested in philosophical conjecture than in the pageant of the Westward advance.

That advance was not presented as an anonymous tide: it was personified by figures who were given special status. Out of the West ultimately came America's most durable heroes. When shorter-lived enthusiasms had faded, permanent heroic status was not given to Revolutionary War patriots, Southern cavaliers, intrepid Yankee skippers, penniless immigrants who became millionaire entrepreneurs, or men of the people who went from log cabin to White House – though each of these had his day and all embodied some aspect of America's beliefs about herself. It was the Western hero who found the widest appeal and showed the most consistent vitality. Yet those who actually *settled* the West failed to qualify. The pioneer farmers, whose enterprise marked the arrival of civilisation, the victors of the conquest, had only lip-service paid to their achievement. The heroes were those who preceded the farmers, blazed the trails and brought the frontier perils to manageable levels. Simply to be out in the wilderness was not enough: the true frontier heroes were nobly performing a socially useful task. Or at least, that is how they were presented. In actuality, the real-life figures chosen were invariably helpless pawns in the hands of propagandists for a particular image of the West.

Since the first frontier to be tamed was the trans-Appalachian forests, the first heroic frontier-tamer was the forest hunter. Daniel Boone was elected as the exemplar. Boone had been one of the explorers of Kentucky in the early 1770s, he had guided some settlers there in 1775 and helped defend the new settlements against Indian

attacks in the Revolutionary War. He later moved twice more within Kentucky, then to what is now West Virginia and finally to Missouri. In 1784 John Filson wrote a history of Kentucky, mainly with the intention of attracting the attention of investors so that his own schemes might flourish, and appended a biography of Boone portraying him as the standard-bearer of civilisation in the wilderness. The only standard Boone had carried was that of the Transylvania Company, the notorious group of land speculators who hoped to make a quick killing in Kentucky. Then newspapers became fascinated by his frequent moves and typed him as that peculiar kind of frontiersman who so hated being crowded that he resettled as soon as he could see the smoke from his neighbour's chimney. Eastern Romantics translated this into the more noble figure who sought a life in nature, uncorrupted by civilisation. The reason why Boone made a career of moving on was his incompetence: he simply failed to register his land claims in Kentucky and West Virginia, so was legally ejected; he even failed to convert the Spanish grant he was given in Missouri and only after protracted appeals was it confirmed by Congress six years before his death in 1820.

By that point, thanks largely to the press, this obscure pioneer was a nationally-known figure. Byron had picked up on the Romantic implications – of course – and given Boone a eulogy in *Don Juan*, proudly quoted in the United States after the poem's publication in 1823. Ten years later Boone was the subject of a full biography by Timothy Flint. A New Englander who had settled in Cincinnati, Flint had two enthusiasms: he was a romantic idealist about 'nature' and an indefatigable propagandist for Western settlement. Not surprisingly therefore his Boone is simultaneously both fleeing civilisation and leading its advance. The reading public were presumably unworried by this inherent contradiction, for the book went through fourteen editions and is credited with being the most widely-read biography in America up to 1850. In 1860 Boone's canonisation was completed when George Bancroft, America's most influential historian before Turner, cast Boone in Volume VIII of his magisterial *History of the United States* as the saviour of the nation by leading her into a secure democratic future in the West. From start to finish, the poor man had greatness thrust upon him and at each stage he was stamped with other men's images of the West.

Immortality in another form awaited. James Fenimore Cooper's vastly popular *Leatherstocking Tales*, five novels published between 1823 and 1841, had as their central character a wilderness hunter who was meant to personify frontier virtues. Most authorities agree that though Cooper did not exactly base *Leatherstocking* on Boone, he

had him in mind. Cooper's readers fused Boone and Leatherstocking together to produce a nationally-accepted image of the Western hero. He was the buckskin-clad, dead-shot hunter, with uncanny knowledge of the wilderness. His antagonists were Indians, who kidnapped white maidens, who in turn had to be rescued. Indians were devious, ruthless, evil and a barbaric barrier to civilisation's advance, so deserved slaughter, except for the occasional good Indian who proved himself the white man's loyal friend. Above all, the frontier hero of literature remained the outsider, unable to fit into civilised society and, often as not, he didn't get the girl. This model was to have a great future.

Cooper did not portray all Indians as villains but his readers knew that each advance westward had been bought at the cost of a bitter conflict with redskins. Five years after Boone had left for Missouri, Indian resistance north and west of the Ohio was broken by frontier riflemen under 'Mad Anthony' Wayne at the battle of Fallen Timbers: Cooper had Leatherstocking serve under Wayne. Even as Cooper was writing, Illinois and Wisconsin were made safe for settlement by the Black Hawk War of 1832. It has been claimed that *Last of the Mohicans* was the most widely read American novel of the nineteenth century; it is also the novel in which Cooper's Mingoes are portrayed as fundamentally evil and are attacked by Leatherstocking with the wary 'Exterminate 'em! Henceforward the frontier hero would have one primal function. Whether he was fleeing civilisation or leading its advance, he was an Indian-killer.

