

True "Grit" and "True Grit"

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THE relatively recent success of the film version of Charles Portis's *True Grit* — with John Wayne playing its hero, Rooster Cogburn — has restored to familiar usage the term "grit." Wayne's performance, in which self-parody is indistinguishable from the serious portrayal of frontier manliness, challenges certain premises Americans hold about themselves. For the search for the meaning and the presence of true "grit" in the world of the American West ultimately leads to a re-examination of the roles which men and women were in effect asked to play by the conflicting norms of their society and their environment — *were* asked to play, that is, and also *are* asked to play, though the conditions of contemporary life differ markedly (at least in theory) from those of the legendary Wild West.

In *The Return of the Vanishing American* (1968), Leslie Fiedler discusses the several myths born of frontier experience which inform a substantial body of current American literature. Not a few of these story-patterns represent reactions to the frontier environment that are themselves part of a fictional American "character," particularly when the effects of frontier life on the American woman are considered. Fiedler identifies a Hannah Duston "Basic Myth" — that of the self-sufficient frontierswoman who survives by assuming the male role, often surpassing male skills in the part:

But women insist that their *essential fable* be not obscured by . . . irrelevant male concerns, that the story remain true to their central vision of their lot and be projected in terms of their own sort of heroine: a strong

but immensely ordinary woman — preferably a mother — who is confronted by a male antagonist and, finding no male champion, must deliver herself. . . .

. . . What really counts is the composite image created finally in any mind which tries to evoke one by one the succession of Marys and Mercys and Elizabeths and Hannahs — all, we are somehow sure, utterly un-exotic, completely non-alluring, objects of lust only to the eyes of those no better than beasts. . . .¹

Though Fiedler is forced by the relative scarcity of materials to rely rather heavily on such works as David Markson's *The Ballad of Dingus Magee* (1965), the characteristics he outlines as belonging to a certain type of frontier woman — their adoption of certain masculine traits out of a need to survive — is, I would suggest, precisely this quality of *grit* which *True Grit* is all about. For *True Grit* is the book Fiedler was writing about, even though its late publication (1968) deprived him of the chance to use it as an illustration of his theory. By it, woman in the frontier environment, where inadequate males failed to protect her from dangers, real or supposed (because the men were in the process of being gentled, turned into "Emersonians," by the frontier) ultimately led, through the conditioned reflex of self-defense, to the contemporary myth of the all-consuming female, the emasculating monster of current fiction and drama being blamed for any number of American ills. I would further suggest that the quality of "grit," definable from study of a representative frontier journalistic account, is the quality Charles Portis discovers in his heroine, and which Fiedler thinks modern American woman refuses to surrender.

What is this thing called Grit? The word's obvious elemental appeal, its onomatopoeic rightness, suits its essential definition: Grit is more than mere pluck; it is a quality of spirit taking the form of a reaction of a personality to a hostile environment. I have rather arbitrarily chosen a work by Charles Carleton Coffin (1832-1896) to present the nineteenth-century definition of Grit, for both

its representative qualities and its present lack of celebrity.

Charles Coffin was a surveyor and war reporter who went on to become a writer of books dedicated to the pursuit of manliness. As such, he is not unrepresentative of the American writer of a certain type, though a totally forgotten example. As "Carleton," he wrote travel volumes (*Our New Way Round the World*), war observations (*Four Years of Fighting*), and a series of boys' books based upon war experiences, such as *My Days and Nights on the Battle-Field*, *Following the Flag*, and *Winning His Way* — the latter of which won praise from the *Sunday School Times*, interestingly enough, for the "true American grit" its boy-hero evidenced. In 1870, Coffin published *The Seat of Empire*,² apparently to create support for the construction of a Northern Pacific Railroad to help open up the American West, and as an inducement to further settlement. In describing the qualities of the frontiersman, Coffin was also describing the attitudes of himself and his countrymen toward what, in the twentieth century, would become a phenomenon epitomized in the White House by Theodore Roosevelt and in the motion pictures of a later era by John Wayne. That phenomenon is Grit.

The fact that Grit is a transformation of the older Yankee acquisitive spirit ought to surprise no one. In Coffin's terms, the purpose of manliness is to make money; when he praises Norse settlers, for example, it is because they have caught on to the frontier's *raison d'être*: "They are poor now, but a few years hence they will be well off in the world" (p. 6). The coming railroad, for which Coffin's settlers wait as for a Messiah, will work an almost religious sort of redemption upon the land. He pictures the Father of Waters as about to give up his heretofore lazy mode of existence: "He will not be allowed to idle away his time by leaping and laughing year in and year out over yonder cataract. He must work for the good of the Human race" (p. 24).

