

WLA—Past President's Address 2001

THE WESTERN LITERATURE ASSOCIATION'S
OFFICIAL HOME PAGE

Part-Time Westerner

Robert Murray Davis, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma

WLA past-presidential address, delivered in fall 2001, in Omaha, Nebraska

“A Western man is a good thing. And he generally knows that. But he has a heap to learn. And he generally don't know that.”

—Owen Wister, *The Virginian*

“It was proper to call things by their proper names on the other side of the Missouri.”

—Buffalo Bill, Chicago, 1893

“The fool's ... gonna do it!”

—*Blazing Saddles*

^

Returning from a trip to the West in 1887, Owen Wister wrote in his journal that during his travels he had been mistaken for an Englishman, a drummer, a bartender, and a stage driver. Clearly he was pleased at the rapid shifting of identities, for he continued: “In another day or so I shall be back where nobody takes me for anyone but myself, and my period of entertainment will have ceased for a long while” (*Owen Wister Out West*, ed. Fanny Kemble Wister [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958], p. 61).

For the past ten years, I have posed as a western literature scholar successfully enough to present papers or preside at eight conferences and to be able to give this address as past president without being publicly exposed as, at worst, an impostor or, at best, the kind of opportunist who lives on borders and smuggles or raids across them.

In a way, though, my intellectual position reflects the ambiguity of my regional background. At the end of the Depression, my family moved east, from southern Kansas, near the staging area for the 1889 Oklahoma Land Run, to Boonville, Missouri, on the right bank of the Missouri River. At last year's conference, both Peter Hassrick, Charles M. Russell Professor of Art History at the University of Oklahoma, and Mike Kowalewski, the WLA's past president then, referred almost casually to the Missouri, not the Mississippi, as the dividing line between east and west.

One could argue with this, but I'm not going to because the Missouri as dividing line not only speaks to the theme of this year's conference but helps to account for the divisions in my career and in my imagination.

People in Boonville don't really look at the Missouri River at Boonville as a thoroughfare, though when my family moved there, the railroad bridge still raised a section—now permanently raised, the railroad absent—to allow steamboats to pass, and barges still navigate the river. Instead, it is a boundary, something to be crossed. Kit Carson left for the West from Franklin, just across the river, before it was washed away. Boonville is near enough to the starting point for the Santa Fe Trail, and the street of that name is closer than usual to something more than a developer's fantasy.

Crossing the river the other way meant, to me, going east—to Columbia, the academic center of Missouri, and to St. Louis, definitely eastern and according to the natives the intellectual capital of the state and perhaps the world. In the other direction, Kansas City was disquietingly large and unfamiliar, but it was not, like St. Louis, alien.

Of course, the people I saw, even the ones who owned horses, weren't cowboys—they were farmers. Like many males of my generation, I thought of the West as a region that existed more in imagination or perhaps in fantasy than in anyplace on a map. As a pre-teen, I saw at least two B Western movies a week, for a dime, at the Casino Theater. I didn't want to be a farmer or a mountain man or a wagon master or a Santa Fe trader. I wanted to be a cowboy.

I never became one—dealing with horses and cattle didn't make me like them as well as I did the cinematic ones—but half a century after I left Boonville for college, I became president of the Western Literature Association at the end of a long and circuitous journey. And because I've lived on various borders, I may have a unique and perhaps useful view of the WLA. What follows isn't a formal "state of the association" address, but it's as close as I can come.

When I told some old friends, scholars, and writers in Europe and America that I was to be president of the Western Literature Association, they assumed that the organization deals with Eurocentric rather than Asian and post-colonial writing. Others, slightly more knowledgeable, wondered if the WLA deals with Louis L'Amour and writers of that sort. So most of us would agree that the Virginian's dictum that westerners need to learn about the East can be turned around.

Even when I was most deeply involved with twentieth-century British fiction, as I was for the first thirty-five years of my academic career, I would never have made those mistakes. But for most of that time I might have wondered if there was much specifically western literature—what we thought of as *real* literature—to study. But the western writers I'd come across didn't engage my imagination.

The movies I'd seen as a boy did, and the lessons they taught are summarized in the song "King of the Cowboys" by the Amazing Rhythm Aces. The key lines, "It was lies, but I never knew it. You taught me how to act like a man," indicate the paradox of getting fantasized freedom, violent action, and real values that permeate

action films today, wherever they are set.

