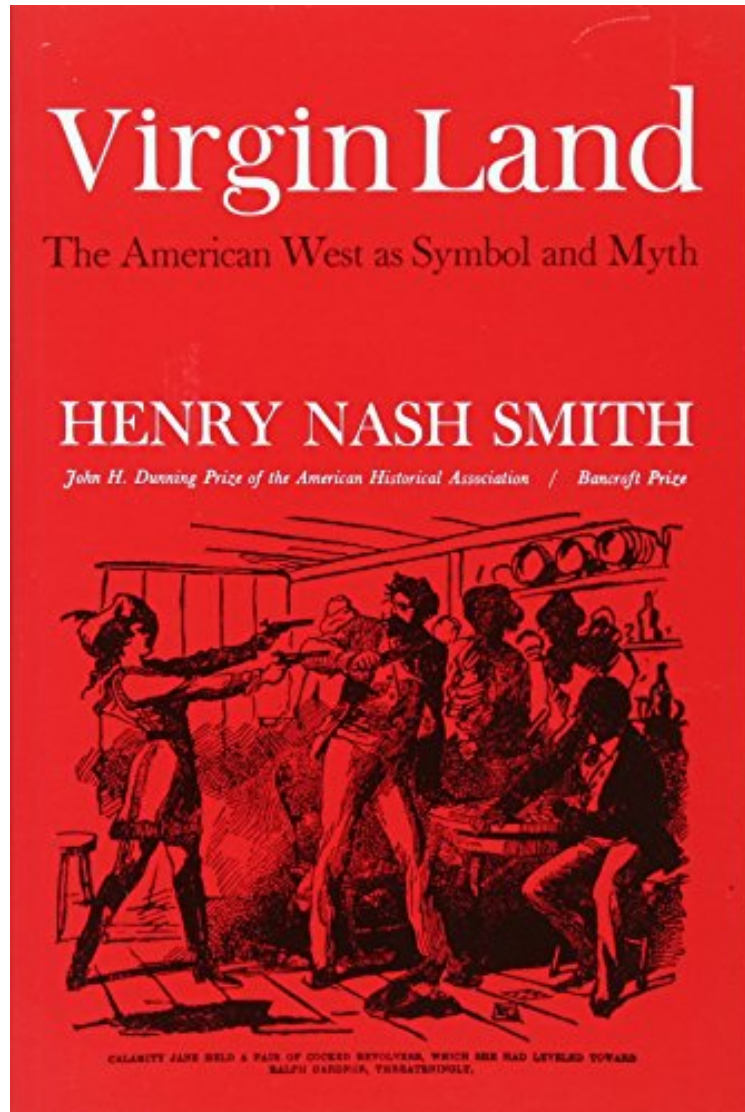


(Ebook free) Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth (Harvard Paperback, HP 21)

## Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth (Harvard Paperback, HP 21)

Henry Nash Smith

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**Henry Nash Smith : Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth (Harvard Paperback, HP 21)** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth (Harvard Paperback, HP 21):

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. It held my attention better than Leo Marx's Machine in the GardenBy P. BoyerIt held my attention better than Leo Marx's Machine in the Garden. I didn't feel I was being hit on

