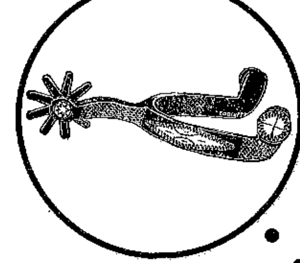
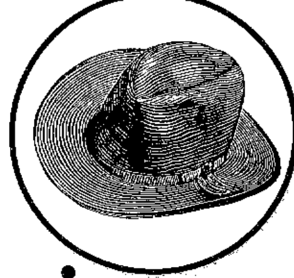
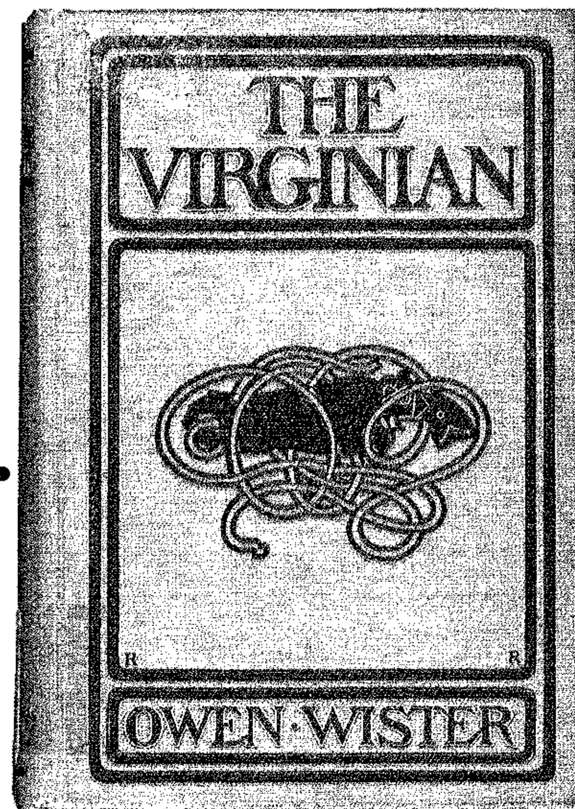
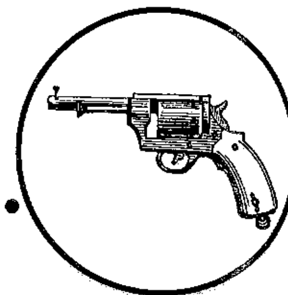
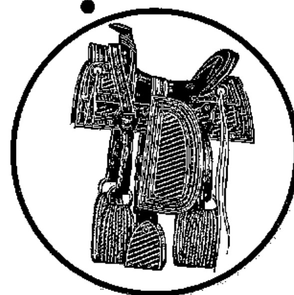








Monopolizing *The Virginian* (or, Railroading Wister)

BY MELODY GRAULICH

JUST ABOUT any western historian who has had the novel in his sights has taken a potshot at Owen Wister's *The Virginian,* first published in book form in 1902. It was an easy target for Bernard DeVoto in one of his "Easy Chair" columns for *Harper's* in 1955. He pointed out the novel's "artistic flaws," but his main gripe was captured in his title, "Birth of an Art." Holding Wister responsible for fathering nearly fifty years of bad writing, DeVoto claimed that "*The Virginian* created Western fiction—created the cowboy story, the horse-opera novel, the conventions, the clichés, the values, and the sun god." Wister, he accused, "enclosed himself in the Old West; he was one of the artificers who made it up."[1]

MHS Museum, Helena

Charles M. Russell drew this pen and ink, called *Cowboy Mounted #2*—also known as *The Virginian*—and others for the 1911 edition of Owen Wister's book. The novel traces the Virginian's courtship of the plucky young schoolmarm, Molly Wood, his showdown with a rustler named Trampas, and his transition from cowboy to entrepreneur.

In *"It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own,"* Richard White hits the same mark, though he replaces "Old West" with a more up-to-date term: "Owen Wister's *The Virginian* (1902) became the classic literary Western, and its author's premodern preferences ran through it pure and unadulterated." White not only holds Wister responsible for the formula western but also for the oversimplified "mythic West" that New Western History debunked. "The lessons . . . of *The Virginian*," White says, "were straightforward."[2]

An abbreviated plot summary seems to support White and DeVoto's view. The novel traces the courtship between cowboy and schoolmarm and the showdown between that same white-hatted cowboy—the Virginian—and the black-haired rustler, Trampas. It even introduced that classic spaghetti Western line: "*Smile* when you call me that."[3]

Over a century after *The Virginian*'s initial publication, many see the novel as one of those patriarchal texts that belongs in a literary Boot Hill. Focused on the West's diversity, critics complain that the novel perpetuates a static view of a West immobilized in a past that existed only fleetingly, if ever. By narrowly concentrating on the Anglo-Saxon pioneer West, they argue, the novel fences out vast expanses of western history and experience. Even Wister's biographer, Darwin Payne, believes that "*The Virginian* was not sufficiently complex to lend itself to extensive literary analysis, and the novel was not to profit from the passage of time."[4]