All things act for Progress. The ex-Governor of Vermont is portrayed as having carried the zeal with which he cared for the War's wounded with him into the world of business, bringing to the Northern Pacific's expansion a "like zeal and energy" (p. 27). "The locomotive — that great civilizer of this century — will be here before the flowers bloom . . ." They will not bloom so profusely again, for "another year will bring the beginning of the change" (p. 49). Although Coffin later regrets the fact that new farmers are heedlessly "cruel towards Mother Earth" (pp. 191-2), he is generally the proponent of enterprise and commercial development first; pretensions to Art will follow quite naturally (pp. 118-9), as Louis Wright has shown in *Culture on the Moving Frontier* and elsewhere. Indeed, it is as if the Railroad were Nature's Manifest Destiny:

Nature has done a great deal for the place, — scooping out the ravine as if the sole purpose had been to make the construction of a railroad an easy matter. (pp. 10-11)

It is precisely the doctrine of Manifest Destiny that is the larger accompaniment of the individual frontier spirit. Democratic Man, "practical in all things" (p. 20), will work Yankee ingenuity upon the landscape: "We see New England thrift and enterprise, for the six States east of the Hudson have been sending their wide-awake sons and daughters to this section for the last twenty years" (pp. 19-20). Babbitt is on the way, bringing pep and enthusiasm:

. . . and to think that this is the development of American civilization, going on now as never before, and destined to continue till all this wide region is to be thus dotted over with centres of influence and power, sends an indescribable thrill through our veins. It is not merely that we are Americans, but because in this land Christian civilization is attaining the highest development of all time. (p. 18)

Coffin's confidence in the Christian rectitude of the American settlers sweeps all other considerations before it, merging the coming of the railroad with those of the cross and

the ballot. So carried away does Coffin become with the idea of national and regional expansion that he cries out, in a rare mood of negative enthusiasm, against the "pusillanimity of President Polk" (p. 61). (Under Polk, the United States agreed to settle for less than all of the Oregon Territory, thus losing the area around Winnipeg; yet, during this same Polk Administration, the United States accomplished an almost incredible national expansion through the Oregon border settlement and the Mexican War.) However, he later takes heart from the knowledge that the arbitrary 49th Parallel border line will sooner or later "fade away" (p. 105). Coffin, in short, is a typical nineteenth-century American apologist for the sea-to-sea (Arctic to Caribbean as well) establishment of the American Way.

Still, it is in individual men that the individualist philosophy of Grit will largely manifest itself. The relationship of the sexes is peculiarly affected by the move to the frontier, and it is here that the study of Coffin is closely pertinent to that of both Fiedler and Portis. Coffin describes the unsuccessful attempts of a "lively La Crosse maiden" to persuade members of his party to dance (pp. 4-5), then shortly afterwards notes the fact that "in the West young men are plenty, maidens scarce" (p. 12). Coffin apparently misses the connection between the frontier's distraction of male attentions and the subsequent effects in women, with the further result of a low population of acceptable (presumably, *white*) "maidens" on such an inhospitable and ungracious frontier.

There is a paradox here, an important double-standard of social behavior that is responsible for a definite part of the drama of the frontier (and which is even present in the cliché of the cowboy and his horse, or the curiously chaste love affairs of the Virginian and his successors). Familiar in these days of Women's Liberation, the quality of this unique sexual energy has evidently deeply impressed Fiedler as somehow central to the American national

identity, and the initial contradiction-in-terms of the Woman with Grit is its everyday avatar. "Where men are men and women are women" begins to seem like Protesting Too Much.

Come out to the West, calls Coffin to "young men of the East" who are "barely earning your living" at "measuring off tape for young ladies" (p. 50). Come out and make your fortune! Coffin's customary exclamation points are seldom so common as when he talks about the invigorating qualities of the frontier upon the "weariest mind or jaded body" of the man who visits it, shortly to become "good as new, — tough, rugged, hale, hearty, and ready for a frolic here, or another battle with life when we reach home" (p. 132). The results of this separation from women, and of making the frontier one's temporary (or permanent) mistress, is an evident two-stage development. Grit's sexual aspects thereby seem to parallel Crèvecoeur's distinction between frontier Nature's decivilizing effects upon the hunter, and the following second stage in which, as if by miracle, life upon the cleared farm and its resultant uplifting qualities create the personal independence that makes genuine Democracy possible.

