IMAGINING THE WEST:
A Guide to Printed Materials in The
British Library on The Literature
of The American West

by

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PREFACE

To imagine the American West of literature is to picture rugged landscapes and people to match them. It is difficult to escape the dramatic power of the American westward movement as portrayed in the novels of a Zane Grey or a Louis L'Amour. In numerous volumes, the action, adventure and descriptive power of the western novel describes the sweep of the westward expansion in stories that continue to find a world-wide readership. A number have won a Pulitzer Prize, and in addition it gave America a new hero, the cowboy.

While the western novel can find its origins in early narratives of American discovery and travel, it was James Fenimore Cooper who, with his *Leatherstocking Tales*, was the first imaginative writer to produce widely-read novels about the West. But it was the end of the nineteenth-century that witnessed the full-blown emergence of the western novel. Richard Etulain, [*Journal of Popular Culture* 6 (Spring 1972):799-805] has suggested several key factors that account for this development: the conflict between industrial and agricultural America and the resultant nostalgia for the past; the emergence of the "strenuous age" as reflected in the fiction of Jack London and others who wrote of the rough virile life "out-of-doors," in addition to a period of militant Anglo-Saxonism, whose hero-spirit can be found in the western novel; the disappearance of the dime novel and the revival of interest in historical fiction; and a general increased interest in the West as a kind of physical and spiritual frontier, an important symbol of
American values. No one saw the latter more clearly than Henry Nash Smith whose *Virgin Land, The American West as Symbol and Myth* (1950) is a seminal study of these themes.

Jane Tompkins has recently suggested an additional perspective: that the western novel was a specific response to the sentimental novel of the nineteenth-century. [*West of Everything, The Inner Life of Westerns* (1992)]. Her feminist perspective suggests important considerations: where woman is the main character in the sentimental novel, it is always a man in the western novel. In the sentimental novel the action takes place in private spaces (household rituals in kitchens, parlors, upstairs chambers); in westerns the action takes place either outdoors or in public places (on the prairie, in mountains, on the main street, the saloon or sheriff's office and it often focused on the rituals of the duel). Other differences include their focus (where one dramatizes the interior struggles of the heroine to live up to an ideal of Christian virtue, the other concerns the physical struggles between the hero and his opponents, ending in a fight to the death with guns); their descriptions of relations (where women tend to have close relationships with each other, the western hero's most important ties are with another man or an animal such as his horse or dog, from whom great physical hardships are required); their treatment of emotions (where women freely and openly express their feelings, the western hero seldom expresses his emotions—he is a man of few words who expresses himself through physical action, usually riding, fist-fighting and shooting); and religion (where the sentimental novels portray Bible reading, praying, hymn
singing, tea drinking, and focus on the key role of women in saving themselves and others in Christianity and dying a natural death at home, the western novel rejects the temperance movement and seldom worships or recognizes any divinity except nature itself, and death is never at home and always sudden, not something one prepares for). For Tompkins, the western answers the domestic novel and in so doing deliberately rejects evangelical protestantism by marginalizing the figure who stood for its religious and domestic ideals.

Clearly one of the main features of the western novel is its focus on the land, its beauty, ruggedness, and vastness. Its being conquered or itself conquering is a central theme that accounts for its continuing popularity and writers who had the literary skills to capture this part of America are still worth reading. But people are important features also, whether they be women, Native Americans, Spanish/Mexicans or the variety of immigrants that contributed to the rich tapestry of the Western American experience. Many have only recently found a literary voice. One need only read Leslie Silko's Ceremony (1977) or Scott Momaday's House Made of Dawn (1969) to sense the deep power the American West holds both for Native Americans and for those who would learn from them. Such works also remind us that the West did not end with the closing of the frontier in 1890, but that it continues to be a living force. Along with writers such as Wallace Stegner, these authors have written not just western novels, but world-class literature.
The popularity of novels of the American West and the recent scholarship on them suggests a continuing vitality in the study of Western American literature. The British Library has extensive holdings in this area. This bibliography provides a guide to the Library's extensive collections of both the works themselves and the interpretative studies about them.