Does *The Virginian* have anything to offer twenty-first-century readers? I contend that the novel is less "straightforward" than historians or literary critics have sometimes suggested. Nor is its message "pure and unadulterated." In a typically quirky comment, historian and cultural critic Patricia Nelson Limerick recently suggested obliquely, perhaps unintentionally, that the novel does not so much romanticize the past as dramatize, perhaps even satirize, a moment of cultural change: "At the turn of the century, Owen Wister published *The Virginian* and created the archetypal Westerner. . . . The 1990s present a comparable opportunity for an ambitious writer to make her authorial reputation with the publication of *The Californian*, symbol of the New West of emus and ostriches, espressos and utility vehicles."[5]

Wister could be almost as sarcastic and witty as Limerick about the cultural icons and symbols that defined *his* "New" West at the beginning of the twentieth century. His California already has a nouvelle cuisine: he envisions his newly rich eating "*Frogs' legs à la Delmonico*" at the Cliff House. (Indeed, Harvey House restaurants, aspiring to be more than a train chain, offered bullfrogs on their menus.) Instead of SUVs, their luxury vehicles are Pullman cars. In Wister's New West, the cattle shipped east to Omaha reappear in the West as "corned beef" in cheap restaurants; Wyoming is littered not with bones but tin cans. Self-conscious young men wear kerchiefs not to keep dust out of their nostrils but to cultivate a look. Senators "rake . . . a million out of Los Angeles real estate." Transportation companies, "sired by a . . . Dutch syndicate" and in debt to "German bondholders," wheel and deal *and* lose baggage. Young couples even go backpacking on their honeymoon.[6]

The Virginian includes a vision of the twentieth-century West that anticipates themes that concern historians today. By the end of the novel, the Virginian is no longer a prank-playing cowboy but the owner of a coal mine, conveniently serviced by a railroad line. The West too has matured from the playground of young men Wister documented in his

1. Bernard DeVoto, "The Birth of an Art," *Harper's*, 127 (December 1955), 12, 9, 9.
2. Richard White, *"It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own": A New History of the American West* (Norman, Okla., 1991), 621, 625.
3. Owen Wister, *The Virginian* (1902; repr., London, 2002), 28.
4. Darwin Payne, *Owen Wister: Chronicler of the West, Gentleman of the East* (Dallas, 1985), 206.
5. Patricia Nelson Limerick, "The Shadows of Heaven Itself: The Demanding Dreams of the American West," in *Something in the Soil: Legacies and Reckonings in the New West* (New York, 2000), 274–301, 275.
6. Wister, *The Virginian*, 93, 10, 31, 121, 98, 100.

earlier novel, *Lin McLean*; it is getting down to the serious business of resource extraction, labor management, irrigation projects, competition for markets, emerging monopolies, foreign investment, real estate speculation, "cheap foreign" labor, and tourism, all issues explored in the text. Most Indian tribes have been herded onto reservations, where beef contracts provide another source of capital for enterprising entrepreneurs, who also market native artifacts. Wister approves of some of these changes, but most he decries in the voice of the satirical conservative. His conservatism, however, does not lead him to depict the static West of his political compatriot Frederic Remington. Instead, he describes a changing West recognizable to today's New Western historians.[7]

"Yeh, seh, there is a right smart of oddities around. They come in on every train."

This is not to say that Wister takes the same view on our legacy of conquest as Richard White or Patty Limerick. Clearly, Wister was often racist and misogynist, elitist and imperialist.[8] His satire of the West he saw coming toward him resulted partially from his disgust with populism, labor movements, immigration, the rising middle class, and government; "Our country and its government are now two separate things, not greatly unlike a carcass and vulture," he wrote.[9] Yet contemporary readers do not need to approve his politics to acknowledge his awareness. Critics or historians who read or teach the novel as simply fathering the formula Western, as a biased recounting of the Johnson County War, or as a straightforward celebration of the course of empire are recapitulating far more than did Wister the myths of the Old West. In the twenty-first century, *The Virginian* should be seen as a seminal text in raising many of the themes that preoccupy New Western historians, though from a divergent political point of view. This fine novel is more fluid and mobile, more subtle and contradictory than most critics have allowed and can and should be put to more complicated critical uses.[10]

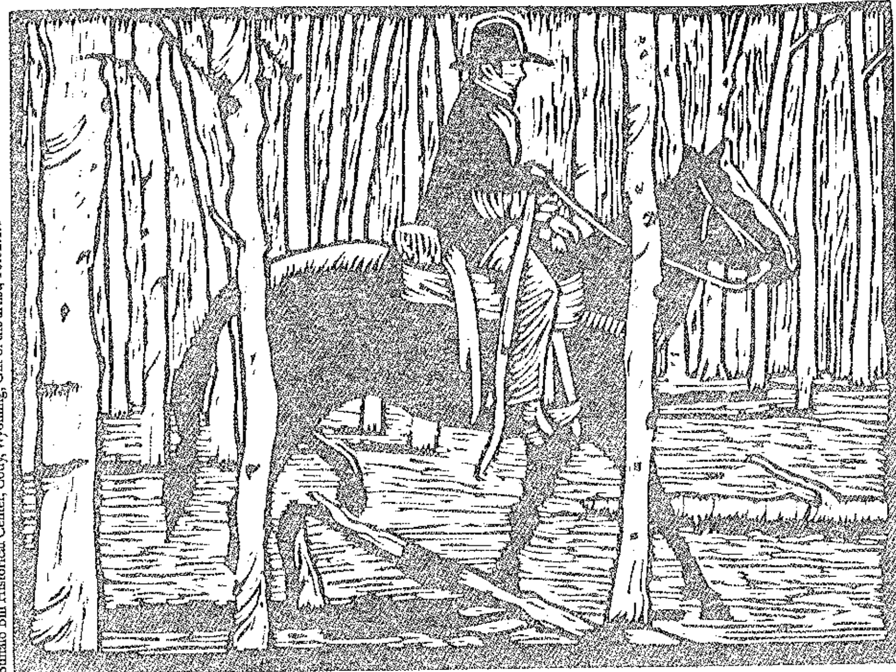
From Owen Wister, *The Virginian* (New York, 1911), p. 140

