

WALLACE STEGNER AND THE AMERICAN WEST

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a study of the revision of the Frontier Thesis of Frederick Jackson Turner offered in the novels of Wallace Stegner. The thesis adopts a cross-disciplinary approach to literature and history, in order to indicate their ideological identification within the Western American context, in the form of myth. In its reading of the differing narratives of the American West produced by Frederick Jackson Turner and Wallace Stegner, a contrast is made between the ideological consciousness as opposed to the conditional materiality of the American western historical experience.

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For Eric, who is from the West.

Introduction

Wallace Stegner

Wallace Stegner was born in 1909 in Lake Mills, Iowa and died in 1993 in Santa Fe, New Mexico. During a long career, that was spent mainly in the American West, he published a large body of work, which included fiction, biography, essays, and history. The great part of this work was devoted to the theme of Western American history, in particular, the relevance of the western past to an understanding of its present. Throughout his life and his writing career, Wallace Stegner was concerned to revise the romantic conception of Western American history that he perceived as a limitation upon the full potential of the West for achieving a culture and an identity of its own. This conception of the West is still a popular one, and is expressed in film and the enduring form of the "Western" novel. In intellectual terms, however, the mythic conception of the American West that Wallace Stegner opposed in his fiction and historical writing was formalized by Frederick Jackson Turner in 1893. The origin and development of the historical argument presented in Turner's essay, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History", is the subject of the first chapter of this thesis.

The second chapter addresses the revisionist aspect of Wallace Stegner's novels. In opposing western myth, Stegner substituted a socially realistic interpretation of the American past. Although his writing is not crudely propagandist and technically limited as the term "social realism" implies, in his work there is a concern for nineteenth-century fictional values, of the kind generally unpopular with a twentieth-century audience. Some critics have suggested this as a reason for Stegner's lack of wider recognition. Kerry Ahearn, the most penetrating of these, has described Wallace Stegner's situation in American literary culture:

The West is the home of popular mythology, and Stegner has sought to function there as a serious artist, finding his materials from among the faded mythic props and settings, and trying to present them with the clear vision of traditional realism so that they seem

"true," and able to convey Stegner's themes without being confused with the old stereotypes.¹

Jackson Benson, Stegner's biographer, has termed him "the greatest of our noncelebrity [American] authors"², and the stylistic puritanism, as well as the regional identification of his work may have something to do with this.

Despite his lack of prominence upon the American literary scene as a whole, Stegner's work has earned him a strong reputation among critics and other readers of western literature. In 1995, at the opening of the Wallace Stegner Environmental Centre at the San Francisco Public Library, Barry Lopez paid tribute to him as "our great citizen writer".³ Several other renowned writers of the American West also spoke at this event, including Ivan Doig, Terry Tempest Williams, and Gretel Ehrlich. All were united in their appreciation of Wallace Stegner's contribution to western literature. In the western context, Stegner's concern for serious writing, and with establishing links between the present and the real, non-mythic past made him a latter-day pioneer in the cultural wilderness. Writing in 1963, Stegner argued that

The West does not need to explore its myths much further; it has already relied on them too long. It has no future in exploiting its setting either, for too consistently it has tried to substitute scenery for a society. All it has to do is to be itself at the most responsible pitch, to take a hard look at itself and acknowledge some things that the myths have consistently obscured—been used to obscure.⁴

Stegner's desire to liberate the potential of the West for self-realization by dispelling its myths was an idealistic undertaking in the early 1960's. Despite the effort of earlier western writers such as Vardis Fisher⁵, Stegner's former teacher, and that of

¹ Kerry Ahearn, "The Big Rock Candy Mountain and Angle of Repose: Trial and Culmination", in Critical Essays on Wallace Stegner ed. Anthony Arthur (Boston, 1982), 111.

² Jackson Benson, Wallace Stegner: His Life and Work (New York, 1966), 2.

³ The event took place on April 27, 1995. The text of this speech subsequently appeared under the title of "Looking in a Deeper Lair: A Tribute to Wallace Stegner" in Northern Lights Magazine (September 1995).

⁴ Wallace Stegner, "Born a Square", in The Sound of Mountain Water (New York, 1969), 183. Emphasis in the original.

⁵ Joseph M. Flora, "Vardis Fisher and Wallace Stegner: Teacher and Student", in Critical Essays on Wallace Stegner, 60-66. See also Ronald W. Taber, "Vardis Fisher: New Directions for the Historical Novel", Western American Literature 1 (1967), 285-296.

Bernard De Voto, the great western historian⁶, the leading myths of the West were still potent. In the years that have passed since then, the contribution of Wallace Stegner to the ongoing task of freeing the West from its myths has been a significant and a worthy one.

⁶ Wallace Stegner, The Uneasy Chair: A Biography of Bernard De Voto (New York, 1974).

Chapter One

"History and Myth": The Agrarian Tradition and the Development of Frederick Jackson Turner's Frontier Thesis

This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character. The true point of view in the history of this nation is not the Atlantic coast, it is the great West.

— Frederick Jackson Turner, The Significance of the Frontier in American History

In 1893, before a meeting of the American Historical Association in Chicago, held to commemorate the four hundredth anniversary of Columbus' arrival in the Americas, Frederick Jackson Turner first read his paper entitled "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." The response of the audience was not encouraging. Among the two hundred or more historians present, one later recalled that "The audience reacted with the bored indifference normally shown a young instructor from a backwater college reading his first professional paper."⁷ In 1893, Turner was a thirty-two-year-old assistant professor from the University of Wisconsin, reading to colleagues far more distinguished than he was. Within a relatively short time, however, Turner's view of American history became more widely known, and by 1910, the year he assumed a chair at Harvard University and the presidency of the American Historical Association, his observation had become the commanding view of the American past.⁸ In the course of the next fifty years, Turner's thesis exerted a remarkable influence, not only upon historical studies — where, according to Ray Allen Billington, it was transformed into "not one, but the interpretation of the American past" — but also upon disciplines as varied as economics, literary criticism, politics and sociology.⁹

⁷ Ray Allen Billington, Frederick Jackson Turner: Historian, Scholar, Teacher (New York, 1973), 126, and The Genesis of the Frontier Thesis: A Study in Historical Creativity (San Marino, Calif., 1971), 172.

⁸ John Mack Faragher, comp., Rereading Frederick Jackson Turner: "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" and Other Essays (Markham, Ontario, 1994), 2.

⁹ Ray Allen Billington, comp., Frontier and Section: Selected Essays of Frederick Jackson Turner (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1961), 6, Emphasis in the original; Henry Nash Smith, Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth (Harvard, 1978), 250.

"The Significance of the Frontier in American History" is a carefully structured essay, that presents its argument in terms of the range of influence exercised by the frontier upon American experience. The essence of Turner's argument, however, appears in a passage at the essay's beginning:

Up to our own day American history has been in a large degree the history of the colonization of the Great West. The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development.¹⁰

Envisioning American history in terms of the settlement of the West, Turner proposed the frontier as the most important agent of historical change and progress. As a point (or line) of interface between "wilderness" and "civilization" the frontier worked to resolve these opposing forces. In Turner's view, the opposition between primitivism and the advance of western settlement along the line of the frontier was ultimately creative, and resulted in a new synthesis:

American development has exhibited not merely advance along a single line, but a return to primitive conditions on a continually advancing frontier line, and a new development for that area. American social development has been continually beginning over again on the frontier. This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character.¹¹

In this dialectical model of historical progress, with the frontier as the point of contact between the forces of "primitivism" and "civilization", the wilderness, while it must ultimately be subdued by the settler and made to conform to his wishes, is also a source of social and psychic renewal; of an ongoing "rebirth". This view of Nature as somehow regenerative — as productive of newer and more energetic forms of Culture — was itself the most vital element of Turner's model of frontier development.

While the view of Nature contained in the Frontier Thesis was hardly original, in 1893 it set Turner against the two major schools of American historiography which,

¹⁰ Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History", Annual Report for 1893, American Historical Association, 199-227; reprinted in Frederick Jackson Turner: "The Significance of the Frontier in American History", ed. with intro. by Harold Simonson, (New York, 1963), 27.

¹¹ Simonson, 28.

in the late nineteenth century, was dominated by two main currents of thought. The first interpreted American history in terms of the slavery controversy and the conflict between North and South; the second, headed by Herbert Baxter Adams, Turner's former teacher at Johns Hopkins University, explained American institutions as the outgrowth of English, or rather Teutonic germs planted in the New World.¹² In opposition to these two ways of thinking about the American past, and in particular to the teaching he received while at Johns Hopkins, Turner's Frontier Thesis emphasized the importance of Nature (or environment) over Heredity (or inherited culture) in influencing the course of America's unique destiny. Discussing the radical departure from contemporary historical interpretation represented by the Frontier Thesis, Henry Nash Smith contends that

In 1893 [Turner's thesis] . . . was a polemic directed against the two dominant schools of historians. . . . Turner maintained that the West, not the proslavery South or the antislavery North, was the most important among American sections, and that the novel attitudes and institutions produced by the frontier . . . had been more significant than the imported European heritage in shaping American society.¹³

In affording the idea of a regenerative Nature a central position in the Frontier Thesis, Turner was fully aware of his historiographical heresy. Billington describes Turner's relation to Herbert Baxter Adams at Johns Hopkins:

Adams was an exponent of the theory that the roots of all American institutions could be traced to their beginnings in the folkmoths of medieval Germany; at one point he told his students that the origins of every institution had been so thoroughly studied that the subject was exhausted and urged them to turn to the investigation of European history. Turner refused to accept either the advice or a concept that recognized no difference between European and American culture, and that offended his belief in social evolution. "The Frontier theory", he later recalled, "was pretty much a reaction from that due to my indignation".¹⁴

¹² Smith, 250.

¹³ Smith, 250.

¹⁴ Ray Allen Billington, *America's Frontier Heritage*, (1974; reprint, Albuquerque, New Mexico, 1988), 7. Emphasis in the original.

Turner's reaction underlines the connection between the nationalism of the Frontier Thesis and its emphasis upon Nature as a source of cultural renewal. Turner's claim that "The true point of view in the history of this nation is not the Atlantic coast, it is the great West" is a direct challenge to the traditional dominance of the American East, and to its cultural identification with Europe. In place of this former "narrative of Eastern dominance", Turner argues the effect of contact with the Wilderness along the moving line of the frontier in forming the American nation.

The imbrication of Turner's nationalism with his conception of Nature is apparent in his description of the role of the frontier in producing a "composite nationality" for the American people. Of immigrants to the colonial frontier during the eighteenth century, Turner claims:

Very generally these redemptioners were of non-English stock. In the crucible of the frontier the immigrants were Americanized, liberated, and fused into a mixed race, English in neither nationality or characteristics.¹⁵

In describing the emergence of the "new man" under the unique conditions created by the frontier, Turner describes an ideal synthesis¹⁶ between inherited culture and a second force, identified with the vast unknown that is the American West itself. According to Turner, this contact by settlers with the natural wilderness also had an important political effect, the most notable of which was the impulse toward democratic individualism:

The most important effect of the frontier has been in the promotion of democracy here and in Europe. As has been indicated, the frontier is productive of individualism. Complex society is precipitated by the wilderness into a kind of primitive organization based on the family. The tendency is anti-social. It produces antipathy to control, and particularly to any direct control. . . . The frontier individualism has from the beginning promoted democracy.¹⁷

¹⁵ Simonson, 44.

¹⁶ As it is employed throughout this chapter, this term refers to the distinctive structure characteristic of "mythic narrative" as it has been described by Richard Slotkin: "Myth organizes its metaphors synthetically and in narrative form, whereas science organizes metaphors analytically and ideology arranges them into an argument", Richard Slotkin, "Myth and the Production of History", in Ideology and Classic American Literature, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch and Myra Jehlen (Cambridge, 1986), 83-84.

¹⁷ Simonson, 51. Emphasis added.

In this passage, the role of the frontier as a point of interface between the forces of "wilderness" and "civilization" is again emphasized. The ideal resolution or synthesis of the opposing forces of European culture and primitive social organization under the unique conditions of the frontier is valued for its creation of a distinctive American culture, politics, society, and, finally, even intellect:

To the frontier the American intellect owes its striking characteristics. That coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom — these are traits of the frontier, or traits called out elsewhere because of the existence of the frontier.¹⁸

Here, the frontier's role in effecting an ideal resolution of dialectical oppositions is reflected in the very structure of Turner's rhetoric. Harold Simonson succinctly describes the process of (re)acculturation experienced by the settler at the edge of the American wilderness: the ideal national synthesis envisioned by Turner along the line of the western frontier:

Though at first the wilderness mastered the pioneer, the pioneer slowly transformed the wilderness. . . . In first being overwhelmed by nature, then in overwhelming it, the pioneer underwent a process which "Americanized" him. It freed him from dependence upon Europe. It made him not only a more self-conscious American but . . . a more self-conscious Westerner. The frontier transformed his old ways into new American ways, and subduing nature became the American's manifest destiny.¹⁹



The reasons for the wide currency and acceptance gained by the Frontier Thesis in the years after its first appearance remain the subject of debate. One obvious factor contributing to the popularity of the thesis was its deliberate nationalism.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 57. Emphasis added.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

Simonson draws a parallel between the popular nationalism of Turner's essay and Emerson's "The American Scholar" published in 1837:

Both were declarations of American independence, both asserted that the uniqueness of American institutions largely evolved from the national experience itself, not from traditions inherited from Europe.²⁰

A second factor was Turner's idealism. In common with Emerson and other nineteenth-century American writers, Turner's idealism was related to the popular, democratic form of his nationalism. In the Frontier Thesis, as in Emerson's writing, Turner's idealism about America is expressed mainly in terms of his approach to the natural landscape, in this case the western wilderness, with its abundance of "free land":

So long as free land exists, the opportunity for a competency exists, and economic power secures political power. . . . the attempts to limit the boundaries, to restrict land sales and settlement, and to deprive the West of its share of political power were all in vain. Steadily the frontier of settlement advanced and carried with it individualism, democracy, and nationalism, and powerfully affected the East and the Old World.²¹

Turner's idealism about the West was a challenge to the traditional narrative of Eastern dominance. In common with previous challenges to this during the nineteenth-century, such as the populist movement, it identified the East with concentrated capital.

Yet another reason for the influence of the Frontier Thesis incorporates the first two into a broader explanation. In his creation of the Frontier Thesis, Turner may have been tapping into sources already present within American culture at the end of the nineteenth century. One such source was the agrarian tradition that entered American culture from Western Europe during the late eighteenth century. According to Henry Nash Smith, this cultural tradition is the most important source of Turner's thesis:

Whatever the merits or demerits of the frontier hypothesis in explaining actual events, the hypothesis itself developed out of the myth of the garden. Its insistence on the importance of the West, its affirmation of

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 52.

democracy, and its doctrine of geographical determinism derive from a still broader tradition of Western thought . . . but its emphasis on agricultural settlement places it clearly within the stream of agrarian theory that flows from 18th Century England and France.²²

If Smith's view is to be accepted, the popularity of the Frontier Thesis was largely due to its successful combination of novelty with the appeal of a broader cultural tradition. Turner adapted the myth of the garden to his theory of the effect of frontier upon American national experience. In keeping with the agrarian tradition, the Frontier Thesis identifies the West with Nature, in all its abundance.

Before the late eighteenth century, and the influence of the agrarian tradition from the Old World, American attitudes toward the western frontier were more ambivalent. In what follows, the progress of the agrarian tradition within America will be described.

I. THE PURITAN APPROACH TO THE WILDERNESS

The perception of the landscape by the early Puritan immigrants to North America was inherently paradoxical. On the one hand, the wilderness was conceived as a dark and inhospitable place outside of human culture, a place to be resisted in order to avoid spiritual corruption. At the same time, however, the wilderness was also imagined by the Puritans to be a place of spiritual insight, a potential Zion to be redeemed in accordance with Biblical metaphor. As Peter Carroll has pointed out, the primary aim of Puritan settlement in North America was that of religious fulfillment:

The successful transplantation of the Protestant Church in America convinced the Puritans of their mission to regenerate the barren soil. . . . Frontier expansion and church settlement went hand in hand in New England as each inland town provided for the spiritual solace of the saints in the wilderness.²³

²² Smith, 251.

²³ Peter N. Carroll, Puritanism and the Wilderness: The Intellectual Significance of the New England Frontier 1629-1700, (New York, 1969), 120.

Carroll interprets the paradoxical conception of the wilderness on the part of the Puritans as expressive of two different ideas of community: the cohesive and the expansive:

Throughout the seventeenth century, neither idea established hegemony over the other. Instead, both versions of the wilderness community . . . flourished simultaneously. Despite the obvious contradictions, Puritan leaders praised both virtues and argued for both causes. While they blessed the subjugation of the forest because it fulfilled a divine commandment, the ministers urged the settlers to resist the forces of frontier expansion. . . . New England society lacked a clearly defined direction in adjusting to the wilderness in the seventeenth century.²⁴

While the Christian-Protestant sense of mission to subdue the earth by defeating the forces of evil concealed in the wilderness was strong, this was balanced by the equal desire to resist the wilderness and the temptation toward sin that it represented. The moral battle that issued from this ambivalence is expressed in the captivity narratives of the early colonial period.