When I got too old to go to Saturday matinees, I began to read genre Westerns—Ernest Haycox, William Colt MacDonald, Max Brand, Gordon R. Young, and others whose names I can't remember. No titles at all, except for the *Hondo* series, and I can't remember who wrote those. Even then I couldn't distinguish one from another. Perhaps I read them because there was no television.

As an undergraduate, I had reason to be grateful for this knowledge because I faced an examination on James Fenimore Cooper's *The Prairie*, which I hadn't read. So, drawing on what I'd heard in lectures, I wrote about his influence on Western films and got a perfectly respectable B.

There were movies, of course, some of an entirely new breed. A few of us can remember the shock and surprise at the first viewing of "adult Westerns" in the early 1950s—"The Gunfighter," "High Noon," "Shane," moving from gritty black and white to glorious Technicolor and into elements of the myth we had learned from Republic Pictures.

In graduate school I continued to read genre Westerns occasionally and, prompted by a non-academic neighbor, Oakley Hall's *Warlock*, which was obviously different and also obviously not going to be of any use on my general exams, which covered English literature from 1500 to 1960. I did so partly from a desire to rest my mind from the rigors of the canon and the body of commentary that then seemed huge, and partly from a desire, as Owen Wister put it in a journal entry, "to be able to feel I'm something of an animal and not a stinking brain alone" (Owen Wister 37). Just after I finished my generals, I wrote a paragraph or so of a Western based on Jacobean revenge tragedies—my last foray into fiction for more than thirty years. When I put that aside for the dissertation and a nostalgic foray into city league basketball as a not very efficient animal, I continued to watch Western screens large and small, but I didn't *think* about them for more than a decade while I was trying to make a career as a scholar.

If it hadn't been for the Vietnam War and the youth revolution, I probably never would have. But the atmosphere of the late 1960s and early 1970s and the call for "relevance" (often misspelled and usually meaning what students thought they were interested in rather than what we wanted to teach them) caused many of us to shed some of our inhibitions as well as our ties. Special topics courses proliferated, and I taught one on popular narrative forms in which I tried to show the relationship between low and high culture in mysteries, romances, science fiction, and Westerns. That was fun, and perhaps instructive, but I never repeated the course.

I probably wouldn't have gone any farther if I hadn't, in the course of soliciting articles on allegory in the modern novel for a special issue of *Genre*, been put in touch with Alvin Greenberg and, a few years later, been sent a copy of his novel *The Invention of the West*, which looks like a collision of a Louis L'Amour novel with a Borges piece, a prose equivalent of "Blazing Saddles" on a higher level. Intrigued by what was not, at that time, called intertextuality, I decided to write about Al's novel. And that made me think about questions of representation, what was not yet called postmodernism, and my relation to the myth of the West. But I was still using the Western as a respite from my ordinary life, left-handed, so to speak.

A few years after that, I had come to what I thought was the end of my work on Evelyn Waugh and also to the end of my marriage. So I needed, for personal reasons, to get out of Dodge, but I headed east instead of west. To get a Fulbright, I had to pretend to know something about American Studies. To steal a little from Henry James, I knew how to study and I thought I knew what it was to be American, so I cobbled up something about the literature of the American West. I don't remember teaching that, but I was asked to write something for a special issue of the journal of the Hungarian Academy of Science, and I wrote about *The Virginian*. I also discovered how American I was and how western I seemed to Central Europeans.

The Fulbright gave me enough credibility as an Americanist to get an AMPART stint with the U.S. Information Service, and between assignments I spent five weeks in Paris lecturing at the University of Paris on various topics, including *The Prairie*, and I sent my undergraduate professor a postcard to the effect that, as a condition of a trip to Paris, I'd finally read the novel, and when the payoff was another trip, I'd read another Cooper novel. And to get a sabbatical leave, I had to propose a research topic. I thought that I'd pretty well used up Evelyn Waugh, so I decided on a book about the Western and even wrote, staying on the Left Bank just down the hill from Hemingway country, what became a chapter on Oakley Hall. That didn't seem unreasonable. Cooper wrote *The Prairie* and Hemingway wrote about Michigan while living in Paris, so I was in a great tradition.

Back in Oklahoma, I occasionally taught courses in the Western, and I wrote about some of the books I taught and even began to review secondary work in the field, including a composite review that cost me one friendship and found me Steve Tatum, the only friend that reviewing several hundred books ever brought me. And in the course of finishing *Playing Cowboys: Low Culture and High Art in the Western*, I began to make connections between my academic and personal lives that otherwise I might not have done. But I was still playing cowboys, enjoying the freedom from bibliography and textual study and conventional canonical scholarship.