In fact, *The Virginian* is all about the mobility technological changes brought to the West, as can be seen in Wister's treatment of the railroad. Those who read *The Virginian* as the progenitor of the "horse opera" focus on how Wister believes you can assess a man's character by his relationship with his horse (true enough). But the Iron Horse snorts and steams through the text more vigorously than does the Virginian's horse, Monte. The novel's spatial terrain is surveyed more fully from train windows than from horseback. The plot rides the rails. Wister's interest in trains carries his readers into territories now under exploration by cultural historians: tourism and marketing, the evolution of national parks, global economies, industrialization and monopolization, corruption, governmental sponsorship, consumerism, class, labor, and property rights. Technology and capitalism are at home on the range in the West Wister surveyed.

Significantly, Wister's cowboy romance opens with a Union Pacific train chugging into a western landscape, some years after the completion of the transcontinental railroad. "Through the window glass of our Pullman," the narrator catches his first postcard image of the novel's hero, "a slim young giant, more beautiful than pictures." The train makes possible the narrator's western sojourn, his role as a tourist. Although the narrator soon ponders his distance from the East, wondering if "this same planet hold[s] Fifth Avenue," Wister has already answered the question by connecting Wyoming with New York by rail. In fact, the narrator learns to live comfortably in both worlds, traveling by train back and forth several times throughout the novel, as does Molly Stark Wood, the heroine schoolteacher, and, ultimately, the Virginian. The transcontinental train unites East and West into a nation for better *and* for worse, allowing eastern capital and a tourist economy to prey on the West.[11]

Moreover, the opening chapters are filled with characters brought into Wyoming by train. As the Virginian remarks to the narrator, who is jocularly presuming equal footing, "'Yes, seh, there is a right smart of oddities around. They come in on every train.'" The tenderfoot narrator is one of the oddities: because of him the Virginian has "got to stay responsible" and control his boyish exploits. The

7. Fanny Kemble Wister, ed., *Owen Wister Out West: His Journals and Letters* (Chicago, 1958), 181–82.
8. See Melody Graulich, "What If Wister Were a Woman?" in *Reading* The Virginian *in the New West*, ed. Melody Graulich and Stephen Tatum (Lincoln, Nebr., 2003), 198–212.
9. Quoted in Ben Merchant Vorpahl, *My dear Wister—The Frederic Remington-Owen Wister Letters* (Palo Alto, Calif., 1972), 36.
10. Many fine scholars do just this in Graulich and Tatum, eds., *Reading* The Virginian.
11. Wister, *The Virginian*, 8, 9, 39.



Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Cody, Wyoming; Gift of the artist; 16.02.1A

Like all great novels, *The Virginian* tells multiple stories: it's a western romance as well as a tale of the human and environmental consequences of American business practices and the economic development of the West. Artist Thom Ross created this woodcut illustration, *Aspen,* for the hundredth-anniversary edition of the book.

"agent of the Union Pacific Railroad [is] among the crowd" that observes and applauds his duping of another "oddity," a "drummer," one of the "commercial travelers" representative of an encroaching consumer culture. Significantly, the drummers' train travel has both global and imperialist dimensions with oblique references to Wister's pal Teddy Roosevelt: one is "selling cigars from Cuba." Because he never forgets a face—" 'white men, that is . . . [he c]an't do nothing with niggers or Chinese' "—the drummer presumes an acquaintance with the Virginian, whom he declares he has previously met at Ikey's in Chicago, and concludes, " 'Ain't the world small, though!' "[12]

And then there are the women brought in by the train, women of diverse classes and occupations: the wife of the train engineer as well as Mrs. Glen, she of the blond hair over whom the narrator notes that "impropriety lurks." Mrs. Glen is in Medicine Bow because she is the wife of a "freight conductor," and her frequent absences perhaps lead to the strand of blond hair the narrator notices on the Virginian's shoulder.[13] In a few chapters, another train will bring the woman who will ultimately change the Virginian's life, Molly Wood. By uniting them, the train will unite the nation.

