

# Red River Rationalist

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redriverfreethinkers.org

## OLD BOOKS; NEW BOOKS

**Davis Cope**

[Reviews books or anything else interesting to Cope]

*The Virginian: A Horseman of the Plains.* By Owen Wister.

I recently read this 1902 best-seller for the first time (to advance my familiarity with the classics) and found it the quintessence of the western novel, indeed, possibly the very origin of now hackneyed western cliches. Chapter 2, for example, is entitled "When You Call Me That, SMILE!". The main character, known only as the Virginian, wins the hand of a proud schoolmarm, who has moved from Vermont to Wyoming to make a life for herself. A gunfight with an old enemy is part of the wedding preparations. But none of these things is overdone, and it makes a great read. The characters include the narrator, who starts as a tenderfoot and ends with calluses, a hen named Em'ly, occasional rustlers (alive and dead), Monte the horse, a Judge, a Parson, a bishop, sidekicks and other cowboys, the occasional bartender, and respectable folk. The Virginian and his old enemy start as just cowboys together, but they can't get along from the get-go (Chapter 2). About midway through the book, there is a moment of hope when the Virginian beats his old enemy at the telling of tall tales (OK, it was about a frog ranch in California), a situation with more than usual potential for good (and, I should think, rather less for evil). But the old enemy just cannot bring himself to lose gracefully and steps onto the path of darkness leading to the fatal showdown.

But the characters talk real and act real and that certainly makes them as real as anybody I've ever heard of at second hand. The Virginian is a genuine hero, and this understanding is not hampered by having much of his nature revealed through his practical jokes. Did Homer ever use this approach? As best I recall, Achilles was touchy about his honor and Ulysses found gravitas mighty handy. That would tend to make them the butt of the Virginian's practical jokes rather than accomplices. Come to think of it, weren't the gods playing practical jokes on Achilles and company? Thus we see that, in early Western Civilization, the playing of practical jokes was an aspect of the divine.

The Parson mentioned above is the Rev. Dr. Alexander MacBride, an intense and wordy Calvinist of a missionary, visiting Judge Henry's ranch on his way to his station ("... the Judge detained me behind all of them long enough to whisper dolorously, 'He's going to stay a whole week.'"). Dr. MacBride has apparently asserted his social prerogative and is to give a sermon after his first evening's supper, at which he has shown himself a pompous prig. There are hints that he intends a sermon after every supper the whole seven days! Such is the tyranny of social convention! Anyway, the supper table is cleared away, chairs are lined up, Judge Henry, his wife and visitors (including the now lightly callused narrator), and the ranch hands (called in from the bunkhouse and including the Virginian, promoted to foreman earlier that evening) sit themselves down and look to Dr. MacBride. "He made his selection ... from the Psalms; and when it came, I did not dare to look at anybody; I was much nearer unseemly conduct than the cowboys. Dr. MacBride gave us his text sonorously, "'They are altogether become filthy; There is none of them that doeth good, no, not one.'" His eye showed us plainly that present company was not excepted from this. He repeated the text once more, then, launching upon his discourse, gave none of us a ray of hope."

"I had heard it all before; but preached to cowboys it took on a new glare of untimeliness, of

grotesque obsolescence ... . The cow-boys were told that not only they could do no good, but that if they did contrive to, it would not help them. Nay, more: not only honest deeds availed them nothing, but even if they accepted this especial creed which was being explained to them as necessary for salvation, still it might not save them. Their sin was indeed the cause of their damnation, yet, keeping from sin, they might nevertheless be lost. It had all been settled for them not only before they were born, but before Adam was shaped. Having told them this, he invited them to glorify the Creator of the scheme. ... " And so on. (I am pleased to note that the bishop, who pops up occasionally, in particular just before the eventual gunfight, appears as a more humble, and admirable, Christian exemplar.) What effect on the hands? "Their attention merely wandered. Three hundred years ago they would have been frightened; but not in this electric day. ... but I forgot the Virginian. At first his attitude might have been mere propriety. One can look respectfully at a preacher and be internally breaking all the commandments. But even with the text I saw real attention light in the Virginian's eye. And keeping track of the concentration that grew on him with each minute made the sermon short for me. He missed nothing. Before the end his gaze at the preacher had become swerveless. Was he convert or critic? Convert was incredible. Thus was an hour passed before I had thought of time." The sermon ends, to no particular effect, and when the Judge gloomily reflects, "I suppose I'll have to take [MacBride] trout fishing", he is reminded that he must indeed, "otherwise, ... it might be reported that you were enemies of religion".