One of the things that Owen Wister discovered about the West was that you could assume a new identity. Of course, as another aesthete who traveled in the West—Oscar Wilde—put it, pretending to be something can turn you into it. Or, as in my case, close enough.

However, I didn't go to a WLA meeting until 1990, in Denton, just to see what the real westerners were up to. I gave a paper about "Blazing Saddles" as a postmodern Western, and no one seemed to think that odd. (I also did my first poetry reading and discovered that it was so much fun that it ought to be illegal and found enough people interested in what's now called creative nonfiction to staff one of the early panels, if not the first, dealing with that amorphous genre.)

To someone who had spent a lot of time at MLA and SCMLA meetings, the WLA was refreshingly small and relaxed. Very few neckties in evidence. No job market business. Graduate students accepted on something like equal terms. Room for almost any paper that might be proposed. (Ten years later, I think I turned down three proposals at most. One was an hour-long slide show on California in English literature *ab ovo*; one was from a person who, the previous year, had shown up not with a paper but with a stack of books with dozens of slips of

paper sticking out, which she manipulated like musical glasses; and one I couldn't figure out what it was about.) Also, since there's not a hell of a lot to do in Denton (or Wichita or Norman), I went to many more sessions than I ever did at MLA and SCMLA. And the halls and lobbies aren't crowded with desperate throngs.

For me, the meeting became a way of lighting out for the Territory, to escape restrictions, real or imagined, and then get back to what I still thought of as real life. But I could see that not everyone felt this way. Many of the veterans, like Ann Ronald and Jim Work, had been trained in canonical literature but very early in their careers moved into the study of the West, and if not the founders of the Association, they had enlisted early. There were survivals of the early meetings in the old timers' gathering and the Readers' Theater. I had a vision of forty or fifty people gathering for papers and parties and good clean fun. Or not so clean, depending on the opportunities. But the WLA was central to their academic lives.

I didn't know these people at first, except by name or reputation, but I did know a number of people—Terrell Dixon, Walter Isle, Harold Fromm, many others of the older eco-lit generation—from various stops along the line of my academic life. Like me, they had come to the WLA from other careers. Some of them keep a foot in that other life or, like me, in two or three other lives.

The generation beginning with Steve Tatum and continuing with Krista Comer and her contemporaries started with western studies, which they approach from a formidably theoretical point of view. They seem to be the most serious cadre of the membership.

The general tenor of the meetings and what I can see of the membership has also changed. The level of gender and racial sensitivity has increased. For example, at the Estes Park meeting, the Readers' Theater presented a nineteenth-century melodrama which featured a stereotypical Chinaman. He may have been bleached out by the end of the play, so you'd wonder where the yellow went, but what I saw looked pretty offensive, and I wondered what a Chinese-American would think about it. By the time I was able to suggest that someone be given a platform to comment, some members of the association had become so sensitive that they regarded Frank Chin as sexist (because he speaks for Asian males rather than females and has strong opinions about everything), homophobic (because he objects to western feminization of Asian males), and abrasive (because he objects to white racism). I was particularly struck by the last charge, since the Association had previously honored Edward Abbey, that notoriously mild-mannered western writer.

I also encountered what is called, at Boeing, the "not-invented-here syndrome." When I suggested honoring a poet with more than a dozen books, some through commercial publishers, a long-time member of the Association responded that he wasn't well enough known—which meant that she'd never heard of him.

There are a number of ways to interpret these incidents. The least inflammatory is to discuss a tendency by some members of the Association to canonize certain writers, themes, and topics. This is understandable, even inevitable, for scholars and critics trying to establish the respectability of their field and the authors in it. It explains Jim Maguire's paper at Banff, in which he worried about what areas and authors to cover in a western literature course. It explains Jim Work's paper at Sacramento, which dealt with the hundred best western books.

It explains Evelyn Funda's recent attempt to get the membership to establish a list of worthy new books that we all should read.

