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Owen Wister and the West

Gary Scharnhorst. *Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2015. 244 pp. Illus. Chron. Notes. Biblio. Ind. Cloth, \$24.95.*

The most recent publication in Oklahoma's Western Biographies' series sheds new light on the novelist and short story writer Owen Wister, an eastern elitist who "paradoxically" helped create the cowboy folk hero (6).

The goal of literary scholar Gary Scharnhorst's biography is to demonstrate that "the West was the crucible in which Wister imaginatively tested and expressed his political opinions" (3) or: that the Philadelphia-born Wister turned the West into his own brand of social and political critique. The biographer provides numerous examples of where OW's approval of Jim Crow in the South, support for the lynching of criminals, anti-feminism, hostility toward immigrants and non-Anglo-Saxons, and other views are in evidence throughout his famous portrayals of the West. On the issue of class, Scharnhorst demonstrates that during the 1894 Pullman (railroad) Strike, Wister's initial sympathy for the strikers quickly soured when he was personally inconvenienced. The strike, he contends, focused Wister's own upper class prejudices and strengthened his opposition to foreign immigration and organized labor which, in turn, only heightened Wister's respect for and his heroic depictions of Anglo-Saxon cowboys. As Wister declared in one *Harper's Weekly* essay: "'They [Anglo-cowboys] work hard, they play hard, and they don't go on strikes'" (76).

Unlike previous Wister biographers, Gary Scharnhorst focuses specifically on drawing connections between the tenderfoot Wister's experiences *in* and writings *about* the West. Wister kept a complete and highly detailed journal of his observations out West and, when he began writing stories about the region in the 1890s, milked his diaries for story ideas. Most of his tales, Scharnhorst points out, are based at least in part on "true [if skewed] stories" and anecdotes told to him by military officers, cowboys, local officials and others he met throughout the West. The details Wister recorded from these encounters were later used to fill his writings with: vivid descriptions of the landscapes, towns, sounds, and even smells of the West; portrayals of events such as the Johnson County War in Wyoming (as seen through Owen's own "privileged" lenses); fictional characters including the cowboy Lin McLean and archetype villain Trampas, who were modeled on individuals encountered by or described to Wister; and dozens of colorful incidents. In one of Scharnhorst's many interesting revelations we learn that Wister's classic line from his magnum opus, *The Virginian* (1902): "When you call me that, *smile!*" was the rewording of a threat uttered in a card game in a story related to Wister by future governor of Wyoming Amos Barber (139).

Owen Wister and the West is based in part on Gary Scharnhorst's research into the two most valuable collections of Wister's papers at the Library of Congress and the American Heritage Center at the University of Wyoming, and includes a judicious bibliographic essay and detailed chronology emphasizing Wister's Western experiences and writings. Unfortunately, the book lacks endnotes and has some other weaknesses. The lengthy account of the adapting

of *The Virginian* novel into a play in Chapter 5 reads as overly detailed. By contrast the author, inexplicably, waits until the book's Conclusion to explore Wister's "modern progressive" stance on environmentalism (218) and to discuss Wister's efforts to lure female readers to *The Virginian*: both matters warrant attention earlier in the text. But these are minor points. On the whole, Gary Scharnhorst has succeeded in making an important contribution to our understanding of the motives and methods behind one of the key shapers of the Western and cowboy myth.

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