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Book Review: Reading "The Virginian" in the New West

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The Virginian is here to stay. For most of the first century of its life, critics gave their attention to what they found on the novel’s face: the rugged hero, conquest, a reinvigorated national identity, the triumph of patriarchal law and of good over evil. It was a tale out of Turner. This timely new volume confirms and elaborates recent, revisionist moves to overturn the consensus reading and replace it with interrogations of the novel’s competing, even contradictory perspectives in matters of race, class, and gender. Once the embodiment of a faith in the American character and mission, The Virginian commences its second century as a complex expression of how our errand into the wilderness has gone astray.

There is something for nearly everyone in Reading “The Virginian” in the New West. Students of film will surely appreciate Richard Hutson’s thoughtful survey of several early screen adaptations of the novel; history buffs will be edified by Gary Scharnhorst’s commentary on The Virginian and the Pullman Strike of 1894, as they also will be by Susan Kollin’s balanced assessment of attempts to maintain sharp distinctions between New West and Old West, both in the novel and in regional studies more generally; and comparativists will find much to interest them in Zeese Papanikolas’s chapter on “The Cowboy and the Gaucho.” In the midst of such rich variety, however, editors Melody Graulich and Stephen Tatum properly emphasize what virtually all the contributors to the volume assume: “that Wister’s novel is not a coherent, harmoniously unified text . . . but rather a verbal and visual construct where the confrontation of several discourses—some explicit, some implicit or absent—produces a multiplicity of meanings.”

Jennifer S. Tuttle and the late Louis Owens argue that Wister’s erasure of Indians is conspicuous and, for that, quite telling. Victoria Lamont contrasts The Virginian with Frances McElrath’s The Rustler, also published in 1902, arguing that the early western “became insistently masculine precisely because it . . . had become subject to feminist occupation.” Along related lines, Melody Graulich draws critical attention to Wister’s surprising readiness to contemplate the crossing of gender roles. Neil Campbell is similarly attentive to Wister’s unconscious attraction to the very hybridity and mixing from which his novel outwardly recoils. William R. Handley traces key contradictions and omissions in The Virginian to the author’s complex sexuality. Erotic themes are central as well to Stephen Tatum’s analysis of the novel’s “aesthetic of presentation through concealment” as manifest in the synergistic relationship between the verbal text and its illustrations. Tatum’s afterword, with its moving evocation of the novel’s yearning after “a mythos of reciprocity and exchange,
of communion," is yet another element in the overall success of this valuable collection.

Reading "The Virginian" in the New West will likely set the critical agenda in Wister studies for many years to come.

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