

Book Reviews

Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America, by Richard Slotkin. New York: Atheneum Publishers of Macmillan Publishing, 1992. xii, 850 pp. Notes, bibliography, index. \$40.00 cloth.

REVIEWED BY KENT BLASER, WAYNE STATE COLLEGE

Gunfighter Nation is a massive, complex, ultimately impressive book that defies easy summary or analysis. It is the third volume in a trilogy that began more than two decades ago with *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600–1860*, and continued with *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800–1890*. As such, *Gunfighter Nation* brings to a close the most significant interpretation of the frontier and American culture in recent American historiography.

This book is both broader and narrower than its subtitle indicates. Slotkin believes the most basic values of American culture—our propensities toward violence both at home and abroad; the racial, gender, and class ideologies of American society—are directly related to our frontier experiences and memories. These themes allow Slotkin an extremely fecund wandering across the landscape of modern American culture. At the same time, however, many manifestations of the frontier myth in the twentieth century are ignored. This is a densely packed and entwined examination of the frontier myth in one part of twentieth-century popular culture—the movies, with selective attention to popular literature.

The frontier myth is the oldest, most significant symbolic expression of the meaning and significance of American history. But the myth itself can be used to support a variety of conflicting ideologies. At the same time that Frederick Jackson Turner was creating an interpretation of the frontier that would preoccupy academics, Theodore Roosevelt was creating an antithetical interpretation that has had a much greater influence in popular culture. Roosevelt's frontier featured the predominance of racial conflict over environmentalism, the violent adventurer/hunter/Indian fighter rather than the peaceful farmer as the archetypal figure, and a strong dose of masculine gender

and patrician class values. It was Roosevelt's version of the frontier—somewhat perversely labeled “progressive” by Slotkin—that became central to dime novel authors, to Bill Cody's immensely popular *Wild West Show*, and eventually to the movies and to the entire twentieth-century popular culture industry. But this view was not uncontested, and was countered by a “populist” interpretation, more Jeffersonian and Turnerian. Here the villains were railroaders, bankers, rich ranchers, powerful politicians, military bureaucrats, and the hero-outlaws such as Jesse James or even Indians resisting dispossession.

One of the strengths of this book is its examination of how heavily indebted other genres and works that are not usually considered frontier or “western” are to the frontier myth. Edgar Rice Burroughs, who actually enlisted in the Seventh Cavalry and tried to join Theodore Roosevelt's Rough Riders, extended the frontier myth to outer space in his science fiction books and to Africa for the Tarzan stories. *Birth of a Nation* transferred frontier themes to the post-Civil War South, while twentieth-century detective, gangster, and “empire” genres were equally indebted to frontier mythology. War and “combat” movies became so closely related to westerns that the two are almost inseparable.

An even greater strength is Slotkin's ability to delineate connections between popular culture and the real world, and to show how directly western movies often reflected contemporary social and political issues. The heart of the book—and the golden age of western movies—is the Cold War era. Slotkin is at his best in showing how movies such as *Rio Grande* or the “gunfighter” genre can be read as parables of the Cold War and Korean Conflict, or how closely *The Wild Bunch* or *The Magnificent Seven* paralleled issues raised by Vietnam and My Lai, or how liberal racial values could be expressed in movies that made heroes of Indians and villains of white bigots. Kennedy's choice of the New Frontier as the symbol for his administration gains an important significance against this background, for it is no surprise to Slotkin that defeat in Vietnam coincided with the demise of the frontier myth in American culture. His question is where we go from here.

It would take a long essay indeed to begin to describe the richness and complexity of this book. For all its faults—and there are many—*Gunfighter Nation* is essential reading for anyone interested in modern American culture. Wading through long, overly schematic, difficult, and sometimes idiosyncratic interpretations turns out to be a small price to pay for the rewards returned. For intellectual and cultural history, to paraphrase a cliché, it doesn't get much better than this.

There is a huge generation gap between Slotkin and Frederick Jackson Turner, but in the end Turner could not ask for a better legacy: the frontier mattered, and still matters, even if in ways he did not anticipate.

Bright Radical Star: Black Freedom and White Supremacy on the Hawkeye Frontier, by Robert R. Dykstra. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993. xi, 348 pp. Illustrations, maps, tables, appendixes, notes, index. \$47.50 cloth.

REVIEWED BY STEPHEN E. MAIZLISH, UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS, ARLINGTON

In the fall of 1868 Republican presidential candidate Ulysses S. Grant urged Iowa, the "bright Radical star" as he called it, to "be the first State to carry impartial suffrage through unfalteringly" (227). Iowans responded positively to his appeal, passing by an astounding 57 percent a state constitutional amendment granting suffrage to all adult males regardless of color. Only one other state opened the ballot to African Americans before the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment. Yet only nine years earlier, in equally convincing fashion, Iowa had reaffirmed its racially defined suffrage restriction. With its vote in 1868, Iowa had been transformed from "perhaps the most radically conservative free state in the Union into one of its most progressive" (238).

Robert R. Dykstra charts the course of this dramatic change in his painstakingly detailed, broadly informative book, *Bright Radical Star*. Taking advantage of Iowa's small population, Dykstra constructs an intimate portrait of race relations in frontier Iowa. His account of the years 1833 through 1880 successfully penetrates the complexity of racial attitudes and shrewdly delineates the impact of political developments on the evolution of racial policies.

Dykstra's story starts with the earliest entry of African Americans into the Iowa territory. He meticulously recounts the history of their first settlements in the region, concentrating particularly on Dubuque and Muscatine, and then pursues the development of each of their communities during Iowa's frontier years. The numbers he deals with are small, and the generalizations he can make about the early African-American experience in Iowa are therefore limited. Nevertheless, his description of their difficulties, his biographical treatments of their leaders, and especially his analysis of the differences in the ways they were treated in various parts of the territory make a significant

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