New Ranges for Collecting Western Americana: Is It Time to Put the Old Bibliographies Out to Pasture?

MICHAEL VINSON

The bibliographies of Western American history owe a great deal to the energy and interest of early book collectors, among whom were Henry R. Wagner, Ramon F. Adams, Thomas W. Streeter, and Everett D. Graff. These bibliographies have identified thousands of books relating to the West. But the fundamental direction of Western American history which these bibliographies were based on is being challenged by up-and-coming historians who are asking new questions about the West.

The new questions are giving energy and emphasis to an area of study whose survival seemed in doubt only a few years ago. The introspection in many cases was pessimistic, and librarians listening to historians may well have wondered whether they should continue collecting any Western books. Gerald Thompson, a well-known Western historian, noted in the Journal of the Southwest in 1988 that whenever Western scholars gather at conventions the private conversations often turn to the topic, “What’s wrong with Western history?” The historians then recount tales of declining enrollments and lost faculty appointments. In addition, the historians have to deal with charges made by outside faculty that the field lacks intellectual rigor. As Thompson notes, “On occasion, one’s colleagues drop remarks which indicate that the study of the West is simply ‘cowboys and Indians,’ the scholar’s version of child’s games.”1 Gene M. Gressley says that “declining enrollments, inadequate research and teaching, lack of administrative support and the respect of our colleagues in other fields of our discipline are all symptoms of a malaise.”2

According to Roger L. Nichols, part of the problem is that historians of the West have been slow to take up the newer methodologies of social, cultural, and ideological history. As a rule, much of Western history has been seen as popularized and antiquarian. Nichols blames this reluctance in part on “old-fashioned” faculty who fear the demise of “gunsmoke and horse manure” history. Nichols

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believes that the turn to new methodologies will increase the sophistication of Western historical studies and offers frontier and Western historians an “exciting chance to rejoin the rest of the profession.”

There are abundant indications in the historiography of the last few years that many historians have taken a new look at their fields in Western history through the lens of the “new” social history. The emphasis on this new examination has troubled some traditional historians, and the resulting disputes have caught the attention of the national media. Richard Bernstein, writing in the *New York Times Magazine*, reviewed the efforts of the new Western historians in an article titled “Unsettling the Old West: Now Historians Are Bad-Mouthing the American Frontier.” Bernstein notes that there have been earlier generations of historians who contributed to a new view of the West, among whom were Charles Beard, Gerald Nash, Howard Lamar, and others. What marks the newer Western historians from their predecessors is that they represent “a tipping of the moral scales to that unhappy point where national faults and imperfections seem to balance national virtues.” This view of Western history has a moral perspective which embraces defeat and failure, particularly as it touches poor and laboring classes in the West.

Larry McMurtry has taken a turn at examining the revisionist view of Western history in the *New Republic* in an essay titled “How the West Was Won or Lost: The Revisionists’ Failure of Imagination.” McMurtry notes that one of the main themes of the new Western history is that our “westward expansion was a mosaic of failure, financial and personal, but also, in the largest sense, moral” (p. 32). There is no shortage of victims in the West: “you have the native peoples (destroyed), the migrant poor (degraded), the landscape (damaged, mangled, eroded, stripped), the women and children (brutalized, exploited), the national ideals (tarnished)” (p. 33). Indeed, McMurtry suggests tongue in cheek that the new history of the West might be called “Failure Studies.” The evidence is in, and studies of the new Western history are being published in increasing numbers in journals and university presses.

How do the bibliographies of Western American history fit into this changing historiographical environment? Since these bibliographies were often begun by book collectors (or based on a collector’s library), they reflect an interest in popular themes which may be considered quaint or antiquarian in the light of the new Western history. Henry Wagner compiled and published an influential bibliography which contained travel accounts of those who crossed the West between 1800 and 1865 and which emphasized “exploration, adventure, and travel.” More than 400 books, pamphlets, and newspaper accounts are cataloged in the current edition (1982). While this bibliography reflects an interest in the “scouts and openers of the West,” Ramon F. Adams has focused his bibliographic work on outlaws and cattle history, the “gunsmoke and horse manure” side of Western history. Adams compiled two bibliographies which are standards in the
field: Six-Guns and Saddle Leather: A Bibliography of Books and Pamphlets on Western Outlaws and Gunmen, and The Rampaging Herd: A Bibliography of Books and Pamphlets on Men and Events in the Cattle Industry.8

In many respects, these bibliographies exemplify the American interest in the Hollywood West. As Adams wrote in the introduction to Six-Guns, “of all the figures of the American frontier, the bad man with the single action Colt’s revolver in his hand has the surest claim upon the attention of American readers” (p. xv). Next to the outlaw, the cowboy was “the most picturesque character” on the American ranges (Rampaging Herd, p. xvii). To be sure, there are other bibliographies less tied to popular Western images (Streeter’s Bibliography of Texas, the various WPA imprint inventories, and Cowan’s Bibliography of California, to name a few). For better or worse, the field of Western American history has begun to change, and it is important for librarians to identify the new directions and the implications for building collections.