Though Easterners admired the great march into the wilderness, they did not particularly admire the society which sprang up in the West. On the contrary, Eastern snobbery made the crudity of Western life the butt of endless jokes. The West had also become well-known as the source of a new kind of American humour, wonderful anecdotes of exaggeration usually called 'tall tales.' Regarding tall tales as crude nonsense and the boasting as crass, the East tended to write off Westerners as uncouth, loud-mouthed braggarts. One man came to personify these traits: Davy Crockett.

Crockett the hero - King of the Wild Frontier as the 1954 hit-song put it - was not a product of legend. Nor was he the creation of nineteenth-century writers and the public imagination. Crockett the frontier superman, coonskin cap, buckskin shirt, homespun wisdom and awe-inspiring bravery, was invented in his entirety by the media in the 1950s. For a few brief years this Crockett was a national craze. A three-part TV series was turned in 1955 into a very successful film, which then had two sequels. Seizing on his potential, manufacturers then turned Crockett into a marketing device, so that his name

endorsed an extraordinary range of products. None of this was based on history, nor on legends, nor folktales (even the song was specially written for the TV series). This Crockett was a media artifact, the product of a search for a variant on the frontier theme in a decade which produced more Western films than any before it. The Crockett of history had enjoyed a different kind of fame.

In the nineteenth century, Crockett's fame had been brief as a politician who had played the theme tune of the Age of Jackson - the common man who makes good. He was portrayed as the astute yokel who defeated his opponents by low cunning and frontier humour; his death at the Alamo did not transform this image. Never known as an Indian-killer, as a backwoods hunter he eventually became bracketed with Boone - Theodore Roosevelt was a founder member of a group of gentleman-sportsmen interested in conservation who called themselves the Boone and Crockett Club. As a frontier humourist Crockett survived in a different way through the 'Crockett Almanacks', cheap prints which retold and embellished old frontier tall tales and added new ones. Entirely appropriately, as a master of the tall tale himself, Crockett was turned by the Almanacks into a comic giant of fable - but they left no basis for a national hero of flesh and blood. Except, that is, in Texas. There, where the revolution against Mexico approaches the status of a creation myth and the martyrs of the Alamo are near-sacred figures, Crockett remained revered. The reverence continues undimmed. In 1978 some evidence emerged which suggested that Crockett had hidden throughout the siege and attempted to escape death by claiming he was an innocent bystander. Public uproar resulted, with one newspaper claiming the publication was a Communist plot.

By the time of Crockett's death in 1836, public attention had turned from the forests of Kentucky and Boone/Leatherstocking to a new West. In their vicarious quest for romance and excitement, Easterners persistently looked not to what was happening at the limits of settlement - that was just a risky variation of what many of them were doing themselves - but beyond to the cutting edge of the frontier. From the 1830s to the 1850s much excitement was generated by tales of the mountain men, the fur trappers of the Far West. It is difficult to exaggerate the exploits of the mountain men, even though many of them did their best to do so. Their courage, endurance and skills were of an extraordinary order. By the 1840s, the mountain man had become a new and exciting character in the great Western drama. He had been thrust on to the stage not by straightforward reporting of his remarkable activities, although good examples of such reporting existed. Writers seized on this new figure to manipu-

late his potential for illustrating the *idea* of the frontier. The fur trapper was fresh and wonderful copy to be exploited. What emerged followed the pattern already laid down for frontier heroes. Fact gleaned from stories, reports and travellers' accounts was reinterpreted through the prejudices of the author; 'autobiographies' and biographies were tailored for a public seeking sensationalism; and novels took up and extended the fiction already masquerading as truth. The mountain man was given a version of the same treatment which had produced the frontier-tamer of the forests.

The Eastern public did not however look on the achievements of the mountain men with the same admiration and moral approval in which Daniel Boone had basked. The image of the mountain man which had taken shape in the East by the 1840s was essentially that of a wild man, a solitary predator, rugged and brave, unwashed and illiterate, who threw away the profits of his herculean endeavours in annual orgies of drinking, gambling and general unmentionable profligacy. He was exciting and picturesque but he had three disturbing defects as hero-material. First was his symbiotic relationship with the Indians - most trappers were obliged to fight Indians part of the time, but some lived with Indians and some took Indian wives. Second, he had apparently deliberately rejected civilised society for the wrong reasons: he sought freedom in the wilderness not to exercise natural virtue but to enjoy himself free from society's rules. Third, he exemplified no great and noble purpose - collecting beaver pelts to make fashionable gentleman's headgear might be profitable but it was hardly the same as leading settlers into a new promised land.

