

## Oswald Spengler

*by Richard Moore*

He said that mathematics was an art  
and won my heart;  
that cultures die; the sign of death, a Caesar—  
O, what a teaser!—

and once they're dead, stay dead. No one's at home  
in Ancient Rome,  
that took grand Greece with it. And how divine a  
pattern for China?

Nothing in China for TWO THOUSAND years,  
decadent dears . . .  
O yes, Tang art, then Buddhism . . . but then  
Tao becomes Zen,

and nothing really changes, nothing's new. . . .  
Nothing is true  
everywhere all the time; everything grows,  
rooted, for those

who see deeper than logic, learn to hate your  
dead laws of nature.  
Hey, was it Spengler speaking there, or me?  
Easy to see . . .

I had to have thought-countries rich and strange  
where I could range,  
as once, among wild thoughts of our black maid,  
I skipped and played,

and hoped someday to live down the disgrace  
of my dead race,  
as if I'd grasped the strangeness of my portion,  
I, failed abortion.

Mother felt guilty. Drugs she took, the dear,  
had made me queer.  
But no, they gave me Spengler, made me blest  
in our dead West.

## Sins of Omission

by Roger D. McGrath

# The Modern Myth of the Black Cowboy

"Nigger Charley" Tyler rode the range of the Owens Valley in the trans-Sierra country of California during the early 1860's. He was one of the hired hands of the ranching McGee family, who grazed their beeves in the valley and then drove them north to market at the booming mining camp of Aurora. Paiute Indians, living in the valley and subsisting primarily on pine nuts and grass seed, found the new food source irresistible and began rustling cattle. Tyler was one of dozens of cowboys from several ranches who tried to stop the thefts. Fights erupted, and both Indians and cowboys were killed. Then, in an ambush, Tyler was captured by the Paiute, bound securely, and sequestered at a remote location.

To Paiute, Tyler was a special prize. They later explained that they easily recognized this one cowboy and identified him as having been in several earlier fights because he was black. Not only was he the only black among all the cowboys, but he was the only black they had ever seen. Now, they would make him pay for those earlier fights. They tortured him for three days, then roasted him to death.

That there were black cowboys such as Charley Tyler is not to be denied. (I told Tyler's story in a book I wrote about the mining camps of Aurora and Bodie.) However, that blacks accounted for a significant percentage of cowboys is a politically correct myth. I have watched this myth develop and grow during the last 30 years until it is now *de rigueur* to claim that 20 or 25 or even 30 percent of all cowboys were black. Much of this began following the 1965 publication of *The Negro Cowboys*. UCLA English professors Philip Durham and Everett Jones argue that popular literature about cowboys rarely mentioned black cowboys, although they not only existed but participated in good numbers on the long drives from Texas to the cattle towns of Kansas.

The authors include numerous anecdotes about black cowboys that were not new at all, having been mentioned in several works dealing with cowboys going back to the turn of the century. They also estimate that nearly 20 percent of the cowboys who drove the herds north from

Texas were black or Mexican. This is where the fun really began. First, the Mexican component of the estimate was soon ignored. Then, the fact that the estimate only applied to cowboys on the cattle drives from Texas was ignored. By the mid-1970's, it was said that 20 percent of all the cowboys of the Old West were black. By the 80's, the figure had reached 25 percent. An otherwise excellent documentary, *America's Music: The Roots of Country*, has musician Marty Stuart matter-of-factly stating that a quarter of all cowboys were black. The movie *Posse* (1993) was accompanied by a promotional flyer that claimed 30 percent of cowboys were black. The Black American West Museum in Denver states on its website that "nearly a third of the cowboys of the West were black."

If anyone challenges these wildly inflated figures, he is called a racist. My own research has led me to conclude that, in the cattle country outside of Texas, it was uncommon to find more than a few black cowboys. In Montana, where there were thousands of cowboys, the federal census of 1880 records only 346 blacks—men, women, and children—in the entire territory. Similar figures can be found for the Dakotas and Wyoming. The cattle regions throughout the rest of the West also had a dearth of blacks.

But what of Texas in the post-Civil War period, when slaves were freed and used as cowboys? Terry Jordan, in an outstanding work of cultural geography, *North American Cattle-Ranching Frontiers* (1993), provides demographic data that puts the percentage of black cowboys in Texas in the single digits. Jordan, for example, notes that

Runnels and Callahan counties, representative of the north-central Texas region, by 1880 housed, respectively, 118 and 177 Anglo-American cowboys, but not a single black cowhand. Wichita County, farther north on the Red River, in that year boasted the greatest concentration of black cowboys on the Texas cattle frontier, a total of 15, but even there the African-Americans were greatly outnumbered by



the 67 Anglo herdsmen. In all West Texas in 1880, only 4 percent of all cowboys, excluding camp cooks, were black while Anglo-Americans accounted for about 9 out of every 10. Subsequently black ranch hands never became common anywhere in the West . . . in spite of exaggerated claims to the contrary.

The most exaggerated claims about black cowboys are found in Nat Love's supposed autobiography, *The Life and Adventures of Nat Love* (1907). If he actually wrote it, it is the only known autobiography of a black cowboy. Love's exaggerations are all about himself: He was almost everywhere in the Old West and palled around with many of the famous figures of the frontier, including Billy the Kid; he was captured by Indians but escaped, used his lariat to save a drowning cowboy from a raging river, was adopted by an Indian tribe, survived 14 different bullet wounds ("any one of which would be sufficient to kill an ordinary man"), had horses shot out from under him, killed men in gunfights.

Books about blacks in the West never fail to mention Nat Love. What they do not tell the reader, however, is the mere fact that there is no independent confirmation of anything in Love's autobiography. Nat Love can only be found in his own book. Ramon Adams, in *Burrs Under the Saddle: A Second Look at Books and Histories of the West* (1964), says, "Although this Negro author is supposed to be writing of his own experiences, he either has a bad memory or a good imagination." We do, however, know one thing for certain: Love did spend time on the frontier—he was a porter on a railroad that ran through the West.

c