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Jim Hoy

Emporia State University

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WHITHER COWBOY POETRY?

JIM HOY

As a cultural phenomenon the explosion in popularity of cowboy poetry in the past dozen years has been nothing short of spectacular. Until the first full-scale cowboy poetry gathering at Elko, Nevada, in late January 1985, poetry was arguably the one aspect of cowboy culture that had not been expropriated into American popular culture. Certainly the mental picture of the cowboy himself—big hat,

high-heeled boots, silk neckerchief, leather chaps—has long since become an icon that represents the very nation: wear a cowboy hat and you will be taken for an American anywhere in the world. The two essential working skills of the cowboy—roping cattle and riding bucking horses—long ago have been transformed from actual ranch work into one of the nation's largest spectator and participant sports: rodeo. And the idealized, romanticized image of the cowboy (certainly far removed from the low-paid, hard-working hired man on horseback who actually works with cows, horses, and four-wheel-drive pickups) has become, through pulp fiction, television, and film, a symbol of justice and right, a hero who both represents and defends the American Way. Finally, cowboy songs, although often mistakenly lumped together with country-and-western music, comprise a well-defined subgenre of popular music, particularly those songs associated with the singing cowboy of the silver screen.

Until the Elko renaissance, however, most Americans, including those who lived and worked in ranch country, did not associate the cowboy with poetry. Since Elko, however,

*James F. (Jim) Hoy is Professor of English at Emporia State University. His chief interest is the folklife of ranching, both historical and contemporary, in various parts of the world, with special emphasis on the Great Plains and particularly the Flint Hills of Kansas. Professor Hoy has published over one-hundred articles, both scholarly and journalistic, and is the author or co-author of nine books, including *Cowboys and Kansas: Stories from the Tallgrass Prairie*, published by the University of Oklahoma Press.*

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that association has become hard to escape: turn over a rock anywhere west of the Missouri River and two or three cowboy poets will jump out and start reciting. Or so it seems to my somewhat jaundiced ear. For me personally, and I would argue for the movement in general, cowboy poetry has moved from the excitement of discovery into an occasionally ungainly adolescence. The bloom of freshly discovered innocence, where a relatively few poets, many if not most of them working cowboys or ranchers performing for an audience that also was chiefly from ranch country, has been succeeded by a sprawling growth of popularity that has seen both an increase in audience and also the emergence of a sizeable cadre of practitioners of mediocre talent whose connection to actual cattle work is tenuous at best. This situation is not all bad, by any means, for if cowboy poetry, as an art form, folk or otherwise, is to remain vital it must change and grow. But as a purist, trained by my father and uncle to note with quiet scorn any pretentiousness in the realm of things cowboy and by my profession to flinch at cliché and bad rhyme, I find the current status of cowboy poetry a mixed bag—some striking innovation, some excellent traditional work, a lot of competent (if uninspired) verse, and some downright embarrassments. (But then I reckon one could make a similar judgment about any poetic genre.)

Given my bent for historical rather than theoretical criticism, I would like first to take a brief look backward before focusing on my personal assessment of the contemporary state of cowboy verse. I have heard Guy Logsdon, one of the leading authorities on cowboy verse and music, say that no other occupational group in this country has composed as many poems and songs as has the cowboy. It really isn't surprising when you consider that cowboys have great source material (they love the excitement and occasional danger of their work, much of which occurs amid the beauties of nature) and they have, despite the rigors and long hours, sufficient leisure in which to

