

The Other Wild West

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In The Other Wild West, the author discusses the revisionist arguments on American Old West violence as put forward by leading historians including Robert Dykstra and Lynn Perrigo, systematically debunking former work by Roger McGrath and Ray Billington on cow-town violence. Drawing on Richard Brown's argument that Old West violence was a part of the same conflict as the Indian Wars, the author demonstrates how violence in this era was neither reduced to individual vigilantism nor white-on-white aggression. The author concludes that although conflicts were more collective, systematic and transnational than conventional understandings suggest, the myth of personal violence persists. The author discusses the value that this myth has played in forming national consciousness and bolstering political rhetoric and how this has tangled the historical credence of pop-culture with documented reality. The author holds that such confusion dispossesses non-white participants from the historical purview; those who not only played formative roles but were themselves also victims of the most violence. Because of the disinheritance intrinsic to the old west myth of personal violence, the author forwards a continual re-visitation of de-facto history.

In a 1910 address to the American Historical Association Frederick Jackson Turner said “each age studies its history anew and with interests determined by the spirit of the time.”¹ In his time Turner interpreted the frontier as a concept that had been integral to American identity and considered its loss a moment of great adjustment. Historians have not failed to continue reading meaning into the frontier age and the “Wild West,” often milking it of nationalist, social or political interpretations. One of the most contested motifs of the late 19th century West is violence and homicide. Here, myths and truths abound, and traditionalists

¹ Fredrick Jackson Turner, quoted in, Gerald Nash, *Creating the West: Historical Interpretations 1890-1990*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1991), 7.

and revisionists have found ample ground for dispute. By looking at the discussion as it has evolved over the past fifty years, it becomes evident that the myth of individual “honourable” violence must be, at least mostly, replaced by the reality of collective violence and that those minority groups who were subjected to the most violence should be brought into the greater purview of the Old West.

In his 1968 book *The Cattle Towns*, Robert Dykstra argued against historians such as Ray Billington, Vernon L. Parrington and Harvey Wish who had written that rampant cattle town violence was fact. Dykstra countered their created histories by pointing out that it was in a cattle town’s interest to keep violence at bay, and that this was achieved through an emphasis on police and on gun control laws.² Dykstra admitted that there was occasionally corruption through hiring ex-criminals into law enforcement but that, on the whole, the system worked.³ Even famed outlaws such as Clay Allison, Doc Holliday and Ben Thompson were never recorded as having killed anyone in a cattle town. The highest rate of homicide in any one cattle town was five in a single cattle season.⁴ Dykstra concluded that “[l]egend does the cattle town people a double injustice- falsely magnifying the periodic failures of their effort while altogether refusing to take account of its internal complexities.”⁵ Roger McGrath, in his 1984 book on frontier violence wrote about mining towns, agreeing that they, like cow-towns were well policed, but answered Dykstra with an alternate perspective on violence.

² Robert Dykstra, *The Cattle Towns*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc, 1968), 116-117, 21.

³ Dykstra, *The Cattle Towns*, 132.

⁴ Dykstra, *The Cattle Towns*, 142, 145.

⁵ Dykstra, *The Cattle Towns*, 148.

In McGrath's case, the towns of Aurora and Bodie, he contended that there were continual fistfights and gunfights among the men: "[m]any of them belonged to that class of western frontiersmen known as badmen: proud, confident, and recklessly brave individuals who were always ready to do battle and to do battle in earnest."⁶ McGrath recorded homicide rates by the FBI's rating system which utilized a 100,000 population denominator, and thereby concluded that Bodie and Aurora had murder rates some five and ten times higher than the American average in 1980.⁷ Richard White in his 1991 work on the American west, as well as Robert Hine and John Faragher in their 2000 text, reproduced McGrath's shocking-by-contrast statistics.⁸ Dykstra, however, countered McGrath in 1996, arguing that using small population towns for this kind of measurement was statistically misleading. For instance, comparing Bodie to Miami was to compare Bodie's 29 homicides "over several years" to Miami's 515.21 in 1980 alone. It was hardly a fair rubric.⁹