Mary Rowlandson's The Sovereignty & Goodness of God . . . a Narrative of the Captivity and Restauration (1682) is the most famous captivity narrative of the late seventeenth century. Like the other captivity narratives that it inspired, Rowlandson's narrative expresses the paradox inherent in the Puritan orientation toward the New World. In much of Rowlandson's narrative, the wilderness is figured as Hell itself. The wilderness landscape and the terrors it contains are described in terms that are consistent with the Puritan view of the wilderness as a projection of human sinfulness. Rowlandson describes her Indian captors as representatives of "unregenerate man"; as a symbolic figure, the native American is equated with the dark landscape:

Oh the roaring, and singing, and danceing, and yelling of those black creatures in the night, which made the place a lively resemblance of hell. And as miserable was the wast[e] there made, of Horses, Cattle, Sheep, Swine, Calves, Lambs, Roasting Pigs, and Fowl . . . some roasting, some lying and burning, and some boyling to feed our merciless enemies.²⁵

²⁴ Ibid., 3-4.

²⁵ Mary Rowlandson, The Sovereignty and Goodness of God, Together with the Faithfulness of His Promises Displayed: Being a Narrative of the Captivity and Restauration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson: Commended by Her, to All that Desires to Know the Lords Doings to, and Dealings with Her:

Richard Slotkin writes of the captivity narrative as a genre:

In the captivity narrative, the Indians become the instruments of God for the chastisement of his guilty people. . . . All interest in the landscape of the wilderness disappears. . . . Natural terrain is suggested in horrific abstractions; the landscape of the Puritan mind replaces the real wilderness.²⁶

In Rowlandson's narrative, however, she is also ultimately redeemed within the environment in which she witnesses spiritual abandonment. Like Jesus in the wilderness, Rowlandson undergoes a spiritual trial, out of which she emerges fulfilled and strengthened in her faith. Rowlandson's "Restauration" signifies that she has crossed the wilderness and is closer to a return to the Biblical garden of Zion.

The paradox expressed in Rowlandson's narrative is largely the result of the process of abstraction identified by Slotkin. As Carroll argues:

The Puritans had developed specific views of the wilderness situation prior to their migration to Massachusetts Bay. Derived largely from Biblical metaphors, these concepts provided New Englanders with elaborate rhetorical devices with which they could judge their own experiences. Disregarding inherent contradictions, the colonists identified the New England forest with the Biblical wilderness and employed traditional Christian language to articulate their life in America. The notion of the wilderness as a refuge from worldly corruption, for example, moved the settlers of New England to stress the advantages of sanctuary in justifying their departure from the degeneracy of England. In other contexts, the Puritans interpreted the wilderness as the place of religious insight, and therefore could challenge ecclesiastical deviation both in America and in Europe. Furthermore, as the children of Israel, they translated their hardships in the New World as God's testing of his chosen people — a necessary prelude to everlasting salvation. The continued use of these metaphors illustrates the Puritans' remarkable ability to apply preconceived ideas to the experientially different world of New England.²⁷

Especially to Her Dear Children and Relations . . . Written by Her Own Hand for Her Private Use, and Now Made Publick at the Earnest Desire of Some Friends, and for the Benefit of the Afflicted. (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1682); quoted in Richard Slotkin, Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860, (1973; reprint, New York, 1996), 109-110.

²⁶ Slotkin, Regeneration, 99.

²⁷ Carroll, 2.

The captivity narrative was the literary expression of a predominantly religious worldview. As the Puritans' experience of the New World developed, however, religious metaphor tended to be displaced by New World concerns, and the basically ambivalent orientation toward the wilderness underwent a change. Slotkin argues that:

Changes in the image of the wilderness reflected changes in the colonial concept of the role Europeans should play in America and of their relation to the land and the Indians.²⁸

Through a reading of Puritan personal accounts, Slotkin traces a gradual process of Puritan acculturation to New World conditions. This process was most rapid from 1716 to 1784, when a more secularized worldview, based on rationalistic philosophy and continuing experience on the frontier resulted in a dramatic change in the Puritan vision of the New World. During this same period, there was a new realism in writers' treatment of the wilderness landscape, and imaginative literature came to be trusted as interest revived in the reading and writing of fiction.²⁹ The changed attitude to nature that was the outcome of an increased secularism was reflected in turn by the emergence of new literary types. In 1784, the appearance of Daniel Boone underlined the degree of change that had taken place in the Puritan view of nature. Boone was one of America's first frontier heroes, and his Indian-like, mythopoeic view of the landscape amounted to a complete reversal of the earlier conception of the wilderness:

By 1784, when John Filson published his life of Daniel Boone, landscape description was a major interest, and nature was functioning in literature as a godlike agent for the regeneration of man.³⁰

The alteration that took place in the Puritan vision of the American landscape during the eighteenth century is partly accounted for by the colonists' increased familiarity with the wilderness environment. In addition, European attitudes toward nature during this same period were vitally important to the emerging view of the American West.

²⁸ Slotkin, *Regeneration*, 181; 147.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 180-181; 222.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 223.

II. THE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY AGRARIAN IDEAL AND THE NEW WORLD

In England and France during the eighteenth century, a new attitude toward the depiction of nature developed in the arts of literature, painting, and landscape design. The paintings of Thomas Gainsborough, the popularity of poetry about rural subjects, and the upper-class enthusiasm for gardening all attest to an alteration in the way nature was perceived. This renewed interest in nature formed a part of the general eighteenth-century revival of classical aesthetics. The interest in gardening, for example, was indebted to an essentially Virgilian conception of nature, complete with temples and obelisks.³¹ Slotkin describes the assumptions underlying the classic pastoral ideal:

The pastoral vision of nature saw the natural world as a garden cultivated and dominated by the mind of man or by a reasonable God. It was a vision of nature as humanized and gentled, symmetrical, orderly, and peaceful . . . It was, above all, a vision of nature as the vehicle of civilized European values, that is, a field for the physical realization of humanistic ideals.³²

In England and France, the popularity of the pastoral ideal reached a peak around 1770. By this time, the fashion for gardening and the taste for the bucolic among the English upper classes amounted to a sort of "craze."³³ However, the process of "improvement" — or economic development — that was also taking place during the late eighteenth century created anxiety among the upper classes about the survival of the countryside and the old, rural culture. Enclosure of common land and the growth of semi-industrial cities threatened to spoil the pastoral vision for the upper classes of Europe. Faced with these important historical changes, the pastoral ideal also underwent a change. In the context of endangered rural values in Europe, the bucolic ideal was projected upon the unspoiled terrain of the New World. During the War of Independence, the pastoral idea of America caught on everywhere in England.³⁴

³¹ Simon Schama, Landscape and Memory, (London, 1995), 538-539.

³² Slotkin, Regeneration, 203.

³³ Leo Marx, The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America, (1964; reprint, New York, 1970), 98-99.

³⁴ Ibid., 103-104.

At the same time that the recognition of North America as a refuge for rural ideals was taking hold in Europe, the new American Republic was itself influenced by the neo-classical view of nature. According to Leo Marx, the new lease of life given the pastoral ideal by its transplantation into North American soil also involved a change in the basic nature of the ideal. In the New World context, what had previously served as an essentially literary device (or perhaps conceit) was turned to ideological or broadly political uses.³⁵ While Marx's easy distinction between the literary and the political may demand some degree of qualification, his basic point about the difference between Old and New World investment in the agrarian or pastoral ideal is accurate. Under American conditions, the ideal acquired a credibility that enabled it to exist as more than a passing fashion. In the late eighteenth century, the effect of the character of Daniel Boone upon the imagination of the American public illustrates this broader investment in the agrarian view of nature within the different environment of the New World.

The character of Daniel Boone originated in an Appendix to The Discovery, Settlement, and Present State of Kentucke, an elaborate real-estate promotion brochure published in 1784 by John Filson, a Kentucky land developer. In the context of the recent end to the War of Independence, and the Indian wars that continued in Kentucky, the brochure was intended to arouse interest in Kentucky among easterners and Europeans.³⁶ The "Appendix" was entitled "The Adventures of Col. Daniel Boon" and took the form of a first person narrative of a series of ventures into the wilderness beyond the frontier. Filson based the character of Boone on a Kentucky frontiersman of the same name, but the incidents described in the narrative are largely of his own invention.

Filson's narrative of Boone's "Adventures" is structured in terms of a basic opposition between Wilderness and Civilization, and the respective values they are intended to represent. According to Slotkin, during his time in the wilderness beyond the frontier settlement, the character of Boone

[Undergoes] a series of initiations, a series of progressive immersions that take him deeper into the wilderness. Each immersion is followed by a return to civilization, where Boone can apply his growing wisdom to the ordering of his community, and by a momentary interlude of meditation and contemplation, in which Boone can review his experience, interpret it, and formulate the

³⁵ Ibid., 73.

³⁶ Slotkin, Regeneration, 268.

wisdom gained from it. As a result of these rhythmic cycles of immersion and emergence, he grows to become the commanding genius of his people, their hero-chief, and the man fit to realize Kentucky's destiny.³⁷

In the Filson narrative, Boone's heroism is the outcome of his successful negotiation between the opposing forces of Wilderness and Civilization. As Filson tells it, the eventual synthesis of these two forces takes place within Boone's own character. Read in a certain way, "The Adventures of Col. Daniel Boone" resembles Turner's later model of the frontier as a vehicle for the resolution of opposing forces. In structural terms, both the Boone narrative and the Frontier Thesis exist as paeans to an ideal synthesis achieved between the dialectically opposed forces of Wilderness and Civilization.

According to Leo Marx, the pastoral ideal "is located in a middle-ground somewhere 'between', yet in a transcendent relation to, the opposing forces of civilization and nature."³⁸ In Filson's narrative, the fictional Boone describes Kentucky as being

Like the land of promise, flowing with milk and honey, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and depths, that spring out of valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, and all kinds of fruits.³⁹

This is a vision of pastoral as the new Eden; for the new settler, it is a refuge from history, even from the current history of Kentucky itself. The reality of the present as well as the past is overlaid with the agrarian vision of nature. Filson's ideal landscape contrasts strongly with the Puritan wilderness of a century before. Slotkin writes of Filson's Kentucky:

³⁷ Slotkin, *Regeneration*, 278-279.

³⁸ Marx, 23.

³⁹ Filson, John, *The Discovery, Settlement, and Present State of Kentucke: and an Essay Towards the Topography, and Natural History of that Important Country: To which is added, an Appendix, Containing, I. The Adventures of Col. Daniel Boone, One of the First Settlers, Comprehending Every Important Occurrence in the Political History of that Province; II. The Minutes of the Piankashaw Council, Held at Post St. Vincents, April 15, 1784; III. An Account of the Indian Nations Inhabiting within the Limits of the Thirteen United States, Their Manners and Customs, and Reflections on Their Origin; IV. The Stages and Distances between Philadelphia and the Falls of the Ohio; from Pittsburgh to Pensacola and Several Other Places: The Whole Illustrated by a New and Accurate Map of Kentucke and the Country Adjoining.* (Wilmington, Delaware, 1784); quoted in Slotkin, *Regeneration*, 277.

Filson . . . substitutes all of the wilderness landscape, its ambiguous and even hellish elements as well as its pure and paradisiacal qualities . . . for the Word of God in the symbolic universe of Boone's personal narrative. He thus expands the boundaries of that universe to include the wild continent as an integral and vital part of the divine plan for the regeneration of man.⁴⁰

Of the basically "synthetic" nature of Boone and his agrarian utopia, Slotkin comments:

As a hero of the Enlightenment, enamored of peace and order, Boone views the promise of the West as dependent on its ability to produce an agrarian arcadia, cultivated to a symmetrical and orderly beauty, offsetting the sublime and terrible picture of what convulsions man and nature are capable of producing.⁴¹

After the first appearance of the Boone narrative, it was lifted out of its original context and reprinted as a separate pamphlet, in anthologies of Indian war narratives and captivity narratives, and in popular literary periodicals in both Europe and the United States. "Daniel Boone" soon became a popular figure with the national reading public, and eventually the subject of myth. Slotkin describes Boone as the first hero of a "nationally viable" myth of America — the archetype of the frontier hero later found in popular culture and the novels of Fenimore Cooper:

It [the Boone narrative] became the vehicle by which Filson's version of the frontier myth was transmitted to the literary giants of the American Renaissance and to the European Romantics.⁴²

The transformation of Filson's Boone into a figure of mythical proportions was a lengthy cultural process. In the original narrative, however, as already mentioned, Boone's success as a frontiersman is due to his ideal synthesis of the opposing forces of Wilderness and Civilization within his own character. Like the Kentucky he describes, Boone is a synthetic creation, combining the roles of hunter/warrior with that of husbandman, or, the reality of recent western historical experience — as narrated by Filson — with the Old World myth of an agrarian utopia. Even

⁴⁰ Slotkin, *Regeneration*, 279.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 294. Emphasis added.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 278; 269; 267; 279.

before one considers his literary progenesis, the ideal equations represented by Boone and Kentucky in the Filson narrative are sufficient indication of the fate of the pastoral ideal within the American context.

In the New World, the transplanted ideal, together with all it implied for the future of the West, acquired a new credibility. The original form of the Boone narrative demonstrates already the broader American investment in the agrarian ideal, and the process by which myth offered itself as an alternative to history in the different environment of the New World. The new credibility gained by the agrarian myth during the eighteenth century, and its translation into a form of historical explanation, is also apparent in other accounts of the American West during this period.

In 1782, J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, an expatriate Frenchman, published Letters From an American Farmer, a kind of epistolary fiction, which became popular with both European and American readers. The ostensible author of the Letters is a persona — a "humble American planter, a simple cultivator of the earth" — and the letters themselves are fabrications; in this work, however, Crèvecoeur projected the old pastoral ideal, now translated into a wholly new vocabulary, onto the American scene. In doing so, Crèvecoeur contributed to the development of the Boone myth some years later.⁴³

In the Letters, an American husbandman writes in deferential terms to a learned Englishman who has invited the rustic American to become his correspondent. In contrast to the "great world" of Europe, the farmer of the Letters lives in an ideal state: in the "middle realm" of the North American continent, between the wilderness and the eastern seaboard. This realm is freed at once of the Indian menace and the corruption of the city, and like Boone's Kentucky, it is represented as a sort of Utopia, where nature is tamed to man's use. In common with the hero of Filson's narrative, Crèvecoeur's farmer achieves his agrarian utopia through a successful negotiation of the opposing forces of Wilderness and Civilization. At the conclusion of the Letters, when the farmer decides to move further west during the revolutionary war, he restates the agrarian ideal in terms of an ideal synthesis between these two states of human existence:

I will revert into a state approaching nearer to that of nature, unencumbered either with voluminous laws, or contradictory codes, often galling the very necks of those whom they protect; and at the same

⁴³ Marx, 107-108; Slotkin, 260.

time sufficiently remote from the brutality of unconnected savage nature. Do you, my friend, perceive the path I have found out? it is that which leads to . . . the . . . village of ____, where, far removed from the accursed neighbourhood of Europeans, its inhabitants live with more ease, decency, and peace, than you imagine: where, though governed by no laws, yet find, in uncontaminated simple manners all that laws can afford. Their system is sufficiently complete to answer all the primary wants of man, and to constitute him a social being, such as he ought to be in the great forest of nature.⁴⁴

In Letters From an American Farmer, as in the Boone narrative, the agrarian tradition, transplanted into American soil, offers itself as an ideal, synthetic alternative to history. Of the overall imaginative landscape of the Letters, Leo Marx writes:

Taken as a whole, the moral geography of the Letters forms a neat spatial pattern, a compelling triptych that figures an implied judgement upon all the conditions of man which may be thought to exist between the savagery of the frontier on one side and the court of Versailles on the other. It is in this sense a potentially mythic idea, an all-encompassing vision that converts the ethic of the middle link into "the true and the only" philosophy for Americans.⁴⁵

In eighteenth century America, the closest approach to a home-grown agrarianism is expressed in Thomas Jefferson's Notes on the State of Virginia. The Notes restate the pastoral ideal and locate it in the American West, but in giving the ideal a clear political definition, it also represents a further step in the process of American translation of the agrarian myth into a form of historical explanation. In the Notes, Jefferson, writing in response to a series of questions from François Marbois, a French diplomat, sets out to describe Virginia for both a European and American audience. Proceeding through geographical, political and naturalistic description, the Notes conclude with utopian speculation about the future of Virginia.

When Jefferson began writing in 1780, the War of Independence was not yet over and the ultimate goals of the new Republic were on his mind. His adaptation of the agrarian myth to direct political purposes is found in the definition given to the husbandman as he exists, or as he will exist in the future history of America. In the

⁴⁴ Michel Guillaume St. Jean de. Letters from an American Farmer (1782); quoted in Marx, 113. Emphasis added.

⁴⁵ Marx, 112. Emphasis added.

Notes the yeoman farmer appears as the ideal "good shepherd" of the Old World pastoral vision, yet in Jefferson's New World translation, he is also independent, rational, democratic, and the backbone of the new American Republic.⁴⁶ For Jefferson, the yeoman's devotion to agriculture is a statement of both his spiritual and political worthiness, of his new "belonging" to the American soil:

Those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue.⁴⁷

In Jefferson's projection of an ideal future for Virginia, the pastoral vision of nature is dominant. In Notes on the State of Virginia, Jefferson effectively turns his back on nascent industrialization, which he associates with the social problems and spiritual malaise of a far-distant Europe. In common with Benjamin Franklin, who declared in the late 1780's that "The great business of the continent . . . is Agriculture" Jefferson envisions the future of America as determined by the ready availability of fertile land:

While we have land to labour then, let us never wish to see our citizens occupied at a workbench, or twirling a distaff. Carpenters, masons, smiths, are wanting in husbandry; but, for the general operations of manufacture, let our work-shops remain in Europe. It is better to carry provisions and materials to workmen there, than bring them to the provisions and materials, and with them their manners and principles. The loss by the transportation of commodities across the Atlantic will be made up in happiness and permanence of government. The mobs of great cities add just so much to the support of pure government, as sores do to the strength of the human body. It is the manners and spirit of a people which preserve a republic in vigour. A degeneracy in these is a canker which soon eats to the heart of its laws and constitution.⁴⁸

In contrast to contemporary Europe, Jefferson projects the future history of America as implying a republic of virtuous and independent farmers. The influence of the eighteenth-century agrarian view of nature upon Jefferson's democratic vision is quite obvious. In Jefferson's new Republic, the goal of the virtuous yeoman is self-sufficiency rather than economic growth. By eliminating greed as a motive,

⁴⁶ Marx, 118, 127.