These attitudes were unjust. In reality, there was no single type of mountain man. Some were illiterate, some not. Some indeed were loners, but the most effective trapping unit was the organised group called the brigade. Some threw away their desperately hard-earned profits to unscrupulous traders and in orgiastic release at the annual rendezvous, but others demonstrably did not. One interesting study has suggested that they should be seen simply as entrepreneurs in an entrepreneurial age; many just took their profits and went into other, safer and usually respectable occupations. More important, the mountain men had indeed made a crucial contribution to Western settlement. It was not government-sponsored expeditions which explored the Rockies and found the routes into Oregon and California, but trappers like Jedediah Smith, Jim Bridger, Thomas Fitzpatrick and Joseph Walker. Some indeed, like Smith and Zenas Leonard, saw the potential for settling the Pacific Shore.

But the mountain men were given little credit for their achieve-

ments and farsightedness at the time. The heyday of fur trapping was from the mid-1820s to the late 1830s; very suddenly, the fashion for beaver hats was replaced with one for the silk 'topper' and the trade simply collapsed - the last rendezvous was held in 1842. It is often forgotten that, though the East had seen some stories published about mountain men in the 1830s, the main rush of writing came from 1845 when to all intents and purposes the trade was over. The reason was simple. By that point the Far West was at the centre of political debate because ardent nationalists were pressing for the annexation of Oregon and California.

In the next thirty-five years, from about 1845 to 1880, Americans invented the Wild West. They polished, embellished and admired their invention and peopled it with inhabitants of their imagination. Shifting their gaze from the forests of Kentucky and Tennessee, now a part of history, and from the trappers of the Rocky Mountains, who were fading into a romantic episode, they looked to the whole frontier beyond the Mississippi as an arena for westward expansion and therefore for heroic drama.

In the great migration across the Mississippi into the new West which began after 1848, crossing the plains and mountains was as hazardous as ever. The physical barriers were formidable and the Indian menace acute, so that those who streamed out to Oregon and California needed guiding and the Army, embarked on a role of making the Plains safe, needed experts for reconnaissance. Both were promptly seen to be dependent on the scout - far seeing, wise in the ways of the wilderness, a deadly foe to the redskins. The only people available to fill this role were mountain men, many of whom, putting to obvious use their knowledge of the land and Indians, already had switched to acting as guides when the fur trade declined and the first attempts were made to find wagon trails to the Pacific shore. In terms of public acclaim, they got little credit for it until one of the obscurest of them was catapulted to fame.

The catalyst for that process, and a good deal else besides, was John Charles Frémont, soldier, explorer, politician and adventurer. Frémont's three expeditions to the Far West between 1842 and 1846 gave him the title of 'the Pathfinder' and a reputation as the greatest explorer of the age. Both were unearned. Frémont was a good scientific geographer and a competent map-maker; his major contribution to geographical knowledge was to identify the Great Basin and his major practical achievement was to convince those back East that the Plains were not a desert. He was credited with exploring the key routes through the Rockies and for leading the first wagon train west in 1843. He did neither: the mountain men had already found

all the important routes and passes; one of them led the first wagons into California and a missionary led the first into Oregon.

Nevertheless, Frémont was a truly important figure because his greatest talent was for publicity. His official reports on the first two expeditions were masterpieces of vivid prose and when published in 1845 were instant best-sellers (they were reprinted seven times by 1856). Frémont caught the public imagination and directed it westward at the high point of the shrill cries about Manifest Destiny. With his involvement on the third expedition in the seizure of California at the outbreak of the Mexican War, he became a national figure and his influence was to last for a generation. Though Frémont judiciously distributed praise for services rendered by his guides, he reserved unstinting admiration for one of them – Kit Carson.

Born in 1809 in Kentucky and raised on the Missouri border, Carson had run away to New Mexico when he was seventeen and became a trapper three years later. He had made no particular name for himself but by 1840 was a seasoned mountain man. He met Frémont by accident in St. Louis in 1842 and became *one* of his guides on each of the three expeditions up to 1846. Frémont's reports over and over again praise Carson – 'my true and reliable friend' – for his skills, bravery and outstanding dependability. The ambitious Frémont was doubtless deliberately creating a heroic image for himself and another for Carson as his foil. During the Mexican War, in the conquest of California, Carson earned a considerable, indeed an excessive, reputation as a courier for Frémont and a guide to General Kearney's force on the last leg of its advance. An English naval officer, who met Carson at the end of the hostilities in California in 1846, wrote: 'Why, he is as famous here as is the Duke [of Wellington] in Europe,'* and when he finally went East to Washington in 1847 he was greeted with a hero's welcome.

