

MEDIA REVIEW

The American West: Myth and Reality. 52 minutes. One videocassette, teacher's notes, card catalog kit. Available in Videocassette Beta (7VB 0005) or Videocassette VHS (7BH 0005). Order from Educational Audio Visual, Inc., 17 Marble Avenue, Pleasantville NY 10570. \$149.00.

The American West: Myth and Reality is a three-part documentary on the frontier process in United States history. Part I, Myth, is an examination of the fictional West of print, film, and television. Part II, Reality, examines the relentless success of Manifest Destiny. And Part III, Blurred Image, attempts to reconcile the poles represented by parts I and II. Each runs approximately fifteen minutes, although Part III seems somewhat longer.

Myth begins with the romantic and familiar Marlboro Country music so often used to suggest the late nineteenth-century West to veterans of television Westerns and cigarette commercials. The narrator admits that part of even the mythical West, especially prairies, mountains, and deserts, was and is real, but suggests--accurately, I believe--that the average person takes history from the romantic image of film that often only loosely reflects reality.

The mythical hero belongs to the nineteenth century. We see images of lone fighters of wrong who defend women and children and chastise evil in the form of robbers, rustlers, and others who jeopardize them. We learn that the process began in print in 1823 when James Fenimore Cooper introduced the "Leatherstocking Tales" to elite readers hungry for heroes. By the 1870s and 1880s the genre was cheapened by dime novelists who celebrated real characters in fictional exploits. In 1902 Owen Wister resurrected the genteel hero in his *Virginian*, and Zane Grey wrote on into the 1920s with similar characters. Even earlier William S. Cody--Buffalo Bill--had secured the place of the Westerner in our pantheon with his *Wild West Show*.

The greatest impact on Western myth came from motion pictures. *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) allowed audiences to *see*, much as does this tape, the heroes at their work. Liberated (or limited, as the case may be) from imagining activities suggested by print or symbolically performed in shows, audiences could personify actual Western activities through the medium of acting. Bronco Billy, Tom Mix, and William S. Hart dominated Western films in the early part of the century, and B Westerns took over until the 1950s, only to be succeeded by television Westerns and Westerns made in Italy or Spain with renewed but less attractive realism. Our

narrator concludes, with the romanticism suggested by the segment, that this mythical cowboy never was but always will be.

Part II, *Reality*, employs music and graphics to inform the viewer of the "real" West, especially the public policy-popular trend known as Manifest Destiny. The music retains the romantic atmosphere but lyrics paint a picture of hardship and human effort more believable and ordinary than Part I. Adequate images of Western industry, especially mining, farming, and cattle raising, are portrayed. Most of this is good enough history, although the script adheres strictly to the traditional interpretation of the cattle industry as being of Spanish origin, despite recent writings that view much of the American cattle industry as proceeding from Anglo-Celtic origins. Also, the presentation of Manifest Destiny reflects the bias so prevalent for generations in history texts written and published in the East.

Part III, *Blurred Image*, again uses music and graphics to try to set the record straight. It begins with a segment of the real Mountain Men, the failed Donner Party, and the Mormon migration, showing why some who journeyed West survived and some did not. Memorable points: the oft used phrase, "the Taming of the West," is contradicted by the fact that Americans brought crime to the region; myths made real people--David Crockett, Daniel Boone, Kit Carson--into superhumans who did not recognize themselves; the pleasant young man seen in many movies as Billy the Kid was really a brutal murderer; and women, most often seen as teachers or saloon girls, in reality were as hard working as they were indispensable.

Part I is the most successful of the three in establishing its point, however errant or romantic; Part II has good cuts of actual work experiences; and Part III adequately blends the myths with which we are familiar with the reality with which we should be more familiar. Each could be used separately in class, depending on the point to be made, or a whole class period could be devoted to all three for continuity. In our visual age they probably will be more successful as teachers of their topic than the standard lecturer with a map and an hour to fill. But they cannot stand alone. Like many documentaries, they are best used in conjunction with the "live performance" of the teacher who prepares the class for what they will see, explains what they saw, and interprets and expands on things that go by too rapidly for note taking. The skillful use of this medium can make it a marvelous teaching aid; unskilled use can make it an hour that is not wasted so much as it falls short of its potential. When it works, it works; and the West it recalls was *and* always will be.

Thomas C. Cochran. *Challenges to American Values: Society, Business and Religion*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987. Pp. 147. Paper, \$6.95.

Occasionally historians write thoughtful studies or "think" pieces that cover a broad sweep of American history. *Challenges to American Values* is one such work. Thomas C. Cochran, Professor of History Emeritus at the University of Pennsylvania, examines the development of American beliefs and values from a pre-industrial age to the present one of post-industrialism. Cochran, highly influenced by Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier hypothesis, sees Americans as restless, aggressive, and wasteful. Corporate business executives, for example, commonly have pursued hasty action rather than embraced careful advanced planning; this occurred in the Gilded Age and it continues a century later. Turner and his students described Americans as a "practical lot," and Cochran agrees. He suggests, for instance, that when Americans became involved in serious abstract speculation about the time of World War I, it was only because of "the inadequacy of American theoretical knowledge." Therefore, speculative thought acquired the dimension of the practical! Similarly, Americans have long glorified "common sense." This commitment to the useful and pragmatic remains strong. But, according to Cochran, Americans need to modify their historic ways. "[N]ew values . . . need to be placed on contemplation, abstract knowledge, and the governmental provision of planning and services not profitable or affordable on a market basis."

Challenges to American Values is an important work. Professor Cochran is especially skilled at relating economic change to cultural values. This is understandable since he has always written with an economic slant. This book holds considerable value to the high school student who wishes to prepare for the Advanced Placement Examination in American history; the college student who wants to tie together an American survey course; and the graduate student who seeks to understand the American past revealed in a larger light. Of course, the classroom instructor, largely for the same reasons, will discover this thoughtful and lively study to be of major worth.

M.S. Anderson. *Europe in the Eighteenth Century, 1713-1783*. London and New York: Longman, 1987. Third Edition. Pp. xii, 539. Cloth, \$34.95.

In 1961 as a lecturer at the London School of Economics and author of only one book, Mathew S. Anderson completed the first edition of *Europe in the Eighteenth Century* as part of the Longman's "History of Europe Series." Twenty-six years later, now an emeritus professor, Fellow in the Royal Historical Society, and a writer of six highly praised works on a variety of historical topics, Anderson completed the third, and perhaps, the last edition of his eighteenth-century history. That the publisher has issued it so many times and for so long suggests something about its general acceptance. Although the third edition follows the same high standards as the first, it is a better book. The most substantive revisions occurred in the chapters on "Structure of Society" and "Economic Life," in which the author has drawn on the most recent and significant articles and monographs in these fields. This is as one might expect considering the increasing popularity today of the social/cultural side of history. The format of the earlier editions offered a truncated list of sources at the beginning of each chapter; the third places them in a separate bibliography at the end of the text, a convenient change. A chronological list of the main political events that occurred in the eighteenth century remains useful, as are the maps.

Europe in the Eighteenth Century is an excellent work on all accounts. On the other hand, one must question its appropriateness as a textbook for an American undergraduate audience. The work offers more analysis than narrative. Unless students bring to the work a sound background in European history, they will fail to appreciate or even understand the erudition that radiates from the book. That is a pity. Yet it could be used effectively as a reserve reading source by assigning a few of the more significant chapters, such as "Diplomacy and International Relations" and "The Expansion of Russia: Poland, the Baltic, and the Near East."

University of Montana

Robert Lindsay