

JENNINGS, John – *The Cowboy Legend: Owen Wister's Virginian and the Canadian-American Frontier*. Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2015. Pp. 412.

This book is unique in that its historical narrative and focus are played out against a single individual and an unanswered literary question. In setting the two ranching frontiers in the United States and Canada against the experiences of Everett Johnson who lived on both, John Jennings brings a new dimension to what has become an ongoing debate about the nature of two parallel ranching traditions. Furthermore, through his plausible speculations that the Virginia-born Everett Johnson was the model for Owen Wister's hero in his 1902 seminal novel, *The Virginian*, Jennings links the origins of a literary genre and a North American mythical figure with a cowboy who lived most of his life in western Canada.

Jennings' research is impressive, involving several archival collections and a wide range of other primary and secondary sources. It is also personal. Jennings' father was Everett Johnson's doctor and friend in Calgary; Jennings was also well-acquainted with Johnson's son, and daughter-in-law whose reminiscences, now housed in Calgary's Glenbow Archives, provided much of the details on Johnson's life. The narrative is enlivened by Jennings' very readable prose, his propensity to debunk myths, and his interesting anecdotes, wry observations, and turn of the phrase. The book is well-illustrated and augmented by a Prologue which features pertinent extracts from *The Virginian*.

In a lengthy Introduction, Jennings sees violence and vigilantism as crucial components of the American frontier experience. He argues that their roots lay in an inadequate system of land tenure with its liberal interpretation of the public domain, and a weak, fragmented legal enforcement regime. He also sees the lingering respectability of vigilantism in American culture as an unfortunate modern by-product. On the other hand, Jennings takes the view advanced by David Breen almost forty years ago that an orderly western Canadian ranching frontier was enabled by a centralized leasehold system of land tenure and the presence of a federal law enforcement agency in the form the North-West Mounted Police. Essentially, he tries to reinforce these arguments in the narrative by situating Everett Johnson on both frontiers to see their unfolding through his eyes.

Using Johnson as a participant and eyewitness, Jennings discusses particular phases in his life to exemplify and elaborate on the violent nature of the American frontier. In Texas, Johnson saw cold-blooded murder. He was only fourteen years of age when he was forced to kill a fleeing Mexican outlaw who had shot at him. Amid the lawlessness of Deadwood City, he was acquainted with murderers and outlaw gangs, and formed less than admirable opinions of gambling drifters like Wild Bill Hickok and Wyatt Earp. As a scout, he witnessed Buffalo Bill Cody's famous fateful encounter with the Cheyenne warrior, Yellow Hair, and gives a far different and less heroic account than the Cody version. He also took part in lynchings in Wyoming, and claimed responsibility for at least three violent deaths (two were outlaws and the other an act of self-defence). Whether as stagecoach driver, scout or expert working cowboy, Johnson reminisced about a world where human conflict, danger and violence were normal components of life.

As for Alberta where he relocated in 1888, there were no such memories. As a ranch foreman, and horse breaker and trainer, Johnson entered the life of a ranching society where there were no lynchings, no vigilantism, and no range wars. Johnson's voice does not come through as strongly in Alberta because, given Jennings' central point about violence, there was nothing much to say. Johnson's reminiscences, however, frequently refer to the number of dangerous American cowboys who came to Alberta to visit and live, including the notorious Sundance Kid, a law-abiding citizen when north of the 49th Parallel and Johnson's best man at his wedding in 1891.

Jennings devotes significant attention to Owen Wister and his literary path, which culminated in his creation of the quintessential cowboy hero in *The Virginian* and a subsequent reluctance to name an individual inspiration. Jennings contends that Johnson was the model for Wister's Virginian and bases his arguments on the circumstances of their relationship that began in 1885 when Johnson was given the task of looking after the eastern greenhorn, Wister, who was visiting the VR Ranch in Wyoming. Jennings illustrates how the novel's plot included characters close to Johnson as well as specific events in his life, while also noting the physical attributes Johnson and the Virginian shared, in particular, the changing blueness of the eyes. Yet, to his credit, Jennings is not equivocal in his speculations and does not overstate his case. His arguments are plausible but are anything but definitive, as demonstrated in his balanced analysis of alternative viewpoints about the identity of Wister's hero. It is also clear, however, that Jennings does believe that Johnson was the Virginian. In fact, he references his parents seeing a copy of *The Virginian* (destroyed later in a fire) sent to Johnson by Wister and inscribed, "To the Hero from the author."

