

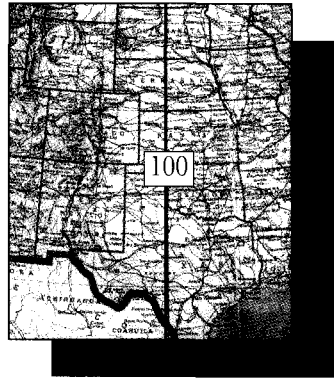
The Hundredth Meridian

by Chilton Williamson, Jr.

Epic America

Up in Oregon a woman was bathing in a river. The transistor radio she had set on the bank played as she swam. She was still swimming when a movement farther along the bank caught her eye. She turned and saw Elvis disappearing into the woods on her side of the river. At the same moment "Heartbreak Hotel" came on the radio.

We tend to regard Elvis sightings as examples of a peculiarly contemporary form of zaniness, yet the phenomenon of autosuggestion induced by heroes or celebrities is probably as old as human history itself. People have been seeing Mary the Mother of God for nearly two millennia, and the folk history of Europe is enriched by apparitions of figures beloved by the populace from their own time, or earlier ones. The author of the Wobbly ballad claimed he saw Joe Hill last night, and Lew Rockwell, in an adaptation of the Hill lyrics, saw Murray Rothbard. Popular icons, like left-wing causes, never die. So with Butch Cassidy, the Sundance Kid. And so with the other Kid, Billy—alias William Bonney, William Antrim, and Kid Antrim—whose actual name was Billy McCarty and who was born, probably, in Missouri around 1855 and grew up in Silver City, New Mexico Territory. This worthy youth was dispatched to bliss eternal by Sheriff Pat Garrett at Fort Sumner, New Mexico, at midnight, July 14, 1881—and almost immediately, as one of his biographers says, the Billy the Kid of legend came alive. Since that night he has been spotted many times throughout the West, and in Old Mexico. Not only for New Mexico but the entire Southwest, Billy, who achieved fame and notoriety in the Lincoln County War, had been adopted well before his death by much of the Mexican population of the region, and also by many small cattlemen of the Anglo-Saxon persuasion, as their champion against the cattle interest. Pat Garrett's shot in the dark in Pete Maxwell's adobe house in Fort Sumner made him a hero in certain circles only; beyond them he was instantly branded as a cow-



ard and a murderer, a hired gun of privilege. Many of the Kid's fans to survive the following 27 years must have been gratified to learn of Garrett's own murder five miles east of Las Cruces on the Mail-Scott Road (now Highway 70), where he had descended from Carl Adamson's buggy to urinate and was shot twice in the back of the head while assuming a highly indefensible position.

The literature, print and celluloid, of violence in the Old American West—the Southwest especially—is vast enough to fill the Grand Canyon, which for the majority of Americans perhaps is a less awesome phenomenon than the bloody frontier saga evoked by names like Wyatt Earp, George Scarborough, and John Wesley Hardin, and events such as the shootout at the OK Corral and Jesse James laid in his grave by Bob Ford. Individually these are mythic tales; collectively they amount to nothing less than the Great American Epic with which we must be content, the Great American Novel having failed to make its advent among us. People who dare to doubt that other American myth called Progress are certainly entitled to find validation for their heresy in the cultural descent implied by the replacement of the quick-draw artist by the pelvically oriented guitar-picker packing a slower type of gun as the model of American manhood. Still, how is it that a commercial civilization dedicated from the beginning to making America safe for making money *and for keeping it* can find not just enjoyment but inspiration in the spectacle of violent outlawry at the margin and beyond of ordered middle-class life and the rule of law? One answer is the American tradition of

a comfortable and complacent gnosticism which understands American history as a battle between good men and bad ones, a pitched fight between almost-equals in which the bad men, however, slowly lose ground and are conclusively defeated in the end. But on the frontier and in the wilderness conditions were too fluid, the circumstances of existence too uncertain, for romantic gnosticism to enjoy more than superficial plausibility. Scarborough, Garrett, Hardin, John Selman—men like these constantly crossed and recrossed the boundary between legal and illegal behavior, while the ambiguities characteristic of a half-formed society made it often difficult for anyone—themselves and others—to know on which side of the line they actually stood. The position of the best men of this place and time was that of a God-fearing person compelled to apply familiar moral and theological axioms to hitherto unforeseen and unimaginable situations, in a totally ad hoc manner. Was Scarborough, in his pursuit of rustlers in the southern territories of Arizona and New Mexico, acting as a casually deputized arm of the law or as the paid hitman of the cattle growers' association? Probably he was both, unable himself to have said which.