write. (That part of their job that is not dangerous is often routine, besides which, in the old days, it was the horse, not the cowboy, who was doing the heavy work; it's hard to imagine John Henry still singing after twelve hours of swinging a nine-pound hammer but easy enough to picture a drover humming out a new verse to "The Old Chisholm Trail" as he pokes along behind a herd of slow moving longhorns.) The cowboy also had ample opportunity for sharing his work. It seems a natural inclination in many occupations, from coal miners to computer programmers, to want to recap the day's labor over a bit of socializing. For the working cowboy, many of them excellent storytellers, that opportunity took place around the chuckwagon on a trail drive or in the bunkhouse on the ranch. There the events of the day would trigger memories of previous episodes of bucking horses or ringy cows. Some of the more poetically inclined hands would transform these episodes into verse, while the more musical would often set the verse to song. That, at least, is what happened in the late nineteenth century with D. J. O'Malley's "When the Work's All Done this Fall" and Jack Thorp's "Little Joe the Wrangler" and with Gail Gardner's "Syrie Peaks" and Curley Fletcher's "Strawberry Roan" in the early twentieth. These songs, along with many others, entered the folk tradition as anonymous verses, picking up all sorts of regional variants before their authorship was re-established. At other times, as with Frank Maynard and "The Cowboy's Lament," a folk song ("The Bad Girl's Lament," in turn derived from "The Unfortunate Rake") served as the inspiration for a poem about the cowboy experience.¹

Maynard's lyrics, written in 1876, provide perhaps the earliest documented composition of cowboy verse, although undoubtedly drovers had begun singing "The Old Chisholm Trail" some years earlier. Whether set to music or not, by the end of the century cowboy verse in the oral tradition permeated the West, while individual poems were often published

in newspapers or livestock journals. By the turn of the century, according to the bibliography in Hal Cannon's *Cowboy Poetry: A Gathering*, some half dozen authors had published collections of their verse.² The first decade of the twentieth century saw three more such volumes published, in addition to Jack Thorp's seminal anthology (1908) and John Lomax's first comprehensive collection (1910).³ The popularity of verse and song among working cowboys is documented in Lomax's account of the singing contests that occurred on ranches in the Southwest where cowboys would take turns, each singing a complete song without repeating an earlier one until all but one man had been "sung down." These contests, Lomax attests, would sometimes last the night through.⁴

Despite the fact that poetry was widespread throughout range country in the early years of this century, that aspect of cowboy life did not, until Elko, find its way into the broad public awareness in the way that other aspects of cowboy life had. Cowboy poets continued to publish their collections throughout the first half of the century, but only a few authors (Badger Clark, S. Omar Barker, Henry Herbert Knibbs) found mainstream eastern publishers. The rest, as has always been the norm in this field, published privately, in livestock journals or with small regional presses. Undoubtedly, however, the most prevalent form of transmission of cowboy verse, again until Elko, was surely oral tradition.

Beginning in 1985 the mushrooming of cowboy poetry gatherings throughout the West, along with the highly visible success of Baxter Black, gave cowboy poets access to a larger popular audience through public performance, radio and television, books, and audiotapes (the latter two usually self-financed). Whether chicken or egg, these increased opportunities have unquestionably resulted in a large increase in the number of poets eager to share their work. I dare say many of these new practitioners (in a half dozen cases I have it from their own lips) were inspired not by any

inner drive but instead democratically: "I heard Baxter, and I thought to myself, 'I can do that, too.'" And so they have, but not nearly so well.

Which is not to say that all good cowboy poetry has already been written and that no newcomers need apply to the guild. But it is to say that as more and more join in the venture, especially those with limited experience in the subject matter and/or pedestrian ability in poesy, the overall quality of cowboy verse must necessarily be diluted. At the same time, the work of the best poets will stand out in even greater relief than previously. Think, for instance, of the Renaissance fad of sonneteering. Literally hundreds of suffering lovers were indistinguishably freezing and burning in fourteen lines of iambic pentameter all over the place, all of which made the gems of Sidney and Shakespeare shine even brighter. So, too, the hundreds of subsequent attempts to incorporate the latest morning-coffee-time joke into cowboy verse have made Wally McRae's "Reincarnation" even more remarkable.