Frémont had made Carson; as his fame rose so did Carson's until it eclipsed his creator's. By the time Frémont ran, unsuccessfully, for the presidency in 1856 his supporters were using Carson's name to shed lustre on their candidate. Carson had become a national figure: from that point he moved inexorably to become a legend. Henry Nash Smith and Kent L. Steckmesser have charted this voyage in detail. Reverent biographers produced a Carson unknown to his friends but entirely suited to his Eastern admirers: genteel, well-spoken (to the point of literary pedantry) and abstemious. No-one who knew him ever doubted Carson's courage, but his near-illiteracy,

* This was praise indeed, for the Post Office had become used to delivering letters to the Duke addressed merely 'No. 1, London.'

broad dialect (including the usual range of mountain man oaths), and liking for whiskey were just as obvious. Carson had been irrevocably set on the road that Daniel Boone had travelled before him. The final accolade came, five years after Carson's death, when in 1873 John S.C. Abbott included Carson in his series of biographies, 'American Pioneers and Patriots.' Abbott was a clergyman-turned-popular-historian, much acclaimed, with a reputation for combining drama with moral uplift in his writings.* Abbott's Carson is a pillar of moral rectitude as well as a model of chivalry.

Beyond the solemn biographies, Carson soon took on a new life in literature, appearing in novel after novel under his own name – but not of course as his real self. The Carson of fiction, particularly of the dime novels which flooded the market after 1860, took on whatever characteristics the writer believed best illustrated what he thought the public wanted to hear about the frontier. If the frontier hero was intended to be an edifying example, then the Carson of the biographies was displayed, but side by side with those predictable inventions another Carson emerged, savage, brutal – and an Indian-killer. It is usually implied that the wild and woolly Carson is as much an invention as the gentleman-scout. Certainly he usually grew at least four inches on the real Carson's five feet six and put on fifty pounds of herculean muscles. But this should not obscure the fact that Carson *was* an Indian-killer. Frémont's Reports are full of accounts of Carson's Indian fights and include, for April 1844, a detailed description of Carson killing and scalping two Indians, one of them while still alive. Boone is alleged to have admitted that he only killed one Indian in his whole career. With Carson's real record as a basis, it was entirely predictable that the prolific dime novelist Edward Ellis should eventually call him 'the most renowned Indian fighter the world ever produced.'

As a legendary hero, Carson pioneered a new trend which took him a great step beyond Boone. Those who wrote nonsense about Boone were writing what purported to be history; Cooper and his later imitators drew on actual persons and events but were writing romances (even if their readers made obvious connections); and the publishers of Crockett tall tales were perpetuating a comic tradition. Carson was unhesitatingly turned into fiction. The reason lies in America's developing attitude to the West: it was the land where anything was possible. By the 1840s, when tales of the mountain men had shown its inhabitants were extraordinary, the boundary – in the experience of the East – between the credible and the incredible had

* The author's copy was originally presented as a Sunday School prize in 1896

become blurred. Into that misty land, novelists thrust a character whose real exploits were beyond the comprehension of city-dwellers anyway. Carson, like all those who followed him down the road to fictional immortality, was unlikely to sue for libel!

Well before his death in 1868, for Carson himself fantasy and the real world became inextricably entangled. Two of the best-known stories about Carson bear repeating because they illustrate this process so well. In 1849 he was asked to guide a troop of dragoons in pursuit of a band of Apaches who had captured a white woman, a Mrs. J.M. White. The party arrived too late – the Indians had killed their captive and fled – but amid the abandoned loot in the Apache camp, lay a copy of a novel in which (of course) Carson rescues a white girl from fiendish redskins. Seventeen years later, Colonel Henry Inman (who eventually wrote several romantic accounts of his own experiences in the West) showed Carson a lurid illustration of a heroic Kit defending a white girl from a horde of red savages. Carson is reported to have said: 'That thar might be true but I hain't got no recklerlection of it.'

From the 1840s the public became saturated with images of the West through the emergence of true mass media. The decisive step was a publishing revolution, both in technology and marketing. Steam had powered printing presses in Britain since 1814, but the first successful rotary steam press, capable of printing 8,000 copies an hour, was patented in New York in 1845. Twenty years later, a method for running continuous rolls of paper (instead of single sheets) through a rotary press completed the technical changes needed for mass-circulation publishing. The rotary press did not merely benefit newspapers; it encouraged the rise of the weekly story paper emerging first in Boston and New York in the mid-1840s and reaching circulations of over 100,000 copies ten years later. Distribution received a major boost in 1857 when the Post Office dropped magazine mail charges to two cents. New and aggressive marketing techniques were adopted: the *New York Ledger* bought space for striking advertisements in rival papers and ran 'teaser' episodes of its stories in them, while Street and Smith, publishers of the *New York Weekly*, pioneered the use of billboards along railroad tracks and mobilised the hitherto ignored army of newsagents as salesmen. The huge demand for story papers was perceived to be in the main from young working girls. Street and Smith believed they detected an equal if not larger market among young men. They were right and they inaugurated a switch from predominantly sentimental hogwash to adventure hokum – and amid the subjects available the Wild West was a natural contender for a predominant place.

