American writer whose stories helped to establish the cowboy as an archetypical, individualist hero. Wister and his predecessor James Fenimore Cooper (1789-1851) created the basic Western myths and themes, which were later popularized by such writers as Zane Grey and Max Brand. But before Wister, Theodore Roosevelt published his book *The Winning of the West* (1889-1896) to make clear the meaning of the land beyond the Mississippi to the whole country, and Mark Twain and Bret Harte wrote their stories about frontiersmen. In art, Frederik Remington, born and raised in the East, and Charles M. Russell, who worked as a cowboy, contributed to the image of cowboy life. Although Westerns are normally set in the 19th-century, they are not considered simply historical novel, but special kind of moral tales, in which the protagonist, usually male, must defend his personal values of life in a violent confrontation with socially destructive forces.

"He was evidently howling the remarkable strain of yells that the cow-punchers invented as the speech best understood by cows - "Oi-ee, yah, whoop-yah-ye-ee, oooo-oop, oop, oop-oop-oop-oop- yah-hee!" But that gives you no idea of it. Alphabets are worse than photographs. It is not the lungs of every man that can produce these effects, not even from armies, eagles, or mules were such sounds ever heard on earth. The cow-puncher invented them. And when the last cow-puncher is laid to rest (if that, alas! have not already befallen) the yells will be forever gone." (from *Lin McLean*, 1898)

Owen Wister was born in Germantown, outside Philadelphia, as the son of Owen Jones Wister, a physician, and Sarah (Butler) Wister, daughter of the actress Fanny Kemble. His parents were interested in arts, Wister's mother played piano, and the family frequently traveled abroad. Wister attended briefly schools in Switzerland and England, and studied at St. Paul's School in Concord, New Hampshire and Harvard University.

After graduating in 1882, Wister studied two years music in Paris but then gave up a musical career, and settled in New York, where he worked as a bank clerk. Due to poor health, Wister spent some time in the West to restore his physical well-being. In 1885 he entered Harvard Law School, graduating in 1888. Before devoting himself to a writing, Wister had an office in the Philadelphia law firm of Francis Rawle, but he had no real desire to be a lawyer.

"When ya' call me that, smile!"

Wister had spent summers in the West, and on the basis of these experiences he started to produce Western sketches. The first story, 'Hank's Woman,' appeared in *Harper's*, and launched his career as a writer. Beginning with his first encounter with Wyoming in 1854, he kept journals and notes, which were published in an edited form in *WISTER OUT WEST* (1958).

In 1891, after a conversation in which the author and Roosevelt discussed the literary potential of his impressions of western life, Wister began writing his stories of America's last internal frontier. These preliminary works eventually led to the novel *THE VIRGINIAN: A HORSEMAN OF THE PLAINS* (1902), a story about the conflict between wilderness and civilization and the passing of the traditional way of life. Wister, who later characterized his best-selling book as an "expression of American faith", dedicated it originally to Theodore Roosevelt: "Some of these pages you have seen, some you have praised, one stands new-written because you blamed it; and all, my dear critic, beg leave to remind you of their author's changeless admiration."

The story of a modest, quit hero, who is more comfortable with his horse than with other people, gained a huge popularity. In *The Virginian* Wister created the image of the West that was heroic as well exotic. However, for a modern
reader the work can be a disappointment: "The 1902 novel, ancestor of the classic western, turned out to be not only corny and flag-waving but also intolerant and reactionary by today's standards. The story includes sentimental lectures on Americanism that sound like a jingoist speech by Theodore Roosevelt, to whom the book is dedicated." (Herbert Mitgang in The New York Times, December 2, 1989)

*Virginian* is set in the Wyoming territory during the late 1870s and 1880s. Courageous but mysterious cowboy known only as the 'Virginian' works as a foreman of a Wyoming cattle ranch. He meets a pretty schoolteacher Molly Wood from Vermont. She introduces him the works of Sir Walter Scott, Shakespeare, and Keats. The Virginian is horrified and Judge Henry, the Virginian's employer, explains her the code of the West. However, their marriage is threatened by Trampas, who also works on the farm. He vows to gun down the Virginian, whose honor in now at stake. "It is only the great mediocrity that goes to law in these personal matters," Wister wrote. The climatic gun duel between the two men is probably the first "showdown" in fiction. Trampas fires first but misses and the Virginian kills him in self-defense. In the end the hero proves himself capable of taking his place in the community - he marries Molly and rides with her in the mountains. *The Virginian* has been filmed several times, but the television series from 1962 to 1969 had little to do with the original dynamics of the story. Trampas (Doug McClure) appears in the series as an impulsive and vigorous cowboy, not a villain. The film adaptation from 1929 included the first famous exchange of Talkies: Huston (the villain): "You long-legged-sonova -". Cooper: "If you wanna call me that, smile." Huston: "With a gun in my belly, I always smile." Although the legendary American Western director, John Ford, knew Wister's work, he chose to film LIN McLEAN (1898), the author's first novel about a young cow-puncher, retitled as *A Woman's Fool* (1918).

In 1898 Wister married his cousin, Mary Channing; they had six children. Molly, as she was called by her family and friends, was socially active, member of the Philadelphia Board of Education, a founder of the Civic Club of Philadelphia, and defender of women's rights. She died in 1913, after giving birth to her sixth child. Her death was a deep blow to Wister and his novel, ROMNEY, which he had started in 1912, was left unfinished.

Wister's literary success did not inspire him to write more Western novels, although in his short prose Wister developed the genre of cowboy fiction. Several of his stories were illustrated by Frederick Remington. In 1904 appeared PHILOSOPHY 4, a story about college life at Harvard. It was followed by LADY BALTIMORE (1906), about aristocratic Southerners in Charleston. It has been said that the novel made a hit of the white layered cake described in it. Wister's later major works include ROOSEVELT: THE STORY OF A FRIENDSHIP, 1880-1919 (1930), based on the author's long acquaintance with Roosevelt, a Harvard classmate. Besides novels and histories Wister wrote books for children. Wister's collected writings were published in 11 volumes in 1928. He died in Kingston, Rhode Island on July 21, 1938.

Complete Works of Owen Wister

- Wister, Owen. *The Jimmyjohn Boss and Other Stories* [Electronic Resource]. Champaign, Ill.: Project Gutenberg; Boulder, Co.: NetLibrary, 199-?
- Wister, Owen. *When the West was West*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1928
- Stokes, Fanny Kemble. *My Father, Owen Wister: and Ten Letters Written by Owen Wister to his Mother During his First Trip to Wyoming in the Summer of 1885*. Laramie, Wy.: ?, 1952

The family Mark Twain
Twain, Mark, 1835-1910.

Owen Wister out west: his journals and letters. Edited by Fanny Kemble Wister
Wister, Owen, 1860-1938.

The role of the mythic West in some representative examples J. Bakker c1991
Owen Wister by John L. Cobbs c1984
The Wister trace: classic novels of the American frontier Loren D. Estleman c1987
Reading "The Virginian" in the new West edited by Melody Graulich and Stephen Tatum. c2003
The West of Owen Wister; selected short stories. Introd. by Robert L. Hough 1972
Owen Wister, chronicler of the West, gentleman of the East by Darwin Payne 1985
Owen Wister out west: his journals and letters. Edited by Fanny Kemble Wister 1958
My father, Owen Wister and ten letters written by Owen Wister [microform] 1952
Roosevelt, the story of a friendship, 1880-1919 1930

Dartmouth College Library

Owen Wister / by John L. Cobbs: Cobbs, John L. c1984
The Eastern establishment and the Western experience; the West of Frederic Remington, Theodore Roosevelt: White, G. Edward. 1968
Done in the open; drawings: Remington, Frederic, 1902
Reading The Virginian in the new West / edited by Melody Graulich and Stephen Tatum. Bottom of Form

Animal heroes of the great war, by Ernest Harold Baynes; with an account of the writer "The man and" Baynes, Ernest Harold, 1925
Cultural secrets as narrative form: storytelling in nineteenth-century America / Margaret Reid: Reid, Margaret c2004
Owen Wister: : Etulain, Richard W. c1973
Cultural secrets as narrative form: storytelling in nineteenth-century America / Margaret Reid. 2004
Reading "The Virginian" in the new West / edited by Melody Graulich and Stephen Tatum. 2003
100 years of cowboy stories / edited by Ted Stone. 1994
Owen Wister, chronicler of the West, gentleman of the East / by Darwin Payne. 1985
Owen Wister / by John L. Cobbs. 1984
Diversions of a Westerner: with emphasis upon Owen Wister and Frederic Remington, books and libraries / by N. Orwin Rush. 1979
My dear Wister: the Frederic Remington-Owen Wister letters / by Ben Merchant Vorpahl; with a foreword by Wallace Stegner. 1972
Eastern establishment and the Western experience; the West of Frederic Remington, Theodore Roosevelt, and Owen Wister [by] G. Edward White. 1968

JSTOR – Journal Storage

Title: Theodore Roosevelt as Cowboy: The Virginian as Jacksonian Man
Author(s): John A. Barsness
Stable URL: http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0003-0678%28196923%2921%3C609%3ATRACTV%3E2.0.CO%3B2-H

Title: Stephen Crane and the Strenuous Life
Author(s): Edwin Harrison Cady
Stable URL: http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0013-8304%28196112%2928%3A4%3C376%3ASCATSL%3E2.0.CO%3B2-E

Title: Ten-Gallon Hero
Author(s): David B. Davis
Stable URL: http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0003-0678%28195422%296%3A2%3C111%3ATH%3E2.0.CO%3B2-W
Title: Wister, Roosevelt and James: A Note on the Western  
Author(s): Don D. Walker  
Stable URL: http://links.jstor.org/sici?script=sici=0003-0678%28196023%2912%3C358%3AWRAJAN%3E2.0.CO%3B2-H

Title: The Nervous Origins of the American Western  
Author(s): Barbara Will  
Stable URL: http://links.jstor.org/sici?script=sici=0002-9831%28199806%2970%3C293%3ATNOOTA%3E2.0.CO%3B2-Z

InfoTrac Articles:

American and Argentine literary traditions in the writing of Borges' "El Sur". (Jorge Luis Borges) Ariel de la Fuente. 
Variaciones Borges Jan 2005 v19 p41(52)

Shakespeare and the cowboy: Prince Hal as the model for Owen Wister's Virginian. James T. Bratcher. 
Journal of the West Spring 2004 v43 i2 p72(6)

Owen Wister: from history to myth. Louis Tanner. 
Journal of the West April 1998 v37 n2 p61(9)

Em'ly in the 'Cuckoo's Nest.' Sonya Yvette Alvarado. 
The Midwest Quarterly Summer 1997 v38 n4 p351(12)

Great Stories of the American West II. (Brief Article) 

Owen Wister: chronicler of the West, gentleman of the East. Edwin R. Bingham. 
Journal of American History March 1987 v73 p1059(2)


Presidential Studies Quarterly March 2005 v35 i1 p204(2)