Jennings does well in delineating the evolution of the cowboy from a dime novel caricature and Buffalo Bill show entertainer to a national icon and a symbol of a particular version of the American character. He isolates the pivotal roles of Wister, Frederic Remington and Theodore Roosevelt, whose writings, correspondences, working partnerships, and personal social interactions helped integrate a particular view of the West with an individual human expression. Jennings is also critical of the strong Anglo-Saxon nativist sentiments that characterized their thinking about the true American cowboy. Though Johnson did not figure in this discussion, Jennings' portrayal of him reveals some of these prejudices.

Given its wide focus and specific thesis, "The Cowboy Legend" was subject to some noticeable disconnects and inherent limitations. Much of the text had nothing to do with Johnson. He was not present in the discussion of the Canadian ranching frontier, nor in those dealing with the Indian wars in the Black Hills and northern Wyoming or the Johnson County range war that erupted soon after he left Wyoming. He appeared for the most part, certainly in the United States, as a shadowy presence. Jennings could not prove that Everett Johnson was Wister's model and, indeed, his entire account of Johnson's life was essentially an extrapolation.

Yet, these are minor quibbles. What Jennings did was quite remarkable and innovative. He used a powerful literary creation and tried to relate its authenticity to a particular individual in a particularly violent social environment. He also implied that when the violence was lacking, as it was on the Alberta frontier, the essential nature of the cowboy, or Wister's quintessential figure, remained largely unchanged. Jennings has no illusions as to which environment was better. In summary, I thoroughly enjoyed "The Cowboy Legend." It is a fine book well worth reading for enjoyment, knowledge, insights, and reflection.

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MCCALLA, Douglas – *Consumers in the Bush: Shopping in Rural Upper Canada*.  
Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013. Pp. 296.

All of us who have been engaged in the social and economic history or historical geography of Upper Canada have, as Douglas McCalla recognizes, viewed the issues studied from the perspective of what was achieved, produced, or, in the case of a patent or land price, simply manifest from some economic, legislative, or social process. McCalla has himself done this, especially in *Planting the Province: The Economic History of Upper Canada, 1784-1870*, which remains the pre-eminent interpretation in this substantive area of study. Since its publication, his emphasis has shifted to that of the consumer, and in this genre he has written on the acquisition of alcohol, textiles, guns, and "A World without Chocolate"—a theme first offered in *Agricultural History* and developed here under the same intriguing title. This is not so much about the absence of chocolate as it is about groceries and medications. Interestingly, though this commodity was thought by the traveller and writer, Patrick Campbell, to have been part of the life of the day labourer, and was enjoyed by the social elite, such as Frances Stewart, and by Surveyor General Thomas Ridout at his breakfast, McCalla's formal analysis did not find a single mention in ten thousand transactions (p. 68). Among groceries, the first ranking item purchased by five or more members in the sample used was, as expected in a British province, tea (390 buyers) followed by tobacco (373 buyers) and sugar (259 buyers). Coffee, with 58 purchasers, ranked eighth, and at the bottom of the continuum were lemon essence (33<sup>rd</sup>), nutmeg (34<sup>th</sup>), hops (35<sup>th</sup>), and caraway seed, last at 36th. With respect to medicines and drugs, McCalla recognized 38 products beginning with "pills" as the first ranking item among the commodities that commanded five or more purchasers with, in fact, 75 (Appendix A, Section C). The second item was castor oil (63 buyers in 9 of 10 time-frames), a tradition that continued with Irish mothers well into the 1950s and still in use today. These two were followed by "salts" (38 buyers), "pain extractor," (30 buyers) and "Cream of Tartar" or potassium hydrogen tartrate (27 buyers), used in things culinary and, unadvisedly, as a purgative. Too much "Cream of Tartar"