A further and decisive change in marketing took place in 1860. Irwin Beadle and his partner Robert Adams brought out the first of a series of novels in a simple all-paper format at a price of ten cents (half the cost of the equivalent in a story paper). The dime novel was launched. In 1862 Erastus Beadle bought out his brother Irwin but saw his employee George Munro set up a rival firm; more competitors emerged with Frank Tousey in 1878 and Street and Smith's late decision to issue dime novels in 1889. The publishers all took a similar line on the nature of the enterprise: they were marketing a product. Novels were standardised at a \$75 – \$150 payment for 35,000 words, with an initial print run of 60,000 copies. Beadle and Adams concentrated on packaging the product: authors were instructed on stock plots and characters and the magic of repeating the familiar. Street and Smith targeted their market and tailored their stories accordingly. The output of dime novels was stupendous: all told, up to their demise at different times in the twentieth century, Beadle and Adams produced twenty-five series, Frank Tousey thirty and Street and Smith fifty. It is difficult to separate out reprints, re-issues under new titles and other duplications, but up to the end of the century figures indicate Beadle and Adams had produced 3,688 issues, Munro 1,362, Frank Tousey 2,154 and Street and Smith 2,802.

The dime novel has been inseparably associated with the Wild West. It was, but not of course exclusively. Dime fiction covered every theme for stories of adventure, and followed rather than created trends – if a plot-line sold, it was instantly copied and recopied. Cooper-imitations were a stock item (Beadle's most successful issue was their eighth, Edward S. Ellis's *Seth Jones*, complete with Leatherstocking clone, which sold 600,000 copies) and they went on being produced up until the 1890s. Sea stories, cashing in on the world-wide success of Yankee trader-captains, were a craze in the 1870s and 1880s. Detective stories arrived earlier than might be supposed – Munro introduced 'Old Sleuth' in 1885 and Street and Smith gave the world the deathless Nick Carter in 1891. General adventure stories, usually involving the irresistible rise to fame (and often fortune) of poor-but-honest lads (and girls too), always formed a large part of the output.

The exact amount of dime fiction devoted to the West is difficult to estimate. It was clearly very large: Philip Durham has said two-thirds and Daryl Jones, in his excellent study of dime novel Westerns, suggests 75 per cent. This latter figure looks high even if one includes Cooper-imitations, essentially frontier-historical rather than Wild West. A survey of the surviving works of a handful of the best-known

dime novel authors shows a good deal of variation. On the basis of titles still existing, Albert W. Aiken wrote about two-thirds of his novels on general Wild West themes, Joseph E. Badger about half, Edward S. Ellis about 45% and St. George Rathbone, prolific juvenile author, about 35%. Some of course specialised in the Wild West: three-quarters of William R. Eyster's output was set on the frontier and, naturally, so were 90% of the tales of 'Buckskin Sam' Hall, former Texas Ranger.

Nor were dime novels the first cheap outlet for tales of the new West: the story papers beat them to it by several years. Street and Smith led the way into turning the Wild West into a publishers' bonanza through the *New York Weekly*, which published the first of Edward Zane Carroll Judson's new Western stories in 1869. Judson had been a successful writer since 1846, mostly, though far from exclusively, of sea stories – hence his regular pseudonym of Ned Buntline. In 1869 he had just completed a lengthy tour of the West which had incidentally provided him with some wonderful new material. Returning from California he had stopped off in Fort McPherson, Nebraska, where he talked at length to William Frederick Cody, the once and future Buffalo Bill.

In the history of the West, the date of that meeting, 24 July 1869, has a far better claim to immortal significance than, say, 25 June 1876 (Custer's Last Stand) or 26 October 1881 (the gunfight at the O.K. Corral). Out of that encounter came not merely a new Western hero but an entire new image of the West, and an image ultimately created by the most successful example of showbusiness of its day. This image was ecstatically received, enshrined in memory and credited as truth and it therefore formed an indispensable element in creating fertile ground for the reception of the myth to come.

Buffalo Bill Cody has the unique distinction of first being invented by a dime novelist and then re-inventing himself. Because he had a short and successful career as an actor and a long and spectacular career as a showman, it is often assumed that, as a frontiersman, he was a fraud. He did not do much to dispel this impression by his autobiography, which is padded with tall tales and sections plagiarised from others' laudatory accounts of his exploits. He happily endorsed the publicity his agents dreamed up for his show. So strident did the publicity become and so enthusiastically did he encourage it, that his name did not have to wait for the debunking of Western legends which became a feature of the 1960s. On his claim that he bore the scars of 137 wounds from Indian fights, his wife caustically told reporters she had noticed only one. In 1897 journalists dug out William Matthewson of Wichita who claimed Cody had

stolen the nickname and reputation of champion buffalo-killer from him. In the same year the *New York World* challenged his claim that he killed the Indian chief Tall Bull in 1869 and the details of his famous account of his single-handed slaying of Yellow Hand in 1876 were denied by eyewitnesses to it. He left the Union Army with the rank he entered it – private; he received his promotion to Colonel in 1887 when the Governor of Nebraska gave him the rank in the National Guard. Modern writers frequently refer to Cody as a charlatan and dismiss him as a braggart.

