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The 'Wild' West, Where a Myth Is as Good as a Mile

by Ivan Doig

When Ted Turner, Tom Brokaw, Dolly Parton, Whoopi Goldberg and other entertainment luminaries bought hideaways in Montana, we figured we finally had it made, those of us who derive from the place and have tried to unload the cowboy myth we and our part of the country have been saddled with.

~~As with many Westerners,~~ my mailing address is now "out on the Coast," suburban, metropolitan--a common move for so many of us whose lives have been chapters in the diaspora from the land and America's rural past. But just as James Joyce didn't stop being an Irishman when he went to Paris, those of us who were born and raised along the Rocky Mountains and the upper Missouri River don't stop knowing where we're from.

Quite a number of us out West in fact do what writers have always done and pay homage to our native place in our words. By now a couple of literary generations of us, through fiction and memoir and the insights of our scholarly allies called the "New West" historians, have produced versions of the West that turn "The Virginian" on his head. Owen Wister's 1902 novel colored the West with that blood-red tint of the gunfighting cowboy--the walkdown in the dusty street, "When you call me that, smile," bang bang bang bang and so on. The cowboys without the cows, that version of the West was, because no one in Wister's pages ever did the milking or put in time at the calving shed; they were much too busy with gunplay.

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So, those of us from the West of women homesteaders and male schoolteachers--the West of people who came to build and not to destroy, to work but to dance and laugh along with it--thought we had safely written our way past "The Virginian" and his later heftier cohorts in popular culture, John Wayne and Louis L'Amour. Ted-Tom-Dolly-Whoopi in the West obviously were at least a different story from bang bang bang bang.

Then, though, the Unabomber suspect and the so-called Freeman, both in Montana: what's going on out there?

Well, out where? Take a look at the distance between those two news events, and if the Unabomber suspect, say, had been nabbed in St. Louis, the Freeman would be out in the weeds somewhere south of Memphis. But would the media then be asking what had got into the water of the Mississippi, to cause all this?

What's lost, when the simplistic image of the cowboy, in his quick-change guise of gunfighter and vigilante, is plastered on the American West, is the complicated story of that big stretch of our country. What I notice, beyond the outbreak of news about turbulent individuals and cults in places such as my homestate, is the resilience of Montanans and other Westerners who go about their chores in hard country without turning humorless and conspiracy-obsessed.

In a media world which one week features mad cows and Englishmen, and the next, the Unabomber suspect and the Freeman, some Montanans had the wit to start sporting rueful T-shirts and bumper stickers that say: "At least our cows aren't crazy." The cows without the cowboys; now there's a promising theme.

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Ivan Doig's recent novel "Bucking the Sun" is set in Montana. He will be speaking at Left Bank Books on May 29.