

When Cowboys Became Capitalists and the West Became New

John Clayton

Caroline Lockhart (1871–1962) wore many of the brands of the classic Western genre novelist: a love of horses, a nostalgia for the open range, a stylistic affection for literary formula and contrivance, and an appreciation for how the western landscape could pose physical threats to men of adventure. But in other ways she was remarkably unusual. She was a woman—indeed, an unmarried woman living in a small Western town. Her interests ranged beyond cattle. And her characters were based not on the heroic prototypes of James Fenimore Cooper and other frontier mythmakers, but rather personal experience.

For her fourth novel, *The Man From the Bitter Roots* (1915), Lockhart desperately needed a success. After the widely admired debut of *Me-Smith* (a bestseller in 1911), her career had slipped. *The Lady Doc* (1912) was as much a personal vendetta as a novel; Lockhart had worked so hard at making her fact-based protagonist an unpleasant character that nobody wanted to read about her. Lockhart followed that up with *The Full of the Moon* (1914), a novel she had been trying to publish for fifteen years—with a justified lack of success. With slow sales, Lockhart's money likely running thin, and her paranoia telling her that critics

would pounce on a failure, she may have felt some pressure to produce a blockbuster. Worse, her only copy of the new manuscript had been accidentally destroyed while she was traveling in Central America.¹ She'd had to rewrite it, and quickly.

Lockhart never thought of herself as a pulp novelist, so she tried to make this book strong and unique. Within her limitations, she met with some success. *The Man From the Bitter Roots* received better reviews than any of her books since *Me-Smith*.² It apparently sold at least modestly well, furnishing enough money for Lockhart to travel and play for three or four years without needing to publish again quickly. It would soon become a movie, directed by Oscar Apfel and starring William Farnum, both leading Hollywood figures of the day.³ And it set the stage for two later novels, *The Fighting Shepherdess* (1919) and *The Dude Wrangler* (1921), which today are seen as some of her strongest.

But what may be most successful about *The Man From the Bitter Roots* is the way it defies standard critical interpretations. This is not a Western about the end of the cattle era, about the conflict between having an adventure and building a society, about the need for violence to tame a wild land, or about man's pursuit of freedom and woman's civilizing influence. It is—in a way that may be more significant now than ninety years ago—a novel about capitalism.

Entrepreneurs

The man in *The Man From the Bitter Roots* is Bruce Burt, and he is a Western hero. Tall, broad-shouldered, a scrapper with a quick and violent temper, he is “a giant in his strength, and as unconscious of the greatness of it as a bear. He could not remember that he had ever fully tried it. He never had lifted a weight when he had not known that, if necessary, he could lift a little more. . . . He was self-educated and well informed along such lines as his tastes led him. He read voraciously all that pertained to Nature, to her rocks and minerals, and he knew the habits of wild animals as he knew his own. Of the people and that vague place they called ‘the outside,’ he knew little or nothing.”⁴

Such descriptions are common of frontier heroes: physical strength, personal determination without societal polish, intelligence without education. But Bruce Burt differs from the cowboy ideal in many ways. Most importantly, he’s not a cowboy. He’s a miner. Though he has plenty of frontier skills, they are not the horsemanship or quick-draw capabilities emphasized by Lockhart’s contemporaries such as Zane Grey or Owen Wister. Additionally, Bruce is neither a natural aristocrat nor a “man who knows Indians” mediating between civilization and savagery.⁵ A Philadelphia financier befriends him, but treats him as something of a pet. And though his father is a successful Midwestern farmer, Bruce ran away at an early age—for good, not

for a temporary sojourn that would reinvigorate his return to society.

The plot of most formula Westerns—especially at the time, just over a dozen years since Owen Wister had defined the genre with 1902’s *The Virginian*—typically involved cowboys dealing with rustlers, or perhaps homesteaders, sheepherders, Indians, outlaws, or other threats to their way of life. They felt a tension between their love of wilderness and their need for civilization, between their personal code of honor and the lawless world they inhabited, and/or between their need for female companionship and the threat that women posed to their rugged way of life. In *The Man From the Bitter Roots*, by contrast, the plot consists of Bruce’s attempts to develop a mine.

Though Bruce battles natural forces—including blizzards and the raging main fork of the Salmon River—he faces equal challenges in the form of financial plans. He must raise \$25,000. He must hire good personnel. And for Lockhart his true heroism is demonstrated in his overcoming of engineering obstacles.