All this ignores some obvious facts. Before Judson ever 'discovered' him, Cody had led a life which gave him as much right to be considered a hero as Carson. Indeed, of all the men who became legends of the Wild West, few had as good a claim as Cody to their fame. His brief period as a rider for the Pony Express, itself to last only eighteen months in 1860-61, was dangerous and did involve one exceptionally long ride of 384 miles, though it was no more remarkable than the experiences of others employed in this ill-conceived enterprise. His claim that he killed a record 4,280 buffalo while under contract to supply meat to the Kansas Pacific Railroad appears to be correct; it was the construction crews (not Ned Buntline) who named him Buffalo Bill. Because trick-shot stars in shows and fairs, like Cody himself later, often cheated by replacing bullets with cartridges made up with bird-shot, it has sometimes been assumed Cody's tales of his marksmanship were just fables.* They were not. General Eugene A. Carr, his commanding officer when he was a scout for the Fifth Cavalry, wrote in his testimonial for Cody in 1878: 'I could not believe that a man could be certain to shoot antelope running till I had seen him do it so often.'

Cody's real distinction lies in his career as a scout for the Army from 1868. Even before then, a St. Louis newspaper was already calling him 'the noted guide.' His record, as his biographer Don Russell has pointed out, was impressive to say the least. He served continuously from September 1868 to November 1872 (the longest period known for any scout) and was involved in fourteen expeditions and fifteen Indian fights. The balance of the evidence suggests he did indeed kill Chief Tall Bull in 1869 (though not in hand-to-hand combat with knives, as his publicity later claimed). He was never, as he insisted he was, made chief of scouts for the Fifth Cavalry, but Carr thought so highly of him that he arranged extra pay 'for extraordinary good services.' His reputation as a scout is indicated by General Sheridan's request for him to act as guide for

* Use of birdshot also of course ensured that the audience was not accidentally depleted.

a hunting-party of Eastern VIPs in September 1871 and again for the Grand Duke Alexis of Russia in January 1872. When the campaign against the Sioux began in 1876, the Army specifically requested his services. Ten days after the news of the Custer massacre was known, the unit of the Third Cavalry to which Cody was attached was involved in an Indian fight, in which Cody fought, killed and scalped the Cheyenne chief Yellow Hand. It is also often forgotten that Cody was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for his part in an Indian fight in April 1872. His name was removed from the Honor rolls in 1917, but simply because it had finally been noticed that, as a civilian employee of the Army and not a serving soldier, he was debarred from receiving the medal. Following a petition by his grandson, Congress restored Cody's name to the rolls in 1989.

The man therefore whom Judson met in July 1869 was worth a newspaper story or two. What he got was immortality. Judson immediately sold to Street and Smith *Buffalo Bill, King of the Border Men*, a lurid tale not of the Wild West but of the Civil War in Kansas, and one which bore the sketchiest resemblance to any events in Cody's life. No matter: Street and Smith advertised it as biography:

All the friends of Ned Buntline should read of *Buffalo Bill*, who is a living SCOUT, and after enjoying reading of the daring adventurer, the best horseman, the best informed guide, and the greatest hunter, should go among their friends and tell them what a splendid *true* story we are now publishing in the *New York Weekly*. In the words of Ned, "It is the wildest, truest story I ever wrote."

Judson then turned the novel into a melodrama, as a result of which Cody's life was transformed. Prompted by offers of hospitality from the prominent men for whom he had acted as a guide, Cody went East in 1872 and was greeted in Chicago and New York as a celebrity. He looked up Judson and was promptly dragged to see the play and to take a bow. Judson then pestered Cody to consider playing himself on stage. He finally agreed and together with his friend John Burwell 'Texas Jack' Omohundro, joined Judson in Chicago for all three to act in *The Scouts of the Prairie*, concocted by Judson on the spot. It is disappointing to discover that the drama critic of the *Chicago Times* on learning the play had been written in four hours did not ask (as Cody says in his autobiography): how had Judson spent the time? Atrocious as drama though it may have been, it toured six cities with great success and ended its run in New York.