⁴⁷ Thomas Jefferson, Notes on the State of Virginia (1785); quoted in Marx, 124-125.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

Jefferson demonstrates his debt to classic pastoral, which depicted an ideal stasis, removed from the corrupting influence of "the great world." Leo Marx compares the view of nature evident in Jefferson's Notes with that of Virgil's first Eclogue, and claims of their place within this literary convention that "Nowhere in our literature is there a more appealing, vivid, or thorough statement of the case for the pastoral ideal."⁴⁹

In its translation of a literary convention into directly political terms, Jefferson's Notes on the State of Virginia represents the fullest realization of the pastoral ideal within eighteenth-century America. As a vision of the future for the new Republic of the United States, moreover, Jefferson's reworking of the agrarian myth gives it an historical credibility it lacked in the environment of an Old World beset by the growth of manufacturing. Until the end of the nineteenth century, the nature and extent of American ideological investment in the agrarian ideal did not significantly alter. Leo Marx writes of this important reality:

For more than a century . . . the American people held on to a version of the pastoral ideal not unlike the one that Jefferson had set forth in 1785, investing it with a quality of thought and feeling that can only be called mythic.⁵⁰

The history of the exploration and settlement of the American West during the nineteenth century appears as the corollary to the eighteenth-century process of adaptation of the agrarian tradition to yield an ideal vision of the future. In the course of the nineteenth-century, many Americans attempted to realize the agrarian myth in literal terms, including those defined by Thomas Jefferson. The history of this attempt demonstrates the compelling nature of agrarian ideals within the American context.

III. THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY AND THE ENACTMENT OF MYTH

One of Jefferson's initiatives following his inauguration as President in 1801 was the exploration of the Far West. In 1804, he sent Meriwether Lewis and William

⁴⁹ Marx, 118.

⁵⁰ Marx, 142. Emphasis added.

Clarke up the Missouri and over the Rocky Mountains to the mouth of the Columbia River. Jefferson's instructions to Lewis were as follows:

The object of your mission is to explore the Missouri river, and such principal stream of it, as, by its course and communication with the waters of the Pacific Ocean, may offer the most direct and practicable water communication across this continent, for the purposes of commerce.⁵¹

Jefferson's immediate goal in seeking a route to the Pacific was the establishment of an overland trade route to the Pacific Northwest, in order to compete with British control of the fur trade.⁵² As described by Henry Nash Smith, however, the implications of Lewis and Clarke's crossing of the Rockies were much greater:

The importance of the Lewis and Clarke expedition lay on the level of imagination: it was drama, it was the enactment of a myth that embodied the future. It gave tangible substance to what had been merely an idea, and established the image of a highway across the continent so firmly in the minds of Americans that repeated failures could not shake it.⁵³

In addition to facilitating trade with the Northwest, another object of the Lewis and Clarke expedition was to gain "scientific" or geographical knowledge of the far west. In late 1802, however, this stated objective was intended mainly to appease the Spanish government, which still controlled Louisiana. In reality, the purpose of the expedition was difficult to define in simple terms. The full meaning of the Lewis and Clarke expedition would only become apparent in the years that followed, when the economic penetration and eventual settlement of the West took place.

During the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth century, Jefferson established a federal policy that favored westward expansion. In 1787 he framed the Northwest Ordinance that opened the trans-Allegheny to settlement and provided for the eventual admission of new western states; he devised the system by which the public lands were to be conveyed to individual owners; and in 1803 he

⁵¹ "Jefferson's Instructions to Lewis", The Journals of Lewis and Clarke, ed. Bernard DeVoto, (Boston, 1953), Appendix I, 482.

⁵² In effect, Jefferson sought an inland Northwest Passage. This had two advantages: it underscored the economic necessity of establishing the western Frontier at the "natural" border of the Mississippi River Valley; and it allowed American monopolization of the route — at this point in time, the U.S. could never realistically expect to compete on an equal basis with Britain, Russian, or Spanish maritime ventures.

⁵³ Smith, 17.

consummated the Louisiana Purchase, which more than doubled the area awaiting settlement in the West.⁵⁴ In all of his important policy decisions, Jefferson was guided by his earlier vision for the state of Virginia, which had included the abolition of entails and primogeniture, and the proposal that every landless adult should be given fifty acres from the public domain.

The influence of eighteenth-century agrarian social theory upon Jefferson's policy toward the West is clear, as is the nationalistic colouring given these ideas during the War of Independence. By the early nineteenth-century, the western yeoman had become a symbol of wide-ranging significance, implicated with the idea of democracy and its related concept of "Free-soil". In opposition to the slave-owning South and the aristocratic system of land ownership that it represented, the hope of the North was that the newly-opened region of the American West would be settled by the small, independent farmer described by Jefferson. During the nineteenth century, this hope and the ideals it represented found full political expression in the Homestead Bill, an important part of the Republican platform upon which Lincoln was elected president in 1860.

The proposed Homestead Bill was vital to the Republican victory of 1860, as it guaranteed Republican support in the formerly Democratic Northwest. Earlier, in 1858, Democratic President Buchanan had vetoed the Bill, and as a consequence it became the most important political issue among recent German immigrants as well as among the descendents of pioneers. In the Northwest, the "free-soil" ideal and the desire for "land for the landless" was most strong. During the 1860 campaign, the symbol of the yeoman farmer was used to communicate these ideals. Its appearance in this political context underlines the democratic principle embodied in agrarian theory which had earlier appealed to Jefferson. In 1860, the realization of the agrarian ideal seemed close at hand. Of the popularity of the Homestead Bill in 1860, Smith claims that:

The strongest appeal of the homestead system to the West, an appeal which touched the deepest levels of American experience in the nineteenth century, lay in the belief that it would enact by statute the fee simple empire, the agrarian utopia of hardy and virtuous yeomen which had haunted the imaginations of writers about the West since the time of Crèvecoeur.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Smith, 128.

⁵⁵ Smith, 170.

The Homestead Act was finally passed in 1862, and granted title to the new settler who cultivated his land for a period of five years. With the passage of this bill, the translation of agrarian myth into the New World context was complete. The reformation of the myth as political action signified the hope for an ideal synthesis of American reality with Old World tradition, in which myth was to assume the form of history. Over the course of the next century the hope for an agrarian utopia in the West did not disappear, even when it became obvious that the Homestead Act had failed, together with the kind of future it projected.

Between 1862 and 1890, only 372,659 settlers benefited from the Homestead Act. Instead of making possible the realization of an ideal republic of small, independent farmers, the operation of the Act was sabotaged by the reality of monopoly capitalism, working hand-in-hand with technological innovation, which included the threshing machine and the steam-driven tractor. Smith writes of the fate of the Act:

The Homestead Act almost wholly failed to have the results that had been predicted. It did not lead to the settlement of large numbers of farmers on lands which they themselves owned and tilled. Vast land grants to railways, failure to repeal the existing laws that played into the hands of speculators by allowing purchase of government lands, and cynical evasion of the law determined the actual working of the public land system.⁵⁶

The failure of the Homestead Act was of such an extent that railways alone sold more land (at an average price of five dollars per acre) than was conveyed under it. Smith describes the historical reasons for this blow to western democratic idealism:

The agrarian utopia in the garden of the world was destroyed, or rather aborted, by the land speculator and the railroad monopolist. These were in turn but expressions of the larger forces at work in American society after the Civil War — the machine, the devices of corporation finance, and the power of big business over Congress. The Homestead Act failed because it was incongruous with the Industrial Revolution.⁵⁷

Another important reason for the eventual failure of the agrarian ideal was the aridity of the western climate, a natural reality that was obscured by the image of an agrarian utopia. Between 1870 and 1890, when the frontier had pushed beyond the

⁵⁶ Smith, 190.

⁵⁷ Smith, 191.

ninety-sixth meridian running through western Kansas and Nebraska, and into the Great Plains region, settlement advanced in periods of relatively low rainfall, only to be forced back by the dry period that always followed.⁵⁸ The repeated experience of drought was a contradiction of the popular belief that "Rain Follows the Plough" — a slogan invented by Charles Dana Wilbur during the 1870's to entice settlers west of the Missouri.⁵⁹

At least to those involved, the knowledge of the far western environment gained through an attempt to settle on small holdings was profoundly disillusioning. Coupled with the economic competition from large landholders, and distance from eastern markets, the position of the homestead farmer was far removed from that of the yeoman described in Jefferson's Notes on the State of Virginia. From the 1870's on, western discontent stemming from the failure of the Homestead Act and political inattention to the fate of small farmers found expression in an agrarian revolt.⁶⁰ Smith describes the emotional nature of this:

The scope of [the] contrast between image and fact, the ideal and the actual, the hope and the consummation, defines the bitterness of the agrarian revolt.⁶¹

The disappointment caused by the failure of the Homestead Act was obvious among western farmers during the late nineteenth century. In contrast to political expectations, their democratic dream of independence was not realized.⁶² Despite

⁵⁸ Smith, 174.

⁵⁹ Wilbur was a speculative town builder and an amateur scientist, and with Samuel Aughey he helped to extend the agrarian myth beyond the Missouri River. His argument about the potential fertility of the Far West is summarized in what follows:

"... in this miracle of progress, the plow was the avant courier -- the unerring prophet — the procuring cause. Not by any magic or enchantment, not by any incantations or offerings, but, instead, in the sweat of his face, toiling with his hands, man can persuade the heavens to yield their treasures of dew and rain upon the land he has chosen for his dwelling place. It is indeed a grand consent, or, rather, concert of forces — the human energy or toil, the vital seed, and the polished raindrop that never fails to fall in answer to the imploring power or prayer of labor." Charles Dana Wilbur, The Great Valleys and Prairies of Nebraska and the Northwest, (Omaha, Nebraska, 1880), 70.

⁶⁰ As a mass democratic movement, agrarian populism began in the late 1870's with the organization of the National Farmer's Alliance and culminated in 1892, with the formation of the People's Party. Lawrence Goodwyn, The Populist Movement: A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America, (New York, 1978), xxi.

⁶¹ Smith, 193.

⁶² "[A]fter the effort of [the National Farmer's] Alliance at economic self-help had been defeated by the financial and political institutions of industrial America [the People's Party]. . . . challenged the corporate state and the creed of progress it put forward" The political form eventually taken by agrarian populism was also short-lived, however. Goodwyn, xxi; 230-322.

this disappointment, however, the myth that had found political expression in the Homestead Act survived its failure. During the 1870's, the agrarian myth was used by land speculators and other interested groups to prevent reform of the public land system aimed at a closer approximation of the ideals of the original proponents of the Homestead Act. The invocation of the agrarian myth to serve different political purposes demonstrates its currency and its broad cultural appeal within nineteenth-century America.

The attempt to reform the public land system during the 1870's was mainly due to the work of John Wesley Powell, director of the federal Survey of the Rocky Mountain Region. In 1874, during a hearing before the House Committee on Public Lands, Powell had warned that "All of the region of country west of the 100th or 99th meridian, except a little in California, Oregon, and Washington Territory, is arid, and no part of that country can be cultivated . . . no part of it can be redeemed for agriculture, except by irrigation."⁶³ In 1878, in his Report on the Lands of the Arid Region, Powell argued for an increase in the size of the Homestead unit to 2,560 acres. Powell claimed that this larger acreage — sixteen times the size of the normal homestead — was necessary to support a family without the use of irrigation.⁶⁴ In addition to his recommendations about the importance of the western environment in determining the nature and extent of western settlement, Powell also suggested measures aimed at eliminating corruption in the General Land Office.

In the political context of the 1870's, Powell's reformism was unpopular and his recommendations were ultimately defeated. In the arguments used against Powell's proposals, the agrarian myth was invoked. Attacking Powell's plan to increase the size of homestead grants, Thomas M. Patterson, House representative for Colorado, declared that

Our agricultural lands . . . are limited, and the number of our population following agricultural pursuits must also be limited. But to have that number as great as possible, to swell it to its maximum, the plan of disposing of the public lands in small tracts . . . must be steadily adhered to.⁶⁵

⁶³ Quoted in Smith, 196.

⁶⁴ Wallace Stegner, Beyond the Hundredth Meridian: John Wesley Powell and the Second Opening of the West, (1954; reprint, New York, 1992), 225.

⁶⁵ Quoted in Smith, 199.

Patterson also used the agrarian myth against Powell's reforms in the form of the yeoman farmer. The image of Jefferson's ideal republic was at odds with Powell's proposal, which according to Patterson would

In a few years . . . fill [the plains] . . . with baronial estates, with an aristocratic and wealthy few, each owning lands sufficient for a European principality, to the exclusion of that hardy and industrious people who, by tilling their own farms, by owning the small tracts upon which they live, not only produce material wealth but give to the nation the sturdy yeomanry that must be its bulwark in the hour of its supremest danger.⁶⁶

Such a deployment of the agrarian myth served to reinforce the agrarian ideal, as it masked corrupt interests and denied the environmental limitations imposed upon western idealism. Smith states the quandary Powell faced in the late 1870's:

The general optimism of the West, together with the economic interests of land speculators and others who stood to profit from continued settlement of the plains, was challenged by Powell's claim that the agricultural frontier was approaching a natural barrier.⁶⁷

The successful defeat of Powell's proposals in 1879 meant that the agrarian ideal continued to be applied to the Far West. In fact, as the frontier period of western settlement slowly came to an end during the late nineteenth century, the image of a synthetic utopia became even more fixed in the American imagination. This cultural reality requires more than a single explanation, but one reason why the agrarian myth was sustained and was even able to gain ground is suggested in Powell's 1878 Report itself, with its emphasis upon irrigation as the only means by which much western cultivation could be made possible. The idea of "greening the desert" was an one that — like the image of the agrarian utopia itself — had its source in myth — in this case Judeo-Christian instead of classical myth.

With the aid of irrigation schemes — often on a grand scale, such as the Owens Valley project — the image of the agrarian utopia in the Far West was to be realized during the course of the next century. The tremendous growth of Los Angeles, the original synthetic city, along the shores of the coastal southern Californian desert, is testament to the fulfillment of the agrarian myth in the form of history during this

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 197-198.

century. As Henry Nash Smith had already claimed: "The myth of the garden was contrary to empirical possibility on the plains but it was true to the course of history."⁶⁸ Such a triumph suggests much about the underlying idealism of American culture and also the background to the Frontier Thesis of Frederick Jackson Turner.

IV. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE FRONTIER THESIS

Despite criticism or severe qualification by historians of the past seventy years, Turner's Frontier Thesis remains a popular model of historical interpretation. This is the case even when the thesis is invoked for purposes of criticism. Ironically, the "growing tendency of scholars to react against the Turner doctrine" noted in 1950 by Henry Nash Smith still affords a central position to the Frontier Thesis. Several historians, including Ray Allen Billington and David Potter have described the various shortcomings of Turner's thesis in detail.⁶⁹ The nineteenth-century origin of the thesis, however, is of most concern here.

In 1893, America faced the end of the nineteenth century — with its attendant economic crisis⁷⁰ — and the beginning of another. Read in historical context, Turner's thesis reflects a widespread sense of division and anxiety for the future. The Frontier Thesis begins with the statement that, with the exhaustion of the public domain, the frontier period of American history has now ended. In the conclusion to the thesis, Turner reminds his audience of this fact once again. Compared to the rest of the thesis, however, Turner's tone undergoes a slight change:

He would be a rash prophet who should assert that the expansive character of American life has now ceased. Movement has been its dominant fact, and, unless this training has no effect upon a people, the

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 180.

⁶⁹ Billington, *America's Frontier Heritage*; David Potter, *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character*, (Chicago, 1954). The work of Billington and Potter constitutes a critical revision, rather than an outright rejection, of The Frontier Thesis. More recent approaches to the theme of the Frontier, by Richard Slotkin and various Amerindian writers, have been less sympathetic to Turner.

⁷⁰ Shortly before Turner read his paper to the American Historical Association in Chicago, the stock market had crashed, and during the same year, "some six hundred banks closed, more than fifteen thousand commercial houses failed, and seventy-four railroad corporations went into the hands of receivers", Faragher, 3.

American energy will continually demand a wider field for its exercise. But never again will such gifts of free land offer themselves.⁷¹

Following upon the rhetorical momentum of the rest of the Frontier Thesis, the tone of this passage is oddly divided between hope for the future and regret for the past. Even as he asserts his faith in the future, Turner also feels the need to remind himself (together with his audience) of the reality of late nineteenth-century history; while the energy and idealism of the frontier spirit persist, the exhaustion of the public lands means that the frontier has in fact closed. Taken as a whole, the Frontier Thesis can be interpreted as an attempt to resolve the sense of anxiety induced by this potential contradiction between the expansive aspirations of the frontier myth and the determinations of contemporary history.