Everything about Molly's presence in the West is the result of the railroad. As the narrator comments, "Now, it is not usual for young ladies of twenty to contemplate a journey of nearly two thousand miles to a country where Indians and wild animals live unchained, unless they are to make such journey in company with a protector." But Molly is "not a usual young lady," and the transcontinental train allows her to set off alone. It provides her with the opportunity to escape the conventional life chosen by her mother and sister, to avoid a loveless marriage, and to achieve economic self-sufficiency. But even more significantly, the train offers her adventure. Without it, she would never have been able to satisfy her "craving for the unknown."[14]

As with the climactic showdown with Trampas on Main Street, endlessly replayed during the opening sequence of *Gunsmoke,* Wister has been credited with inventing the oft-repeated scene that follows Molly's departure from the train—when the Virginian saves her from a runaway stage. In fact, Molly's train trip west reverberates in fiction, film, and reality. As Wister was writing, hundreds of Harvey Girls were riding west, to serve hungry railroad tourists and, some argue, to find husbands. Stephen Crane's bride comes to Yellow Sky on a train. Mary Hallock Foote, the illustrator and soon-to-be writer fictionalized in Stegner's *Angle of Repose,* went west to join her engineer husband in 1876 on a train, as did the host of scientists who became her friends. Although the narrator points out that Molly was "not a New Woman," Wister makes clear enough how the train opened up opportunities for women, "new" or not.[15] And if, as many critics have argued, the marriage between the Virginian and Molly represents Wister's desire to nation-build, to unite west with east, that coupling depends on transcontinental training. The East's acceptance of the West at the novel's end, symbolized by Molly's great-aunt's acceptance of the Virginian, dressed up in conventional store-bought clothes no doubt shipped west, is accomplished by train.

While the train changes the inhabitants of the West, Wister's trains bring not only oddities but also commodities. The plot line in *The Virginian* has less to do with cowpoking than with an increasingly industrialized and interconnected national marketplace dependent upon the train. In the midst of vast ranchlands, covered presumably—we never see one—by cattle, the Virginian and the narrator eat "canned stuff, corned beef" and sweeten their coffee with "condensed milk." Indeed, "sardines were called for, and potted chicken, and devilled ham, a sophisticated nourishment at first glance." Despite the popular view of the West as nature's wonderland, it could not be settled without eastern factories and transportation: "portable ready-made food plays of necessity a great part in the opening of a new country." And Wister even begins to chronicle the ecological consequences: "the empty sardine box lies rusting over the face of the Western earth" while "thick heaps and fringes of tin cans, and shelving mounds of bottles" reflect Wyoming's sun around Medicine Bow.[16]

In an interchange it is hard to believe he did not see as ironic, Wister makes clear how raw materials are turned into products to be sold. For where does the corned beef come from? From western cattle, such as those the Virginian accompanies to Chicago in the central chapters of the book. In these chapters, significantly titled "The Game and the Nation," Wister tells an implicit story about the development of factories and industrial cities (which would require immigrant labor), created markets, food processing, and convenience. In so doing, he anticipates William Cronon's exploration in *Nature's Metropolis* of "the expansion of a metropolitan economy into regions that had not previously been tightly bound to its markets." He also recognizes "the absorption of new peripheral areas into a capitalist orbit," centered in the "Great Bovine City of the World." Cronon argues that the railroad "touched all facets of American life in the second half of the nineteenth century, insinuating itself into virtually every aspect

12. Ibid., 14, 38, 34, 42, 20.
13. Ibid., 26.
14. Ibid., 75, 75, 84.
15. Ibid., 86.
16. Ibid., 18, 19, 40, 40, 40, 45.

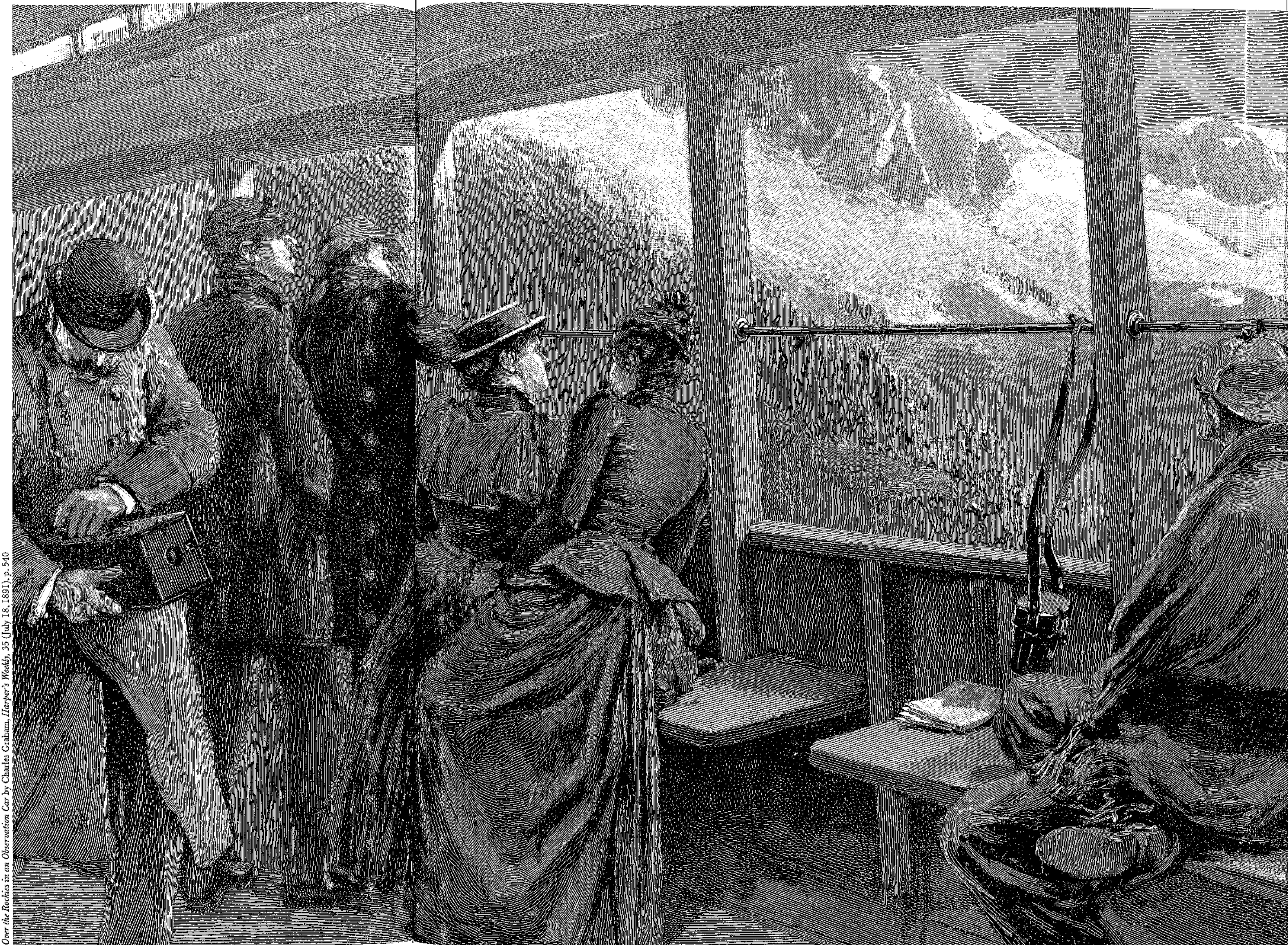
From *Century Magazine,* 50 (May 1895), p. 90