Cody had found a new career. He broke with Judson at the end of the 1872 season, possibly disappointed with his share of the box-office receipts, and formed his own company, The Buffalo Bill

Combination, to play frontier melodramas. For the next nine years — he alternated between making a good living as an actor during the season and then returning to the West, usually to act as a guide or scout. A report of the fight with Yellow Hand, written by J.V. Arlington, and grossly overwritten at that, appeared within days of the event in the *New York Weekly*. Cody then persuaded Arlington to write a melodrama based on the incident, so that the following season, *The Red Right Hand, or, the First Scalp for Custer* played to packed houses all over the East. In 1878 Cody teamed up with Prentiss Ingraham, Southern gentleman, dandy and dime novelist *extraordinaire*, who wrote several melodramas for the Buffalo Bill Combination and kept up a close association with Cody.

One of the most immediate fruits of this arrangement was the beginning of the extraordinary phenomenon of the Buffalo Bill dime novel. Estimates of the total number have always varied widely, but the best evidence suggests 557 originals and, including reprints and re-titled numbers, about 1,700 issues overall. Judson wrote only four and Cody probably wrote some himself. Sometime around 1880 Ingraham began ghostwriting for him and under one pseudonym or another went on to produce about 120 Buffalo Bill titles. As a figure in literature of any kind, no-one has approached then or since the popularity, measured by books published, of Buffalo Bill.*

Where Cody, aided by his press agent John Burke, showed remarkable skill was in weaving together his personae in the dime novels, on stage and in real life, so that the public was bombarded with the image of the heroic frontiersman. Cody certainly made a good living as an actor; his claim that he had made \$135,000 by 1879 is probably another of his exaggerations but he was probably clearing \$100 per week average. In the theatre however Cody was a fad and the fad faded, so he took the decision to retire from the stage in 1882. In 1877, with his old friend Major Frank North, he had bought a ranch in Nebraska. There in 1882 he staged a very successful Fourth of July celebration along the lines of a rodeo. The well-known impresario Nate Salisbury, looking for a variation on the circuses already attracting large audiences across the United States, persuaded Cody to consider organising a touring show with a Wild West theme. Cody made an abortive start by taking as a partner Dr. W.F. Carver, marksman, braggart and confidence man. This 'Wild West, Rocky Mountain and Prairie Exhibition' made some money on tour through the Mid-West and East but broke up at the end of the year. Cody then did what he should have done in the first place and went

* Curiously, Cody has been also the real-life figure most often portrayed in films.

into partnership with Salisbury. In 1883 Buffalo Bill's Wild West was born.

Buffalo Bill Cody's contribution to preparing the ground for the myth of the West is difficult to overestimate. In three distinct but interlinked areas – the theatre, the dime novel and exhibition entertainment – he did more than any other individual, or indeed any other combination of factors, to recreate the image of the Wild West in the mind of the American public. That image, not an understanding of the forces of history, nor the simple facts of the conquest of the frontier, underpinned what was to become the myth. The irony of Cody's fate was to be overtaken by the rise of the myth and to be discarded because his vision of the West was no longer in tune with the central tenets of the myth itself.

Frontier dramas in the theatre did not begin with Buffalo Bill. There is no question however that *Scouts of the Prairie* began a fashion. America's most popular playwright of the age, Bartley Campbell, turned to the West with *The Vigilantes, or, the Heart of the Sierras* in 1878. This basic morality play was not particularly well received, but in the following year *My Partner* opened in New York to sustained acclaim. Campbell had elevated the Western play but beneath that level the success of Cody's Combination encouraged a host of imitators producing simple melodramas, filled with gunfire, Indians and the triumph of the plainsman. The critics were usually unimpressed. Of *The Vigilantes* the *New York Herald* wrote that it was '...entirely devoid of the interest with which an intelligent playwright may invest both dialogue and action, *even in this department*' [italics added]. The fashion which Cody had set however rested on real public approval. Obviously, frontier melodramas were exotic and exciting. More importantly, as Rosemary K. Bank has argued, their characters became symbols: the plays showed individuals participating in the nation's destiny, they represented the chance for a fresh start and success by personal effort.

Buffalo Bill dime novels decisively gave a new direction to the image of the West in popular literature. Though old themes and old stereotypes persisted, the Buffalo Bill stories dictated a different emphasis. Cooper and his imitators had always insisted that the hero be a gentleman, usually an Easterner – the Leatherstocking figure was there to teach him how to be heroic in the West. Now the hero was a self-made man succeeding through rugged individualism. Whether set in mountains, mining camps or on the plains, this hero was the scout, the new leader of the march of civilisation, and, though he might have to clean up nasty deposits of bandits, gold thieves, Mexicans and renegades, his real job was removing Indians.

The level of violence therefore went up on an exponential scale, not least for commercial reasons – when asked how Beadle and Adams had met competition from their rivals, their editor Orville Victor laconically replied: 'We had to kill a few more Indians.'