As his critics have argued, Turner was a nineteenth-century historian, and as such, he failed to anticipate adequately the economic and social issues that would come to have an important effect upon twentieth-century life. In the late nineteenth century, these included labour agitation and the rise of unions, American expansion abroad, laissez-faire capitalism, government control, and social reform. Of Turner's relative neglect of these issues in his later work, Simonson states:

Turner did not tackle these new problems. Though he lived over thirty years into the twentieth century, his main historical concerns ended with the closing of the frontier. . . . [H]e remained an historian of the nineteenth century American West. . . . He centred his attention on the frontier and the sectional configurations shaped by the people living within them.⁷²

Many other historians agree with this view of Turner. Henry Nash Smith, for example, deems the "safety-valve" promise contained in Turner's vision of the West an "imaginative construction" masking "poverty and industrial strife." Similarly, Richard Slotkin sees the Frontier Thesis as an obfuscation of late nineteenth-century history, and claims that "No historian who lived in the heyday of the real frontier saw as much significance in it as the theorists of a post-frontier historiography."⁷³

⁷¹ Simonson, 57.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 13.

⁷³ Smith, 205-206; Richard Slotkin, The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, (1985; reprint, New York, 1994), 16.

In criticizing Turner for his failure to address issues that were vitally important to the American future, materialist historians, in turn, often overlook the nineteenth-century idealism determining the form of Turner's thesis. In common with the Homestead Act, the Frontier Thesis is an attempt to project the agrarian myth into the future by translating it into a form of history. Like all previous applications of the agrarian myth to the American West, the ideal represented by the Frontier Thesis is also synthetic, in this case doubly so, as the forces that led to the transplantation of the agrarian ideal in the New World during the eighteenth century again pose a threat to its cultural viability now that the frontier period — with its ready supply of "free land" — is finally over. In its reliance upon a sense of idealism to address the future, Turner's thesis actually looks backward, into the past from which it emerged.

Like Daniel Boone and his Virginia of the eighteenth century, the Frontier Thesis presents itself as an ideal synthesis of opposing forces; Civilization and Wilderness, Old World and New, Myth and Experience are reconciled in Turner's model of the frontier. Unlike any previous account of the American West, however, Turner's thesis also attempts to reconcile the recent American past (identified with myth) with the historical present. This attempt to ensure the survival of the agrarian myth during the coming century is a new departure for the myth in America. In strictly historical terms, it is also a major source of weakness in the Frontier Thesis.

Turner's relative lack of attention to industrialization and its effects has already been mentioned. In 1893, his focus upon the frontier as the most important agent of historical change also led Turner to misrepresent the nature of the West itself. The ideal nature of the frontier, as the site of a "perennial rebirth" for American life, ignores the fact of aridity as a source of limitation upon western settlement. Like the arguments of the western Senators who sabotaged Powell's attempted reform of the public land system during the 1870's, the Frontier Thesis employs myth as a form of historical interpretation. Turner's motivating idealism endorses the popular view of a limitless scope for human activity, and, as such, it amounts to a distortion of the experience of Homestead farmers and others who failed to realize the agrarian utopia in the Far West during the course of the nineteenth century.

A further distortion is involved in Turner's debt to agrarian myth. Turner's description of the frontier as a synthetic ideal all but ignores the more brutal elements of western experience during the nineteenth century. These include greed and corruption, evident in the failure of the Homestead Act, and also violence and exploitation, most apparent in the figure of the frontier hero, and in the treatment

of Native Americans and their environment. As Richard Slotkin has persuasively argued:

The first colonists saw in America an opportunity to regenerate their fortunes, their spirits, and the power of their church and nation; but the means to that regeneration ultimately became the means of violence, and the myth of regeneration through violence became the structuring metaphor of the American experience.⁷⁴

Turner's vision of the West contrasts with this account of frontier experience, and is closer to that of Jefferson. Instead of raw frontier towns, where the law (even when it existed) was difficult to enforce, Turner pictures a society of western farmers, for whom individualism is productive of democratic virtue. The ideal equation between Civilization and Wilderness contained in Turner's model of the frontier did not leave room for a differing account of western experience.



Despite its shortcomings, for almost half a century after its first appearance the Frontier Thesis was a popular and influential account of American history. This was at least partly owing to Turner's debt to the agrarian tradition and to the New World translation of this tradition into historical form during the eighteenth and nineteenth century. In its conception of the frontier as an extension of the agrarian myth the frontier Thesis encouraged an optimistic outlook upon American history, including that of the twentieth century.

In an important sense, the appeal of the Frontier Thesis was mainly poetic. In common with previous translators of the agrarian myth into the American context, Turner employed myth in a romantic way, presenting it as an ideal to be realized in literal (or historic) terms. In the Frontier Thesis itself, Turner's language plays an important role in giving a romantic or utopian interpretation to the agrarian myth. Many historians have noted this, often in a critical way. Henry Nash Smith, for example, dislikes Turner's rhetoric, and argues that sometimes, especially when the concept of nature is present, "Turner's metaphors threaten to become themselves a means of cognition and to supplant discursive reasoning."⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Slotkin, Regeneration, 5.

⁷⁵ Smith, 254.

This criticism of Turner is quite useful, as it comes close to a definition of the relation between myth and metaphor described by Richard Slotkin. Myth, argues Slotkin, is "History impacted into metaphor."⁷⁶ In a mythic narrative, the experience of a people or culture is dramatized by being reduced into a constellation of compelling metaphors. In such a narrative, the "mythopoeic consciousness" — "a process of reasoning-by-metaphor in which direct statement and logical analysis are replaced by figurative or poetic statement"⁷⁷ — dominates the interpretation of historical events.

In Turner's narrative, the frontier itself serves as the key metaphor of American historical experience, understood as an enactment of the agrarian myth. The conflation of History and Myth through the use of metaphor — a literary device — brings the Frontier Thesis close to the form of poetry or fiction. In the following chapter, the relation between western myth and fiction will be examined, through a reading of the historical novels of Wallace Stegner.

⁷⁶ Slotkin, "Myth and the Production of History", 80.

⁷⁷ Slotkin, Regeneration, 7.

Chapter Two

"Myth and Story": Wallace Stegner's Revision of Western Historical Cliché

Myths are stories, drawn from history, that have acquired through usage over many generations a symbolizing function that is central to the cultural functioning of the society that produces them. Historical experience is preserved in the form of narrative; and through periodic retellings those narratives become traditionalized. These formal qualities and structures are increasingly conventionalized and abstracted, until they are reduced to a set of powerfully evocative and resonant "icons" . . . in which history becomes a cliché.

— Richard Slotkin, The Fatal Environment: The Myth of The Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800-1890

A people unaware of its myths is likely to continue living by them.

— Richard Slotkin, Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860

Wallace Stegner is a highly versatile writer. Throughout his long career in Western American letters he produced writing in a wide range of forms. He dealt with his great theme — the relation of the Western American past to the present — in the biography, the essay, the memoir, the novel and also in writing that comes close to the form of more conventional history, such as The Gathering of Zion, his 1964 account of the Mormon migration to Utah during the nineteenth century.⁷⁸ Throughout Stegner's work, even in its less "personal" and more "objective" forms, there is a reliance upon the inventive or dramatic qualities usually associated with imaginative literature. These qualities occur in The Gathering of Zion and also in Beyond the Hundredth Meridian, Stegner's biography of John Wesley Powell published in 1954. Reflecting upon the inclusion of dramatic elements in his historical narratives, Stegner has claimed that there is a close relation between history and imaginative literature:

History, a fable agreed on, is not a science but a branch of literature, an artifact made by artificers and sometimes by artists. Like fiction, it has only persons, places, and events to work with, and like fiction it may present them either in summary or dramatic scene. Conversely, fiction,

⁷⁸ The Gathering of Zion: The Story of the Mormon Trail, (New York, 1964).

even fantastic fiction, reflects so much of the society that produces it that it may have an almost-historical value as record. Objective and historical novels come very close to history, the difference being principally that history reports the actual, fiction the typical.⁷⁹

The kinship between the two disciplines evident in Stegner's work is described in his concept of a "middle ground":

There is a whole middle ground between fiction and history. So-called historical fiction, which transposes the fictional into the actual, may have every degree of historical authenticity up to the highest. . . . I defend the middle ground as one who has strayed there several times.⁸⁰

Like many other Western American novelists, as distinct from the writers of formula "Westerns" dating from the dime novel up to the present day, Stegner employs fiction to reflect upon western history. Comparing work by Stegner with that of earlier novelists of the American West such as Vardis Fisher and A. B. Guthrie, Richard Etulain claims that the tendency of western novelists to reflect upon the past is one of the major themes of western writing:

To judge from the attention paid to history by several western novelists, historians should reexamine their assumptions about the relation of western fiction and history.⁸¹

The attention to history by the first generation of "serious" or "literary" western novelists represented by Fisher and Guthrie⁸² was perpetuated in the work of later

⁷⁹ Wallace Stegner, "On the Writing of History", in The Sound of Mountain Water, 205.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 206. The concept of a "middle ground" was employed by Forrest and Margaret G. Robinson in the first full-scale treatment of Stegner's work, published in 1977. Expanding upon Stegner's original definition, they identified the "middle ground" as "the dramatic rendering of historical persons, places and events that contributes to the discovery and articulation of continuities between past and present." Wallace Stegner (Boston, 1977), preface.

⁸¹ Richard W. Etulain, "Western Fiction and History: A Reconsideration", in Critical Essays on Wallace Stegner, ed. Anthony Arthur (Boston, 1982), 148.

⁸² Thomas J. Lyon, "Revisionist Western Classics", in Rereading the West: New Essays on the Literature of the American West, ed. Michael Kowalewski (Cambridge, 1996), 144. Lyon claims of this "first generation" of western writers that "[e]ach strove for a realist's stance vis-à-vis his own personal history, and attempted to view larger historical matters with similar objectivity. With the exception of Vardis Fisher's occasional lapses into romantic projection, these writers did not view the West as an endless frontier; they did not make one-dimensional heroes of explorers, trappers, cowboys, gunfighters, and so forth; and they did not share the arrogance of Manifest Destiny. In short, their works are not simple-minded. Their writings' complexity anticipates by several decades the analytic position of the current 'New Historicism'. In some cases . . . these classic writers have mapped territory that remains untraveled by most contemporary critics of the West."

writers such as Stegner. In Stegner's fiction, serious fictional treatment of western history is intended to serve as an antidote to what he has argued is the facile presentation of the past in the popular "Western". As Stegner has argued, the preoccupation with the past characteristic of the traditional Western adheres to the form of myth. In the dime novel and its descendents (including the "Westerns" of film and television) the present is "amputated" from the heroic past of the frontier period. In "History, Myth, and the Western Writer" an essay written in 1965, Stegner argued that the lack of a sense of historical continuity in western writing was the source of its weakness as both history and as literature. He claimed that western literature

Remains rooted in the historic, the rural, the heroic; it does not take account of time and change. That means that it has no future either, except to come closer and closer to the stereotypes of the mythic, unless it can expand its vision of itself.⁸³

The expansion of the horizon of western literature has been the consistent aim of Stegner throughout his career as an historian and novelist of the American West. In his earlier work the perception of the failure of western myth to provide a reliable sense of direction for life in post-frontier America is already apparent. In his writing up until the late 1960's Stegner's response to this perception was to attempt to expose the myth of the frontier as an inadequate basis for existence in the contemporary West, while preserving its romantic nationalist presumptions about the distinctive Western landscape and its influence upon American character. In his later work, by contrast, Stegner set out to revise the myth of the frontier in a sober and deliberate way, by undermining its romantic or literary foundation. This mature attempt at dealing with the myth of the frontier in a twentieth-century context is most fully realized in his 1971 novel, entitled Angle of Repose. There is thus a progression in Stegner's treatment of western myth, apparent in the transition from a general optimism about the American West to a sense of disquiet about its future. This gradual progress will be traced through a reading of Stegner's two major novels, published 28 years apart. Firstly, however, Stegner's debt to Frederick Jackson Turner will be examined.

⁸³ "History, Myth, and the Western Writer", in The Sound of Mountain Water, 199.

I. THE GEOGRAPHY OF HOPE

In 1960, in response to a request from the Sierra Club, Wallace Stegner drafted a wilderness manifesto in support of the long-delayed Wilderness Bill. The Wilderness Bill was introduced in Congress during the 1950's, and proposed setting aside several million acres of national forest and public domain as federally designated wilderness areas. Western Congressmen and regional mining and timber interests consistently blocked the Bill's passage. By 1960, however, President John F. Kennedy's Interior Secretary Morris Udall, an ardent conservationist, favoured the bill's passage. In this context, the Sierra Club, seeking to make the most of this new momentum, persuaded Stegner to write a letter outlining the argument for wilderness preservation. This document, which became known as the "Wilderness Letter", earned wide public acceptance after its appearance in December 1960, and was subsequently reprinted in The Sound of Mountain Water, Stegner's 1969 collection of essays on western literature and history.⁸⁴ In the "Letter", Stegner's argument went beyond the utilitarian or recreational considerations more commonly urged as a reason for wilderness preservation. At the opening of the "Wilderness Letter", Stegner argued that

What I want to speak for is not so much the wilderness uses, valuable as those are, but the wilderness idea, which is a resource in itself.⁸⁵

In language that echoes the romantic nationalism of Turner's Frontier Thesis, Stegner declared:

I want to speak for the wilderness idea as something that has helped form our character and that has certainly shaped our history as a people. . . . Something will have gone out of us as a people if we ever let the remaining wilderness be destroyed.⁸⁶

The "Wilderness Letter" can in fact be read alongside the Frontier Thesis, for although Stegner rejected Turner's nineteenth-century assumption of a boundless scope for human activity in favour of a twentieth-century conservationist ethic, he

⁸⁴ "Coda: Wilderness Letter", in The Sound of Mountain Water, 145-153.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 146. Emphasis in the original.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

also invoked several of Turner's key ideas in support of his argument. These included the idea of the West as the most important region of the American nation, and the related idea of the interaction between man and nature as the main determinant of American national character. Although this interaction was to take place in a post-frontier context, Stegner was in substantial agreement with Turner when he claimed that

We need wilderness preserved — as much of it as is still left, and as many kinds — because it was the challenge against which our character as a people was formed. . . . while we were demonstrating ourselves the most efficient and ruthless environment-busters in history, and slashing and burning and cutting our way through a wilderness continent, the wilderness was working on us. It remains in us as surely as Indian names remain on the land. If the abstract dream of human liberty and human dignity became, in America, something more than an abstract dream, mark it down at least partially to the fact that we were in subtle ways subdued by what we conquered.⁸⁷

These passages, and the "Letter" as a whole, consist of an odd mixture, in which Turner's romantic and anthropomorphic view of nature is transformed into an argument for wilderness preservation. Also presented in support of the conservationist ethic is Turner's argument about the influence of the frontier upon the growth of democracy and individualism. This particular debt to the Frontier Thesis is underlined in a later passage:

To make such a man, such a democrat, such a believer in human individual dignity, as Mark Twain himself, the frontier was necessary . . . and reaching out from those the wilderness as opportunity and as idea, the thing that has helped to make an American different from and, until we forget it in the roar of our industrial cities, more fortunate than other men. For an American, insofar as he is new and different at all, is a civilized man who has renewed himself in the wild.⁸⁸

In the "Wilderness Letter", Stegner retains Turner's romantic view of the dynamic relation of man to the wilderness environment. Even though the frontier period is definitely ended and the remaining American wilderness is most likely to be experienced within the bounds of a national park, Stegner echoes Turner when

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 147-148.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 148.

he argues that wilderness is a continuing source of renewal to the nation as a whole. This argument is made more compelling due to Stegner's sense of a threat from the urban industrial world of the mid twentieth-century:

We need to demonstrate our acceptance of the natural world, including ourselves; we need the spiritual refreshment that being natural can produce. And one of the best places for us to get that is in the wilderness where the fun houses, the bulldozers, and the pavements of our civilization are shut out.⁸⁹

As is the case with Turner, the pastoral vision of nature is integral to Stegner's romantic conception of the wilderness environment. This is demonstrated again in the conclusion to the "Wilderness Letter", which — as a statement of faith in the potential of the West to provide a scope for human dreams — also reiterates Turner's basic idealism:

We simply need that wild country available to us, even if we never do more than drive to its edge and look in. For it can be a means of reassuring ourselves of our sanity as creatures, a part of the geography of hope.⁹⁰

Instead of fully rejecting Turner and the view of western history that he represented, in the "Wilderness Letter" Stegner recasts the Frontier Thesis in environmentalist terms. As Brett Olsen, in an article on the development of Stegner's environmentalist views, has provocatively suggested

Perhaps the key to the Wilderness Letter's overwhelming public acceptance derived from Stegner's delicate treatment of beloved western myths. He managed to refute nineteenth-century "progress" without becoming vituperative, and he pragmatically substituted a more realistic, usable hope for the mythical frontier hope intertwined with wilderness subjugation. Though phrased as a potential threat, the letter . . . displayed an enthusiastic tone in touting both the wilderness as an "idea" and the

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 149.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 153. In the introduction to The Sound of Mountain Water, written in the late 1960's, Stegner repeats his previous attempt to combine environmental ethics with the idealistic, Turnerian view of the West: "Angry as one may be at what heedless men have done and still do to a noble habitat, one cannot be pessimistic about the West. This is the native home of hope." The Sound of Mountain Water, 38.