In fact, Dykstra argued that "when one looks closely at the western experience beyond the cattle towns, it is odd that actual body counts all over the place are not especially high."¹⁰ Dykstra pointed out Boorstin's report of Billy the Kid killing more than sixty men in the Lincoln County War was about triple of the actual count. The notorious Wild Bill Hickok accounted only

⁶ Roger McGrath, *Gunfighters Highwaymen and Vigilantes: Violence on the Frontier* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 253.

⁷ McGrath, *Gunfighters Highwaymen and Vigilantes*, 254.

⁸ Richard White, "It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own": A New History of the American West (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 331-32; Robert Hine and John Faragher, *The American West* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 308.

⁹ Robert Dykstra, "Overdosing on Dodge City," *The Western Historical Quarterly* 27, no. 4 (1996): 509.

¹⁰ Dykstra, "Overdosing on Dodge City," 512.

seven or eight kills in his life, and the Jesse James gang took, on average, just about one life a year.¹¹ Dykstra held that “it was clearly a safer-and one heck of a lot saner-West than ever dreamt of in our national imagination.”¹² Dykstra built on the pioneering 1941 revisionist work of Lynn Perrigo who said that “the Wild West as related to the communities strung along these Colorado gulches can be tamed down considerably” but that “more sweeping conclusions await similar detailed investigations of law and order in many other widely separated mining communities.”¹³ Indeed, Richard White wrote that if the violent West with its men “devoted to the cult of personal violence” was *anywhere*, it was in the cattle and mining towns.¹⁴ In 1993 Richard Brown argued that the violent West was a reality, but that it should be seen from the context of a Western Civil War of Incorporation, not self-serving gunslingers.¹⁵

“From 1850 to 1920,” argued Brown, “the conservative, consolidating authority of modern capitalistic forces infused the dynamics of the Western Civil War of Incorporation.”¹⁶ This is the conflict that saw the use of gunfighters, albeit, not as the lone riders that myth has made of them.¹⁷ Gunfighters were hired by capitalists such as rail barons Collis Potter Huntington, Leland Stanford and Charles Crocker who rallied against farmers in the Mussel Slough district, prompting a bloody shootout.¹⁸ Or millionaire William A. Clark who utilized vigilantism to break up

¹¹ Dykstra, “Overdosing on Dodge City,” 512.

¹² Dykstra, “Overdosing on Dodge City,” 509.

¹³ Robert Dykstra, “Quantifying the Wild West: The Problematic Statistics of Frontier Violence,” *The Western Historical Quarterly* 40, no. 3 (2009): 329.

¹⁴ White, “*It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own*,” 329.

¹⁵ Richard Brown, “Western Violence: Structure, Values, Myth,” *The Western Historical Quarterly* 24, no. 1 (1993): 6, 8.

¹⁶ Brown, “Western Violence,” 6.

¹⁷ Brown, “Western Violence,” 7-8.

¹⁸ Brown, “Western Violence,” 9.

the violent Tonto Basin War— a feud precipitated by incorporation politics— so that trains could run without dissidents robbing them.¹⁹ The War of Incorporation, Brown found, bred two kinds of gunslingers. There were those who fought for incorporation on a payroll, such as Wild Bill Hickok and Wyatt Earp, but there were also the anti-incorporation rebels such as Billy the Kid, Jesse James and Gregorio Cortez.²⁰ There were, in short, enough characters to give both sides of the political fence, their heroes.