The romance between the Virginian and Molly Wood opens with the Union Pacific chugging across a western landscape some years after the completion of the transcontinental railroad. Credit the train with Molly's presence in the West, as well as that of hundreds of real women, including artist Mary Hallock Foote who traveled west in 1876 to join her engineer husband, commemorating the journey in *The Engineer's Mate* (above).

of the national landscape." *The Virginian* plots the same argument.[17]

Wister's use of the railroad as plot device allows him to comment indirectly on its centrality in the emerging capitalist marketplace. Like White many years later, Wister points out that the development of markets for western commodities was dependent upon a railroad system—and then the railroad system marketed itself to create need. Instead of eating their own freshly slaughtered cattle or game, westerners eat processed meat and "potted chicken," and they carry around cans of stewed tomatoes for liquid. (Soon they will have so much to carry, they'll require automobiles.) And that need for "portable ready-made food," once created, has become necessary for nation building, playing "a great part in the opening of a new country." Once again, Wister seems acutely aware of ecological consequences, revealing the cruelty behind the shipping process: "the terrified brutes" "ain't ate or drank anything to speak of . . . since they struck the railroad."[18]

On his trip east to deliver cattle, the Virginian is involved in another venture as well. His boss, Judge Henry, is playing politics, even from out in the "wilds" of Wyoming, forcing railroads to compete for his business. The cattle are being shipped on the "Burlington" line because "the Judge is fighting the Elkhorn road." (The Burlington was particularly active in promoting immigration, notably from England, so perhaps the Judge, like Wister, was hoping for Anglo-Saxon settlement in Wyoming.) The Virginian does not explain the reason for the Judge's feud, but his covert mission hints at it: "After Chicago, he was to return by St. Paul over the Northern Pacific; for the Judge had wished him to see certain of the road's directors and explain to them persuasively how good a thing it would be for them to allow especially cheap rates to the Sunk Creek outfit henceforth." In Wister's view, competition gives consumers choice: the Virginian reminds the narrator that from "Plattsmouth [he] had the choice of two trains returning." Apparently the Virginian is as persuasive and articulate in the rhetoric of capitalism as he is in other discourses, arguing not only for the judge but also for himself; by the novel's end, we discover that "the railroad came, and built a branch to that land of the Virginian's where the coal was." That, too, exposes the symbiotic relationship between the railroad and the West. The Virginian can market his coal because he attracts a feeder line to Judge Henry's ranch; at the same time, the railroad was dependent upon such coal for operation.[19]



Over the Rockies in an Observation Car by Charles Graham, *Harper's Weekly*, 35 (July 18, 1891), p. 540

***The Virginian* explores issues that originated at least in part with the railroads' western expansion, including tourism and marketing, the evolution of national parks, global economics, industrialization and monopolization, corruption, government sponsorship, consumerism, class, labor, and property rights.**

17. William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York, 1991), xviii, 207, 73. It might not be too much of a stretch to say Wister laid the groundwork for Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1906); although the two men later became bitter enemies, Sinclair admired Wister's work and avidly read *The Virginian* in 1902. Payne, *Owen Wister,* 219.