"geography of hope." This enthusiasm captured the nation, no doubt aiding passage of the Wilderness Act in 1964.⁹¹

Part of the explanation for Stegner's careful handling of the frontier myth in 1960 was almost certainly political. However, in his 1943 novel, The Big Rock Candy Mountain, Stegner also demonstrated his debt to the romantic or mythical conception of the West formalized in Turner's Frontier Thesis. In this autobiographically based novel, Stegner's attitude to western myth is at least ambivalent, the result of the central character's unresolved relation to his own past and to the West as a whole.

II. BO MASON AND THE BIG ROCK CANDY MOUNTAIN

Many years after the initial publication of The Big Rock Candy Mountain, Stegner said of the novel:

I obviously had Turner in mind when I was writing The Big Rock Candy Mountain, and the ending of the frontier and what it does psychologically to whole bodies of people.⁹²

In narrative terms, Stegner's novel is a saga, which traces the history of the Mason family, led by the domineering Harry "Bo" Mason, throughout its peripatetic life in the American West during the early part of the twentieth century. The novel begins in 1905, in the fictional town of Hardanger, North Dakota, and concludes in Salt Lake City in 1932, with the death and funeral of Bo Mason. For many reasons, it is tempting to view Bo Mason as the main character of The Big Rock Candy Mountain. This is in spite of the fact that, unlike the other three members of the Mason family, Bo is never accorded a definite point-of-view in Stegner's narrative. The reader finds out about Bo from the opinions of his family, including those of his wife, Elsa, and of his younger son, Bruce. At the opening of the novel, eighteen-year-old Elsa Norgaard is a second-generation Norwegian from Minnesota, who has come to live with her uncle in North Dakota following the death of her mother and the remarriage of her father to her closest friend. Not long after her

⁹¹ Brett Olsen, "Wallace Stegner and the Environmental Ethic: Environmentalism as a Rejection of Western Myth," Western American Literature 29:2 (1994), 135.

⁹² Wallace Stegner and Richard W. Etulain, Stegner: Conversations on History and Literature, rev. ed. (Reno, Nevada, 1996), 61.

arrival in Hardanger, Elsa encounters the youthful Bo Mason, the owner of a pool hall and the runner of a "blind pig", or an illegal saloon. Despite the wishes of both her father and her uncle, Elsa soon becomes fascinated by Bo, who represents everything she has been taught to fear. In large part, Elsa's attraction to Bo is due to his strong masculine presence. To the well-brought-up Elsa, Bo embodies a half-wild or semi-civilized quality that she finds irresistible:

He was the most masterful, dominating, contradictory, and unusual man she had ever met . . .

. . . it was a kind of teasing and sultry and almost dangerous charm, a feeling of power you got from him as you got heat from a stove.⁹³

The personal history of Bo Mason, as the son of poor parents, who left home at fourteen to escape his father's violence and to seek his fortune first in Chicago, and then in numerous places and occupations across the United States, gives him an added appeal. As a contrast to her own limited horizons, Bo's physical freedom impresses Elsa. According to the narrator, Bo's mobility and resourcefulness identify him with the archetype of the western frontiersman:

Two winters in Wisconsin gave him many skills. Either with a rifle or shotgun he was the best shot in camp, so that frequently he got laid off the saw to go hunting for the cook. Those days of prowling the timber with a gun only deepened the wild streak in him as the work on the crosscut deepened his chest. He took to skis and snowshoes as if he had known them all his life, and he went out of his way to make friends. (29)

After his short time in Chicago, where he suffers the temporary disappointment of finding that "the days when you started with nothing and got to the top were gone. . . . All the big money was already well grabbed", Bo Mason leaves the city for North Dakota, which in 1899 is a focal point for Norwegian and Russian immigrants and other land seekers. Bo is drawn to North Dakota's promise as a "last frontier" for the challenge that he seeks:

Something in the bustle of migration stirred a pulse in Bo Mason. He was not a lazy man; his activities had been various and strenuous since he was fourteen. But the boredom of carpentry, of towns, of regular hours and wages every Saturday and orders all the rest of the week, had

⁹³ Wallace Stegner, *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, (1943; reprint, New York, 1991), 21, 94. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

always made him restless. Here in Dakota there was something else. Here everybody was his own boss, here was a wide open and unskimmed country where a man could hew his own line and not suffer for his independence. Obstacles raised by nature—cold, heat, drouth, the solid resistance of great trees, he could slog through with almost fierce joy, but obstacles raised by institutions and the habits of a civilized community left him prowling and baffled. (30-31)

Bo's individualism is of the classic kind described by Turner and other formulators of western myth. Like Daniel Boone, Bo seeks a confrontation with the wilderness in order to achieve an heroic self-definition. Inseparable from this individualist impulse is Bo's sense of optimism about the West, where opportunity is represented by the land itself. To both Elsa Norgaard and to the reader of The Big Rock Candy Mountain, Bo Mason and the "frontier spirit" that he embodies is quite compelling. This is the case even though the frontier period described by Turner officially ended in 1880, almost ten years before Bo's arrival in North Dakota.⁹⁴ It is the central irony of this novel of a post-frontier society that Stegner allows the larger-than-life figure of Bo Mason to dominate the narrative. Throughout The Big Rock Candy Mountain the theme of the closure of the frontier is returned to consistently, until it constitutes a refrain. As a personification of the frontier myth, Stegner presents Bo as a walking anachronism — "a frontiersman *manqué*"⁹⁵ — yet among the different characters of the novel, Bo is the most vivid:

He was born with the itch in his bones, Elsa knew. He was always telling stories of men who had gone over the hills to some new place and found a land of Canaan, made their pile, got to be big men in the communities they fathered. But the Canaans toward which Bo's feet had turned had not lived up to their promise. People had been before him. The cream, he said, was gone. He should have lived a hundred years earlier.

Yet he would never quite grant that all the good places were filled up. There was somewhere, if you knew where to find it, some place where money could be made like drawing water from a well, some Big Rock Candy Mountain where life was effortless and rich and unrestricted and full of adventure and action, where something could be had for nothing.

⁹⁴ Simonson, 27. Turner derives this date from the Superintendent for the Census of 1890, whom he quotes in the beginning to the Frontier Thesis: "Up to and including 1880 the country had a frontier of settlement, but at present the unsettled area has been so broken into by isolated bodies of settlement that there can hardly be said to be a frontier line. In the discussion of its extent, its westward movement, etc., it can not therefore, any longer have a place in the census reports."

⁹⁵ Conversations, 47.

He hadn't found it in Chicago or Milwaukee or Terre Haute or the Wisconsin woods or Dakota; there was no place and no business where you took chances and the chances paid off, where you played, and the play was profitable. Ball playing might have been it, if he had hit the big time, but bad luck had spoiled that chance. But in the Klondike . . . the Klondike, Elsa knew as soon as he opened his mouth to say something when Pinky Jordan was gone, was the real thing, the thing he had been looking for for a lifetime. (83-84)

In a post-frontier America, the myth is still a source of compulsion to Bo Mason, and the cause of his rootlessness, his endless optimism, and his dream of easy money. Driven by the need to "make a pile", Bo leads his family all over the prairies and the north-western United States, from Grand Forks, North Dakota, and a failed hotel business doubling as an illegal saloon, to Richmond, Washington, and then to southern Saskatchewan, Canada, where Elsa rejoins him after a separation brought about by his harsh treatment of their youngest son, Bruce. As in North Dakota at the turn of the century, Bo is drawn by the promise of a "last frontier", where individual opportunity is still present (162). On the Canadian high plains in 1914, under the influence of agrarian myth, Bo takes up a homestead section and briefly establishes himself as a farmer, only to be defeated by the semi-arid climate, which results in a drought and the loss of a valuable wheat crop. Following upon this disappointment, Bo develops a contempt for farming as falling short of his goal of making "a pile" of money (216, 230). Despite the continued influence upon Bo Mason of key aspects of the frontier myth, including its romantic individualism, his loss of faith in the Garden myth places him within a general movement away from agriculture at this point in western history.⁹⁶

The failure in 1914 of Bo Mason's attempt to become a farmer results in the final disappointment of his family's wish for a home and the social respectability this

⁹⁶ Robert G. Athearn, in The Mythic West in Twentieth-Century America, discusses the growing industrialization, business and commercial activity, and shift to urban living which took place from 1900-1915 in terms of the threat it posed to traditional romantic definitions of the West. In particular, he describes the figure of the urban booster of the 1920's as a kind of latter-day frontiersman, who served to displace the farmer in the mythic conception of the West: "The merchants called the agrarians 'clodhoppers', and they could not agree with [Bernard] De Voto, who thought the nearby rural folk 'altogether admirable,' just because these rustics were presumed to be in touch with the soil, and therefore in contact with historical roots. To the merchants the honest plowman was a relic from a dead past they had abandoned in favor of a quest for the American holy grail of 'bigger and better.' "The Mythic West in Twentieth-Century America, (Kansas, 1986, 69-79). Later, in the "Dust Bowl" years of the mid-1930's the romantic literary conception of the western farmer suffered its most severe blow. In giving up farming in 1914, Bo Mason actually looks forward, to the predominantly urban future of the West.

represents. As a contrast to Bo and his romantic ambitions, Elsa Mason voices a desire for permanence and security that is continually frustrated. During the winter of 1915, when the Mason family abandons its homestead shack and moves back to a rented house in Eastend, Bo becomes an illegal trader in whiskey, running carloads across the border between Montana and Saskatchewan. Before Bo persuades her to rejoin him in Canada, Elsa is aware of his restless, half-civilized nature: "He wasn't a domestic animal" (160). With Bo's new scheme for making money, however, the full extent of this difference between them becomes apparent:

"I just want us to have a good solid place in the world where nobody can shame us with anything."

"That's sure ambitious," he said. "That shows a lot of imagination, that does. Any dirt farmer in the province can claim that, practically."

"But we can't," she said. (299)

Elsa Mason's desire for a conventional home is expressed at many other points in Stegner's novel (215, 235, 252, 324, 373). As a kind of foil to Bo, Elsa's point-of-view is given prominence in the first two-thirds of the novel, yet from the reader's perspective, she is too much the passive victim of Bo's romantic scheming to be a fully credible character. In a rare moment in the narrative, the reader is given a glimpse of Elsa through Bo, who reflects that

She had a habit of swallowing things, and then years later you discovered that she hadn't forgotten them. (254)

Despite such potential criticism, however, the overall narrative structure of The Big Rock Candy Mountain is biased strongly in Elsa Mason's favour. Many times in the novel she is made a spokesperson for what seems the author's personal opinion:

He honestly wanted her back, he would promise anything. And he sent her gifts that were not gifts, but slaps in the face that shamed her for him in front of everybody. . . . And his optimism, his incurable conviction that this time he was going to make his pile, the old, endless, repetitive story of his whole life . . . (172)

Such a degree of cynicism about her husband and his motives does not help the reader to understand why Elsa remains with Bo Mason, despite the best interests of

both herself and her children.⁹⁷ Like the single, masculine hero of frontier mythology, Bo acts impulsively. Elsa is also aware that Bo often feels his family as a check upon his freedom. For the most part, however, Bo pursues his ambitions at its expense. This is the case when he decides to uproot the family yet again, for a move back to the United States after the end of the First World War. When this decision occurs, Elsa's reaction to the news of Bo's plans is characteristic:

There was no time for regrets. Maybe this whiskey business, for all its illegality, was as good as anything they could have chosen. There were no places on earth any more where opportunity lay new and shining and untouched. The old days when people used to rush to Dakota or California or Alaska in search of easy wealth were gone forever; she and Bo had tried one or two of those worn-out dreams, to their sorrow. But if he could do as well as he said he could at this business, and then get out, he at least would have been preserved from his own irritability and restlessness and bad temper.

So she went carefully pulling up the little roots that gave with a slight unwilling tug, and left the future to Bo. He was so sure of it. (330-331)

Elsa's enduring passivity in the face of Bo's restless scheming suggests that she may have more faith in him than the narrative actually admits, and that despite her competing desire for permanence and stability, she may even share in his dream of a "Big Rock Candy Mountain".⁹⁸

After Bo Mason leaves Canada he takes his family to Montana, where Prohibition is in effect and he plans to make money by selling whiskey in wholesale lots (327). After a local gang of whiskey-runners forces him to work at a reduced profit, in return for protection from the police, Bo takes a load of its whiskey and goes to Salt Lake City, the size of which attracts him (369-370). Here in Utah, Bo again asserts his independence as an illegal trader of whiskey. For the first time, the Mason family enjoys a certain prosperity, which Bo displays by buying large houses and

⁹⁷ Kerry Ahearn, in an intriguing analysis of gender roles in Stegner's fiction, describes the characterization of women thus: "They are the prophetesses of reduced expectations, of objectivity, of the desire to live by controls, and like all bearers of bad tidings, they suffer." "Heroes vs. Women: Conflict and Duplicity in Stegner," *Western Humanities Review* 31:2 (1977), 129. Ahearn also argues that Stegner's motive for the presentation of such female characters is proto-feminist — "Stegner does not reinforce the sexist myths of feminine weakness and subordination; he reflects their existence, and by implication attacks them" (129) —, but this claim is less convincing.

⁹⁸ Elsa's investment in western myth is suggested earlier in the novel, when she receives Bo's letter containing news of the opportunity to be had in Saskatchewan: "So he had finally struck something that promised to pay off. She had always believed that some day he would. If you tried enough things, sooner or later something was bound to turn up." *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, 163.

expensive clothing.⁹⁹ Despite its change of fortune, however, the family does not gain the social respectability most desired by Elsa. In a period when class lines were being drawn, especially in western towns,¹⁰⁰ Bo Mason's dream of "making a pile" in an occupation outside the law keeps the family moving from house to house in a constant effort to evade detection. During its first four years in Salt Lake City, the Mason family lives in a total of twelve different houses, one a speakeasy. Elsa Mason's social isolation during these years in Salt Lake, and later in Nevada — where Bo runs a gambling house in Reno — is a source of regret to her, and later to her youngest son, Bruce (424, 427, 374-376). In their close relationship Elsa and Bruce Mason attempt to compensate for the home and security denied them by Bo's rootlessness. In the rapidly-changing, increasingly business-oriented West of the twentieth-century, Bo's lack of social respectability identifies him with the figure of the urban drifter described by Robert Athearn in The Mythic West in Twentieth-Century America:

There still lurked in the West that foot-loose individual, the "sagebrusher", who manifested the traditional western spirit of restlessness. Moving about constantly, with the conviction that more money was to be made more easily on the other side of the mountain, was his response to the natural seductiveness of the West, a place historically attractive to the dreamer and the idealist.

The belief that undeveloped country always offered opportunities had been a lodestone for carefree spirits in all parts of America, and although modern westerners and their eastern friends refused to admit that opportunity no longer stalked the setting sun, it was better to think that more conventional methods would realize them. Floaters . . . no longer were regarded as restless frontiersmen, pursuing their destiny, but instead, as transients, homeless people who were unable to find the West of their choice, drifters who were unsure of themselves. Chambers of Commerce shunned them, for they that did not join the crowd were not apt to be taxpayers. Fortunately, said the city fathers, these wanderers

⁹⁹ Bo's cultural values approximate those of many urban westerners in the postwar decade. Robert G. Athearn notes the change that occurred in western culture in this period: "The notion that the West was succumbing to both a material and cultural standardization during the twenties was noted with increasing frequency in eastern periodicals. These once-special frontier people were now wearing the same hats, shoes, dresses, and suits as were other Americans. Mail order houses and chain stores made these things available, and the belief that these were the uniforms of modern times caused them to be purchased and worn. Westerners also drove the same cars, read the same magazines, and listened to the same radio programs as did more ordinary folks in the East." The Mythic West in Twentieth-Century America, 66.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 48.

were outnumbered by reliable, steady young businessmen who knew real gold when they had found it and had settled in for the duration.¹⁰¹

In the New West of service clubs and urban boosterism, Bo Mason and the frontier mythology that he represents exists as an historical anachronism or a cliché. Growing up in Salt Lake City and later, as a law student in Minnesota, Bruce Mason is acutely conscious of this. In the final third of The Big Rock Candy Mountain, the narrative point-of-view is given over to the thoughts and reflections of Bruce Mason as he looks back upon his transient childhood:

Long afterward, Bruce looked back on the life of his family with half-amused wonder at its rootlessness. The people who lived a lifetime in one place, cutting down the overgrown lilac hedge and substituting barberry, changing the shape of the lily-pool from square to round, digging out old bulbs and putting in new, watching their trees grow from saplings to giants that shaded the house, by contrast seemed to walk a dubious line between contentment and boredom. What they had must be comfortable, pleasant, worn smooth by long use; they did not feel the edge of change.

It was not permanence alone that made what the Anglo-Saxons called home, he thought. It was continuity, the flux of fashion and decoration moving in and out again as minds and purses altered, but always within the framework of the established and recognizable outline. Even if the thing itself was paltry and dull, the history of the thing was not. (374)

In this passage, the concern with history and especially with historical continuity resembles Stegner's own. Stegner has never denied the autobiographical basis of the novel. In an interview in the early 1980's, he said that

The whole experience of writing [the] novel was . . . cathartic, because I had to recreate a lot of my past. . . . I was exorcising my father, and in a sense making some kind of recompense to my mother, who led a very rough life with him. . . . The effect . . . of such a dominating and hairtrigger kind of father on many kids is to breed a kind of insecurity which may never be healed. I was probably looking for security.¹⁰²

The strong autobiographical element of The Big Rock Candy Mountain goes a long way toward explaining the novel's treatment of Bo Mason. In the narrative, as

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹⁰² *Conversations*, 41, 43.

in life, the son's sympathies lie with Elsa Mason as the victim of her husband's rootlessness. In contrast to his extreme dislike of Bo, Bruce idealizes his mother, and reflects:

If one subscribed to the idea of home at all, one would insist on an attic for the family history to hide in. His mother had felt so all her life. She wanted to be part of something, an essential atom in a street, a town, a state; she would have loved to get herself expressed in all the pleasant, secure details of a deeply-lived-in house. She was cut out to be a wife and mother as few women were. Given half a chance, she would have done well at it.