Hine and Faragher wrote on how Buffalo Bill's Wild West shows depicted real life characters to audiences in the East simultaneous to those characters living their actual exploits in the West, and thus "western history was converted into living melodrama."²¹ The way these characters were depicted was a matter of show business. Paula Marks wrote that the "abundance of distorted narratives stems in part from our love affair with the mythical American West... The distorted narratives and caricatures stem from the fact that nobody at the time of the confusing fight could agree on who the good guys and bad guys were."²² "Generally," wrote Brown, "the socially conservative myth of the western hero dominates (but not by much) in our culture- probably because it confronts and engages our fear of anarchy."²³ Richard White suggested, rather, that "Western myth, in effect, validat[ed] the larger belief in a society of social peace. Violence existed, the myth said, but the violence was personal, and it largely vanished as society imposed law and order."²⁴

¹⁹ Brown, "Western Violence," 9-11.

²⁰ Brown, "Western Violence," 20.

²¹ Robert Hine and John Faragher, *The American West* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 501-502.

²² Paula Marks, *And Die in the West: The Story of the O.K. Corral Gunfight* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc, 1989), 7.

²³ Brown, *Western Violence*, 20.

²⁴ White, "It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own," 328.

What the myth does not address is Dykstra's continued argument that "the western experience was part and parcel of a larger American strain of violence" pointing out, by the way, that the Cincinnati homicide rate in 1883 was twice that of San Francisco in 1860.²⁵ Perhaps the Old West was not so different from the East.

Michael Bellesiles took up Dykstra's argument, claiming that "[v]iolence in the West has tended to be collective, as was true elsewhere in the nation prior to the twentieth century.... Nonetheless, writers search for the distinctiveness of the West."²⁶ Bellesiles divided the kind of violence in the West into three categories: "state-sanctioned, personal, and impersonal (or structural)." He gave personal violence the benefit of notoriety, state-sanctioned as most significant in conquering the West, and impersonal, "resulting from unregulated industrialization," as actually claiming the most lives: "In each category" Bellesiles notes, "little difference can be found between the nature of violence in the West and in the rest of the country."²⁷ Significantly, however, the second of Bellesiles' categories has prevailed in popular history of novels and films. Tellingly, this lesser category of personal violence is the one that least indicts a greater population and therefore skirts the problematic politics of collective class conflict or, more so, blatant racism. Michael Pfeifer argued, in his 2004 work on lynch culture, that lynching was a "harsh, rapid, and communal punishment" in the 1850s and 1860s, which was revived nearing the end of the century as a means of resisting the new (Eastern

²⁵ Dykstra, "Quantifying the Wild West: The Problematic Statistics of Frontier Violence," 344.

²⁶ Michael Bellesiles, "Western Violence," *A New Significance: Re-Envisioning the History of the American West*, ed. Clyde A. Milner II (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 167.

²⁷ Bellesiles, "Western Violence," 162.

model) imposition of law.²⁸ Dykstra, however, pointed out that though lynching was more common in the West than in the East, it was more common still in the South, and generally in the states with more racial diversity.²⁹

Here Dykstra has put a finger on the much larger venue of violence which many authors skirt when discussing the creation or deconstruction of a violent West myth. Even Brown made reference to Cormac McCarthy's (1985) *Blood Meridian* without mention of the fact that most of the violence in the novel, based on the exploits of the real Glanton gang, was towards Indians and Mexicans.³⁰ Richard White recorded that whites "killed an estimated 4,500 Indians in California between 1848 and 1880... Most of those killed died at the hands of civilians, not soldiers."³¹ Bellesiles noted that in 1860 Californian ranchers "killed an estimated 185 peaceful Wiyots in response to some cattle thefts by a different Indian tribe."³² Any suggestion that these are part of a separate conflict from the late 18th century Wild West (a suggestion that some authors make) are silenced by Brown's explanation that the white conflicts were simply borne of incorporation conflict in the first— the same conflict, concerning land and resources, as was at the core of Indian Wars. "The so-called 'Indian Wars' of the West might better be labeled 'Wars of Incorporation'" wrote Brown; "I say this because the Native American struggle did not simply collapse and end on some

²⁸ Michael Pfeifer, *Rough Justice: Lynching and American Society 1874-1947* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 94-95.