Something of the sort left its mark upon sexual relations in the United States, at least in their literary manifestations, and point to a radical displacement of the casually accepted traditional roles of the sexes in American life. Women were thrust upon their own resources by male abandonment — either temporary, while land was cleared or battles fought, or permanent, as young men went westward in search of fortune, and learned to "handle fishing-rod or rifle," as Coffin puts it, "not aiming to be Amazons" but merely to survive, to cope with a new reality (p. 30):

It is the glory of our civilization that it adapts itself to all the circumstances of life. I have no doubt that if Minnie, or Winnie, or Georgiana, or almost any of the pale, attenuated young ladies who are now frittering away their time in studying the last style of *paniers*, or

thrumming the piano, or reading the latest vapid novel, were to have their lot cast in the West, — on the frontiers of civilization, — where they would be *compelled* to do something for themselves or those around them, that they would manfully and *womanfully* accept the situation, be far happier than they now are, and worth more to themselves and to the world. (pp. 152-3)

“Manfully and *womanfully*.” Womanfully and *manfully*, Fiedler might well suggest: the dislocation of sexual focus, the setting-up of falsely-resonant sexual antagonisms, is that profound. Coffin is as serious in his way, though less consciously so, as Fiedler: he tells of a farm run by seven sisters, “plucky girls” who might “set a good example to young men” (pp. 204-5); he mentions an eighty-year-old woman whose white hair, after the experience of moving onto the frontier, came back in “its original color” (pp. 115-6). He concludes that frontier life increases sexuality, or how else to explain the “abundance of children” in “all new communities”? (p. 183)

But before the resumption of normal sexual relationships, there is that period of prolonged separation of the sexes which guarantees that woman, having learned in the meantime to be something of a man, will never be the same again. Therefore, it is man as well as woman that Coffin describes when he portrays his frontier ideal, whether as the “keen-sighted” and “quick to act” guide Bot-tineau (pp. 109-10), or the coming Nordic American superman — and superwoman:

The future man of the Northwest will have American, Norse, Celtic, and Saxon blood in his veins. His countenance, in the pure, dry, electric air, will be as fresh as the morning. His muscles will be iron, his nerves steel. Vigor will characterize his every action, — for climate gives quality to the blood, strength to the muscles, power to the brain. (pp. 230-1)

Thus Coffin argues for the arising of a race of Northern godlings out of the American soil, the vision of which is the point where the concept of Grit becomes a form of mystical experience.

This recognizably epic quality to which the acquisition of Grit may be said to lead turns the object of quest in

Charles Portis's *True Grit*, a man with "true Grit," into the personification of the virtue that the girl who is the novel's focal character has been taught to revere. (Oddly enough, the choice of film locations respects this epic quality far better than the novel, which handles the matter ironically, "truthfully": the film replaces the novel's Indian territory with an exaltedly Wyomingish high country.) Epic begins when home is left behind.

Portis's attempt to render faithfully the manners and speech of the nineteenth-century frontier, his deadpan accuracy of spoken diction, is what impresses the reader first, quickly delineating the character of Portis's fourteen-year-old heroine, Mattie Ross, and her milieu. "Here is what happened,"³ she will say, and her reliability as a witness is established. She has lost her father, and is in pursuit of his killer; she will have to follow him into "the Territory." In these and other respects the novel seems made up out of the cloth of *Huck Finn*, and further study along that line is surely warranted; in both books, however, the missing father-figure is the source of a search that produces a surrogate-father, a plot similarity that in the Portis work has sexual ramifications not present in Clemens's.

Mattie's voice characteristically flattens actions to the level of ordinary events coolly reported, just as her narrative method punctures the romance of the Old West. She talks incessantly about money, from the first page until she recalls the price of Rooster's tombstone; in fact, there is considerable talk of money in this book, and Portis reminds us that all things had their prices in this place and time — and the comparative values are noteworthy. Mattie had been her father's bookkeeper; interestingly, her power with numbers makes her any man's equal, suggesting that money and not the gun was the great equalizer in the Old West. Certainly, Coffin's summoning westward of the enterprising youth of Yankee New England is not irrelevant. And Mattie can *write*, becoming valuable thereby

to illiterate outlaws (pp. 186-8); her sort will inherit the West (compare Cather's *A Lost Lady*), for, as Rooster complains,

"... If you don't have no schooling you are up against it in this country. That is the way of it. No sir, that man has no chance any more. No matter if he has got sand in his craw, others will push him aside, little thin fellows that have won spelling bees back home." (pp. 79-80)

Written in 1928, supposedly, Mattie's reflections acquire an added poignancy, for Rooster ended up in a Wild West show, and the country went to the "little thin fellows" in fact. Finally, she often quotes the Bible, and places phrases she considers of doubtful propriety or quality in quotation marks. All in all, she is well conceived as a character made up out of the stuff of nineteenth-century first-person accounts of adventure.