The lead female character is not a society-building “civilizing force,” but an independent-minded journalist. Meanwhile, though the villain bears some resemblance to a rustler, he embodies neither heartless big business nor savagery. T. Victor Sprudell, the self-important head of the Bartlesville Tool Works and the

richest man in Bartlesville, Indiana, is a soft and chubby dandy. On a hunt, he slaughters majestic bighorn sheep not for food or even trophy but the blind fury of the kill. He is a coward and a liar. He aspires to be a man of learning (“the natural outcome of his disproportionate vanity, his abnormal egotism, his craving for prominence and power”) but is too dim-witted to be anything more than a “walking encyclopedia of misinformation.”⁶ But worst, this small-town striver is a small-time capitalist—a bad businessman. His office turns him into an “adamantine, quibbling, frankly penurious, tyrannical man of business.”⁷ His crimes here include filing fallacious land patents and industrial sabotage. Bruce’s primary redress against him is not through a gunfight but in courts and boardrooms.

Obviously there are parallels to the traditional Western (what is rustling, if not industrial sabotage?). And certainly the genre frequently included mining themes. But most Western mining heroes were prospectors.

To mine the West

When the novel opens (following a prelude showing his childhood), Bruce Burt has already acquired a gold claim in the bottom of Idaho’s Salmon River canyon. Describing the sandbar where Bruce has first set up his equipment, Lockhart explains, “In this deposit there was enough flour-gold to enable any good

placer miner to make days’ wages by rocking the rich streaks along the bars and banks.”⁸ But Bruce dreams of building a mill to extract larger quantities of gold. Unlike prospector-heroes, his challenge is not to find a new strike, but to design the machinery that can maximize the value of the existing strike.

It was 1914, after all, sixty years since the first gold rush. Even Alaska was played out. Lockhart wanted to use a contemporary setting rather than reinhabiting the old prospecting myth. She was not so rash as to feature a heroic corporation, however. An individualist herself, Lockhart also gave that quality to all her heroes. Bruce had a historical counterpart in Marcus Daly, the Montana Copper King who bought claims during recessions and then waited for technology and investment to make them profitable. Writing escapism, Lockhart wanted to imagine away the labor-management divide that would surely come about once such a mine was developed. So Bruce is an early Daly, still an underdog with a passion. His goal is the process of processing rock. He’s a geologist: the childhood prelude shows him fascinated with rocks. He’s also an engineer: Lockhart sets up his dream by noting, “A dozen times a day Bruce looked at [the gold-laden sandbar] and said to himself: ‘If only there was some way of getting water on it!’”⁹ Bruce is still driven by money, of course—as is any capitalist. But where the mythical prospector’s ambition led him to overcome

primarily physical hardships, Bruce is also concerned with management theory.

Not that Bruce is a unique (or terribly robust) character. Lockhart's plot is merely the "success story," a standard American mythology dating back at least to Ben Franklin's autobiography. Bruce is merely a rock-headed Horatio Alger character. But when Lockhart transferred the Alger myth to the West, critics saw the book as a Western. The *New York Times* referred to "Miss Caroline Lockhart, author of *The Man From the Bitter Roots* and other Western stories," while the *New York City Bookseller* noted, "Miss Lockhart manages to get the real stuff into her stories of the West—the look, the very smell, of the land, the talk of the men, the sense of adventure and stress of life that belongs in the wild places."¹⁰ Again, the Western was new at the time. But if contemporary critics thought that Lockhart had written a Western, then they must have thought that large-scale industrial development of the type Bruce envisioned was an extension of the frontier myth.

Certainly, Lockhart implies in the novel that large-scale industrial mining is good for the West. Churning up this sandbar—which rises to 200 feet against the canyon wall—is a highest and best use of the rugged, remote canyon. That's a familiar philosophy for the 20th century West, when large-scale mines, dams, and clearcuts made drastic alterations to the landscape. But it doesn't match our vision of cowboys,

who celebrated unspoiled territory and lamented the coming of the very industrial civilization they had fled West to escape.