²⁹ Pfeifer, *Rough Justice*, 289.

³⁰ Richard Brown, "Western Violence," 9-10. The designation "Indian" rather than "indigenous," "Native American" or other allocation is used in this paper for its generally accepted present and historical American usage.

³¹ White, "*It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own*," 338.

³² Bellesiles, "Western Violence," 166.

bloody battlefield.”³³ As such, this broadly spanning conflict caught other non-white parties, such as Chinese workers, and Mexican ranchers, in the crosshairs of incorporation too. Tragically they often became targets of violence in a time of crisis. “[W]estern lynch mobs rarely earn the condemnation directed at southern mobs,” contended Bellesiles, “[m]any scholars of the West identify ‘belief systems’ to explain western violence, yet rarely mention racism, which was probably the single most prominent cause of violence in the West.”³⁴ The discussion of the Old West myth of violence has dealt primarily with white conflict, possibly because so much of the popular entertainment which created the Western myth was by, for, and about whites. David Gutierrez wrote that “Mexican Americans have long been aware of the ways such myths have helped to obscure, and thus to diminish, the actual historical producers of the culture that Anglos ostensibly celebrated.”³⁵ Patricia Limerick saw politics at play in this: “[i]t is the topic of power that knocks the pins out from under any effort to portray region as a unifying factor transcending ethnicity, gender, and class.”³⁶

In 1930, Edward Douglas Branch’s book, *Westward: The Romance of the American Frontier*, had the following words to say about the 19th century conflicts in the West: “[t]here was opposition indeed—Indians, Frenchmen, and Spaniards, but each of these barriers was bowled over so inevitably and so

³³ Richard Brown, “Western Violence: Structure, Values, Myth,” *The Western Historical Quarterly* 24, no. 1 (1993): 6.

³⁴ Bellesiles, “Western Violence,” 168.

³⁵ David Gutierrez, “Significant to whom?: Mexican Americans and the History of the American West,” *A New Significance: Re-Envisioning the History of the American West*, ed. Clyde A. Milner II (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 71.

³⁶ Patricia Limerick, “The New Significance of the American West,” *A New Significance: Re-Envisioning the History of the American West*, ed. Clyde A. Milner II (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 71.

completely that... the Indians and the conflicts with New France and New Spain dwindle in importance...the taming of the land—that is the essential conflict.”³⁷ The polemic of entwined myth and reality demonstrated in Branch’s “history” downplays historical players for want of a tidy American narrative. David Hamilton Murdoch rightly noted that myths “show how things should be by claiming to show how they once were.”³⁸ For this purpose, the myth must be consciously authoritative and morally unquestionable. Murdoch wrote that “Americans could not decide (and still have not decided) how to reconcile their demands for government help and their resentment of government interference. Each time this dilemma has arisen, the Western myth has been trotted out.”³⁹ In this eristic, the didactic of myth, however flawed, is a powerful one, and one where the reality of collective violence against racial minorities must be revised or omitted. David Weber, a historian whose work focuses on Mexican Hispanic transition into the American Union, admitted that as recently as the 1980s “the Spanish borderlands had fallen from fashion in university history departments and had failed to win the attention of writers of American history textbooks. United States historians saw the field as part of Latin American history and ignored it.”⁴⁰ Indian history, meanwhile, has been pushed into a “savage war” myth over the past century, where the uncivilized Indian iconizes the enemy of American ideals.⁴¹ Even African American cowboys, who comprised some

³⁷ Edward Douglas Branch, *Westward; the Romance of the American Frontier* (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1969), v-vi.

³⁸ David Hamilton Murdoch, *The American West: The Invention of a Myth* (Cardiff: Welsh Academic Press, 2001), 100.

³⁹ Murdoch, *The American West*, 101-102.