Papa's "kindly disposition" in a cruel world was his undoing, and because of his weakness his daughter has had to shed her role as adolescent girl to avenge his loss, personal and financial (pp. 10-11). She must be about "my father's business" (p. 24); perhaps that line epitomizes her presumption of rectitude, and necessitates some punishment, some extra loss, before she can go on to adulthood, her initiation completed. In other respects she is a charming mixture of fair- and narrow-mindedness. She defends a black man from insult (p. 16), but attacks half-breeds as a group (p. 55). At a critical moment in the narrative, she finds time to reflect upon a man with "foreign-looking" eyes:

He reminded me of some of those Slovak people that came in here a few years ago to cut barrel staves. The ones that stayed have made good citizens. People from those countries are usually Catholic if they are anything. They love candles and beads. (p. 121)

Her attitudes towards religions crop up in startling ways; when discussing differences between types of Presbyterians, for example, she says of the Cumberland body:

. . . they are not sound on Election. They do not fully accept it. I confess it is a hard doctrine, running contrary to our earthly ideas of fair play, but I can see no way around it. Read I Corinthians 6:13 and II Timothy 1:9, 10. Also I Peter 1: 2, 19, 20 and Romans 11:7. There you have it. It was good enough for Paul and Silas and it is good enough for me. It is good enough for you too. (pp. 109-10)

She can believe that animals have a capacity for evil intent (p. 29) and yet be stuck with grief for the death of a pony (p. 207). (Interestingly, her male protectors are named Rooster and LaBoeuf.) In all of these respects, she brings hardheaded Yankee rectitude to the frontier's fiery forge, accomplishing maturation by the testing of prior principle, and winning her "manhood" in terms Coffin would approve.

Her test for Grit — for the novel is obviously about *her* Grit and not that of Rooster, although references to Grit are confined to him (pp. 55-6, 193, 210) — comes in the form of a succession of often painful experiences commencing with her father's death and ending with the news of the death of her substitute father and (though Mattie disguises her feelings, as usual) probable love-object, Rooster Cogburn. Thus her life, her *becoming*, takes place between the deaths of two male figures; at novel's end, she is left quite *finished* on at least two levels. It is Coffin's concept of frontier maturation coming home with a vengeance.

The specific experiences Mattie enjoys include the sight of a public hanging (pp. 18-19), a session of bargaining with Rooster for his services (pp. 59-60) after which she refuses a lady's gun to replace the large one her father owned (p. 62), a bout of sickness (from which she recuperates by reading — and enjoying — an English novel about a girl who blushes and beats around the bush, but finally marries) (p. 66), defending herself as woman and child from the insults of LaBoeuf (p. 72), crossing a river on horseback when the men try to leave her behind (pp. 102-3), and the intensification of violence that follows movement "deeper into the Territory" (p. 107) and climaxes in a brutal and

bloody fight from which Mattie hurriedly withdraws (p. 128).

Nor is this the limit of Mattie's trials. Portis has contrived for her one of the most harrowing perils in all of fiction: she falls into a rattlesnake pit, breaking an arm which she later loses; before she is rescued, she must suffer probable spiders and bats, the snakes that surround her, the human skeleton whose assistance she eventually requires to prolong her suspension over a further and deeper pit into whose opening she is wedged — a veritable birth-reversal in which the earth seeks to reclaim her and from which only her Grit and that of her two male guardians saves her; finally, there is a long ride for medical assistance, and the loss of the horse and the arm (pp. 195-202).