Few of the writers had any knowledge of the West and even those who had visited the frontier, like Judson and Ingraham, had little interest in portraying it accurately. Apart from the routine slaughter which would have left not an Indian alive within a decade, the Western gunfight was given some bizarre treatment. The cover of the 1894 *Wild Bill, the Wild West Duelist* (ostensibly written by Cody) shows a dashing Hickok, back-to-back with his villainous opponent, pistols raised and cocked, waiting for the signal to pace off in the approved formal European fashion. Mark Twain's description of the arrangements for the ludicrous French duel in *Tramp Abroad* would be the perfect comment:

I have never had any such experience of such a swell duel as this before.

I have had a good deal to do with duels on the Pacific coast, but I see now they were crude affairs.

At this distance of time it is difficult to grasp the scale of the popularity and success of Buffalo Bill's Wild West show. Cody and Salisbury's management lasted until 1894, when Barnum & Bailey replaced Salisbury until the show's demise in 1909. During that time it toured the United States each year, with a major lengthy booking in New York, went to Canada in 1885 and made its first visit to Europe in 1887. Cody consistently claimed that he was presenting not a mere outdoor spectacular entertainment, but an authentic encapsulation of life in the West. It therefore had Indians directly from the reservations (Sitting Bull joined in 1885), former working cowboys, the original Deadwood stage and its own small herd of buffalo. The format of the show contained parades of Western characters and exhibitions of horsemanship and marksmanship but focussed on set-piece re-enactments of frontier 'events.' Among these were (inevitably) Cody's duel with Yellow Hand, Indian attacks on a settler's cabin, and on the Deadwood stage (both defeated by the timely arrival of the cowboys) and Custer's Last Stand (Sitting Bull was often hissed when he appeared).

An explanation of the show's success is not difficult to find. Cody was an instinctive and inspired showman, yet through his showmanship shone his almost child-like sincerity that he was bringing the reality of the West to the world. The show's publicity machine was outstandingly effective: its advance work was meticulous – giant posters were displayed, the local press mobilised and local dignitaries

wooded by the principals. While on the one hand the publicity men claimed the educational value of the show, on the other they organised and timed the appearance of Buffalo Bill dime novels. The height of the show's success was its run in Chicago during the 1893 World's Fair. Thereafter it went into a slow decline. Even after it closed, Cody himself could not quit since a lifetime of carelessness with his huge profits and a series of disastrous investments had left him in deep financial trouble. He joined a rival show in 1909 and, when that went broke in 1913, he appeared in a circus and then in the last remaining major Wild West vehicle, the Miller 101 Ranch show. He made his final farewell performance (the first was in 1910!) in December 1916 and died a few weeks later.

Buffalo Bill's was not the only Wild West show; its first rival appeared within five years and by the 1890s there were fifty or more, of varying sizes, operating across the United States. Nevertheless, Cody's boast that he brought the West to the rest of America was no idle one. Even at the beginning, the audiences were large – 44,445 people saw the show in Chicago in 1884 and in 1885 one million saw it in five months' touring. From 1886 Cody had a permanent venue on Staten Island for New York and one week in July showed receipts for 193,960 attendances. The 1893 World's Fair in Chicago attracted an estimated 27 million people; six million of them took the opportunity to see the show in its grounds nearby. Anxious to dispel any notion that it was some kind of circus, Cody never permitted the use of the word 'show' after the title Buffalo Bill's Wild West. From the beginning, Cody insisted that he was bringing not the history of the West, but its present, or at worst very recent, reality. All the publicity laid great stress on the realism of what was portrayed, right down to claiming that the Indians in the show were so dangerous that the reservations had lent them to him with relief. For a decade, this illusion of authenticity convinced audiences that the show offered them not an enactment but the reality of the victorious march into the West. Mark Twain gave it his personal endorsement:

It brought back to me the breezy, wild life of the Rocky Mountains, and stirred me like a war song. Down to its smallest details, the show is genuine – cowboys, *vaqueros*, Indians, stage coach, costumes and all...

In fact, the publicity men shaped the show around what experience taught them the public liked, and what the public liked were violence and the fights with the Indians. One long-used programme accordingly began: 'The Bullet is the Pioneer of Civilisation, for it has gone hand-in-hand with the axe that cleared the forest and with the Bible and the school book.' Cody was thus trapped into portray-

ing the *Wild West*, but in the 1890s Americans were no longer confident of the worth of progress and they were being urged to look to the West as the source of values which civilisation seemed to have lost. Trapped in a lifetime of simple preconceptions, this was a West Cody could not display.

Well before it entered its long decline however, Buffalo Bill's Wild West had made a decisive contribution to the creation of one final image central to the myth which was about to emerge. By 1887 the definitive Western hero was no longer the plainsman, let alone the forest hunter or mountain man – it was the cowboy.