A large part of the popular appeal of cowboy poetry, hearing it as well as writing it, is its accessibility: it rhymes, it has rhythm, it tells a story, you can understand it. It is, in other words, recognizable as poetry. It's traditional, not innovative. Nothing postmodern about cowboy poetry. Or at least there wasn't until the 1990s. Just as there were a few "real poets" among the myriad of Renaissance sonneteers (and just as there are a few "real poets" among the hundreds of MFAs in university writing programs), so too there have always been a few "real poets" among the host of cowboy versifiers. And it is these "real poets," no matter in what genre they scribble, whose originality of mind will manifest itself in form, content, and mood, often to the discomfort and disapproval of the establishment. On the other hand, without the sometimes disquieting effects of innovation an art form grows stale and moribund. Just how many times by how many different people can the story of faithful Old Paint be retold in ballad stanza

before a terminal glaze coats one's eyes? Even classics grow wearisome: "If I hear 'The Strawberry Roan' one more time . . ." growls Nebraska poet Howard Parker, his voice trailing off.

Thus by five or six years after the first Elko gathering some of the more restless minds among cowboy poets were feeling as constricted as a longhorn bull in a feedlot pen. Free verse began to pop up here and there at gatherings, as did poems about environmental issues or topics and language that could be thought not conducive to family values (such as Paul Zarzyski's expressive bareback bronc "April Showers"), often to the disapprobation and consternation of traditionalists such as Alvin Davis, originator of Lubbock's annual National Cowboy Symposium and Celebration. John Dofflemeyer's journal, *Dry Creek Review*, publishes not only free verse but also a number of issues on environmental topics. Dry Creek Press also published Rod McQueary's *Blood Trails*, a collection, with Bill Jones, of Vietnam War poems. Vess Quinlan, who had been reciting his poetry for years to appreciative audiences, got some quizzical looks when he published a collection and his readers discovered, as his auditors hadn't, that, although there was some internal, his poems had no end rhyme.⁵

Among the most enthusiastic champions of originality in cowboy verse is Paul Zarzyski, the self-described Polish Hobo Rodeo Cowboy Poet. Paul can use rhyme to great effect, but he also writes freewheeling verse that captivates audiences when he performs it. Free verse, Paul says, is like the open range and rhyme like fenced pastures, both part of ranching heritage. Zarzyski serves no master but his muse, and his latest collection, provocatively and postmodernly entitled *I Am Not a Cowboy* (see gallery of poems that follows article), is indeed cowboy poetry at its finest, although the topics range from rodeo to South African apartheid to the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. Paul's credo, that cowboy poetry is a state of mind, not a format, and that poetry

is life itself, is most evident in the poem "Yevgeny Alexandrovich Yevtushenko—Cowboy Poet," written after Yevtushenko's appearance at Elko. Paul's work seems to try to wrench cowboy poetry into the broader realm of "real" poetry much the same way that Donne attempted to wrench together the physical and metaphysical worlds.⁶

The work of some traditionalists, however, transcends the limits of the genre, rendering heartfelt emotion and humor and love of the land and the life with freshness and honesty. Among the best of these is Montana rancher Wallace McRae, whose perception and sensitivity defies stereotype.⁷ Another is J. B. Allen, a working cowboy from Whiteface, Texas, whose verse, usually typed out in all capital letters, is as tough and rugged as its author.⁸

Two Texas poets who, like Zarzyski, bring innovative minds to cowboy poetry but with more connection to traditional subject matter deserve consideration. Both the late Buck Ramsey and Andy Wilkinson have won Western Heritage Awards from the National Cowboy Hall of Fame for their music, but both also write nonmusical verse. Ramsey's epic poem *And as I Rode Out on the Morning*, which begins with his often anthologized and recited "Anthem," is a psychologically profound coming-of-age narrative written in a stanzaic form modeled after Pushkin. Among his shorter work "Christmas Waltz" crisply captures the spirit of both cowboys and the holiday without falling into the sentimentality that, in the hands of run-of-the-mill versifiers, often afflicts both.⁹

Wilkinson's poems and songs documenting the life of his great-uncle, legendary Texas rancher Charlie Goodnight, provide a model, particularly of what contemporary cowboy songs should be.¹⁰ They are neither macho nor maudlin but instead reflect the author's drive to claim some part of the spirit of one of the great pioneer cattlemen in American history. Whatever revisionist historians might make of him, no one can doubt the courage or the

vision of Goodnight. Wilkinson does not flinch from portraying warts, specifically Goodnight's acknowledged mastery of profane language. Thus my ears jarred at Lubbock in 1996 when I heard a singer there render Wilkinson's (and Goodnight's) "goddamned Pecos River" as "doggoned Pecos River."