There is also a related tendency to give passes to writers accepted as canonical or at least worthy of study. This too is understandable, since, to someone as old-fashioned as I am, the mere fact that one chooses to devote this much time to a writer means that she or he must be valuable. I'm not suggesting that we have a series of panels deconstructing Willa Cather or Larry McMurtry or Cormac McCarthy or raking them over for particular attitudes. But it would be refreshing, perhaps even useful, to note that not all New Mexican Hispanics would have quite the same attitude toward Padre Martinez as Cather and her archbishop do and that, for a person who knew about Catholics and Hispanics from the outside, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* was a pretty good book. Or that McMurtry's most financially successful novel bears a number of resemblances to Louis L'Amour's novels. Or that the romance in *All the Pretty Horses* verges on the ludicrous and shares the stereotypes contained in the comic book patched into Michael Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*. Or that when reading McCarthy's prose some of us want to adapt the comment of the emperor in "Amadeus" and say, "Too many words!"

The tendency to canonize certain critics is less obvious, at least in the WLA sessions. But Jane Tompkins' errors of fact and hyper-emotional responses to western literature and film are too seldom noted. If you think that I'm hard on her, read Penelope Reedy's review of *West of Everything* in the sadly defunct *Redneck Review of Literature*. Penelope is not only a woman but a westerner, and her kind of *nil admirari* responses, both as reviewer and editor, are necessary if western literature is going to be able to take itself seriously. A number of younger scholars seem to take as gospel everything that Richard Slotkin writes about the West. One of them, though not from the United States, was astonished when I told her that Daniel Boone really lived and explored. Her impression, from reading Slotkin, was that he was purely an invention by the media of the time. And though the revisionist historians have made valuable contributions, their claims, charges, and facts need to be examined in light of other historical and anthropological facts in order to avoid a return to the myth of the noble red man or stalwart pioneer woman or whatever else becomes fashionable.

Again, I find myself on the border, divided between the kid immersed in the B Western mythos and the scholar trained in what my contemporaries and I like to think was a *real* doctoral program. I sometimes become impatient with what I perceive as the growing seriousness of the organization, feeling, like Daniel Boone, crowded by signs of civilization from a distant neighbor's chimney. At other times, perhaps a nanosecond later, I become impatient with the tendency toward merely euphoric description of favored books and films. Fortunately, the WLA as an organization is pretty much in the same position as I am individually. The meeting allows both for rigor and for a certain amount of frivolity.

However, the process of being president doesn't allow for much of the latter, nor, from conversations I've had with other past presidents, has wild glee been the universal response. That is because, though the texture of the meetings has changed, the structure hasn't. I'm not aware of any histories of the WLA, so I'm imagining this

narrative, but, as I said earlier, I'm assuming that in the early days forty or fifty like-minded people got together in rustic surroundings to discuss a fairly narrow range of authors and topics, or at least far fewer of either than we are doing this week. Perhaps not a lot of preparation or organization was needed.

The meeting in Norman last year drew almost 250 participants, and more attractive venues like Banff and Albuquerque and bigger population centers draw even more people. But almost all of the burden of planning, funding, and organizing the annual meeting falls upon the president. Each president has to submit a financial report, but as far as I know, none has done a personal and psychological balance sheet. I can testify that, while the job doesn't take all of your time, it does take most of your attention. I'll say only that assuming the presidency cost me at least one book, a lot of sleep, and some digestive problems. I've learned that one duty of the past president is to find people willing to be nominated as future presidents. As I told the executive council last year, I cannot in conscience recommend that, under the present arrangements, anyone take the job.

It seems likely that things are going to change. Until the Sacramento meeting, the Executive Secretary functioned largely as a kind of organizational memory—what one of my predecessors called random access memory. Since then, the office has become much more proactive, and the fact that Bob Thacker has recent experience of the presidency has been enormously helpful and promises to be even more so. The support staff at Utah State is willing to do anything asked of them. The problem is that each new president has had no clear idea of what to ask them.

Various ways of dividing the labor have been suggested in the past. Bob Thacker has talked about taking over all responsibility for book exhibits—and for advertising in the program. Another possibility is to divide responsibility between a conference host—for local arrangements and funding—and a program chair, or even a number of area chairs, though the number and diversity of proposals may be too great for that kind of sub-division to work. The executive committee and past presidents are working on other structural changes and, more important, on new scholarly and intellectual tasks for the membership.

Changes like these would not solve the question of the organization's funding. I haven't surveyed fees for other associations, but at \$30, which includes the subscription to *Western American Literature*, membership in WLA has to be one of the best bargains in North America. Similarly, conference fees have until last year been very low, although until last year the meeting has apparently shown a profit larger than \$716.31. A lot of this is coming out of the hide of each successive president. We are now in a run of four consecutive women presidents—but this is not, under the present system, a blow for women's liberation.