Tellingly, however, the two exist side by side in *The Man From the Bitter Roots*. Lockhart establishes Bruce's love of nature early, as he takes a break from his mining to feed salt to a flock of bighorn sheep. "His liking for animals amounted to a passion, and he had been absurdly elated the first time he had enticed them to the salt, which he had placed on a flat rock not far from the cabin door. For the first few visits their soft black eyes, with their amber rims, had followed him timorously, and they were ready to run at any unusual movement. Then, one afternoon, they unexpectedly lay down in the soft dirt which banked the cabin, and he was so pleased that he chuckled softly to himself all the time they stayed."¹¹ Sprudell, by contrast, exterminates the family of sheep, and when Bruce finds the carcasses, "he raised his eyes in the direction in which he fancied the hunters had gone. They shone black and vindictive through the mist of tears which blinded him as he cried in a shaking voice: 'You butchers! You game hogs! I hope you starve and freeze back there in the hills, as you deserve!'"¹²

Lockhart further portrays uncharted territory as capable of coexisting with industrial mines. On the very next page, Uncle Bill Griswold—a sympathetic character despite having been hired as Sprudell's

guide—admires, “There’s a hundred square miles over there that I reckon there never was a white man’s foot on, and they say that the West has been went over with a fine-tooth comb. Wouldn’t it make you laugh?”¹³

In short, *The Man From the Bitter Roots* tried to point the cowboy myth toward the actual, industrial West of the 20th century. The genre did not follow Lockhart—readers still preferred fantasy stories about honorable cowpunchers battling rustlers and Indians on the open range of the 1880s. But at least one author understood the West’s evolution toward the odd juxtaposition of unspoiled and exploited. And, in fact, she recorded it with general approval.

Private enterprise and the value of money

Consistent with the Western genre, Bruce and Sprudell fight their battles in a lawless world. No police arrest Sprudell, no financial regulators slap his wrists. He gets his comeuppance when Uncle Bill Griswold vows to take his money from Bruce’s soon-to-be-successful mine and “go back to Bartlesville, Indianny, and lick him every day, reg’lar, or jest as often as I kin pay my fine, git washed up, and locate him agin.”¹⁴ Not just the rivalry, but all of Bruce’s challenges are set outside the purview of government: raising money through private investors, setting up the machinery, handling the site. Though Bruce mourns for the sheep Sprudell kills, he never suggests the government should

pass laws to protect them. This is only surprising in retrospect, as we consider the large role government has come to play in the West, and the huge investments in government relations made by operators of mines: permit approvals, labor-safety concerns, waste handling, taxes, and even economic development grants. The industrial culture that did grow through the 20th century West was far more dominated by government than the libertarian fantasy portrayed by Lockhart.

But for her the government could do little right. At one point she interrupts her narrative for a rant that she tries (not very successfully) to ascribe to her hero:

On the trip out from Ore City an overworked stage horse straining on a sixteen per cent. grade and more had dropped dead in the harness—a victim to the parsimony of a government that has spent millions on useless dams, pumping plants, and reservoirs, but continues to pay cheerfully the salaries of the engineers responsible for the blunders; footing the bills for the junkets of hordes of ‘foresters,’ or ‘timber inspectors’ and inspectors inspecting the inspectors, and what not, yet forcing the parcel post upon some poor mountain mail-contractor without sufficient compensation, haggling over a pittance with the man it is ruining like some

Baxter street Jew.

Like many people in the West, Bruce had come to have a feeling for some of the departments of the government, whose activities had come under his observation, that was as strong as a personal enmity.

Aside from the ugly (if sadly common to the time) ethnic slur, it may well have been true, and may even still be true. But the passage feels out of place in this supposed book of action, with this hero who supposedly knows so little of “the outside.” Surely the author got carried away here, felt the need to explain her own ideology to her Eastern audiences. *The Man From the Bitter Roots* then is not just a narrative about the challenges of capitalism but a polemic in favor of private enterprise and libertarian philosophies over government involvement. Lockhart approves of this evolution of Western political philosophy—an evolution that would continue through James Watt and George W. Bush.

Similarly, and consistently, Lockhart’s attitude toward money comes through in another passage she attempts to ascribe to Bruce:

He never had realized before how much money meant in the world ‘outside.’ It was comfort, independence, and most of all the

ability to choose, to a great extent, one’s friends instead of being forced to accept such as circumstances may thrust upon one.

Bruce saw what anyone may see who looks facts in the face, namely, that money is the greatest contributory factor to happiness, no matter how comforting it may be to those who have none to assure themselves to the contrary.¹⁵

Again, it seems an odd position for a loner cowboy-geologist whom she has previously, admiringly, described as having *no* friends.¹⁶ And again, whether or not it is true, it’s hardly “cowboy”—deep in the book, the author’s passionately held philosophy snuck through her desire to create a frontier fable.

