



The Cowboy Way: An Exploration of History and Culture

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The lives of American cowboys have been both real and mythic; hence our continuing fascination with their history and culture. In sixteen essays and an annotated bibliography, scholars explore cowboy music, dress, humor, films, and literature. Some examine the cowboy's powerful symbolic life. Others look at African American, Hispanic, Native American, French, and English cowboys, the great cowboy strike of 1883, and even the origins of the term cowboy itself. Celebrating the cowboy way, the essays also come to grips with false images and the make-believe world that surrounds cowboy culture. Nonetheless, these essays demonstrate, the American cowboy is destined to remain the most easily recognized of all western character types, a knight of the road who, with a large hat, tall boots, and a big gun, rode justifiably into legend and into the history books. "Cowboys—both mythic and real—have become part of an American epic that is commemorated from Denver to Dresden, from Montreal to Melbourne. Their image is burned deep into America's collective consciousness. . . . "The abiding interest has a long history. It can be seen first in the attraction of dime novels and Buffalo Bill's Wild West Exhibition, then in the enormous popularity of Owen Wister's *The Virginian* (1902), and subsequently in the success of popular western novels of the type by Zane Grey and Max Brand, in western films (made in Italy and Germany and Hollywood and elsewhere), in television programs, in public television documentaries, and in other formats, including the highly effective use of cowboys as advertising symbols. Serious scholars, including historians, sociologists, literary critics, and others, have studied cowboys and the symbols and myths that surround them. "In the popular view cowboys were men on horseback. In fact, most of the time they spent their days on foot working at such farm-related chores as repairing fences and cutting hay. Even in Wister's defining cowboy novel, for example, the hero of the story—the prototypical cowboy—herded neither cows nor cattle of any kind. "Nonetheless, in both his actual and his imagined life the cowboy has become a popular hallmark for defining what it means to be a 'real' American male. Perceived as a tough, mobile, and independent outdoorsman, he has become a symbolic yardstick against which modern men might measure their own manhood." —Paul Carlson "Few readers of *The Cowboy Way* will be surprised that real cowboys of the late nineteenth century differed markedly from their twentieth-century mythical counterparts, but they may learn much about the nature and extent of that difference." —*Western Historical Quarterly*. "[Helps] us distinguish the historical reality of the cowhand from the myths that now surround the cowboy. . . . Both a general audience and scholars will appreciate this volume." —*Southwestern Historical Quarterly*. "Whether discussing the myth or the reality of the cowboy, his work clothes, his place in film history, his humor, or his songs, these essays once again demonstrate the strength of the cowboy as cultural icon." —*Roundup Magazine*. "Promises to get at the truth behind the cowboy myth . . . [and suggests] all kinds of reasons why the cowboy should have held his place in the American imagination for so long." —*Bloomsbury Review*. Sixteen essays explore cowboy music, dress, humor, films, and literature. Some examine the cowboy's powerful symbolic life. Others look at African American, Hispanic, Native American, French, and English cowboys, the great cowboy strike of 1883, and even the origins of the term cowboy itself.

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