the head time and time again after the first chapters. 52 of 53 people found the following review helpful. Developing the Master Symbol of the "Garden" By S. Pactor An excellent book on several levels. I highly recommend it for all of those interested in American History, Cultural Studies and Sociology. The purpose of this book is to demonstrate the development of the American myth of the "Garden of the World". Smith argues (persuasively) that the idea of the American continent as a garden: fertile, lush and tamed (or tameable), deeply influenced the course of American history. As Leo Marx said in his similarly awesome "The Machine in the Garden", the brilliance of this book lies in how Smith demonstrates how ideology drives action (or, alternatively: how ideas drive behavior). Smith divides "Virgin Land" into three parts. Part One "Passage to India" describes the initial path westward and the philosophy of the individuals who pushed for westward expansion (Thomas Jefferson, Thomas Hart Benton, Asa Whitney, William Gilpin and Walt Whitman). By way of a prologue, Smith notes that the idea of "Manifest Destiny" did not develop as soon as the settlers arrived, but rather was developed by American Philosophers and Politicians (and land speculators). In the first Part, Smith describes how the initial push westward was justified via the idea that a passage west would increase trade with the Orient. Smith notes that this idea derived from 18th century Mercantilist economic theory and was therefore "archaic" (a favorite term of Smith's in this book) from the very beginning. The Second part of the book ("The Sons of Leatherstocking") uses the literary character of Leatherstocking as an entry point for a discussion of the development of the western hero figure in literature. A highlight of the book comes in Chapter Ten when Smith discusses the "Dime Novel Heroine". I found his discussion illuminating. In the third and final part of the book, Smith lays out the characteristics of American Agarianism which would come to define westward expansion after the Civil War. Smith outlines the conflict between Southern Pastoralism and North/Western "Yeoman" Agarianism and notes how the Homestead Act was singularly influenced by this second conception of American settlement. He also documents how this same philosophy of agarianism prevented later reform of the Homestead Act even after it became clear to many that the Homestead Act had failed miserably in its goals. Smith also discusses the struggle by authors to develop authentic western "characters" and relates that struggle to the emergence of the "Garden of the World" symbol. This really isn't the forum to tease out all the different issues presented, thoughtfully, in this classic book. I recommend it highly. 10 of 11 people found the following review helpful. Great Work on the Development of the West By M. P. Procter Sr. Author Henry Nash Smith has written a book which attempts to encapsulate the symbolism and mythology of the American West. *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*, "...traces the impact of the West...on the consciousness of Americans and follows the principal consequences of the impact in literature and social thought...." The work is based on the theory developed by historian Frederick Jackson Turner which states "...that our society has been shaped by the pull of a vacant continent drawing population westward...." Smith continues this study in *Virgin Land* through three sections (referred to as books): "Passage to India," "The Sons of Leatherstocking," and "The Garden of the World." *Virgin Land's* premise is that the American West was settled and developed due to the romanticism and heroics written about in eighteenth and nineteenth century poetry, books, and dime novels. Although the term "Manifest Destiny" was not coined until the 1840s, American patriot Benjamin Franklin seized on this concept about eighty years before Andrew Jackson's followers. Throughout the latter half of the eighteenth century, Franklin insisted that North America would eventually become the largest jewel in the British crown of possessions. England would at once not only have the largest empire in the world, but the greatest navy, most favorable trade routes, and a towering economic base from which to rule. Thomas Jefferson, as Secretary of State to President George Washington and as president himself, was an early force in the exploration and development of western areas. Under the guise of scientific exploration, Jefferson commissioned several expeditions. One such event planned by Jefferson while he was ambassador to France was to send a Connecticut traveler named John Ledyard who "...was to go eastward through Siberia to the Pacific Northwest and thence overland across North America to Virginia, but the venture was frustrated by the Empress Catherine [of Russia]." History shows that Jefferson was the president who commissioned Meriwether Lewis and William Clark to explore much of the western portion of the continent. Spain granted the United States permission to map and chart its own territory because Jefferson assured them it was for scientific purposes for the sake of the fur trade. But Jefferson knew that "...a responsible statesman was not likely to forget that geographical knowledge was a necessary preliminary to economic penetration and eventual political domination." Later it was hoped that there would be a western passage to the far east, specifically "...India, with its associated images of fabulous wealth...." Still later in the early 1800s, when passage to India was not available through the American West, it was discovered that the rich soil was suitable for farming and would bring opportunity and wealth to those who conquered and settled the land. In "The Sons of Leatherstocking," the second section or book within *Virgin Land*, Smith introduces the reader to Daniel Boone. Although Boone was the subject of folklore both during and after his life, Smith addresses Boone's life thus: "Which was the real Boone - the standard-bearer of civilization and refinement, or the child of nature who fled into the wilderness before the advance of settlement?" Boone's life is explored, albeit on a superficial level, in an attempt to dispel myths that followed him and to support the factual history of his life. James Fenimore Cooper's series of novels, collectively entitled "The Leatherstocking Tales," featured the character Natty Bumppo, who was also known as Leatherstocking, Pathfinder, Deerslayer and Hawkeye. Through descriptions of Cooper's novels, Smith uses this character to discuss the development of the western hero in

