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Review of *The Code of the West* By Bruce A. Rosenberg

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BOOK REVIEWS

The Code of the West. By Bruce A. Rosenberg. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982. Photographs, illustrations, notes. 213 pp. \$15.00.

In *Custer: The Epic of Defeat* (1975), Bruce A. Rosenberg analyzed more than a century of discussion of the massacre of the general and some two hundred cavalymen under his command by Sioux Indians near the Little Bighorn River in 1876. The book demonstrates how in American popular culture this catastrophe was transformed into the heroic triumph of Custer's Last Stand. Rosenberg says that in his new book, *The Code of the West*, he has used the same method but expanded its "cultural implications." His table of contents does indeed present an attractive variety of topics. In addition to a reprise of the earlier book, he deals with "Mountain Men Narratives," "Prospectors and Their Gold," "Narratives of the Overland Trail," "The Handcart Odyssey" (that is, the migration of Mormons on foot to Salt Lake City in the 1850s), "The Pony Express," "The Race of the *Natchez* and the *Robert E. Lee*," "The Ten-Mile Day" (an episode in the construction of the first transcontinental railroad), "The Outlaw" (mainly Wyatt Earp and Billy the Kid), "The Moslem Princess of the Prairies" (variations on the theme of the rescue of a white stranger by an Indian maiden), and stories of "The White Steed of the Prairies."

Rosenberg's documentation draws heavily on conventional historical scholarship, but he has ranged widely beyond this into both "folk" and "popular" materials: legends and folk songs, contemporary newspaper accounts, and letters, journals, and reminiscences. Both the choice of topics and the use of such diverse sources show energy, imagination, and scholarly courage. But the very novelty of the undertak-

ing confronts the author with formidable problems of method and organization.

In an introductory chapter he strives valiantly to set forth a coherent plan of operation. The earlier Custer book provides two basic procedures: establishing a solid historical narrative, and then considering "the legendizing process." Since this has usually involved a greater or lesser distortion of the facts, the obvious next step is to identify the distorting forces. They are of two main sorts. One arises from attitudes inherent in American culture (such as the pervasive hatred of Indians evident in the formation of the Custer legend, or the national cult of speed and fondness for statistics manifested in contemporary reactions to the building of the first Pacific railroad). But the legendizing process is also shaped (in a fashion that Rosenberg does not attempt to analyze) by something like a gravitational attraction registered in analogues—earlier narratives that are recorded in indexes of folklore motives. Thus he cites the stories of Nausicaä and Odysseus, and of Pocahontas and John Smith, among many others, in discussing the assistance given to Milton Sublette by the daughter of a Crow chieftain. Another factor to be reckoned with is the powerful ideology of Manifest Destiny that pervaded nineteenth-century American attitudes toward the West.

How can these various interpretations be validated? Rosenberg refers to Paul Ricoeur's notion that "social events" can be read as texts. The word "code" in the title of the book implies that the various chapters are to be devoted to readings of the widely various items. A proposal to bring the arcane methods of hermeneutics to bear on Western history is welcome because it promises fresh insights in a field badly in need of new perspectives. But Rosenberg does not follow out this possibility. His "readings" yield rather commonplace results,

and the interpretations do not add up to a coherent "code." For example, he does not seem aware of the potential contradiction between the theory of structuralism underlying the effort to trace persistent motives in literary and historical analogues, and the anti-referential tendency in contemporary French criticism—or between the implication of universality in the search for analogues and the identification of specifically American cultural traits in the materials discussed.

There is space for only two illustrations of these problems. The highly original choice of the construction of the Pacific railroad as a topic loses much of its effectiveness because Rosenberg is uncertain about what to do with it. In the Introduction he states an intention to produce "an interpretation of the events of the day that will match the understanding of a century ago," and even declares that "folklore and the popular arts reveal, in expressive forms, what the men who actually laid the track were feeling." But a few pages later the achievement of laying ten miles of track in a single day is said to encapsulate "the spirit in which the entire transcontinental railroad was built," even though no contemporary made such an observation and the "symbol was first verbalized by this writer." Again, Rosenberg asserts that "stories about the White Steed seem to me to epitomize the attitude of many Americans toward the West." But he provides no evidence to support his statement that "the White Steed is liberty and independence personified; it is in large measure what we think—and what the nineteenth century thought—the West was all about."

In short, the interpretations offered in this book are a good deal less satisfactory than its bringing to life of vivid moments in the history of the West.

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