

Introduction

The American West was a time, and a place. But above all, it was a state of mind.

For pioneers staring, hip-cocked, into the virgin land of the setting sun, the West represented a new start, a future of endless possibilities, a place where a man or woman might make something of themselves. Wrote Helen Carpenter in her diary on 26 May 1857, the day she began her journey across the plains in an ox wagon: "Ho - for California - at last we are on the way - only seven miles from home (which is to be home no longer) yet we have really started and with good luck may some day reach the 'promised land'."

The promised land of the West did not always turn out to be the Eden of pioneer expectations. "Oh, the trees, the trees," lamented one settler in Kentucky, faced with the awesome task of clearing the looming, claustrophobic forest. Yet, whether they liked it or loathed it, those who endured life on the remote frontier became transformed, even as they transformed the land around them. They became less urbane, less European in outlook. The frontier mentality thus formed was independent, optimistic, eager for material success, and scornful of rank, pretension, and class. Nearly all travellers to the New World noted these pronounced traits. The English writer Anthony

Trollope, visiting the USA in the early 1860s, commented in his *North America* (1862) that "there is an independence which sits gracefully on their [the Americans'] shoulders, and teaches you at first glance that the man has a right to assume himself your equal."

This frontier spirit was born long before men and women moved to settle the big, rolling lands beyond the Mississippi. Although the decades 1860-1890 are often equated with "the American West", the frontier, the moving edge of settlement into the "wilderness", began on the Eastern side of the Appalachians in the seventeenth century. The final sweep of settlement, the conquering of trans-Mississippi America, was but the finale of a process which had been hundreds of years in the making. Many of those who homesteaded the Great Plains were the descendants of farmers who had toiled on land of the Eastern coastal belt. And pioneers nearly always went West, not North or South, so keeping within familiar climatic zones. New Englanders stuck to the upper reaches of the West; Virginians and Carolinians headed for Alabama, and then crossed the Mississippi into Louisiana, Arkansas, and Texas.

Land for farming was the great spur which prompted men and women to go West. (The cowboy on horseback might be a more romantic, attractive figure, but it was the pedestrian "sod-buster" who tamed the bulk of the West; agriculture was the new country's basic endeavour.) Sons of farmers, on finding the family claim too small to sustain division, left home and trekked west to find a place of their own. And then, in turn, their sons did the same. Southerners also found themselves driven westwards by soil exhaustion; their cash crops of tobacco and cotton took a heavy toll on the earth. The relative abundance of land did little to encourage good husbandry. There always seemed to be more land for the taking.

That is, for the taking from the continent's original inhabitants, the American Indian. For the land the settlers thirsted for was not unoccupied; the Indians had to be persuaded to part with it, or prised off it by force. If the frontier mentality had attractive features, it also had ugly aspects. It justified the cleansing of Indians from their lands in the name of Manifest Destiny, and encouraged the cult of the gun, the use of firearms to settle all matters, big or small. To "win" the West took the White man nearly three hundred years of warfare.

What befell the Indian was a tragedy, even a travesty. At times something like genocide was practised against the native people of America. But it is wrong to picture the American Indian as a noble but hapless victim. There are few innocents in war. The Indians did not see themselves as a homogenous entity, just as Europeans do not see themselves as alike, but as English, French, or German. Some Indian tribes, in conflict with their aboriginal neighbours, allied themselves with the White man as a means of winning local power struggles. The example of the Crow is only the most famous. And American Indian tribes could wage war as relentlessly and bloodily as the White man. The long enmity between the 7th Cavalry and the Sioux had as one of its fillips the killing and mutilation of Frederick Wyllyams by Sioux (and Arapaho and Cheyenne) braves at Fort Wallace, Kansas, in 1867. The 7th Cavalry never forgot or forgave what had been done to Sergeant Wyllyams.

The Indian wars had their ironies, as well as their brutalities. In the 1870s the Sioux fought bitterly to keep White settlers out of the Black Hills of Dakota, which they declared to be their ancestral and spiritual home. In truth, the Sioux were settlers too, and had only been in the Black Hills country for a century or so. The much cherished freedom of the Plains Indian to ride free like the wind over

the prairie was a gift given him by the White man; the horse, after all, was introduced to America by the Spanish. And if the White man slaughtered the buffalo to near extinction, Indian hunters had long before wiped out the beast's giant prehistoric relative – along with the mammoth, the mastadon, and more than 70 other species of large game. (This ecological disaster seems to have caused the American Indians to rethink their attitude to American fauna; certainly they came to revere animals and to be zealous in their conservation, never killing more than were needed for the maintenance of the tribe.)