But look, he said, at what she had to work with. . . . Twelve houses in four years, in every part of the city. They moved in, circled around like a dog preparing to drop its haunches, and moved out again, without any chance of ever infusing any house with the quality of their own lives.
(374)

For Bruce Mason, as for Wallace Stegner, Elsa represents the unrealized alternative to Bo's restless wandering. Bruce admits, however, that this has more to do with his own interpretation of his parents' relationship than with any sure knowledge of the feelings of Elsa herself:

It was only in retrospect that the moves had any significance, only when he thought of what his mother's life must have been all that time; and even there, he realized, his memories were probably colored by a sentimental pity that had little relation to his mother's real feelings. She never complained, except humorously, about the life she led. Probably much of the time she was almost contented except for her constant nagging worry that Bo would get into trouble that he couldn't get out of.
(376)

Influenced strongly by his own wish for a permanent home, Bruce regards Elsa as almost a saint, a martyr to her husband's romantic ambitions. For Bruce Mason, the lack of a "home" or sense of belonging to a particular place is intertwined with a lack of social and historical identity. As Bruce has observed, a home contains history, and this is perhaps its most important quality. Driving west across the country in 1931 in order to visit his mother after a year spent at college, Bruce's inherited rootlessness comes back to haunt him:

It was a grand country, a country to lift the blood, and he was going home across its wind-kissed miles with the sun on him and the

cornfields steaming under the first summer heat and the first bugs immolating themselves against his windshield.

But going home where? he said. Where do I belong in this? Going home to Reno? I've never been in Reno more than six hours at a time in my life. Going home to Tahoe, to a summer cottage that I haven't ever seen, that isn't even quite completed yet? Or going home to Salt Lake, only to go right on through across the Salt Desert and the little brown dancing hills, through Battle Mountain and Wells and Winnemucca and the dusty towns of the Great Basin that are only specks on a map, that have no hold on me? Where do I belong in this country? Where is home? (457-458)

Looking back upon his life up to this point enables Bruce to see how the history of his family, despite its apparent eccentricity, is involved with the existence of the West itself. Like Bruce Mason, the West (and by extension, all of America), lacks a deep commitment to "home" and all this represents. The frontier myth, responsible for the nation's optimism and endless mobility, has inhibited the growth of a strong social and historical identity. In 1931, in the context of the Great Depression, this sense of the nation's vulnerability is especially meaningful to Bruce:

Those were the things that not only his family, but thousands of Americans had missed. The whole nation had been footloose too long, Heaven had been just over the next range for too many generations. Why remain in one dull plot of earth when Heaven was reachable, was touchable, was just over there? The whole race was like the fir tree in the fairy-tale which wanted to be cut down and dressed up with lights and bangles and colored paper, and see the world and be a Christmas tree.

Well, he said, thinking of the closed banks, the crashed markets that had ruined thousands and cut his father's savings in half, the breadlines in the cities, the political jawing and the passing of a buck. Well, we've been a Christmas tree, and now we're in the back yard and how do we like it? (460)

In spite of the apparent distance from western myth that his reflection implies, Bruce Mason is also aware of the influence of myth upon his own life, firstly in the figure of his father, and secondly, but just as importantly, in his attachment to the western landscape. During his journey westward in 1931, in the midst of his reflection upon the hollow idealism expressed in his father's dream of a Big Rock Candy Mountain — "that place of impossible loveliness that had pulled the whole nation westward" (460-461) — Bruce cannot help but be drawn to the western

landscape. Partly, this attraction arises out of his need to acquire a "home" and a full identity for himself; in its tone of optimism, however, his attachment to the landscape also suggests a more traditional romantic conception of the West, as a land of opportunity or as a "geography of hope":

Anything beyond the Missouri was close to home, at least. He was a Westerner, whatever that was. The moment he crossed the Big Sioux and got into the brown country where the raw earth showed, the minute the grass got sparser and the air dryer and the service stations less grandiose and the towns rattier, the moment he saw his first lonesome shack on the baking flats with a tipsy windmill creaking away at the reluctant underground water, he knew approximately where he belonged. He belonged where the overalls saw the washtub less often, where the corduroy bagged more sloppily at the knees, where the ground was bare and sometimes raw and the sand-devils whirled across the landscape and the barns were innocent of any paint except that advertising Dr. Peirce's Golden Medical Discovery. The feeling came on him like sun after an overcast day, and in pure contentment he limbered his knees and slouched deeper against the Ford's lefthand door.

At sunset he was still wheeling across the plains toward Chamberlain, the sun fiery through the dust and the wide wings of the west going red to saffron to green as he watched, and the horizon ahead of him vast and empty and beckoning like an open gate. At ten o'clock he was still driving, and at twelve. As long as the road ran west he didn't want to stop, because that was where he was going, west beyond the Dakotas toward home. (463-464)

In common with the "Wilderness Letter" of 1960, Bruce Mason's reflections on the West and on the western landscape combine a traditional, nineteenth-century idealism with a more contemporary recognition of cultural and material limitation. As is the case in 1960, this combination is inherently paradoxical, and potentially contradictory. In The Big Rock Candy Mountain, the mythical conception of the West that is represented and even parodied in the character of Bo Mason is expressed in the emotional attachments of his son.¹⁰³ This is also true in the case of Bruce Mason's attachment to Bo himself.

¹⁰³ Cf. Robert G. Athearn on the nostalgia for the mythic West in 1920's and 1930's America: "Myths have the emotional pull of long-held family treasures, and lovers of the idyllic Old West clung to them tenaciously, grudgingly surrendering an item here and there as the real world closed in." The Mythic West in Twentieth-Century America, 74.

In the conclusion to The Big Rock Candy Mountain, the general narrative bias against Bo Mason that is present in the rest of the novel alters slightly. Instead of a wholly negative portrait of Bo, Stegner introduces an element of uncertainty into the characterization that is expressed in Bruce Mason's unspoken "eulogy" for his father as attends his funeral. Bo Mason has died violently and by his own hand, in a cheap hotel immediately following upon his shooting of a former mistress. Bruce's mother is already deceased and he has now returned to Salt Lake City for the last time. On the drive west he has already guessed the motive for his father's suicide:

As he shifted to ease his aching back he thought of the old man, always chasing something down a long road, always moving on from something to something else. At the very end, before that fatal morning, he must have looked down his road and seen nothing, no Big Rock Candy Mountain, no lemonade springs, no cigarette trees, no little streams of alcohol, no handout bushes. Nothing. The end, the empty end, nothing to move toward because nothing was there. (552)

Bruce Mason perceives Bo's final disillusionment with the dream of the West, as this was expressed in the hobo ballad of the late nineteenth century from which Stegner's novel takes its title.¹⁰⁴ After this point in the novel, the conflicting feelings about his father that have previously troubled Bruce Mason (427-438) are finally given full expression. Listening to the minister deliver the funeral oration, Bruce is driven to reflect upon his ambivalent feelings about his father's life and death:

Harry Mason was a child and a man. Whatever he did, any time, he was a completely masculine being, and almost always he was a child, even in his rages. In an earlier time, under other circumstances, he might have become something the nation would have elected to honor, but he would have been no different. He would have always been an undeveloped human being, an immature social animal, and the further the nation goes the less room there is for that kind of man. Harry Mason lived with the woman who was my mother, and whom I honor for her kindness and gentleness and courage and wisdom. But I tell you at his funeral, and in spite of the hatred I have had for him for many years, that he was more talented and more versatile and more energetic than she. Refine her qualities and you would get saintliness, but never

¹⁰⁴ Anonymous, "The Big Rock Candy Mountains" (c. 1885), in The Faber Book of America, ed. Christopher Ricks and William L. Vance (London, 1992), 32-33.

greatness. His qualities were the raw material for a notable man. Though I have hated him, and though I neither honor nor respect him now, I can not deny him that. (562)

In this apparent softening¹⁰⁵ toward his father at the end of the novel, Bruce Mason allows Bo his potentially heroic qualities. As Bruce has meditated earlier, in a previous attempt to come to terms with his conflicting feelings about his father:

His history is important. . . . It is valuable to remember that all his ancestors as far back as I know anything about them were pioneers, and that he was born when almost all the opportunities for pioneering were gone. (437)

Bruce's more mature perspective upon his father as the product of his history, including the history of the entire West itself, allows him to indulge his degree of admiration for Bo, suppressed due to his overwhelming sympathy with his mother. As Bruce claims, Bo is a much more vital character than she is, which raises the question of where Stegner's ultimate sympathies lie in this novel. Kerry Ahearn, in an intriguing analysis of Stegner's ambivalent attitude toward western history, defined in terms of gender-conflict, argues that:

Stegner is fascinated by and makes his most moving fiction from the battle of the sexes, and imperils his novels with an overlay of morality whose source is a renunciation of that energy, as though all energy must lead toward evil. . . . Yet Stegner remains fascinated with the aggressiveness and the opportunity for tests of will that characterize the male-dominated world of his fiction. His novels use women, but are inevitably about men.¹⁰⁶

The belated admiration for the potential heroism of Bo Mason expressed by his son in the conclusion to The Big Rock Candy Mountain suggests the continuing influence of the romantic or mythical conception of the West upon Stegner in the

¹⁰⁵ Kerry Ahearn argues that Stegner (as the autobiographical basis for the character of Bruce), tries to soften his previous narrative bias toward Bo Mason at the end of the novel: "Stegner, fearing that he has overstated, tries to soften the son's denunciations." Ahearn also claims that the result of this narrative uncertainty is a novel that is the product of conflicting impulses; "a narrative of parts not unified by technique", "The Big Rock Candy Mountain and Angle of Repose: Trial and Culmination" in Critical Essays on Wallace Stegner, 116-117.

¹⁰⁶ Ahearn, "Heroes vs. Women: Conflict and Duplicity in Stegner", 141.

writing of this early novel. As Bruce Mason realizes at his father's funeral, the past — especially when this is understood in terms of myth — is inescapable:

His past was upon him, the feeling he had had two or three times that he bore his whole family's history in his own mind. . . . Perhaps it took several generations to make a man, perhaps it took several combinations and re-creations of his mother's gentleness and resilience, his father's enormous energy and appetite for the new, a subtle blending of masculine and feminine, selfish and selfless, stubborn and yielding, before a proper man could be fashioned. He was the only one left to fulfill that contract and try to justify the labor and the harshness and the mistakes of his parents' lives, and that responsibility was so clearly his, was so great an obligation, that it made unimportant and unreal the sight of the motley collection of pall-bearers staggering under the weight of his father's body, and the back door of the hearse closing quietly upon the casket and the flowers. (563)

With the death of Bo Mason, Bruce Mason is faced with the inadequacy of his father's frontier values for living in the contemporary West, but he also perceives the need to reclaim the past somehow. Unlike his father, who lived in an eternal future, Bruce cannot reject the past in the expectation of a Big Rock Candy Mountain on the next horizon. Bruce's sense of social responsibility demands that he attempts to resolve his relationship to his family history and to the West itself.¹⁰⁷ This attempt on the part of Wallace Stegner is expressed in his 1971 novel, entitled Angle of Repose.

III. ANGLE OF REPOSE AND WESTERN REALISM

Compared to The Big Rock Candy Mountain, Wallace Stegner's eleventh novel is a more sophisticated work. The maturity of Angle of Repose is both aesthetic and political. In contrast to the earlier work, which is narrated from several different points-of-view, Angle of Repose employs a single yet also highly self-conscious narrator, who is an historian of the American West. In this novel, Stegner's attempt to revise western myth is also most fully expressed. In place of the

¹⁰⁷ Of Stegner's general attempt to reclaim the Western past for contemporary, non-mythic uses, Barnett Singer contends that "His historical idealism . . . is a determined intellectual antidote to a bulldozed present." "The Historical Ideal in Wallace Stegner's Fiction", in Critical Essays on Wallace Stegner, 128.

romantic assumptions supporting Turner's Frontier Thesis, Stegner substitutes a more "realistic" narrative of western experience. The novel's "realism" is of the kind described by Max Westbrook in his approach to the question of historical authenticity in Western Literature:

The best of Western writers, for all their essential differences as original artists, are devoted to authenticity as denotation, not as a guarantee of aesthetic success, not for the purpose of factual accuracy, but as a creative choice among the bounty of Western history, their selected subject. The general intent is not to provide for local readers a nostalgic analogue of regional experience, and thus the standard of facsimile authenticity is not an adequate standard for judgement.¹⁰⁸

As Stegner has claimed earlier, historical fiction must be based on sound research in order to achieve some kind of historical validity, but the historical novelist is free to invent within the broad outline established by this research: "History reports the actual, fiction the typical."¹⁰⁹ In Angle of Repose Stegner's reporting of the typical takes the form of an account of Susan and Oliver Ward — grandparents of the novel's narrator — and their lives in the West during the nineteenth century. The characters have a factual basis in Mary Hallock Foote, an early illustrator and writer, and her husband Arthur de Wint Foote, an engineer and scientist.¹¹⁰ Significant details of the Foote's actual lives are altered or even invented by Stegner in order to achieve his fictional purposes, however.

In common with The Big Rock Candy Mountain, the main theme of Angle of Repose is the problematic relationship between the past and present of the American West. At the beginning of the novel, the situation of Lyman Ward, the novel's narrator, is established. Crotchety and intellectual, he is afflicted by a rare bone disease, which has necessitated the removal of his right leg and has also confined him to a wheelchair. In addition to this, Ward's wife has deserted him for the physician who performed his amputation. As an historian, Ward perceives a correspondence between his own physical state and that of the world around him:

¹⁰⁸ Max Westbrook, "The Authentic Western", Western American Literature 13 (1978), 215. See also Jackson Putnam, "Historical Fact and Literary Truth: The Problem of Authenticity in Western American Literature", Western American Literature 15 (1980): 17-23. Both Westbrook and Putnam reject the narrowly "authenticist" approach to western writing, which enjoyed a brief popularity among writers and critics reacting against the formula Western.

¹⁰⁹ "On the Writing of History", The Sound of Mountain Water, 205.

¹¹⁰ Mary Hallock Foote, A Victorian Gentlewoman in the Far West: The Reminiscences of Mary Hallock Foote, ed. Rodman Paul (San Marino, California, 1972); Robinson, Wallace Stegner, 148.