The philosophy comes through one more time for the female lead, Helen Dunbar. A Philadelphia journalist, Helen enjoys her independence and loathes Sprudell, but feels some pressure to submit to his matrimonial entreaties when she sees a sort of ghost of her future: “Mae Smith had been young and good-looking once, also a local celebrity in her way when she had signed a column in a daily [newspaper]. But she had grown stale with the grind, and having no special talent or personality had been easily replaced when a new Managing Editor came. . . [She] personified unsuccessful, anxious middle-age.”¹⁷ Worst, however,

Smith emanates “that indefinable odor of poverty—cooking, cabbage, lack of ventilation, bad air”—and is always in need of a loan.¹⁸

Money makes happiness. And money comes from private enterprise, rather than the government. It’s a familiar philosophy, unremarkable except that it’s occurring in a 1915 cowboy novel. Lockhart was transforming the cowboy into a libertarian capitalist. And the world played along.

The transition from Old West to New

These days, the world plays with endless debates on what exactly represents the “New West.”¹⁹ It may be emu ranches, microbreweries, upscale elkhorn furniture, or log-cabin-style espresso stands. But for the purposes of this essay, let’s explore the following ideas that I believe the term tries to convey:

1. **Anything that is not cowboys.** The Old West was cattle ranches and rustlers, open range, settling the frontier. The Old West was as close as history got to the cowboy myth and the literary Western genre. The facets of today’s West that are not “cowboy”—cities, ski resorts, industry, technology—are New West.
2. **The application of traditional heroic values to new concepts.** The Old West was about the mythical cowboy’s traits: individualist,

honorable, horsey, rugged, rustic, etc. The New West appropriates those ideals by applying the symbols to new (sometimes seemingly contrary) objects. So an espresso stand in a mini-mall is not necessarily New West—unless it’s dressed up to look like a log cabin. An SUV is New West when it’s pictured on a mountaintop rather than beside a soccer field. A telecommuter is New West only if he thinks of himself as a “modern cowboy.”

3. **The confusion that arises when a myth-based political philosophy collides with economic interests.** The Old West was not just cowboys or their ideals, but the politics and policies they inspired: individualist, nature-oriented, pragmatic, and libertarian. (Of course this is also the classic “American” political philosophy—that’s why the cowboy myth is so big and enduring.) In the New West, people still claim that philosophy even as they pursue activities that seem contrary to it. Under this cynical view, New Westers are the ranchers who condemn big government as they cash their subsidy checks, mountain bikers who condemn cattle grazing on federal lands as they eat up that same habitat with their high-tech toys, and multinational mining companies who celebrate “Western lifestyles” as they slash employee benefits and pollute the environment.

Under these definitions, *The Man From the Bitter Roots* can serve as a seminal novel of the New West. 1) It is not about cowboys. It's about mining and technology, engineering, finance. 2) It applies cowboy traits to its miner hero. It dresses up its Alger story with cowboy trappings and a Western setting. 3) Its affection for nature seems at odds with its view of industrial mining. Its dislike of government seems at odds with the federal role of taming the West. And its view of the value of money seems diametrically opposed to the ideal of the honorable cowboy.

Where fact meets fiction

If we accept *The Man From the Bitter Roots* as an early New West novel, then its author is a similar pioneer. Because for today's reader, one of Caroline Lockhart's most interesting traits is the value she placed on personal experience in writing fiction.

Lockhart moved to Cody, Wyoming (home of a government-sponsored dam, pumping plant, and reservoir she came to regard with personal enmity), in 1904, and set all of her novels in the West. Like many Western writers, she believed that her residence—and her horse-oriented lifestyle there—legitimated her fiction.²⁰ And with her background as a journalist, she always researched her settings and stories before writing them.²¹ *The Man From the Bitter Roots* was no less fact-based than any of her other work.

For as many as ten years prior to the publication of *The Man From the Bitter Roots*, Lockhart had a relationship with a former Philadelphia music-box importer named John R. Painter. Painter was trying to develop a remote mine at the bottom of Idaho's Salmon River canyon. He faced continual challenges financing the mine—and met with some success with Eastern financiers including the duPont and/or Villard families.²² Engineering the site was tricky, and getting the machinery to it even trickier. Lockhart spent the summer of 1911 with him in Idaho; its highlight was a wild trip down the Salmon, loaded with machinery for the mine—an episode she only slightly exaggerated in the novel.²³

Undoubtedly she took great license in turning Painter into Bruce Burt. For one thing, she shaved 23 years off his age—Painter was fifty (and legally married to another woman) during their 1911 adventures. For another, Painter was born and raised in Maryland; she gave Bruce a Midwestern farm childhood and parsimonious father more resembling her own. And so she doubtless exaggerated or altered other features as well.