None of these culpabilities, however, excuse the treatment of America's native people by the White man. They are only given to illustrate the intricacy of the history of the West. The winning (or losing) of the American West is the greatest story ever told, bar one epic of biblical times, but it is not a simple tale of Good versus Bad, however these attributes are apportioned. Western history is infinitely shaded.

And it is even more wondrous and terrible than its fictional and mythic tellings. Few of the legends of the West, the Earps and the Jameses, have much substance when truth is applied, but even a dime novelist would blush to write a scenario where a lone gunfighter engaged 80 assailants and won – which is exactly what Elfecho Baca did in 1884. Baca was no superhuman but a naive teenager who wanted to be a lawman and who had tired of local anti-Hispanic racism.

It could only happen in the West, that place of nobility and endless possibilities, cruel violence and depredation.

Prologue

They came, the first inhabitants of the New World, in small family groups, pushing eastward over the land bridge from Siberian Asia. They sought neither God nor gold but game, in the vast archaic shapes of the mammoth and the mastodon. No one knows for certain when the feet of these nomadic hunters first touched the soil of what would become America; it was some time towards the end of the Ice Age, not before 30,000 BC but not later than 28,000 BC. From Alaska, they fanned out across the northern continent, and then down through the central isthmus to the south. They remained hunters until the mammoth and mastodons were all gone, after which they began to adopt ways of living suitable to the lands into which they had walked. Some who had reached the Southwest, turned to agriculture and built magnificent stone cities. The people of the plains continued to hunt smaller game, especially a sub-species of bison, *Bos bison americanus*, the million-strong herds of which blackened the landscape. Around the Great Lakes, wild rice gathered by women poling bark canoes was the main means of sustaining the life of the people. Geronimo, the wild Apache warrior, looking back on his homeland from exile, would express the Indians' beautiful adaptation to the land thus:

For each tribe of men Usen [God] created He also made a home. In the land for any particular tribe He placed whatever would be best for the welfare of that tribe.

With the diversifying of lifestyle, came other changes, of language, culture, even physique. Over time, the people no longer thought of themselves as a single entity but as many differing tribes – Dakota, Mandan, Seminole, Pequot, Pawnee, Kickapoo, Comanche and nearly 500 others, most of whose tongues were incomprehensible to each other, and some of whom were incessantly warring rivals. (The West never was Arcadia, despite its siren beauty.) The original inhabitants of America, though, retained one common belief wherever they went, whom-ever they became. They believed that the land belonged to no one. Tribes might fight over hunting grounds, but they had no concept of private property. The land was sacred, to be handed on almost untouched. As an Omaha warrior's song expressed it:

I shall vanish and be no more,
But the land over which I now roam,
Shall remain,
And change not.

The great ceremonial song of the Navajo, "The Blessing Way", contained a similar sentiment:

All my surroundings are blessed as I found it,
I found it.

And the aboriginal was bound to the earth by a mystical union. It was part of his body. When it was cut, he wept. The attitude of the European intruder was very different. The first White to "discover" the New World is usually

held to be Christopher Columbus, who reached the Bahamas on 12 October AD 1492. Believing he had reached an outpost of India, he christened the people he found on the island of San Salvador *Indios*. "So tractable; so peaceable, are these people," Columbus wrote to his patrons, the King and Queen of Spain, "that I swear to your Majesties there is not in the world a better nation . . . and although it is true that they are naked, yet their manners are decorous and praiseworthy." Where Columbus had sailed, other Spanish subjects soon followed. Led by the conquistadors, merciless hard-fighting minor noblemen, the Spanish overran the Caribbean and moved remorselessly westwards, lured ever on by the prospect of gold. In 1513 Juan Ponce de Leon landed on the American mainland. He found no gold, only flora. His men duly named the place *Florida* ("full of flowers"). Another conquistador, Panfilo de Narvaez, decided that Florida, its lack of yellow metal notwithstanding, was ideal for colonization. The attempt proved disastrous. But it accidentally resulted in the first sighting by White eyes of the American West.

Fleeing Florida in the summer of 1528 for the sanctuary of recently settled Mexico, the makeshift craft of Narvaez's men was blown ashore on the Texas coast, near the mouth of the Sabine. Four Spaniards, led by Cabeza de Vaca and including the Black Moorish servant Estevan, survived shipwreck, disease, starvation, and enslavement by hostile Indians to reach Mexico on foot in 1536. Their saviour was Estevan. It was he who did the work, took the risks. As de Vaca later acknowledged, Estevan "talked to them [the Indians] . . . he inquired the road we should follow in the villages, in short, all the information we wished to know."