Even if more support is not given to the president, amounts and kinds of funding are probably going to have to change—because of technology, if nothing else. More and more people are using slides, audio and video cassettes, PowerPoint, and other electronic technologies that I don't even have names for. One member wanted to download a web page, and this was a perfectly reasonable request, professionally speaking. Economically speaking, the service would have cost just about twice the member's registration fee. Someone—either the individual presenter or the membership as a whole—is going to have to come up with the money to pay for the

gizmos that are increasingly necessary to the electronically sophisticated hungry generation that holds the future of the organization. Or we could adopt the practice of the Southwest/Texas Popular Culture Association and refuse to provide anything more than VCRs and monitors.

One might argue, of course, that we should embrace rather than resist technology. In fact, at an informal meeting in Albuquerque on the future of *Western American Literature*, I suggested that the “work in progress” feature and other ephemera be put on a web site to leave more space for articles and reviews. Melody Graulich has not only done this but has instituted a forum for discussion. (Technology won’t make us infallible or even much smarter. My word processing program changed “Graulich” to “Garlic.” Eternal vigilance and all that.)

We might go still farther. Some organizations, like the Midwest Modern Language Association, tried to distribute copies of papers in advance, so that rather than listen to three or four speakers drone through their presentations, followed by one or two questions, there are genuine discussions of topics and issues. (Not that any WLA members would drone, of course.) Almost twenty-five years ago, I tried to get the South Central Modern Language Association to follow the same policy and met not so much with resistance as with blank incomprehension. I can see why: at that time, circulating papers would have been a logistical and economic nightmare, and apparently the MMLA gave up the practice. But at least they tried. SCMLA, run out of Texas A&M, didn’t. (I will refrain from making Aggie jokes, but I will say that before I despaired of SCMLA, I had been jerked about in my hotel arrangements, left off the membership list, and been ignored by the reviewers of the organization’s journal. None of those things has ever happened in my experience with the WLA.)

Now, of course, it would be logistically and economically feasible to have papers circulated in advance, on demand, over the Internet. I won’t go into details, because if I can think of this, people who really know the Net will have already thought of thirteen ways of looking at the problem more productively.

Of course, if the papers were available, one might argue, we wouldn’t need to have meetings at all. That would be a loss, both personally and professionally, and harried as I was in Norman, I enjoyed seeing old friends and making new ones. Like meetings of other academic organizations, WLA allows us to hang out with like-minded people in new and often pleasant settings, to get hands-on experience of books and ideas, to socialize with people we like but don’t see very often, and to discover that our department’s and institution’s problems are not only not unique but, comparatively speaking, not as bad as we thought. In my experience, though, there’s less institutional gossip at the WLA. At least I’ve never heard anything like the account of a department by which I was being interviewed, at the end of which I stood up and said, “You’ve succeeded in the very difficult task of making me a lot happier where I am.”

Despite some of the things I’ve said, I have been—relatively—happy in the WLA, and a lot happier as past president. I hope to see it prosper. But to do so, it will have to change. If it doesn’t, it won’t die, but it will sort of stagger along like the SCMLA. That organization hasn’t died, though twenty-five years ago my then-wife, a woman of acute perceptions except where I am concerned, attended it for the one and only time and said that the organization had no agenda. Or as an earlier writer said, “There’s no *there* there.”

We have a *there*: the landscape and literature of the American West. And as new initiatives for regional mini-meetings and for a book on globalization and the West indicate, there is plenty of intellectual energy among the elders and at the same time a willingness to hand things over to a new generation. The general membership of the organization clearly do not believe that the frontier is closed—roughly twenty percent of the sessions last year were devoted to Native American writers, and there were more sessions on Louis Owens than on Cormac McCarthy. Seven sessions were devoted to women writers. Latino and Latin writers have become more important and will be featured even more prominently next year in Tucson. Asian American writers—a neglected but important part of the western experience and literature—may soon get the attention they deserve. If some of the energy and ingenuity of individual members can be directed to some of the structural problems I have mentioned as well as to intellectual initiatives, I can say, from the perspective of a part-time past and future westerner, that the words of Mayor Johnson of Rock Ridge in *Blazing Saddles* will be a prophecy as well as a concession: “Aw, prairie shit ... *Everybody*.”

© Western Literature Association. If you encounter any problems with this site, please contact the web master, Sabine Barcatta, at (435) 797-1603 or wal@usu.edu.