The frontier ended about the same time Scarborough did, and today the wilderness is a place where backpackers go to fornicate in the bosom of Mother Gaia. The violence, though, has come creeping back into American life, spreading itself indiscriminately and with democratic partiality around the nation: big cities and small ones, suburbs, small towns, and the hinterland. A strange time, you say, for the American Epic to find favor, and of course the usurper elite that operates America while attempting to dictate the tastes, interests, and enthusiasms of the people has been working very hard to discredit and explode the epic for more than a generation. So far its efforts have had only mixed success at the popular level, where audiences seem innocently to miss the heavy-handed revisionism of movies like *Dances With Wolves* (which

to them is only a romance with plenty of old-fashioned violence, the whole effect somewhat marred by Kevin Costner's bare backside), while even in the more exalted reaches of society Patsy Limerick's *New Western History* is already drawing yawns. Mainstream publishers continue tossing off generic Westerns and coffee-table books, and the best of the Western university presses get on with the job of adding to the corpus of Western scholarly letters, as the University of Oklahoma Press has recently done with *George Scarborough: The Life and Death of a Lawman on the Closing Frontier* by Robert K. DeArment.

Unlike sex, violence is something most people prefer to experience vicariously. Probably being murdered in virtual reality is an experience the average person would choose to forego, even if he might enjoy watching a snuff movie now and again. Vicariousness operates on two levels, location and time. In the first instance, something—bad or good—happens to the other fellow. In the second, it happens to him in another period. Vicariousness with respect to location is a relief; where time is concerned, a reassurance, making the violence of the Old West palatable to consumers of Western lore and legend. We enjoy reading about Custer's Last Stand not simply because we are present only in imagination but because the event and the conditions that produced it, lying in the past, are no longer dynamic but static, threatening no one. The same is true of history in general, which is why sentimentalists and other timid souls are always happiest living (as they suppose) in the past. History stays put, a source of comfort for simple minds and of alarm only to ideologues. For ordinary Americans situated somewhere between these extremes, the Wild, Wild West appeals—for its spirit of adventure and endurance, bravery and heroism—to an age of commercial and bureaucratic tedium from which technique has removed most material challenges, leaving seduction as the only imaginable form of physical adventure. The Old West serves not only as an outlet for the imagination but as a place for it to roam in. Which is what it ought to be, since it is in roaming of this kind that people discover not just the past but what in history is worthy of honor and emulation.

Still unaccounted for is the inclusiveness of the Old West's appeal. The frontier was a cruel and ruthless place, barely

civilized, full of ugliness and crudity, rampant public distemper and immorality whose vices, indeed, were the necessary precondition of its virtues. But the bards of the American Epic extol the scene in its raw entirety, while their auditors applaud. The fact tells us something. Raymond Chandler's fans are responding to Philip Marlowe's chivalrous challenge to the corruption and barbarity of Los Angeles in the 1930's, not to the corrupt and barbarous themselves. Similarly, viewers of contemporary cop shows are enthralled by the ongoing battle against depraved criminals and the culture of criminality, not by criminal culture in its own right. Yet the literature of the Old West is almost as quick to glamorize whores, cardsharps, cut-throats, and bandits as it is lawmen and hardy pioneers. It is this indiscriminate quality of appreciation that gives the Western epic its reputation as an exercise in nostalgia, leading directly to widespread disapprobation among the mandarin class.

The nostalgia, though detectable, is actually a lesser element of the legend of the Old West, which essentially celebrates nothing more—or less—than the role violence necessarily plays in an acceding society—a civilization creating itself out of chaos and building from the bottom up. In these circumstances violence surely has a positive, even a heroic, aspect; the spectacle of violence exhilarates rather than depresses, inspires instead of discourages. Only in deceding societies does violence appeal to us as inevitably tawdry and mean, reprehensible—inhuman and therefore inexcusable. So frontier violence in the 19th century appears in retrospect to have had an engaging and constructive aspect, unlike the destructive mayhem of recent times. That is not the whole story, of course; perhaps it is even a minority report. The frontier knew more, way more, than its share of sadism, nihilism, and evil done only in the name of evil. The perception, however, is somewhat different: violence as fundamentally life-affirming as opposed to life-denying.