De Vaca's lost men could provide little cartographical information, but their tale prompted more purposeful

Spanish expeditions. In 1539 Don Francisco Vasquez de Coronado, the 31-year-old governor of New Spain, headed a great expedition which sought the fabled Seven Cities of Cibola, whose streets were reputedly paved with gold. From Mexico, Coronado marched northwards. Arriving in the land of the Zunis, who were astonished by the expedition's horses (a mammalian form absent from the Americas' indigenous fauna), Coronado demanded obedience to the rule of Spain. The ancient Zunis pelted him with stones, but then withered before the fire from modern Spanish arms. Disappointed at the Zunis' lack of precious metal, Coronado set off for another fabled golden land, Quivira. Eventually, he penetrated as far north as present-day Kansas. Meanwhile, a rival Spanish party under the leadership of Hernando de Soto landed in Florida and stumbled westwards, fighting repeated skirmishes with Indians, eventually reaching Arkansas. In 1542 de Soto "took to his pallet" and died. He was buried in the great river he had found: the Mississippi.

By now, there were White men from other European nations probing the new continent. John Cabot sailed from England along the Atlantic coast of the continent in 1497. Portugal's Gaspar Corte-Real reached Newfoundland and Labrador in 1500. Twenty-four years later the French-sponsored Florentine Giovanni da Verrazano entered New York harbour. In 1534 the intrepid Breton navigator Jacques Cartier explored the Gulf of Saint Lawrence. The response of the Spanish to this trespassing on their Forbidden Empire was to send a host of robed friars to America to establish missions and save the souls of the heathens (and surreptitiously pave the way for the later rule of Spain). In 1598 missionaries and settlers led by Juan de Onate founded the dried mud village of San Juan in the Rio Grande Valley, in what is now New Mexico. It was the first permanent European settlement in the American West.

More missions followed, in Arizona, Texas and California. Resistance by the aboriginals of the Pueblos (stone villages) to the word of God was met by military force and forced conversion. When the Acoma Indians of Sky City refused Spanish food requisitions, Onate sent an armed detachment which slaughtered 800 adult Acomans. Surviving males over the age of 25 had a foot severed, to make them living reminders of the folly of resistance. They were then herded into slavery.

Although the Spanish were the first to settle in the American West, ultimately its conquest lay with others. The great Pueblo uprising of 1680, which drove 2,500 Spanish from their homes and ranches, badly shook the Empire's frontiering will. And Spain was too riven by internal difficulties and too interested in skimming off the surface wealth of the Americas, gold, to develop a coherent colonization policy. France, too, tended to view the New World merely as a place to plunder, whether for gold, beaver furs or Newfoundland cod. As a result, the whole of the Eastern seaboard from Canada down to Florida – a temperate terrain highly suited to large-scale agricultural settlement – was left unclaimed.

It was the fortune and fate of Britain that when she came to build an empire, this rich land remained free. The first British expeditions failed, but in 1606 the London Company was granted the right by James I "to deduce a colony of sundry of our people" in America, north of the 34th parallel. Three ships made their way across the ocean in 1607. "The six and twentieth day of April about foure a clocke in the morning," wrote Master George Percy, "wee descried the Land of Virginia . . . faire meddowes and goodly tall trees, with such Fresh-waters runninge through the woods as I was almost ravished at the first Sight thereof." After landing, the settlers built a village,

Jamestown, named in honour of the monarch. They were attacked by tidewater Indians and suffered a "Starving Time" (until the selfsame Indians brought them gifts of food), but they endured to become the first permanent British settlement in America. A timorous alliance with the Indian was even formed with the marriage of the Indian princess Pocahontas to the Englishman John Rolfe.

More British immigrants arrived; settlements and farms spread along the James River, and then to Maryland and the Carolinas. In 1620 a group of religious dissenters, the Pilgrims, landed in New England after their vessel *Mayflower* was blown off its course for Virginia. They decided to build their homes at Plymouth, where luck had washed them up. A decade later came the great 25,000-strong Puritan migration to Massachusetts. The European population of America grew inexorably – just as its native population declined inexorably. The White man's microbes (particularly smallpox) devastated up to 90 per cent of some of the Eastern Algonquin tribes. Some Indians tried to make a stand against the disease-carrying invader, with his insatiable hunger for land. The Wampanoags of Native American King Philip killed some 600 New Englanders in 1675. But still the Europeans came. The only result for the Wampanoags was slaughter and slavery.

Soon, stable British colonies stretched along the Atlantic seaboard from New Hampshire to Georgia (and included New York and New Jersey, seized from the Dutch). The coastal strip became used up, overcrowded. The colonialists needed more land. The Virginians needed it for their tobacco boom crop (for a while even the streets of Jamestown had been turned over to the cultivation of the "weed"), and the agriculturalists of New England needed it for their farms. There was only one way the territorial

expansion of the British colonies could proceed – westwards, into the unmapped, unknown hinterland. It was now that the story of the West, of the frontier, really began.