⁴⁰ David J. Weber, “The Spanish Borderlands, Historiography Redux” *The History Teacher* 39, No. 1 (November 2005), 44.

⁴¹ Richard Slotkin, “Dreams and Genocide: The American Myth of Regeneration Through Violence,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 5,

9,000 during the “golden” 1880s have been all but omitted from pop-culture, or in the case of Nat Love (Deadwood Dick) and others, re-cast as white heroes.⁴² Generally speaking, any other non-white Americans were tidily categorized as side-kicks or villains in Hollywood and dime novels where the self-serving white gunslinger was king. Richard Slotkin wrote that Theodore Roosevelt identified heavily with the myth of the white, individualist “hunter-hero” who forwarded civil progression by killing Indians.⁴³ Far from correcting popular culture, meanwhile, Dwight D. Eisenhower once told his listeners they ought to “read [their] westerns more,” and Ronald Reagan was so endeared to the myth Hollywood perpetuated that he was known to get film scripts and historical reality confused.⁴⁴ Although Cowboy Historian Richard Slatta suggests that Americans should simply “enjoy the cultural richness and creativity inherent in the myths while also identifying myths as such,” this becomes problematic when it is considered that these myths build a national consciousness in which huge sections of American culture are left out or misrepresented.⁴⁵ Yale Frontier Historian John Mack Faragher rightly asserted that “current historical research of diverse, multifaceted frontiers is instructive,” but also “intimidating, for it requires that historians now imagine a new

no. 1 (2004): 49; Richard Slotkin “Our Myths of Choice,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.

⁴² “Deadwood Dick and the Black Cowboys,” *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, no. 22, 30-31.

⁴³ Richard Slotkin, “Nostalgia and Progress: Theodore Roosevelt's Myth of the Frontier,” *American Quarterly* 33, no. 5 (1981): 612-614.

⁴⁴ Dwight D. Eisenhower, Remarks Upon Receiving America's Democratic Legacy Award, Nov 23, 1953, quoted in David Hamilton Murdoch, *The American West: The Invention of a Myth* (Cardiff: Welsh Academic Press, 2001), 106; Murdoch, *The American West*, 115.

⁴⁵ R. W. Slatta, “Making and Unmaking Myths of the American Frontier,” *European Journal of American Culture* 29, no. 2 (2010): 89.

narrative.”⁴⁶ To look at a more nuanced Frontier History, Faragher admits, will require in-depth comparative analysis, but comes with the benefit of understanding “the remarkable complexity and diversity of North American history.”⁴⁷

What seems certain is that we need a broader understanding of violence in the West and of the players it affected most. Far dismissed should be notions of high noon draws and honourable vigilantism. What gun slinging did transpire was mostly due to a broader trans-national story of incorporation through capitalist and federal control of the West. This conflict extended to Indians, Mexicans, African Americans, Chinese and other minority groups as social changes wrought economic, cultural and racial strains. The largest loss of life was among Indian communities, so when the western myth serves an Anglicized West-East historical narrative, and disinherits and misrepresents Indians and other minorities in it, it adds insult to injury. Limerick and Slotkin may well be right that a politics of power is at work in the myth of Western violence. Not only does it downplay national culpability by reducing anarchic acts to ruthless individualism but it sidesteps a national agenda to incorporate and “civilize” what remained of the frontier, regardless of what that juggernaut dispossessed, fist cuffed, or lynched. Those looking for the heroics of Hollywood westerns may be disappointed with recent revision, but in all likelihood need not be concerned. If the Old West was collective, the new western myth-makers are not. The historian, after all, can expose and rebuff a myth without, as yet, expelling it.

⁴⁶ John Mack Faragher, “Americans, Mexicans, Metis: A Community Approach to the Comparative Study of North American Frontiers,” In *Under an Open Sky: Rethinking America's Western Past*, (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1992), 91.

⁴⁷ Faragher, “Americans, Mexicans, Metis,” 92.

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