18. Wister, *The Virginian,* 40, 127.

19. Ibid., 127, 128, 128, 409.

The flow of capital into the West connects the region to the global economy. Both Wister and White point out that the railroads relied upon capital from the East and from Europe. In *The Virginian,* the narrator is skeptical that the Northern Pacific Railroad will be able to expand its operation because of "the millions owed to this road's German bondholders." Another character, angry when he is stranded because the Northern Pacific changes its schedule, questions the company's parentage in an extended insult, claiming that "the blamed thing was sired by a whole doggone Dutch syndicate." And if capital flows into the West from throughout the globe, so do workers. At one point, the Virginian disingenuously refers to a group of railroad workers as "some more I-talians," allowing another character to correct him: "they're Chinese." In any case, the Virginian concludes, "Without cheap foreigners they couldn't afford all this hyeh new gradin.'" In this exchange and others, Wister suggests that the far West is hardly isolated and remote. And even cowboys are centrally involved with the business concerns generally associated with the East: "They were all sitting over this discussion of the Northern Pacific's recent policy as to betterments, as though they were the board of directors."[20]

Foreigners, whether syndicates or immigrants, helped construct the nation by building the railroad. And the railroad helps construct a national identity. Among those stranded by a washout is a group of tourists headed by train for the "Nation's Park," Yellowstone. They are eager to see "Old Faithful" and the other sights, their desire created by the emerging mass culture and by aggressive advertising by the Northern Pacific. As Chris Magoc argues in *Yellowstone: The Creation and Selling of an American Landscape,* "In the northwest region of the late nineteenth century, the railroad, acting as both symbol and force of the market economy, arrives to trumpet and develop the region's natural resources, not the least of which was Yellowstone itself."[21]

Haynes Fnd. Coll., MHS Photograph Archives, Helena

In examples that use the railroad as both symbol and force of the market economy, Wister mentions the Crows as well as the German bondholders who attended the Northern Pacific Railroad's Last Spike ceremony, photographed in 1883 (above) by F. Jay Haynes.

From Owen Wister, *The Virginian* (New York, 1902), opp. p. 200

In the frog-farm tall tale, illustrated by Arthur I. Keller's *'Frawgs are dead, Trampas, and so are you,'* the Virginian dupes his enemy, and Wister parodies the ways in which capitalism exploits the West's natural resources.

Yellowstone was "safe" for tourists, of course, because Jay Gould and the Northern Pacific had colluded with the military to drive the Indians from the park by 1880. By and large, Wister also drives the Indians who roamed the plains from his novel, but he has some ideas about their role in the twentieth century. Some Crow "chiefs," dressed in their "show war bonnets and blankets," sell "painted bows and arrows" to tourists along the tracks. Perhaps some of these same "chiefs" had attended the Northern Pacific's Last Spike ceremony in 1883; they are shown in the F. Jay Haynes photographs, as are the German bondholders Wister mentioned. Not shown is the "considerable number of acres of their treaty land" the Crows were forced to cede to the Northern Pacific. The expanding tourist industry and the railroad provide what is left of a livelihood for the "subdued" western tribes. As one man comments: "And the Crow agent has let his Indians come in from the reservation. There has been a little beef brought in, and game, and fish. And big money in it, bet your life! Them Eastern passengers has just been robbed. I wish I had something; to sell." The "big money" goes, of course, to the agent, who, Wister implies, is selling off the beef the government contracts to provide the reservation, a "foreign" food necessary because the buffalo herds have been decimated, largely because of the railroad.[22]

The Northern Pacific fought a long battle to lay tracks directly into the park, to become its sole concessionaire, but it had lost the fight, and the tourists in Wister's novel would have to be content with taking the "Yellowstone Limited" and then traveling by stagecoach. Many years later, in an essay titled "Old Yellowstone Days," Wister made clear what he thought of the Northern Pacific's plan to commercialize Yellowstone. "The would-be exploiter of the Park never dies. It may be a railroad, a light and power company, anything," he wrote. In the same essay, he made fun of the tourists who uttered "sight-seeing screams" as they "leaped from the stagecoaches to snapshot" him and his companions, whom they took to be bandits. In *The Virginian,* he also pokes fun at these wealthy Americans in search of spectacle. As in today's New West, they treat local inhabitants as performers of an "authentic" West. "They're cow-boys," one exclaims upon seeing the Virginian and his men, while another believes watching the Virginian tell his story "beats the geysers or anything we're likely to find in the Yellowstone."[23]

Wister makes clear the tourists' connections to eastern capital: the narrator "heard them joylessly mention Wall Street to each other, and Saratoga. . . . But these fragments of home dropped in the wilderness here in Montana beside a freight caboose were of no interest to me now."[24] Wister's linkage of Wall Street and Saratoga in one line plays with the idea of the stock market as gambling; though it's of "no interest" to the narrator, someone is making money off

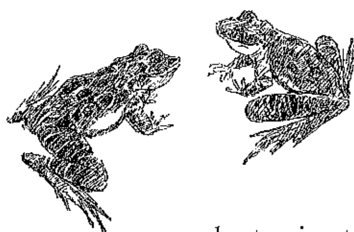
20. White, *"It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own,"* 258; Wister, *The Virginian,* 131, 134, 150, 151.

21. Chris J. Magoc, *Yellowstone: The Creation and Selling of an American Landscape, 1870–1903* (Helena, Mont., and Albuquerque, N.M., 1999), 22.

22. Wister, *The Virginian,* 162, 152, 153; Dee Brown, *Hear That Lonesome Whistle Blow: The Epic Story of the Transcontinental Railroads* (New York, 1977), 258. Wister's treatment of how Indians, once imprisoned on reservations, became sought-after commodities for tourists anticipates the fine work of Anne Hyde in *An American Vision: Far Western Landscape and National Culture, 1820–1920* (New York, 1991).

23. "Old Yellowstone Days," *Harper's,* 172 (March 1936), 471, 476; Wister, *The Virginian,* 154, 155, 161.

24. Wister, *The Virginian,* 154.



the human freight shipped on this train sitting in a "wilderness" characterized by a variety of capitalistic exchanges.

The central incident in "The Game and the Nation" chapters is a tall tale, in which the Virginian dupes his enemy, Trampas, so that Trampas loses face among the men he is trying to lead into rebellion. The story the Virginian tells is about frogs in Tulare County, California, and his tale owes much to a writer Wister admired, Mark Twain.[25] Like Twain's stories, the Virginian's tall tale is only ostensibly about "frawgs"; its real subject is American business practices—the cornering of raw materials, the creation of a market, competition, the threat of monopoly, and, finally, the crash of the market. The connecting link in these enterprises is, of course, the railroad.

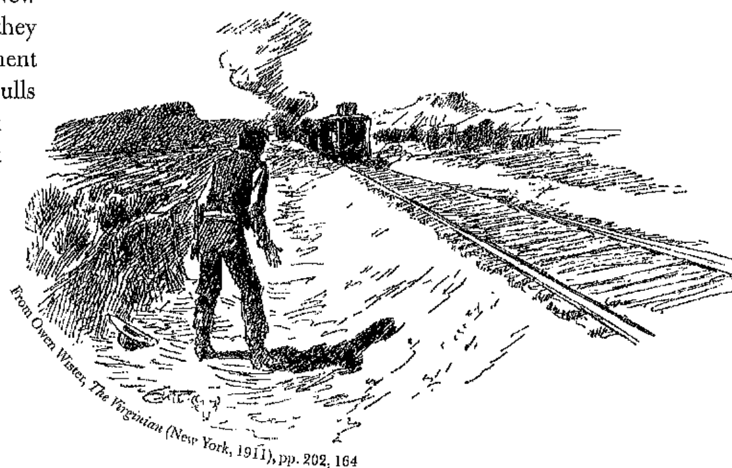
In the Virginian's brilliant performance about the "frawg farm" in Tulare County, Wister most directly parodies the ways in which capitalism exploits the natural resources of the West. Having learned about frogs' legs á la Delmonico in a celebrated eating palace in Omaha "near the trains, . . . painted with [nationalistic] golden emblems—the steamboat, the eagle, and Yosemite," the Virginian and Scipio, enterprising entrepreneurs, catch some bullfrogs to fry up for the starving tourists.[26] As he cooks the frogs, the Virginian is actually frying bigger fish: in order to humiliate Trampas, he hopes to trick him into choosing to raise frogs rather than to mine for gold.

There's "big money" in frogs, the Virginian asserts. He's familiar with the only frawg farm in the country, in Tulare. Of course, the Tulare speculators put up "big capital" to develop "big markets" as far away as New York "afteh the Southern Pacific was through." And they "went into it scientific, gettin' advice from the government Fish Commission," which told them to "herd" the "bulls separate" except at "certain times of year." They took advantage of environmental resources: they bought cheap land, "utilized them hopeless swamps splendid," and then used a nearby railroad for shipping.[27]

But the entrepreneurs also faced environmental challenges from predators: once a "pelican got in the spring pasture, and the herd broke through the fence. . . . The pelican rushed 'em from the pasture right into the San Joaquin River, which was close by the property. The big balance of the herd stampeded." The owners lost all: "Yu' see, a frawg in a river is more hopeless than any maverick loose on the range." In this fast-developing new industry, the speculators hadn't developed the technology to protect property rights: "they never struck any plan to brand their stock and prove ownership." But with typical American engineering ingenuity, they did solve some environmental challenges, creating, for instance, freight trains to transport the frogs alive across the parched desert: "And same as cattle trains, yu'd see frawg trains tearing acrosst Arizona—big glass tanks with wire over 'em—through to New York, an' the frawgs starin' out."[28]

". . . yu'd see frawg trains tearing acrosst Arizona—big glass tanks with wire over 'em—through to New York, an' the frawgs starin' out"

These daring investors were repaid for their risk and their inventiveness: "'twas a gold mine for the owners. Forty percent they netted some years." They were brilliant at creating a market, soon selling to restaurants throughout the country. Of course, they benefited from western economic growth, itself the result of the transcontinental railroad and some corruption. With the Southern Pacific Railroad completed, Collis Huntington having outmaneuvered those who promoted San Diego as a terminus, "Los Angeles was beginnin' its boom. The corner-lot sharps wanted something by way of varnish. And so they dazzled Eastern investors with advertisin' Tulare frawgs clear to N 'Yol'ans and New York." They cornered the market! The "frawgs was the fashionable rage." And the Tulare boys had a monopoly.[29]



