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Review of *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier  
in Twentieth-Century America* by Richard Slotkin

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**Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America.** Richard Slotkin. New York: Atheneum, 1992. Bibliography and index. \$40.00.

This book has 660 pages of text, 102 of notes, plus a very long Bibliography and thorough index. This reviewer has read everything but the Index and some of the Bibliography. I can report that except for avid fans of Slotkin or of the genres on which he chooses to report, this is far more reading than is needed to get his principal idea. It is: a Myth (his caps) about the frontier—the violent conquest of indigenous people and landscape—has been the well spring of American national identity. The truth of this is not relevant to his book: he labors to show that the Myth really has been the cause of all sorts of bad things about the US, including racism, anti-labor violence, imperialism, and the Vietnam War.

The way the Myth made all of these bad things happen is through its constant reexpression in books, Buffalo Bill's Wild West show, and hundreds of movies, most of which Slotkin describes in some detail. The Myth is like some sort of evil being inside of the American mind, wrecking its evil "ideological task" for the colonial times onward (p. 10).

There are so many problems with this book it is hard to know where to start. First, its excessive length comes from the pages devoted to summarizing too many movies and books in an entirely predictable manner. This summarization can be called interpretation: that is, Slotkin tells us what the movie meant.

This leads to a second major problem: audience. Slotkin assumes that he can tell us what the movie, or Wild West show, meant both to its particular audience as well as to whatever larger entity it is that the Myth was busy with. With the notable exception of President Reagan, I really wonder how many people actually take movies or novels or other forms of entertainment to be an articulation of the truth? How do we know what movie watchers saw when they watched a gunfight? Is it possible that the realm of imagination is so limited in ordinary people that popular literature and film is really been the entry point for a kind of mental Dracula?

A third major problem is a nationalist blurring: who are all of the Americans whose minds are controlled by the Myth? Polish immigrants in Chicago? Suffragettes? WASP tool and die makers? Union leaders? Corrupt politicians? Incorrupt politicians? I've seen some of the movies Slotkin interprets: does this mean that the Myth in me now?

A fourth problem is the notion that the U.S. is uniquely imperialist, racist, and aggressive. Or that only the U.S. has had areas which might be called frontiers. Or that only Americans like cowboy movies.

A fifth problem is the whole notion of Myth, as played out by Slotkin. His Myth has its own tasks and needs. This kind of conceptualizing gives it an independent life and agency. It is one thing to see how a culture, or set of cultures, shares tropes, images, characters, and stories, it is quite another to give these some sort of independent existence which grants them needs and tasks.

Slotkin does have many clever things to say about many movies and other entertainments, but this book flattens and oversimplifies a complicated country its complex history. **Eric H. Monkkonen**, *Department of History, University of California, Los Angeles*.