In my mind I write letters to the newspapers, saying Dear Editor, As a modern man and a one-legged man, I can tell you that the conditions are similar. We have been cut off, the past has been ended and the family has broken up and the present is adrift in its wheelchair. I had a wife who after twenty-five years of marriage took on the coloration of the 1960's. I have a son who, though we are affectionate with each other, is no more my true son than if he breathed through gills. That is no gap between the generations, that is a gulf. The elements have changed, there are whole new orders of magnitude and kind. This present of 1970 is no more an extension of my grandparents' world, this West is no more a development of the West they helped build, than the sea over Santorin is an extension of that once-island of rock and olives. My wife turns out after a quarter of a century to be someone I never knew, my son starts out all fresh from his own premises.¹¹¹

At the beginning of the novel, Lyman Ward's complaint against the present has led him to seek refuge in the past and in the lives of his grandparents. Working from the letters of his grandmother, he is constructing an historical account of their experience as pioneers in the West of the nineteenth century. For Ward, the world of his grandparents represents an ideal alternative to the present "amputated" or disconnected state of things. He expresses this conviction at many points in the novel:

My grandparents had to live their way out of one world and into another, or into several others, making new out of old the way corals live their reef upward. I am on my grandparents' side. I believe in Time, as they did, and in the life chronological rather than in the life existential. We live in time and through it, we build our huts in its ruins, or used to, and we cannot afford all these abandonings. (18)

In Angle of Repose, Stegner depicts two American "frontiers" different in time but related by their common abandonment of history. One is the "New Frontier" of the 1960's, especially as this is manifested in the "counterculture" of California. The other is the frontier described by Turner and other formulators of western myth. These are both treated critically by the novel's narrator in his quest for the historical continuity present in the Victorian world of his grandparents. The great

¹¹¹ Wallace Stegner, Angle of Repose, (1971; reprint, New York, 1992), 17-18. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

skill of Stegner's novel is the way in which it sets up a comparison between two different historical periods in order to draw conclusions about the validity of the frontier interpretation of American history. In describing the influence of their own past upon the lives of his nineteenth-century grandparents, for example, the narrator states:

I am impressed with how much of my grandparents' life depended on continuities, contacts, connections, friendships, and blood relationships. Contrary to the myth, the West was not made entirely by pioneers who had thrown everything away but an ax and a gun. (41)

Much later in the novel, he also claims:

When frontier historians theorize about the uprooted, the lawless, the purseless, and the socially cut-off who settled the West, they are not talking about people like my grandmother. . . . For that sort of pioneer, the West was not a new country being created, but an old one being reproduced; in that sense our pioneer women were always more realistic than our pioneer men. The moderns, carrying little baggage of the kind . . . called "merely cultural" . . . are the true pioneers. Their circuitry seems to include no atavistic domestic sentiment, they have suffered empathectomy, their computers hum no ghostly feedback of Home, Sweet Home. How marvelously free they are! How utterly deprived! (277-278)

Like an older version of the Bruce Mason at the end of The Big Rock Candy Mountain, Lyman Ward seeks to establish a connection between past and present, of the kind that is denied by the continuous mobility of frontier mythology.¹¹² As is the case in the earlier novel, historical continuity is associated with the idea of civilization, and is represented by the image of "home", with all of its feminine associations. In contrast to The Big Rock Candy Mountain however, in Angle of Repose Stegner allows the desire for "home" and the civilized values this represents to shape the entire narrative. One important result of this is that, instead of appearing as the passive victim of her husband's pioneering ambitions, the main female character of the novel is also its heroine. As Bruce Ronda has argued, in Angle of Repose Stegner's substitution of a woman for the masculine

¹¹² Cf. Turner: "This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character." Simonson, 28.

hero of the traditional Western novel constitutes a significant revision of frontier mythology:

Stegner's novel as a whole is part of the recovery of a fuller Western history whose variety has not until recently been appreciated or documented. A Western novel with a woman as the central character certainly challenges the fictional orthodoxy that began with James Fenimore Cooper and may be seen in, among other novels, Owen Wister's The Virginian and Walter Tilburg Clark's The Ox-Bow Incident.¹¹³

In his account of his grandparents' lives in the West of the nineteenth century, Stegner's narrator emphasizes several important, but frequently overlooked historical and material realities in order to revise the popular romantic conception of the frontier. The first of these realities is the participation of women in the pioneering process; a second is the strong connection of the American West to the Eastern states. Angle of Repose shows that this connection was both cultural and economic, and that in contrast to the romantic and antihistorical bias of the "New West" of the 1960's, it implied an acknowledgement of the influence of the past upon the present. In Lyman Ward's narrative, the figure of his grandmother is made to embody the cultural values he most respects. Unlike her husband, who, when she meets him for the first time in New York in 1868, expresses his romantic wish to pursue the opportunity for individual self-realization represented by the western frontier (40), Susan is a reluctant pioneer. As the narrator states:

Susan Ward came West not to join a new society but to endure it, not to build anything but to enjoy a temporary experience and make it yield whatever instruction it contained. (81)

In 1876, after an eight-year courtship, Susan Burling and Oliver Ward eventually marry. During most of this time, Oliver has been trying to establish himself as an engineer in various projects in the West, while Susan has enjoyed her life among her literary and artistic friends in New York. In 1873, however, she discovers that her closest friend, Augusta Hudson, a wealthy socialite, is to be married. Largely in reaction to this news, Susan decides to marry Oliver Ward (59). Like Susan, Oliver is also an Easterner, and his family has connections among the social elite (38).

¹¹³ Bruce A. Ronda, "Themes of Past and Present in Angle of Repose", Studies in American Fiction 10: 2 (1982), 218.

Unlike Susan, however, Oliver is relatively inartistic and he also lacks education, having left Yale without a degree. When she resolves to marry Oliver Ward, Susan is acting against her own better judgement and her inherent social snobbery. In his physical appearance, Oliver Ward also resembles the type of the western frontiersman, romantic but also culturally primitive. When he returns from the West in 1873, Susan's feelings about Oliver are still ambivalent. Like Elsa Noorgard when she meets Bo Mason, however, Susan is attracted to Oliver due to his masculine presence and the excitement and adventure he represents. As Stegner's narrator reconstructs the scene:

What did a girl of 1873 feel, waiting for the stranger whom she had never taken quite seriously but whom she had now, in her mind, had resolved to marry? The meeting had all the dramatics of one of her more romantic drawings—shine of lantern light on the oilskins of the ferryman, a tall figure that jumped ashore carrying a carpetbag. And what was he wearing? Some great hooded cloak or ulster that made him like a figure out of a conspiratorial opera. The ferryman's lantern threw his huge shadow down the landing. She was in suspense to see his face, for she might remember him all wrong. Then he was before them throwing back the hood, shaking her hand with his big wet hand, saying some sort of greeting and in the same breath apologizing for the ulster—it was his field coat, his town coat was stolen in San Francisco. (59)

Of his grandmother's final decision to marry Oliver, Ward speculates:

I think she had been stirred by Oliver Ward's masculine strength, by his stories of an adventurous life, by his evenness of disposition, by his obvious adoration. (65)

Despite this positive reason for her decision, however, Susan Ward does not fully consider what marriage to a western engineer will entail. This exists as a threat to her current social and cultural identity in the American East. As the narrator explains:

Her version of the marriage was that for perhaps two years she and Oliver would live in the West while he established himself. Then they would return, and somehow or other the discrepancies between Oliver's personality and Western leanings and the social and artistic brilliance of the Hudsons' circle would all be smoothed away. (70)

In her first journey West to join her husband after his appointment as Resident Engineer at a mercury mine in New Almaden, near San Jose, however, Susan is stricken by the feeling that she is travelling into exile. Extrapolating from the remarks made in her letters, Ward declares:

There are passages that I read as shadowy forecasts of her future. She found Omaha "Western in the worst sense of the word." . . . She was depressed by the repetitive ugly barren little towns across the sod house country, and it could be she felt a shiver of premonition as she described the "lonely little clusters of settlers' houses with the great monotonous waves of land stretching miles around them, that make my heart ache for the women who live there. They stand in the house door as the train whirls past, and I wonder if they feel the hopelessness of their exile?" (72)¹¹⁴

This is the first instance in the novel of the undercutting of Susan's romantic expectations of the West by her experience of its material and historical reality. As Ward indicates, many similar disillusionments will follow, and like the first, these will largely be the result of Susan's reluctance to surrender her eastern identifications. Throughout *Angle of Repose* she vacillates between a romantic and a wholly pessimistic view of the West and her place in it. These differing views of the West are both produced by her cultural, social and family background in the American East. The novel shows this background to be all-but inescapable.

Upon her arrival in New Almaden in 1876, Susan discovers it to resemble the image of the West that she has dreaded. In the words of Lyman Ward:

The whole place had the air of having been dumped down the hillside—steep streets, houses at every angle white and incongruous or unpainted and shabby. Wash hung everywhere, the vacant lots were littered with cans and trash, dogs prowled and children screamed. At the water tank they slowed to pass through a reluctantly parting, densely staring tangle of men, boys, teamsters, cows, donkeys, mules. When Oliver leaned out and saluted some of them they waved, grinning, and stared with their hands forgotten in the air. Engineer and his new missus. She thought them coarse and cow-faced and strangely pale. (84-85)

Soon after this original impression of its sordidness, however, Susan begins to alter her perception of New Almaden. Equipped with her sketching pad and her eastern-

¹¹⁴ Emphasis in the original.

trained sensibility, Susan Ward transforms New Almaden into drawings and written descriptions of "local colour" which she sells to Scribner's and the Atlantic as illustrative of life in the West. In the impressive house built for by her husband, and provided with a servant and an eastern nurse for her newborn child, Susan once again feels free to impose a romantic interpretation upon the West. Contemplating her husband after his return home at the end of the day, Susan imagines him as the subject of one of her drawings.

She loved the way he leaned against the post. He had relaxed, graceful poses, big as he was. The mine hat with a stub of candle socketed in its front was pushed back on his head, his wool shirt was open at the neck. She probably thought him unbearably picturesque. She could have drawn the two of them just as they stood there, pretty bride and manly husband. Title, something like, "The Return from Honest Toil," or perhaps "An Outpost of Civilization." It flooded her with happiness to be there, to have him there, to be able to give him this after so many years of stale crackers and mouse cheese in tarpapered sacks. (99)

In New Almaden Susan Ward also sketches the local Chinese and Mexican fishmongers, packers and labourers, but not the Cornish miners, whom she finds crude and unsettling (101). After some time in New Almaden, however, Susan's romantic impression of the West is once again challenged. Influenced by her desire for some new material for her written sketches, Susan is encouraged to visit the mine where her husband is employed. Susan's reaction to this experience is very revealing, of her own romantic preconceptions and the general Eastern-derived assumptions about the West of which they form a part. Lowered into the mine, Susan is surprised by its dark reality:

Her heart was thudding from the momentary alarm of the snagging skip; she quivered from the unexpectedness of that encounter. It was as if a shutter had opened and a wild face looked in for an awful moment and then been shut back into its blackness. It terrified her to think that the whole riddled mountain crawled with men like that one. Under her feet as she walked in sunshine, under her stool and umbrella as she sat sketching, under the piazza as she rocked the baby in his cradle, creatures like that one were swinging picks, drilling holes, shoveling, pushing ore cars, sinking in cages to ever deeper levels, groping along black tunnels with the energy of ants. It raised the gooseflesh on her arms; it was as if she had suddenly

discovered that the conduits of her blood teemed with tiny, busy, visible vermin. (139)

As a contrast to the West pictured in her own sketches and drawings, in the New Almaden mine Susan encounters the industrial-capitalist reality not addressed in the agrarian interpretation of the West. Faced with this challenge to her own literary assumptions, Susan almost succeeds in overcoming them:

It was like nothing she had ever drawn, a world away from the cider presses and sheepfolds and quiet lanes and farmyard scenes and pensive maidens of her published drawings, yet this scene, lurid and dimly fearful, spoke to her. She felt it as a painting of saints in a grotto, or drinkers in a dark Dutch cellar. The curve of a shovel had the pewterish gleam of a Ten Eyck tankard, the very buttons on overalls had life. (142)

In place of the West of democratic individualism, Susan witnesses a scene she had previously supposed to belong to the Old World of Europe. Asked for her reaction by her husband's cousin, a director of the company that owns the mine, Susan finds this to be difficult:

"How can I say?" Susan said. "There are wonderful pictures, if one had the skill. I'm afraid they're beyond me. But I wouldn't have missed it, not for anything. Oh, those men with candlelight shining off their eyeballs, and that awful cavern of a place where they work, and that tapping through the rock as if men buried alive were trying to make others hear! I suppose I shouldn't find it so picturesque. It's awful, really— isn't it? They seem so like prisoners. (144)

The narrator later remarks of Susan:

She would work into her New Almaden sketch some of the terror of that black labyrinth, and she might even ask outright what sort of life it was, what sort of promise the New World gave, when a miner who emerged from a deep hole in Cornwall could do no better than dive down another in California, and when his children were carrying water to the mine at ten and pushing an ore car at fifteen. (144)

As the direct result of the labour conditions at the New Almaden mine, Oliver Ward eventually loses his position as Resident Engineer. The mine manager,

motivated by his dislike for Oliver and his resentment of Susan, his "uppity" wife, fires a hoist operator for buying stovepipe somewhere else than at the company store. Oliver expresses his disagreement with this decision, and the manager then provokes him by ordering him to tear down the ex-employee's house. Oliver refuses to do this, and quits his position instead. As the narrator comments, with his usual irony:

There are several dubious assumptions about the early West. One is that it was the home of intractable self-reliance amounting to anarchy, whereas in fact large parts of it were owned by Eastern and foreign capital and run by iron-fisted bosses. . . .

The West of my grandparents, I have to keep reminding myself, is the early West, the last home of the freeborn American. It is all owned in Boston and Philadelphia and New York and London. (135-135, 154)¹¹⁵

After her husband's actions at New Almaden, Susan realizes that they will lose the only home that they have established in the West. Her distress at this is extreme, and the narrator is fully sympathetic. Reinforcing his previous argument about the inevitable or the "realistic" nature of cultural and historical continuity, Ward claims that:

Home is a notion that only the nations of the homeless fully appreciate and only the uprooted comprehend. What else would one plant in a wilderness or on a frontier? What loss would hurt more? So I don't snicker backwards ninety years at poor Grandmother pacing her porch and biting her knuckle and hating the loss of what she had never quite got over thinking her exile. I find her moving. (159)

Susan's need to establish a home in the West is akin to that of Elsa Mason. Susan, however, is less of a victim of her husband and the influence of frontier myth upon him than is Elsa. Instead, both Susan and Oliver Ward are victims of the historical reality of the West, present in the inescapable nature of Eastern cultural and economic connections. At this point in the novel the narrator suddenly

¹¹⁵ "The same financial and industrial forces at work in the post-bellum East were at work in the West. . . . although agriculture remained the basic endeavour for the masses of Western emigrants, industrial, engineering, and mining activities went on apace, and both farming and industry danced to a tune played east of the Mississippi." Ronda, "Themes of Past and Present in *Angle of Repose*", 220-221.

intervenes — as he frequently does — to emphasize the difference between his grandparents' experience of the western frontier and the historical conceit represented by the "New Frontier" of the 1960's. He does this by resuming the discontinuous but parallel narrative dealing with the life of his secretary, Shelly Rasmussen, who has been temporarily employed to assist him with the typing of his grandmother's letters. Unlike Susan Ward or Elsa Mason, Shelley has abandoned the past in favour of the present. With an estranged husband who is a Berkeley radical, the narrator regards Shelley as typical of her generation and its lack of desire for "home". It hardly needs saying that Ward does not approve of Shelley, but he finds her curious, nevertheless. As Ward describes her and her attitude to both himself and to the life of his grandmother:

She is a card-carrying member of this liberated generation, and though I am hardly one to go around clucking my tongue and asking Is nothing sacred, I find myself wondering about the state of mind that holds nothing worth the respect of unhumorous suspended judgement. (163)

Throughout Angle of Repose Shelley keeps reappearing as a counterpoint to Susan Ward and her life on the "real" frontier of the nineteenth century. Ward's scepticism toward frontier mythology, typically restrained in his historical narrative, is given full expression in his treatment of the Shelley. Toward the end of the novel Ward states of Shelley:

Somewhere, sometime, somebody taught her to question everything—though it might have been a good thing if he'd also taught her to question the act of questioning. Carried far enough, as far as Shelley's crowd carries it, that can dissolve the ground you stand on. (513)

In her role as secretary to Ward, Shelley frequently imposes her 1960's radical views on the content of the letters written by his grandmother. To Ward, this emphasizes the gulf of understanding that has opened between the past and the present of the West. Half-way through the novel, Shelley claims of Susan Ward:

"I guess I don't understand this home business of hers . . . She's not only a culture hound, she's got a terrible property consciousness."
(273)

While Stegner's portrayal of Shelley Rasmussen in Angle of Repose is undeniably flat and stereotypical, it can be argued that in her radicalism she is intended to serve not only as a contrast to Susan Ward and her desire to establish historical continuity, but also to her grandson and his comparative rejection of the present in favour of the past.¹¹⁶ Lyman Ward's distance from the historical present is a consistent irony within the novel that ultimately distances his attitudes from those of Wallace Stegner.¹¹⁷

Following their failure to establish a permanent home in New Almaden, Susan and Oliver Ward undergo a period of separation. While Oliver searches for another position, Susan goes to stay in Santa Cruz, where she supports herself by her writing and drawing. Encouraged by Susan, Oliver also works on developing a recipe for hydraulic cement, with the aim of attracting financial backers to make this invention profitable. Like the events at New Almaden, the final outcome of this scheme demonstrates the relative powerlessness of the individual lacking in power, money or influence within the West of the nineteenth century. In 1877, Oliver succeeds in making cement but fails to obtain the investment needed to capitalize on this. In his description of this further disappointment, the narrator — in contrast to his grandparents — benefits much from historical hindsight:

End of dream number one, which was her dream, not his. It came and went within six months. Others, better at the talkee-talkie, would later take his formula, which he characteristically had not patented or kept to himself, and tear down the mountains of limestone and the cliffs of clay, grind them and burn them to clinker, add gypsum, and grind and roll clinker and gypsum together into the finest powder for the making of bridges, piers, dams, highways, and

¹¹⁶ "I concentrated on forgetting all about her [Shelley] and her speed freak and the new world he wants to create and she seems to doubt. I am not going to get sucked into this, I'll call the cops in a minute if I have to. And this is all, absolutely all, I am going to think about it. I am going back to Grandmother's nineteenth century, where the problems and the people are less messy." Angle of Repose, 170.

¹¹⁷ In their treatment of the novel, many critics, including Bruce Ronda, have overlooked the essential irony involved in Stegner's attitude toward his narrator. The result is that they have attributed all of Ward's remarks about the 1960's (including the most vitriolic of these) to Stegner himself, and devalued his art accordingly: "Stegner's romantic countercultural hippies are foils for the culturally rooted nineteenth-century Wards and are so stereotypically drawn as to reinforce rather effortlessly a Burkean political conclusion about the irrelevant nature of social and cultural protest. Stegner may think as he wishes about the protest of the last several decades, but his brilliant and complex novel is weakened because of his distortion of the recent past done to elevate the more distant past. . . . Ultimately, Stegner's novel must join many other Western novels in celebrating a West in which giants walked the land, a West that is gone and irretrievable." "Themes of Past and Present in Angle of Repose", 225.

all the works of Roman America that my grandfather's generation thought a part of Progress. The West would be in good part built and some think ruined by that cement. Many would grow rich out of it. Decades later, over the mountain at Permanente, not too far from New Almaden, Henry Kaiser would make a very good thing indeed out of the argillaceous and calcareous that Oliver Ward forced into an insoluble marriage in the winter of 1877. (192)

Within Ward's narrative, the fate of Oliver's cement scheme constitutes another blow to the myth of the romantic individualist. As Bruce Ronda has argued in relation to the past presented in Angle of Repose:

This . . . West is not that of individual enterprise in the new Eden but an extension westward of Victorian America.¹¹⁸

The lack of scope for individual opportunity represented by the failure of Oliver's scheme again reinforces Ward's argument about historical continuity and the inevitable failure of attempts to make a radical breach with the past. Within his grandparents' lives, the disappointment over the cement is momentary and even incidental, but Ward's narrative attributes to the episode a greater historical significance, emphasizing the power of institutions and other established interests over individual initiative.