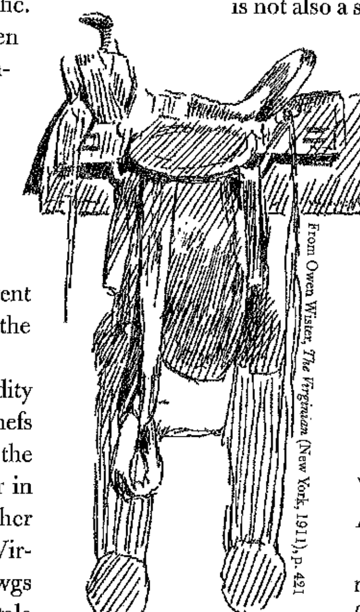
From Owen Wister, *The Virginian* (New York, 1911), pp. 202, 164

25. See Graulich, "What If Wister Were a Woman?" 209.
26. Wister, *The Virginian,* 124.
27. Ibid., 157, 158, 158, 159, 158, 160.
28. Ibid., 161. In an award-winning essay, "History, Gender, and the Origins of the 'Classic' Western," Victoria Lamont has convincingly demonstrated the centrality of branding to *The Virginian* by exploring how disagreements over who owned maverick—or unbranded—calves led to what is popularly known as the Johnson County War. See Graulich and Tatum, eds., *Reading* The Virginian, 148–74.
29. Wister, *The Virginian,* 159, 159, 163.

But then the American fascination with celebrity and eastern "culture" enters the story, in the guise of two famous cooks, Saynt Augustine of Philadelphia and Lorenzo Delmonico of New York. They begin to compete for the frogs, bidding higher and higher, and the Tulare boys just ride "the frawg market . . . on soarin' wings." Each planning to corner the market on frogs, the two cooks head west to Tulare, Delmonico on the Santa Fe line and Saynt Augustine on the Southern Pacific. Then Wister reveals what can happen when two competitors team up to control raw materials. When the two lines "come together at Mojave," the chefs got together in the same car and each "started in to screechin' what they'd give for the monopoly." But traveling together brought them together and "they swore eternal friendship . . . and went home over the Union Pacific, sharing the same stateroom."[30]

Because frogs were a luxury commodity rather than an economic necessity, the chefs could simply change the fashion and the flow of capital dried up: "not a banker in Fifth Avenue'll touch one now if another banker's around watchin' him." The Virginian concludes by declaring that "frawgs are dead"—and so is Trampas. The tall tale worked. By getting Trampas to show an interest in raising frogs, the Virginian showed him up as a fool, and thus regained the loyalty of the men who had begun to stray. Through the use of the language of late-nineteenth-century capitalism, the Virginian turns Trampas into one of those suckers associated with that greatest showman and entrepreneur, P. T. Barnum. This verbal triumph, in which Wister presents a parable about the economic development of the West, is far more significant to the novel's themes than the oft-referenced "first ever" gunfight with Trampas later in the novel.[31]

And, as the Virginian's tall tale suggests, American business practices are far more significant to the novel than generally acknowledged. In his "Re-Dedication and Preface" to the 1911 edition, Wister makes clear that he had such issues on his mind, writing, "If this book be anything more than an American story, it is an expression of American faith. Our democracy has many enemies, both in Wall Street and in the Labor Unions; but as those in Wall Street have by their excesses created those in the Unions, they are the worst." This is not to say, however, that *The Virginian* is not also a story of a "romantic" horseman who "rides in his historic yesterday." Like all great novels, *The Virginian* tells multiple and sometimes conflicting stories.[32]



From Owen Wister, *The Virginian* (New York, 1911), p. 421

With this in mind, I'd like to return to a historian I very much admire, Richard White, and his assertion that "the lessons . . . of *The Virginian* were straightforward." Does Wister's presentation of an emerging corporate order, enabled largely by the octopus-like train, present us with a straightforward lesson? If so, it might be this one: "The building of the transcontinentals and their feeder lines created the basic infrastructure for economic development of the West." That's a line from White's *"It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own."*[33]

More than a hundred years after its original publication, *The Virginian* offers a stage for debating not only the central issues of the past century but those of the next. In a wonderful essay, "The Problem of the 'Popular' in New Western History," Stephen Tatum describes what he sees as the historical tendency to define popular literature as supporting American socio-political imperialist agendas and policies, to see popular audiences as "dupes" who buy wholesale the overt messages of American mass culture. *The Virginian* has often been read in these terms. Yet, as Tatum asserts, "critical thinking about ideals, drives, contradictions, and prospects can and does occur" in popular culture. Rather than presenting Wister as caught up in a romantic and retrograde past, I will leave him as he leaves his hero: as a man "with a strong grip on many various enterprises."[34]

30. Ibid., 164.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid., 6, 4. Critics before me have pointed out how the novel, like Whitman, contradicts itself. In *Having It Both Ways* (Albuquerque, N.M., 1993), Forrest Robinson suggests the novel exposes—or "actually betrays"—the myths it simultaneously embodies (p. 41). "What makes *The Virginian* so interesting," says Jane Tompkins in *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* (New York, 1992), "is that it states so openly the counterargument to its own point of view" (p. 154). "The very ability to have things both ways led to its success," argues Lee Clark Mitchell in " 'When You Call Me That . . . ': Tall Talk and Male Hegemony in *The Virginian," PMLA,* 102 (January 1987), 118.
33. White, *"It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own,"* 625, 257.
34. Stephen Tatum, "The Problem of the 'Popular' in the New Western History," ed. Forrest Robinson, *Arizona Quarterly,* 53 (Summer 1997), 153–90, 164; Wister, *The Virginian,* 409.

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