NEW FIELDS OF INQUIRY
One of the newest fields to emerge is women’s studies. In a recent essay Susan Armitage urged historians to remove the old distortions of women in the West. This rewriting of history will “destroy both the female stereotypes—the lady, the helpmate, and the bad woman—and the male myths of adventure, individualism and violence.” Armitage called for the use of all sources, female and male, “to write a new history of the West.”9

Sandra Myers notes that although many guides to the secondary literature of the history of women in the West are appearing, “there is no comprehensive bibliography” of printed primary sources of women who actually experienced the West.10 Glenda Riley cautions future compilers that, important as it is to seek out the writings of Western women, bibliographers should be careful not to exclude the “less than literate . . . the lower and middle classes, and those of different racial and ethnic stock.”11

Female booksellers of antiquarian materials, such as Elaine Katz and Dorothy Sloan, are among those in the forefront of supplying printed source material in this new area. This has happened despite initial reluctance in the book trade for the new collecting field. Sloan recounts a conversation she had with her employer, Warren Howell of John Howell-Books, in the early 1970s. In response to her inquiry on books about women in ranching, Howell dismissed the topic by citing the lack of books, the recent publication date of those that were available, and finally, “who cares even the least about such a subject?”12

This bias is shown in Ramon Adams’s copious bibliography, Rampaging Herd, where of 2,651 entries, only about 100 deal with women. Nevertheless, Sloan has identified almost 800 books dealing with women in ranching,13 and Evelyn King has identified women who rode the Chisolm Trail.14
Riley suggests that other material to capture the experience of westering women may be "the prescriptive literature designed for 19th-century women, domestic and other novels, poems, speeches, sermons, newspaper articles," and other ephemeral sources (p. 192). These largely ignored sources mean a vast work of compilation and acquisition for those institutions that intend to provide research materials for scholars in the area of women's history in the West.

Another new area of interest for historians is the study of ethnic minorities in the West. This includes the study of African Americans, Hispanics, and Asians, among others. Recovering the printed sources which document the history of these groups is especially challenging because members of these groups were often in the lower economic classes of their communities. Among the types of material which I have handled dealing with these groups are city directories for blacks in Dallas and Denver, and a motorist guide for traveling blacks which identified hotels and restaurants in the West which would accommodate them.15

The new emphasis on social history has given rise to a new field of Western histories called community histories. While local histories (and their bibliographies) have always been compiled and written for Western communities, they have usually been published as compilations of biographies, family histories, and narratives of business institutions. The new community studies use quantitative techniques to ask questions about the social and economic composition of these communities. Historians using these techniques are not as interested in such areas of study as growth of the town, supplying municipal facilities, or the nature of local community institutions (questions which more properly belong to the study of urban history). Instead, questions of social mobility, birth rate, and male-to-female ratios are more important.16

The traditional bibliographies of local history are helpful to these new scholars as a guide to some narrative information about their communities—such as John H. Jenkins Jr., Cracker Barrel Chronicles: A Bibliography of Texas Town and County Histories (Permberton Press, 1965)—but there are many more printed sources in the community for which there are few if any bibliographic records. Published brochures, promotional pamphlets, city directories, social registers, invitations, keepsakes of fraternal orders, and broadsides which embrace political, religious, racial, and labor themes are all part of the history of a community. These can be used by scholars of the new community history to determine elite networks, residential and employment patterns, and ideological motivations for specific groups. Margaret Miller Rocq's bibliography California Local History, 2nd ed., rev. (Stanford University Press, 1970; supp. 1976) is an extraordinary example of inclusivity in this regard.

Environmental history is a new area of study which came to the academy, at least in part, as a response to the disturbing ecological practices used in the development of the West. Historians now recognize the importance of water to the
study of the arid and semi-arid West, and this in turn has opened new areas of study. The sources for the new study include the records of irrigation companies and water districts, and water promotional materials (for dams and canals).\textsuperscript{17}

Another aspect of environmental history is the study of tourism in the West. William L. Lang notes that “the general history of tourism in the West has gone begging for historical treatment.”\textsuperscript{18} Among the areas that could be included in such a study are dude ranches, historical sites and their impact on the environment, and national parks in the West. Guidebooks, travel accounts, maps, promotional brochures, and viewbooks are all part of the printed primary sources which help to document the emergence and growth of Western tourism.

The history of technology in the West is another area deserving future attention. Gilbert C. Fite notes that despite the fact that “Western farmers have been leaders in mechanizing their production, this story must be reconstructed from many sources.”\textsuperscript{19} Among the materials which serve as sources for this area are trade catalogs and pamphlets, owner’s manuals and instruction books for machinery, and agricultural newspapers and magazines.

I have in this essay reviewed a few fields of historical collecting affected by the new studies of Western history. Although interpretations seem sometimes to change in scholarly circles with the frequency of a weathervane on the West Texas plains, bibliographies of primary sources will still be consulted, even if the original reason for their compilation is no longer in vogue in academic circles. Scholars looking for accounts of how Native Americans were viewed by Western travelers can still turn to Wagner’s bibliography; historians seeking to study the myth of the outlaw in printed literature will find no better guide than Adams’s \textit{Six-Guns and Saddle Leather}. In my own experience, librarians and curators are among those on the forefront of collecting and documenting the ephemeral and other printed records of the peoples who loom large on the current horizon of the new Western history.

NOTES

1. Gerald Thompson, “Frontier West: Process or Place?” \textit{Journal of the Southwest} 29.4 (Winter 1987): 364–75. (See p. 364 of this piece, which is a review article of Roger L. Nichols’s \textit{American Frontier and Western Issues)—see note 3 below).


6. For one recent example, see William Cronon, George Miles, and Jay Gitlin, eds., Under an Open Sky: Rethinking America’s Western Past (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992).


14. Evelyn King, Women on the Cattle Trail and in the Roundup (College Station, Tex.: Brazos Corral of the Westerners, 1983).


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