After her husband's failure to provide them with a home and a source of income, Susan Ward returns east to live with her parents, while Oliver takes a job in Deadwood, in the Dakota Territory, where he works to build a mill ditch for the Homestake gold mine, owned by George Hearst. In contrast to her husband's life during the year in which they are apart, upon her return home Susan attempts to reassume the identity and culture she feels that she has abandoned in going West. On Susan's arrival in Milton, New York, Ward describes the appearance of her parents' home:

As in all pictures in the American Cottage tradition, there was a welcoming thread of smoke from the chimney. The crocuses and grape hyacinths were out under the porch, the trumpet vine had begun to leaf out in green as fresh as a newly discovered color. Behind it in the summer dark she had sat up late on how many evenings with the old Scribner crowd. Inside were the known

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 224.

rooms, the woodwork that loved fingers had worn and polished.
(197)

After this brief reestablishment of her eastern connections, however, Susan eventually rejoins Oliver in Leadville, Colorado, where he is employed as a mine inspector. Here they live in reduced circumstances, in a one-room cabin on an irrigation ditch. To Susan's surprise, however, Leadville is not as culturally distant from the East as she had first expected. In 1879, Leadville is a lively place:

A camp that strikes it rich in the middle of a depression speaks as urgently to the well-trained as to the untrained. In Leadville, Harvard men mucked in prospect holes, graduates of MIT and Yale Sheffield Scientific School worked as paymasters and clerks and gunguards, every mine office was approached daily by some junior engineer with a diploma and a new mustache. The Clarendon Hotel heard the accents of Boston, New York, and London; Mosquito Pass was a major flyway for migrating mining experts and capitalists. (250)

The picture of Leadville provided in Angle of Repose is at odds with the image of the frontier West as "uncivilized" or as a site of contact with the more brutal forces of nature, human and otherwise. In describing Susan Ward's life here, the narrator once again captures the contrast between experience and expectation, the real and the imagined West:

In her single room whose usable space was hardly fifteen feet square there assembled every evening an extraordinary collection of education, culture, talent, eloquence, reputation, political power, and intellectual force. There was no way to keep the two cots curtained off; they were always being exposed to serve as sofas. I doubt that Grandmother was offended to have her bedroom once again invaded; she was never more stimulated in her life. Braced for dutiful and deprived exile, ready to lie in the rude Western bed she had made, she found herself presiding over a salon that (she told herself more than once) Augusta's studio itself could hardly have matched for brilliance. (252)

In Leadville, for the first time, Susan realizes a degree of continuity with her eastern past that could enable her to live in the West. In this mining camp there is the beginning of what she recognizes as "civilization". As the narrator declares of Susan:

It was never the West as landscape that she resisted, only the West as transience and social crudity. And these she might transform. (274)

As luck has it, however, the Ward's time in Leadville is limited. After the idyll of their first months here, the violence of claim jumpers and a distant legal suit, which halts Oliver's inspection of the mine disrupt their life. Once again, Susan identifies the West with cultural deprivation and exile:

The dove's long mournful throaty cooing was a dirge for the failed and disappointed, for the innocent and incompetent, themselves not excepted, who wandered out to this harsh place and were destroyed. (307)

When the Syndicate that controls the mine finally gives up on it, the Wards must uproot themselves once again. They enjoy a brief period in Mexico, inspecting a mine that turns out to be unprofitable. Susan returns again to the East to give birth to a daughter. Oliver, who has been in Boise, Idaho, eventually follows Susan to persuade her to return West. This time, she is reluctant, as she is convinced that the West holds only disappointment for them both. She is also sceptical of his plans for an irrigation scheme in Idaho. As the narrator describes Susan and Oliver's meeting:

She saw in his face that he had contracted the incurable Western disease. He had set his cross-hairs on the snowpeak of a vision, and there he would go, triangulating his way across a bone-dry future, dragging her and the children with him, until they all died of thirst. "I believe you're confident," she said. "I know I'm not." (367)

As Susan readily perceives, Oliver has been affected by the culturally resonant idea of "greening the desert". At this stage her only response to agrarian myth is a severe scepticism:

Unwillingly she read about damsites, weather, rainfall, storage capacities, topography, soil analyses, placer production from the Snake River sands. She read two interviews with settlers already irrigating out of Boise Creek, and thought them enthusiasts of the same stripe as her husband. It took some tough financial pirate, some Gould or Vanderbilt, to do what he in his innocence thought he could do. (368)

The Wards eventually go to Idaho, where Oliver's plan is to sell water rights and water from Boise Creek, and eventually to build a dam and seventy-five miles of canal across public land. This is in order to provide irrigation to thousands of acres of former desert. His plan is well conceived, and even Susan begins to share it (376-377). With help provided by investors in the Mining and Irrigation Company formed by Oliver, they build a small part of the canal and sell water rights along this. After their eastern backers fail to provide enough money to complete the canal, however, Susan and Oliver spend five years living in a desert canyon living on their own resources and trying to finish Oliver's work. As the narrator acknowledges, in doing this they are motivated by something more than the hope of financial success. In their shared idealism, the Wards are classic examples of the influence of agrarian myth upon attempts to settle the West during the nineteenth-century:

In their hour of dissipatedness, the haggard face and form that drooped and fainted were authentic enough. They had worked hard and hoped hard, and their disappointment was as great as their expectations had been. But the money motive demeans them. They were in no race for wealth—that was precisely what disgusted Grandfather with the mining business. They were makers and doers, they wanted to take a piece of wilderness and turn it into a home for civilization. I suppose they were wrong—their whole civilization was wrong—but they were the antithesis of mean or greedy. Given the choice, any one of them would have chosen poverty, with the success of their project, over wealth and failure. (385)

Coming from Lyman Ward, this is quite a generous interpretation of the influence of western myth. His attitude toward the nineteenth-century motives of his grandparents may be dictated however, by his knowledge of the eventual failure of their scheme to irrigate the desert. As Ward states:

As a practitioner of hindsight I know that my grandfather was trying to do, by personal initiative and with the financial resources of a small and struggling corporation, what only the immense power of the federal government ultimately proved able to do. . . . He was premature. His clock was set on pioneer time. Like many another Western pioneer, he had heard the clock of history strike, but counted the strokes wrong. Hope was always out ahead of fact, possibility obscured the outlines of reality. (382)

In common with many of their other disappointments and difficulties in establishing themselves in the West, the failure of the irrigation scheme is due to the Ward's crippling reliance upon the American East. As Richard Etulain has already argued:

[Oliver] lays out a usable scheme to irrigate an entire western valley. But he cannot bring his dreams to fruition, and a major reason for his lack of success is a problem that plagued too many western dreamers: he is dependent upon eastern capital, and too often sources of eastern capital are as untrustworthy as Lady Fortuna. All of Oliver's dreams prove workable—but only after he has left the scene. Like many westerners, his schemes and partial successes are destroyed by his inability to control sources of financing.¹¹⁹

Barnett Singer, in his treatment of Angle of Repose, seems to agree with Etulain's judgement when he describes Oliver as "a casualty of the age of growth in America."¹²⁰ As both these writers argue, in the 1880's, Oliver's scheme to irrigate the desert is not unreasonable, but merely premature. In the twentieth century, the Bureau of Reclamation was to achieve what Oliver Ward did not. Despite these strong arguments, however, and the apparent sympathy of the narrator for the Wards, the very failure of Oliver's irrigation scheme in Stegner's novel seems to imply an implicit disapproval of the scheme itself. As Russell Burrows has already contended in a discussion of the pastoral theme in Stegner's fiction:

The ultimate thrust of Stegner's writing is that this meliorist pastoral dream is often flawed. Even though alluring, the idea of improving on nature may only reveal human hubris. What emerges . . . is an understanding of land that is decidedly ecological. Stegner brings his characters to see that land, especially dry, western land, cannot tolerate the idealized pastoral design.¹²¹

Burrows' reading of the conclusion of Angle of Repose interprets it as a more fully revisionist novel than other critics have allowed. While the necessary connection to the East and the past it represents in the novel is a source of limitation upon western idealism, so is the very nature of the West itself. Instead of existing as a

¹¹⁹ "Western Fiction and History: A Reconsideration", in Critical Essays on Wallace Stegner, 155.

¹²⁰ "The Historical Ideal in Wallace Stegner's Fiction", Critical Essays on Wallace Stegner, 134.

¹²¹ Russell Burrows, "Wallace Stegner's Version of Pastoral", Western American Literature 25:1 (1990), 14-15.

"geography of hope", in Angle of Repose the western landscape finally contains nothing but disillusion for its inhabitants. Toward the end of Stegner's novel, Susan, living in almost complete social and cultural isolation in a stone house at the bottom of Boise Canyon, allows herself to indulge her bitterness about her life, her marriage, and the West itself:

She was not a brooder, but she had her disappointments and her grievances and her anxieties, and she believed in the aspirations, refinements, and pretenses of gentility. She had watched her hopes recede, had had her pride humiliated. Her ambitions for her children seemed certain to be frustrated. The life she had given up lay far off and far back in time, unbelievable as a mirage. She had had a reputation and enjoyed a certain fame, but all by mail, all from a distance, or else among the ladies of Boise whose opinion she did not choose to value. (444)

In a letter to her friend Augusta, Susan finally concedes her failure to civilize the West. (491) In its successful revision of several key aspects of the frontier myth, Angle of Repose is a sobering novel, at least in regard to the narrator's attitude toward the nineteenth-century West. Perhaps it was this realization which prompted Stegner to provide a more "upbeat" ending to his novel.

The final section of Angle of Repose, which is placed firmly in the 1960's, consists of a dream by Lyman Ward of an accommodation achieved with his own recent past, in the figure of his estranged wife, who — after her lover has been killed in an automobile accident — arrives seeking forgiveness for her earlier desertion. Ward is not ready to provide her with this, and in the dream, he pays accordingly. Shelley Rasmussen, liberated woman of the 1960's, drags Ward into his bathroom and attempts to force him to strip naked and take a bath. Just in time, Ward awakes from his nightmare of a terrifying present, and contemplates the possibility of achieving some "Angle of Repose" within his own life:

There must be some other possibility than death or lifelong penance, said the Ellen Ward of my dream, that woman I hate and fear. I am sure she meant some meeting, some intersection of lines, and some cowardly, hopeful geometer in my brain tells me it is the angle at which two lines prop each other up, the leaning-together from the vertical which produces the false arch. For lack of a keystone, the false arch may be as much as one can expect in this life. Only the very lucky discover the keystone. (568)

Finally, Ward's judgement of his own past behaviour resembles his criticism of the utopianism represented in the "New Frontier" of the 1960's, and is consistent with the argument throughout Stegner's novel that "Civilizations grow by agreements and accommodations and accretions, not by repudiations" (519).

Conclusion

"A Society to Match Its Scenery": Stegner's Alternative Vision for the American West

In a discussion of Thomas Wolfe, Thomas E. Boyle makes a point that relates directly to the approach adopted by this thesis towards the novels of Wallace Stegner. Boyle claims that

The true meaning of the West . . . resides not in empirical fact nor in myth, but in the conflict between the two. . . . And . . . the dramatization of the agonizing process by which assumption is undercut by experience is the very stuff of literature.¹²²

Like many great twentieth-century American writers, including Wolfe and also William Faulkner, Stegner's attitude to the past and to the mythic narratives in which this past is expressed is essentially revisionist. In common with the work of these writers, his fiction embodies tragedy, in which lived experience fails to measure up to historical and cultural expectation. However, Stegner's fiction differs significantly from that of many other twentieth-century writers. Unlike their works, Stegner's novels do not settle for a static or pessimistic interpretation of the demythicized present. Despite his employment of many of the techniques of modernist fiction, particularly in his later work, Stegner does not share in the outlook characteristic of much twentieth-century writing. Despite the dislike of modern society expressed in his later novels, Stegner's approach toward the present contains a residual optimism. In this optimism, Stegner's definition of the western writer in a short essay of early 1960's may still be applied to his later work. In "Born a Square", Stegner described the western writer as a typical "innocent" unaffected by the cultural and intellectual attitudes characteristic of much other twentieth-century writing:

In a time of repudiation, absurdity, guilt, and despair, he still half believes in the American dream.¹²³

¹²² "Frederick Jackson Turner and Thomas Wolfe: The Frontier as History and as Literature", Western American Literature 4 (1970), 276.

¹²³ "Born a Square", in The Sound of Mountain Water, 176.

While this statement may seem to be at odds with the revisionism expressed in a later novel such as Angle of Repose, this conflict is more apparent than real. Faced with Faulkner's alternative between the "despair" of the present contrast between the ideal and the real, and the "nothing" of an abruptly demythologized regional consciousness, Stegner does not choose any one of these. In Angle of Repose, by his juxtaposition of two historical periods, and his skilful handling of different narratives of the West — the romantic and the "realist" — Wallace Stegner achieves a third perspective, in which he attempts to unite the western past with its present.

As has been claimed already, the discovery of a "usable continuity"¹²⁴ between the past and the present is the main theme of Stegner's work. The lack of such continuity, according to Stegner, is the reason for the lack of a strong cultural and historical identity in the West:

A Westerner trying to examine his life has trouble finding himself in any formed or coherent society . . . His confrontations are therefore likely to be with landscape, which seems to define the West and its meaning better than any of its forming cultures, or with himself in the context of that landscape.¹²⁵

Stegner suggests the frontier myth and its antihistorical bias as the dominant narrative of western historical interpretation. As has been seen, however, in historical novels such as Angle of Repose, Stegner sets out to challenge this narrative. In addition to the challenge to western myth presented by his fiction, Stegner's historical and other non-fictional writing also suggests an alternative to the vision of the West formalized in the Frontier Thesis of Frederick Jackson Turner. Stegner's account of the Mormon settlement in the West, in particular, contains a vision of the West that is ignored in the romantic interpretation of its history. In The Gathering of Zion, Stegner claimed of the Mormons that

They were the most systematic, organized, disciplined, and successful pioneers in our history; and their advantage over the random individualists who preceded them and paralleled them and followed

¹²⁴ Ibid., 179.

¹²⁵ The Sound of Mountain Water, 11.

them up the valley of the Platte came directly from their "un-American" social and religious organization.¹²⁶

According to Stegner, in contrast to those pioneers influenced by western myth, the Mormons had a social cohesion and a consciousness of their own history that ultimately proved more sustaining to them. Unlike the pioneer guided by the dream of material wealth, the Mormons as a community were also able to adapt themselves to the differing material demands of life in the West:

Where Oregon emigrants and argonauts bound for the gold fields lost practically all their social cohesion en route, the Mormons moved like the host of Israel they thought themselves. Far from loosening their social organization, the trail perfected it. As communities on the march they proved extremely adaptable. When driven out of Nauvoo, they converted their fixed property, insofar as they could, into the instruments of mobility, especially livestock, and became for a time herders and shepherds, teamsters and frontiersmen, instead of artisans and townsmen and farmers. When their villages on wheels reached the valley of their destination, the Saints were able to revert at once, because they were town-and-temple builders and because they had their families with them, to the stable agrarian life in which most of them had grown up.¹²⁷

To suggest that the alternative vision of the West presented by Stegner in his novels and in his non-fictional writing has the Mormon social organization (if not the Mormon religion itself) as its basis is to go too far. In the outline for a "civilization" in the West that is described in his work as a whole, however, the influence of the communitarian ideal represented by Mormon settlement in the West is often apparent. Stegner's criticism of the romantic myths of independence and mobility and his contrasting emphasis upon the necessity of a deep attachment to "home" or to a sense of place gains strength in his later writing. In 1992, for example, in the introduction to a collection of essays published the year before he died, Stegner expresses his hope for the western future and his simultaneous misgivings about this. Unless the West can make an accommodation with its past, and learn to adapt itself to the material and environmental limitations imposed by the present, Stegner argues that its future is uncertain:

¹²⁶ The Gathering of Zion: The Story of the Mormon Trail, 6.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

Ghost towns and dust bowls, like motels, are western inventions. All are reflections of transience, and transience in most of the West has hampered the development of stable, rooted communities and aborted the kind of communal effort that takes in everything from kindergarten to graveyard and involves all kinds and grades and ages of people in a shared past and a promise of continuity.¹²⁸

In his late work, Stegner's remaining hopefulness about the West is invested in people and places that represent the kind of adaptation needed for the growth of a genuine western civilization:

It is in places like these that the West will realize itself, if it ever does: these towns and cities still close to the earth, intimate and interdependent in their shared community, shared optimism, and shared memory. These are the seedbeds of an emergent western culture. They are likely to be there when the agribusiness fields have turned to alkali flats and the dams have silted up, when the waves of overpopulation that have been destroying the West have receded, leaving the stickers to get on with the business of adaptation.¹²⁹

This faith in small, non-urban towns and the people who live in them is Stegner's final alternative to the myth of the frontier in the context of the late twentieth century.

¹²⁸ Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs: Living and Writing in the West, (New York, 1992), introduction, xvi.

¹²⁹ "Variations on a Theme by Crèvecoeur", *Ibid.*, 116.

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