This guide makes no claim of completeness. It does not list all writers of Western American Literature, nor does it list all of the works by those individuals listed, but it is a significant guide to the major works and authors. The bibliographical section will lead the serious student to the larger literature. A short section on folklore is included because of its key role in this topic, particularly suggesting the important place of oral tradition and story-telling in Western American Literature.

Important novels which present the Western experience as depressing, savage, violent and lacking in community include E.L. Doctorow, *Welcome to Hardtimes* (1977) and John Seelye, *The Kid* (1972). Novels that poke fun and are satires of the western include Max Evans, *The Rounders* (1960); Thomas Berger, *Little Big Man* (1965); and Robert Flynn, *North to Yesterday* (1967) and *Cat Ballou* (1965).

Examples of the New Western Literature, suggesting important new directions in this genre, include Douglas Unger, *Leaving the Land* (1984); Patricia Henley, *Friday Night at Silver Star* (1986); Craig Leslie, *Winter Kill* (1984); Kent Haruf, *The Tie That Binds* (1985); William Kittredge, *We Are Not*
In This Together (1984); and David Quammen, Blood Line: Stories of Fathers and Sons (1988).


I have specifically avoided the knotty problem of defining the "West" and have opted for a broad focus that embraces the whole of the American Westward Movement. Thus Thoreau, Whitman, Twain, Parkman and others are included in a bibliography that seeks to serve students in understanding the literature of a land that, in itself, is without boundaries east to west.

David J. Whittaker
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

I Bibliographical Guides
II Periodicals and Series
III Interpretive Works
IV Individual Authors
   Edward Abbey
   William Penn Adair
   Andy Adams
   Henry Wilson Allen
   Gertrude F. Atherton
   Mary H. Austin
   Thomas Berger
   Buffalo Bill
   Robert Montgomery Bird
   Black Elk
   B.M. Bower
   Max Brand
   Benjamin Capps
   Willa Cather
   Walter Van Tilbury Clark
   Samuel Longhorne Clemens
   William F. Cody
   Ina Donna Coolbrith
   James Fenimore Cooper
   Bertha Muzzey Bower Sinclair Cowan
   Stephen Crane
   Richard Henry Dana
   Harold L. Davis
Bernard DeVoto
J. Frank Dobie
E.L. Doctorow
Michael Dorris
Joseph-Ernest-Nephtali Dufault
William Eastlake
Louise Erdrich
Max Evans
Frederick Faust
Edna Ferber
Harvey Fergusson
John Filson
Clay Fisher
Vardis Fisher
Mary Hallock Foote
Robert Flynn
Hamlin Garland
John Graves
Josiah Gregg
Frank Glidden
Zane Grey
Frank Gruber
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James Hall
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Cormac McCarthy
Thomas McGuane
Larry McMurtry
Captain Frederick Marryat
D'Arcy McNickle
Frederick Manfred
John Joseph Matthews
Joaquin Miller
N. Scott Momaday
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Conrad Richter
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WILLIAM PENN ADAIR [1879-1935]  
[Pseudonym is Will Rogers]


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ANDY ADAMS [1859-1935]


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HENRY WILSON ALLEN [1912-1991]
[Pseudonyms are Will Henry and Clay Fisher]


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**ROBERT MONTGOMERY BIRD [1806-1854]**

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* [Pseudonym is Luke Short]


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**JOSIAH GREGG [1806-1850]**
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SARA WINNEMUCCA HOPKINS [1844?-1891]

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**JOHN ROLLIN RIDGE [1827-1867]**
[Also known as Yellow Bird, a literal translation of his Cherokee name, Cheesequatalawny]


LYNN RIGGS [1899-1954]

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OSE E. ROLVAAG [1876-1931]


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WALLACE E. STEGNER [1909-1993]


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[Received Nobel Prize for Literature, 1962]

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