No country in the history of the world has moved from youth to sclerotic old age as rapidly as the United States has, and America's love affair with the youthful culture of the American frontier reflects this fact. The affair, in addition, is not America's alone, but the world's. Every summer mules burdened by six-foot-five German males wearing powder-blue

cowboy suits—hatted, booted, and spurred—descend from the South Rim to the depths of the Grand Canyon, and Japanese tourists encumbered by three and four cameras each stand beside their air-conditioned buses at Dead Horse Point above the Colorado River, straining their eyes for a vision of Moab, Utah, the desert oasis and home to the only Golden Arches for a hundred miles around. As the West was once the building edge of the United States, so the New World was the frontier extension of the Old: Europe and the Americas involved together in intersecting cycles of growth and decay, accedence and decedence, acquisition and retrenchment, violence and repose. While the American West was still in the process of formation, eastward the nation was already in decline, spiritually and intellectually though not materially; in the same way, the rise of American civilization occurred as the older civilization that had produced it continued to fall farther from the zenith. As long as the Old West was a going concern, the American people—and others—had a vision of something that was new in the world, and at the same time very old. In this respect the closing of the American frontier as marked by Frederick Jackson Turner was felt not only by the settled part of the country but by the rest of the world as well.

A final aspect of the Old American West is very real and has not passed unnoticed by the ruling class in our own day which, understanding precisely how far it has gone in revoking the rights and privileges of a free people and in destroying their culture, their country, and their tradition (the U.N.'s definition of genocide), turns now to the job of assuring that the people have no redress from tyranny. The violence of the American frontier—in fact, of America itself—has historically been recognized by true Americans to be in some degree cathartic, exercising a cleansing influence on those occasions when it has been responsibly mobilized and directed. Violence as a potentially positive force in the world is an integral part of American folklore, and of American myth. Much as our rulers want it to, it will not go away. The American Epic, the legend of the American West, is the Fort Knox—known to all, available only to its keepers—in which the real national treasure is stored.

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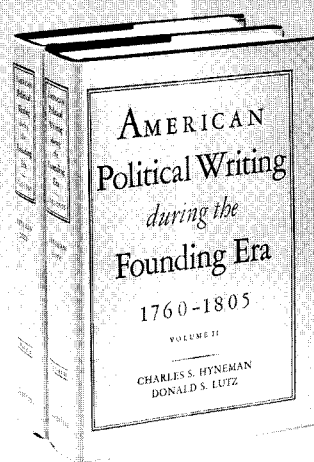
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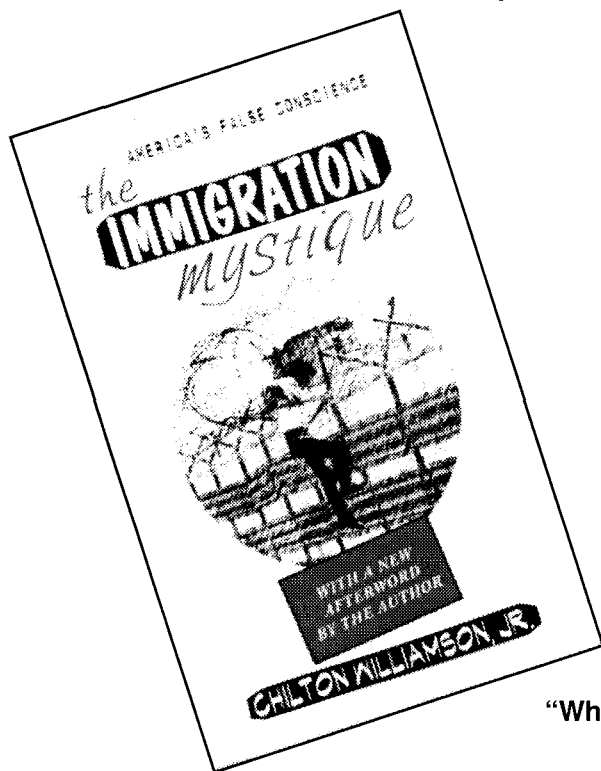
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