MacBride and the narrator share one of the two rooms of the foreman's bunkhouse, and the newly promoted Virginian moves into the other. Late that night, the Virginian wakes the narrator as he slips into the room and says to Dr. MacBride "... I feel like my spirit was going to bear witness. I feel like I might get an enlightening." The use of such language electrifies Dr. MacBride, who retreats with him into the Virginian's room, "... where I could hear exhortations as I lay amazed." The Doctor eventually reappears and, mission accomplished, settles himself to sleep. A bit later, the Virginian enters and steps to the Doctor's bed:

"Are you awake, seh?"

"What? What's that? What is it?"

"Excuse me, seh. The enemy is winning on me. I'm feeling less inward opposition to sin."

Off to the Virginian's room again and "some further exhortations. They must have taken half an hour. When the Doctor was in bed again, I thought that I heard him sigh. This upset my composure in the dark; but I lay face downward in the pillow, and the Doctor was soon again snoring." But the voice of the Virginian sounds suddenly at 3 am:

'I'm afeared to be alone! ... I'm afeared! I'm losin' my desire afteh the sincere milk of the Word!'

'What? What's that? What?' The Doctor's cot gave a great crack as he started up listening, and I put my face deep in the pillow.

'I'm afeared! I'm afeared! Sin has quit being bitter in my belly.'

'Courage, my good man.' The Doctor was out of bed with his lamp again, and the door shut behind him. Between them they made it long this time.

Day arrives, and the Doctor, successful, enters. "... [H]e came in with his book and lamp. He seemed to be shivering a little, and I saw him cast a longing eye at his couch. But the Virginian followed him even as he blew out the now quite superfluous light. They made a noticeable couple in their underclothes: the Virginian with his lean racehorse shanks running to a point at his ankle, and the Doctor with his stomach and his fat sedentary calves. 'You'll be going to breakfast and the ladies, seh, pretty soon,' said the Virginian, with a chastened voice. 'But I'll worry through the day somehow

without you'. And to-night you can turn your wolf loose on me again.' Once more it was no use. My face was deep in the pillow, but I made sounds as of a hen who has laid an egg. It broke on the Doctor with a total instantaneous smash, quite like an egg. He tried to speak calmly. 'This is a disgrace ... .'"

The Virginian has, of course, risked his newly won position as foreman in ribbing the Judge's honored guest this way, but the temptation was clearly unbearable. As it happens, the Doctor declines to stay the week and departs immediately. When the Judge learns indirectly of his foreman's role, he is merciful.

I said the characters talk real and act real, and one of the real things they do is to talk about religion, The Virginian speaks his view on several occasions and has even expressed his view on Original Sin several pages earlier:

'... As for salvation, I have got this far: somebody,' he swept an arm at the sunset and the mountains, 'must have made all that, I know. But I know one more thing I would tell Him to His face: if I can't do nothing long enough and good enough to earn eternal happiness, I can't do nothing long enough and bad enough to be damned. I reckon He plays a square game with us if He plays at all, and I ain't bothering my haid about other worlds.'

Bertrand Russell might have spelled it differently but could not have said it better.