But in its broad outlines, the story of *The Man From the Bitter Roots* really did happen. A man—Caroline Lockhart's hero—really did try to develop a mine at the bottom of the Salmon River canyon, facing challenges including incompetent and/or corrupt employees, unscrupulous rivals, and engineering and

financial hurdles. Along the way he found the love of an independent-minded female writer.

Somehow Lockhart's relationship with Painter did not survive. Perhaps they quarreled; perhaps they were each too tied to the places where they lived. After *The Man From the Bitter Roots*, Lockhart returned to Cody, where she wrote three more Western novels—or at least novels that people saw as Westerns, even as they investigated other industries such as sheep ranching (*The Fighting Shepherdess*) and dude ranching (*The Dude Wrangler*). She railed against government, especially during Prohibition—but later took advantage of government giveaways in the Homestead Act to build gigantic landholdings. Even as she fenced off roads that her neighbors traditionally used to access government land behind her ranch, she increasingly saw herself as a defender of the Old West, the old-time values, cowboys, and open range. She fought to have Cody define itself the same way, and succeeded. Even as its economy

became ever more dependent on automobile traffic into (federally owned and subsidized, environmentally protected) Yellowstone National Park, Cody through the 20th century saw itself as Buffalo Bill's hometown, a place of cowboys and horses and rugged libertarian individualists. So although Lockhart herself would have violently disagreed, today we might classify her as an ultimate New West figure.²⁴

John R. Painter continued living in Idaho, developing his mine. A fire destroyed much of his work in 1918 (he blamed the Germans). But he rebuilt—or tried to, given the financial challenges. Lockhart occasionally sent him money. He kept plugging away, until his death there in 1937. Some saw him as a hero—the old man doggedly pursuing his passion. But others saw him in the sorts of terms old-timers love to use to denigrate New West poseurs. “Unlike anyone else on the river,” wrote Johnny Carrey and Cort Conley in *River of No Return*, a historical guide, “J. R. was out of his element—too proud to cut hay, and not wild enough to eat it.”²⁵

Notes

1. The manuscript may have burned in a hotel fire in Honduras, or sunk in a boat accident in Nicaragua; Lockhart's conflicting stories lead some to question if it was lost at all. See Necah Stewart Furman, *Caroline Lockhart: Her Life and Legacy* (Cody/Seattle: Buffalo

Bill Historical Center/University of Washington Press, 1994), 74–5.

2. See reviews, box 2, Caroline Lockhart Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie (hereafter CLC).

3. www.imdb.com

4. Caroline Lockhart, *The Man From the Bitter Roots* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1915), 40–41.

5. Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation* (New York: Atheneum/Macmillan, 1992), 16.
6. *The Man From the Bitter Roots*, 75–6.
7. *Ibid.*, 74.
8. *Ibid.*, 25.
9. *Ibid.*, 25.
10. *New York Times*, undated, unsourced clipping, and *New York City Bookseller*, Nov. 15, 1915, both in box 2:5, green scrapbook, CLC.
11. *The Man From the Bitter Roots*, 27.
12. *Ibid.*, 31.
13. *Ibid.*, 32.
14. *Ibid.*, 321–2.
15. *Ibid.*, 184–5.
16. *Ibid.*, 41.
17. *Ibid.*, 140–1.
18. *Ibid.*, 140–1.
19. See, among others, Patricia Nelson Limerick, *Something in the Soil* (New York: WW Norton, 2000), 274–301; William Riebsame, preface to the *Atlas of the New West* (New York: WW Norton, 1997), 12–13.
20. See Nathaniel Lewis, *Unsettling the Literary West: Authenticity and Authorship* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003).
21. *Me-Smith* was based on a real man (named Smith) she knew in Cody. *The Lady Doc* included as characters a dozen barely-disguised Cody residents. *The Full of the Moon* was based on Lockhart's own 1898 sojourn in New Mexico. And so on. For details, see Furman.
22. Two undated, unsourced clippings in the Painter biographical file, Park County Historical Archives, Cody, Wyoming.
23. Caroline Lockhart, "The Wildest Boat Ride in America," *Outing Magazine*, February, 1912, 515–524 (box 7, CLC). See also Furman.
24. See Furman; also Lucille Patrick Hicks, *Caroline Lockhart* (Cody, Wyo.: self-published, 1984).
25. Johnny Carrey and Cort Conley, *River of No Return* (Cambridge, ID: Backeddy Books, 1978), 174.