Perhaps as much as anything, that episode brought home to me the loss to cowboy poetry occasioned by its burgeoning popularity and growing number of practitioners. As with rodeo, once a sport of hard-drinking misfits whose moral reputations were on a par with those of hoboes but that now is a family enterprise with its own chapter of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, so cowboy poetry, despite Guy Logsdon's *The Whorehouse Bells Were Ringing and Other Songs Cowboys Sing*, runs the risk of becoming domesticated and tame.¹¹ But just as early rodeo needed organization and discipline in order to grow into its present popularity, so cowboy poetry has benefited from its larger, more diverse audience. And, just as ranch rodeos have taken the sport back to its folk-game roots at the same time that professional rodeo continues to become more polished (both directions viable and desirable), so I believe the best cowboy poets will take cowboy poetry down two paths in the future: the innovators will expand the possibilities for the genre, while the traditionalists will preserve the best of the past. And the poetasters will tag along in great numbers, as they always have.

NOTES

1. Jim Hoy, "F. H. Maynard, Author of 'The Cowboy's Lament,'" *Mid-America Folklore* 21, no. 2 (fall 1993): 61-68.
2. Hal Cannon, ed., *Cowboy Poetry: A Gathering* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Gibbs Smith, 1985).
3. N. Howard "Jack" Thorp, *Songs of the Cowboys* (1908; reprint, Cambridge, Mass.: Applewood Press, 1993); John A. Lomax, *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads* (1910, reprint, New York: Macmillan, 1934). Prior to 1900, collections of cowboy poetry had been published by Wallace D. Coburn, Captain Jack Crawford, William Devere, Harry Ellard, L. Gough, and Nathan Kirk Griggs. In addition to Thorp and Lomax, Robert Carr, Captain Jack Crawford, and Joseph Mills Hanson published collections of their work during the first decade of the century.
4. John A. Lomax, *Adventures of a Ballad Hunter* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), pp. 48-49.
5. Vess Quinlan, *The Trouble with Dreams* (Ketchum, Idaho: Wind Vein Press, 1990).
6. Paul Zarzyski, *I Am Not a Cowboy* (Lemon Cove, Calif.: Dry Crik Press, 1995), and *Roughstock Sonnets* (Kansas City, Mo.: Lowell Press, 1989).
7. Wallace McRae, *It's Just Grass and Water* (Spokane, Wash.: Oxalis, 1986), and *Things of Intrinsic Worth* (Bozeman, Mont.: Outlaw Books, 1989).
8. J. B. Allen, *Water Gap Wisdom* (Whiteface, Tex.: n.p., 1990).
9. Buck Ramsey, *And as I Rode Out on the Morning* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 1993).
10. Andy Wilkinson, *Charlie Goodnight: His Life in Poetry and Song* (Lubbock: Grey Horse Press, 1994).
11. Guy Logsdon, *The Whorehouse Bells Were Ringing and Other Songs that Cowboys Sing* (Champaign-Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989).

GALLERY OF COWBOY POETRY FOLLOWS ON NEXT PAGE

GALLERY OF POEMS

(FROM "I AM NOT A COWBOY" BY PAUL
ZARZYSKI)

Let's make this poem *cowboy* and make up
some
for the poet, who tries but just can't quite
swallow hard enough his joy
as four more quarter horse quarter note
hooves step their first
Rosebud-with-Cody
sorrel stroll around our corral.

