

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

Winter 2001

Review of *Western Stories: From Buffalo Bill to Larry McMurtry* By Richard W. Etulain

Roger Welsch

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, rwelsch1@unl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

Welsch, Roger, "Review of *Western Stories: From Buffalo Bill to Larry McMurtry* By Richard W. Etulain" (2001). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 2286.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/2286>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Western Stories: From Buffalo Bill to Larry McMurtry. By Richard W. Etulain. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999. Illustrations, notes, index. xiii + 174 pp. \$35.00 cloth, \$17.95 paper.

In *Telling Western Stories* Richard Etulain has produced one of those rare combinations of a book that would make an excellent text for any class in Western literature and at the same time a well-written history easily enjoyed simply as a book of general interest. Etulain actually treats ideas and images more than stories, although it is, he argues, through stories that the ideas and images of the American West have been molded this past century and a half.

That is the essence of Etulain's narrative: there is not an absolute history, a clear reality, that determines how we see the past or a region or the history of a region—which is true not only of the history of the American West but all histories, to my mind. The key to understanding a perception of a history is how that history is brought to the public. Briefly, it is not so much history that molds the image, as the image that molds history.

Sometimes the image-makers are patent frauds, manipulating "the story" to their own gain and glory; in other cases the representations are honest but misguided. And if not misguided, inevitably subjective. Only in folklore, curiously, is there a wider reliability; an individual may tell any story he wishes or knows, but a widely told and known narrative—folklore—is under the constant pressure of communal memory, still fallible but with an internal mechanism of constancy and accuracy the popular or high culture story can never enjoy.

This book surveys and briefly analyses the popular and high culture end of that paradigm and does it as well as I have ever seen. I am puzzled by the annoying inclusion of a dozen "illustrations" of the covers of books mentioned in the text that do not really illustrate anything and would have preferred ten more pages of text or even images of examples of a West modeled by, say, art. But even as I write

that I know it is only the requisite academic niggling meant to demonstrate that I read the book and thought about it carefully: "praising with faint damn," as the phrase goes.

The book should be read and enjoyed by students and scholars, literary historians and lovers of the West, disciples of Frederick Jackson Turner and shameless fans of Louis L'Amour alike.

ROGER WELSCH

Departments of English and Anthropology,
Adjunct Retired
University of Nebraska-Lincoln