- Davis Cope

### *Pledge of Allegiance*

*(1924 - 1954)*

*I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America,  
and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation,  
indivisible, with liberty and justice for all*

## **Imperial President**

*When the twin towers fell, we were madder'n hell,  
King George, though, just ran off to hide.  
When he finally came back, he put on a hard hat,  
And he stood on some rubble and lied.*

*Said George, "It's that Goddamn ol' dictator Saddam  
"Who has hatched this nefarious plot;  
"We'll have to go back and we'll blow up Iraq*

*"To destroy all those weapons he's got."*

*"It's a real no-brainium -- he been buyin' uranium*

*"And soon we'll see mushroom clouds bloom.*

*"We must never forget, he's a terrible threat;*

*"We must rush in and take him down soon!"*

*Though his info was flawed, Georgie told us that God*

*Had ordained that he take out Hussein.*

*Shrub had made up his mind - he wasn't weak-spined -*

*That a Bush would bomb Saddam again.*

*The U.N. had inspected and never detected*

*Those weapons that Shrub swore were there.*

*But George wouldn't listen -- he said they were hidden;*

*Saddam sure would never play fair.*

*Well, then we all saw the renowned "shock and awe"*

*As our "smart bombs" laid waste to the land.*

*Yet with all of the damage we never did manage*

*To find WMD's in the sand.*

*Now the picture gets scarier; Shrub struts on a carrier*

*With "Mission Accomplished" proclaimed;*

*And our "awesome" attack had laid waste to Iraq;*

*Countless thousands were murdered and maimed.*

*Now the years have gone by 'n our soldiers are dyin'*

*The casualties mount 'n their mothers are cryin'*

*The war's all a fraud 'n it weren't really Saddam;*

*'Twas Osama bin Laden - and George? He bin lyin'.*

(c 2006 Chuck Crane)

TREATMENT of the screenplay **KENTUCKY HOME** by **LEWIS LUBKA, 2006**

[Note: A "Treatment" is a condensed version of the screen play, with not much room for dialogue or scene setting, but mainly the story line/plot and some character development. The Kentucky Home treatment will be printed in installments in the Red River Rationalist. This is the second installment.]

Moore is crestfallen, but pleads for just a quick look inside. Wallace, decent at heart, tells him that even though it is a violation of the unwritten rules, or gentleman's agreement, the Moores may have a peek. They hurry inside, have a swift look around, glance out of the back window and drive away. Betty is now much more supportive of the dream.

Some time later, Moore is filling up at a gasoline station when he notices Don Wallace also filling up

at the next pump. They greet one another and Wallace tells him to swear not to tell anyone where he got this information, but if he is to get that house, or any other outside the ghetto, his best bet is to give the down payment to a white person who would then buy the house and transfer title to Moore. They part cordially. (Every white is not a Ku Kluxer!)

Moore drives home and excitedly tells Betty about the new development. She is thrilled, but then wonders whether there is a white in Louisville who would risk such a deal, and if there is, how can they find such person.

Moore goes to the office of his pastor, the Reverend Ernest Rucker, of the Ebenezer Baptist Church. Rucker is a bishop of the church and also a lawyer. He has been in several civil rights battles over the years. Rucker is also a bon vivant who likes rum and betting on horses.

Moore tells the Bishop about his dream and outlines events up to the present, including the need to find a white person who will buy the house and transfer title. The pastor has a large vision, but is grounded in reality. He sees the possibilities for a breakthrough for the Black community, but also sees potential pitfalls: opposition from the power structure, from racist whites and from those Blacks who have accommodated and have a cozy niche within the system.

Rucker, however, assures Moore that he will lend his and the church's support and he will try to find a white who will buy the house and transfer the title.

At a regular meeting of the dozen ministers of the Black Ministerial Alliance of Louisville, Rev. Rucker brings up Sterling Moore's house hunting efforts. There is heated discussion and the group is deeply divided. Some question Moore's motives in trying to better himself while leaving his community behind. The meeting ends in disarray.

A short while later, Rev. Moses Duval, a black minister who attended the Ministerial Association meeting phones Bishop Rucker to tell him that he has found a white person who might buy the house for Moore. A welder in his congregation has a white friend, Lewis Overby. When Overby is mentioned to Moore, he remembers meeting him at a NAACP meeting.

Moore and Overby meet in Rev. Rucker's office. They quickly bond as friends. Both are fathers of young children and both look forward to a better society. They discuss the house purchase and transfer of title. Overby says he'll do it if his wife agrees.