Because she falls into the rattlesnake pit as a result of the recoil from the shot she fires into the cowardly villain Tom Chaney (p. 195), her agony is the direct novelistic result of her own participation in adulthood, in the act of judgment, and in the compromise with evil that is life. Without delving into the full set of associations that a symbol-hunter might derive from the pit incident (for the book is also something of a literary trap for would-be critics), one can easily isolate the broken arm as symbolic spiritual wounding, the snakes as Evil, and the skeleton as the embodiment of the compromise she must make with reality. In effect, Portis is presenting a novel whose point is the realization of the ambiguity of morality in a world which, especially as Coffin conceived of it, pretended to moral absolutes. For the story of personal success in the American West can be read as a deep and personal wounding of the psyche of those who survive its stern codes, its demands for that focus of effort and self more cavalierly known as Grit.

True Grit, re-examined from this point of view, reveals a chain of incidents that operate to comment upon justice, or to question it in the reader's moral consciousness. There is the "hanging judge" Parker, who in sending one hundred

and sixty men to the gallows was responding to the outlaw code he was fighting against, and whose career causes Mattie to muse, "I don't know who was right," and later, "It is something to think about" (pp. 38-9). The section of the novel which is a court transcript of a Parker trial with Rooster on the witness stand is itself a test, albeit an often humorous one, of the Little Orphan Annie conception of justice Rooster operates under (pp. 41-54). Rooster's comments on Judge Parker sum up the old lawman's code:

"Judge Parker knows. He is a old carpetbagger but he knows his rats. We had a good court here till the pettifogging lawyers moved in on it. . . . The rat-catchers is too hard on the rats. That is what they say. *Let up on them rats! Give them rats a fair show!* What kind of show did they give Columbus Potter? Tell me that. A finer man never lived." (p. 63)

Where is justice to be found? Is it in the gold piece whose recovery leads Mattie to think herself close to a moral victory? (p. 130) Is it to be found in the interweaving of law and outlawry in the career, before and after Mattie's arrival, of Rooster Cogburn? (pp. 134-41) Is it to be found in the replacement of Rooster's concept of manhood with a gentler code, a slower justice, and a proliferation of lawyers? The novel has no answer, of course, since this very question taxes American society at the present moment. It can only show the obsolescence of Rooster and his ways (and those, by extension, of John Wayne), and the accelerating obscurity of moral positions. It does not lessen the pathos of Rooster's loss, nor the longing for the simplicity with which he faced the world, confident in his own frontier-achieved manhood. Grit, ultimately, is no guarantee of triumph, only of having tried.

Sex is politics. (Surely that point is clear enough by now.) The matter of justice in *True Grit* is inseparable from the matter of Mattie's femininity, or rather her surrender of it — the point raised directly by Fiedler and indirectly by Coffin. Mattie never marries, the changes

wrought upon her by her experiences presumably having made such a step impossible. One can readily identify her as a type of New Woman, like those relics of warfare that fill Faulkner's pages, testimonials to manhood's exhaustion in one form or another. Rooster complains, there is "no generosity in women. They want everything coming in and nothing going out. They show no trust" (p. 166). But Rooster is describing such women as Strindberg's, creatures who want the best of both sexual worlds. Mattie Ross is, on the other hand, a pitiable creature who surrenders her womanhood in order to do a man's work, and whose character is frozen at the moment of her attainment of "manhood" through trial: through the crisis engendered by her use of her Papa's pistol:

" . . . People love to talk. They love to slander you if you have any substance. They say I love nothing but money and the Presbyterian Church and that is why I never married. They think everybody is dying to get married. It is true I love my church and my bank. What is wrong with that? . . ." (pp. 214-5)

Mattie Ross is a female Huck Finn who, having gone out to the Territory and returned forever changed thanks to the coincidence of violent action and her own emerging sexuality, has surrendered innocence and femininity both, and is left, her Rooster dead, with a shaky sense of religious — even puritanical — righteousness and her bank shares, poised on the edge of a literal Depression that will shatter the invincibility of both for all time. With them, the peculiar distortions of her own brand of frontier achievement will lose their last shreds of credible value. Old, ugly, rich, she is the last stage of an enactment of an American classic myth: the good little girl who turned into a self-made man. Searching for something magical, a man with True Grit, she found him within herself, and the implications of her discovery destroy for the readers of a later day the optimistic conception of Grit made available to the readers of men such as Charles Coffin.

NOTES

- ¹Leslie Fiedler, *The Return of the Vanishing American* (New York: Stein and Day, 1968), p. 95.
- ²"Carleton," *The Seat of Empire* (Boston: Fields, Osgood & Co., 1870); the "grit" praise appears in the advertisement endpapers, and all page references appear parenthetically within my text.
- ³Charles Portis, *True Grit* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968), p. 9. All subsequent references appear parenthetically within my text.

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