(FROM "DIPLOMAS" BY J. B. ALLEN)

DON'T TALK TO ME OF, "COWBOYIN",
WHEN, YOUR HORSE IS FAT AS MUD!
YOUR HAT AND SHIRT, PLUMB SPOT-
LESS,
AND, NOT A TRACE OF BLOOD!

YOUR APPAREL, AND YOUR VISAGE,
ARE, BOTH, A WAY TOO NEAT,
TO SPEAK, WITH CARNEL KNOWLEDGE,
'BOUT THEM BEASTS WITH CLOVEN
FEET!

THE NOM DE PLUME OF "COWBOY",
"VAQUERO" OR "BUCKAROO",
ARE, GLIBLY, TAKEN ON BY FOLKS,
WHO'VE NEVER HAD A "CLUE".

BUT, THEM THAT'S STAYED AND
EARNED 'EM,
HOLD THOSE TERMS IN HIGH ESTEEM,
FOR, LIKE THEM "DOC'S" AND LAW-
YERS,
THEY HAVE WORKED, TO GAIN THEIR
DREAM!!

"REFLECTIONS ON SAM WALTER FOSS'
ADVICE" BY WALLACE MCRAE

Now. . .
Bein' a friend of man's the thing,
So other poets tell.
I'd rather live back off a ways.
And let them go to hell.

For. . .
Them folks that drive 'round nowadays
Don't fit in Foss' plan.
You got to live back off the road
To be a friend of man.

"COMMENTS ON COWBOY POETRY CRITICS"
BY WALLACE MCRAE

"Deep from the wellsprings of culture."
"From hidden
seeds these anthems have sprung."
"Subtle roots nurture wildflowers." "From
complexity
plain words are wrung."

"Ta dum, Ta dum pounds the meter."
"Shallow
predictable rhyme."
"Dogie doggerel stampede." "Bunkhouse
bard pap."
"Ho hum, Humpty bumpkin time."

A caution to those who'd dismiss us;
or praise our work as sublime
And heap too much praise, or too little,
upon a cowpuncher's rhyme.

GALLERY OF POEMS

"PASSING THE MANTLE" BY VESS QUINLAN

How small he was
 And how he struggled
 With the work;
 He irrigated, fed, doctored,
 And learned, as I had,
 The difference between right and close,
 Then sought my approval
 To validate his knowing.

How strange it seems,
 And how right,
 That a simple passage
 Of time has brought
 Us here where I finish
 This day of favorite work
 And look to my son
 For his approval.

(FROM "ANTHEM" BY BUCK RAMSEY)

And in the morning I was riding
 Out through the breaks of that long plain,
 And leather creaking in the quieting
 Would sound with trot and trot again.
 I lived in time with horse hoof falling;
 I listened well and heard the calling
 The earth, my mother, bade to me,
 Though I would still ride wild and free.
 And as I flew out on the morning,
 Before the bird, before the dawn,
 I was the poem, I was the song.
 My heart would beat the world a warning—
 Those horsemen now rode all with me,
 And we were good, and we were free.

(FROM "SADDLIN'-UP TIME" BY ANDY WILKINSON)

When the morning night air was marble we
 breathed,
 Heavy and smooth and as cold as the breeze
 That skitters across the new snow-covered
 plains,
 One hand on the horn and the other, the reins
 We stepped aboard stirrups, young bucks in
 our prime,
 Salty as the Pecos at saddlin'-up time.

Though I've lived for this moment most all
 of my life,
 Beginnings, not endings, put the edge on my
 knife;
 And I've cursed too damn much and I've
 never prayed well
 And it may be God figures to send me to Hell,
 Riding drag for the Devil to pay for my
 crimes,
 But I'm damned if I'll go 'fore saddlin'-up
 time.

(FROM "COMMUNION" BY WALLACE MCRAE)

Our bodies are this fertile land.
 This water is our blood.
 Our plains form our communion.
 Our god's organic mud.

Your blasting rends our very flesh.
 Your mining cuts our veins.
 Our fly-blown bloating bodies
 Lie piled upon the plains.

* All poems and excerpts of poems appear here with permission from the cowboy poets.