Overby discusses the impending house purchase with Amanda. Although she shares his egalitarian views, she is more cautious. She also realizes that although there may be some negative consequences, they either have to act on their core beliefs or be hypocrites. She gives him the go-ahead.

Overby makes an appointment with the Realtor and comes to the office with Amanda. He brings a check for the down payment. At the office, Wallace introduces him to Charles "Buck" Gruber, developer of the subdivision and his wife, Gertrude. Gruber mentions that he comes from an old Kentucky family that owned slaves in the "good old days". He inherited several acres that he is subdividing and developing. The land was once part of a large slave plantation owned by family members. He proudly states that he can trace his family back to the days before the Civil War. He plans to develop all the land he owns and buy adjoining land which he has optioned. The house Overby is buying is one of five that are sold or on the market. Several others are almost completed and will be sold soon.

The Grubers live almost directly across the street from the house being sold. Buck says he is looking forward to his children playing with Overby's son and having Lewis and Amanda as neighbors. They are both very uncomfortable and visibly tense up. This is a crucial moment. They are straight-forward people forced by circumstances into a flagrant deception. They want to help Moore and strike a blow against segregation but they have to lie to do this. In their value system, however, equal rights and democracy trump racism and falsehood. This bit of trickery, however, puts their character to a severe challenge. After the documents are signed the Grubers and Overbys go their ways.

(Continued next month)

The Red River Freethinkers is organized by freethinkers to be a nonprofit educational organization. We are a group of nonreligious people skeptical of religious dogma. We advocate Intellectual Freedom and the use of Reason. Articles and letters in this newsletter present ideas and opinions of individual writers and do not necessarily reflect those of the Red River Freethinkers organization.

### **Red River Freethinkers Board Members**

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Items for newsletter may be sent to P.O. Box 995, Alexandria, MN 56308

## **Red River Freethinkers Calendar**

Regularly scheduled meetings are held at 2:30 p.m. on the third Sunday of each month at the Fargo Unitarian Universalist Church at 121 9th Street South in Fargo.

For **August 20, 2006**, we will discuss some business matters, including the possibility of changing our meeting schedule and format. Suggestions are welcome and can be provided at the meeting or passed along to Davis Cope at any time.

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***"... [President Bush] didn't let the new facts affect him. In that sense, the whole issue is emblematic of what's wrong with the Bush presidency: his inflexibility, obsession with his conservative base, religious arrogance and contempt for scientific consensus."***

Jonathan Alter, "It Was the Veto of a Lifetime", *Newsweek*, July 31, 2006 (an article on the veto of the bill on stem cell research.)

## **Communicating**

[The following excerpt is by Kaz Dziamka, Editor, in the July/August *American Rationalist*, commenting on the language barrier between those of differing religious or political persuasions.]

".... human language in general is a rather imperfect means of communication and ... many of our religious, political, and other dilemmas are caused by grammatical ambiguities and semantic instabilities. Some of the most hilarious examples of such linguistic problems are attempts to determine what the Bible really means, whether, for example ... the barbaric biblical 'fatwa' not to suffer witches to live (Exodus 22:18) is compatible with another biblical injunction not to kill; whether this particular commandment, 'Thou shall not kill,' applies to American freedom 'spreaders' or not, since apparently killing is fine, but murdering is not .... There is semantic madness out there, so to speak, and we are all being made fools of by those who themselves are being made fools of by others. And so lawyers prosper and will be around as long as prostitutes. For ever.

"This spectacle of semantic chaos becomes really terrifying when we turn to political discourse. Are American 'liberators' killing 'insurgents' in Iraq; or, rather, are the Pentagon-trained professional assassins murdering Iraqi civilians and Iraqi patriots? Is the 'military action' against Iraq a pre-emptive 'ethical' war; or is it organized, US-supported mass murder? You can pick and choose, you can bend a grammatical rule here and distort a meaning there, and you can argue in support of either Ann Coulter or Noam Chomsky. And you'd be equally eloquent and persuasive. That's because: ***"Language being an imperfect method of communication, we can easily bamboozle one another endlessly."***

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