literature. Kit Carson, Deadwood Dick and Buffalo Bill also fit the western hero mold, as did the "Dime Novel Heroine" like Calamity Jane. Smith concludes *Virgin Land* with "The Garden of the World," focusing on the agricultural significance of the American interior. As American settlers progressed westward, a "...new society...was coming into being under the influence of an abundance of land awaiting settlement." Much of this new influence centered on the "Yeoman" farmer who generally worked his own fields along with paid workers. This contrasts the gentleman farmers who did not work the fields on their own but merely oversaw the farm business. Free land on which to farm became more abundant after the Homestead Act was passed which granted one-hundred-and-sixty acres to a person who would live on the land for at least five years. Such a proposal had been in development since the early 1840s but was constantly shut down in Congress by Southerners who feared a threat to plantation slavery. Prior to the Civil War, Congress was split along geographic lines regarding passage of the Act; after the Southern states seceded it passed in 1862. For many reasons, the Homestead Act was a failure, primarily due to land speculation and the railroads selling better quality land that had been previously granted to them. That, coupled with the industrialization of farming, erased the benefit of a country full of small, family-owned farms. Throughout *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*, Smith explores the reasons why Americans living in the Eastern United States should move west and settle the rest of the country in order to fulfill its "Manifest Destiny." Through authors like James Fenimore Cooper and his character Natty Bumppo, poetry by Walt Whitman, and dime novels, Americans were supposed to latch onto the idea that the West was filled with action and adventure and thus should drive to the Pacific. Smith does not identify the market these fictitious heroes were meant to target. Did the average American of the nineteenth century have access to printed material or possess the ability to read and understand it? Moreover, he does not satisfy the reader regarding the failures of the Homestead Act. Although Smith refers to works of literature throughout the final section, he fails to explain how such works could have influenced readers to settle the western lands. His work would have had more scholarly impact if he identified the reasons why the works lacked the impact their authors sought.

The spell that the West has always exercised on the American people had its most intense impact on American literature and thought during the nineteenth century. Henry Nash Smith shows, with vast comprehension, the influence of the nineteenth-century West in all its variety and strength, in special relation to social, economic, cultural, and political forces. He traces the myths and symbols of the Westward movement such as the general notion of a Westward-moving Course of Empire, the Wild Western hero, the virtuous yeoman-farmer in such varied nineteenth-century writings as *Leaves of Grass*, the great corpus of Dime Novels, and most notably, Frederick Jackson Turner's *The Frontier in American History*. Moreover, he synthesizes the imaginative expression of Western myths and symbols in literature with their role in contemporary politics, economics, and society, embodied in such forms as the idea of Manifest Destiny, the conflict in the American mind between idealizations of primitivism on the one hand and of progress and civilization on the other, the Homestead Act of 1862, and public-land policy after the Civil War. The myths of the American West that found their expression in nineteenth-century words and deeds remain a part of every American's heritage, and Smith, with his insight into their power and significance, makes possible a critical appreciation of that heritage.

A very illuminating study in the history of ideas. Its principal theme is the rise and decline of the conception of the West as an agrarian utopia the myth of the garden of the world that implanted itself so deeply in the imagination of nineteenth-century America. Professor Smith brings to his study an unusual adeptness in the integration of material from different fields, and, what is more important, an admirable feeling for shadings and distinctions, for the complexly organic relationship between empiric fact and what human emotion and imagination would make of it. *Virgin Land* achieves a kind of clarification of its subject that makes it, one feels, a landmark in the interpretation of the West. (The Nation) Mr. Smith's book is a work of solid scholarship on a facet of our history that has not always been assessed at its proper importance. Here is the story of all our yesterdays. (Washington Post) To read *Virgin Land* is to experience a deep intellectual excitement. (Christian Science Monitor) This brilliant interpretative analysis will make a permanent contribution to a better understanding of the role of the West in American history. (Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences)