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HARVARD COWBOYS: THE ROLE OF SILAS WEIR MITCHELL'S CREATIVE WORKS IN DEFINING WESTERN-STYLE AMERICAN MASCULINITY

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A BUNCH OF JANE DANDIES?

It could be argued that comfortable Eastern men who went West in search of romantic cowboy adventures were nothing more than wannabe Westerners—“Jane Dandies” and “Punkin’ Lilies” in the style of the insulting nicknames hurled at Roosevelt when he first travelled to North Dakota as a “feeble asthmatic” seeking to beef up “his frail political image and marketing himself as an embodiment of the ‘strenuous life’” (Tuttle 106). The draw of the West in the years approaching the twentieth century could be viewed as nothing more than a rather quaint symptom of the classic male midlife crisis. In more recent times perhaps these men would be purchasing Ferraris, getting hair plugs or trading in their wives for younger—and hotter—models, eventually returning to reality with a sigh, resigned at last to their sagging chests, thinning hair and waning libidos, the sports cars and girlfriends little more than vague reminders of their last-ditch attempts to be the men they’d always wanted to be. The excesses of mid-life crises tend to be short-lived, perhaps because they are ultimately inauthentic and unsustainable.

Certainly, many of the journeys made by men seeking the “West Cure”—popularized when Dr Silas Weir Mitchell sent Owen Wister to Wyoming as a treatment for his neurasthenia—also had a certain “dude ranch” ring of inauthenticity. For instance, Barbara Will reports that in his 1879 trip to Yellowstone, Mitchell himself—who used the West throughout his life as a cure for various physical and emotional problems—travelled in relatively ostentatious style with “twenty two soldiers, four packers, one chief packer, one guide, one hunter, two cooks, fifty-five horses, twenty-one mules and a dog” (301). There is quite a gap between this seemingly excessive entourage and the typical Western image of the lone cowboy riding the range in solitude, cooking his freshly-killed dinner over an open fire and under a big sky.

But far from making Mitchell or others like him feel inauthentic, this simulation of the Western experience, without any real hardship, danger, hunger or discomfort was hardly viewed as a problem or source of embarrassment. It even seems to have been part of the point. These men were quite comfortable moving between worlds and taking both the best of the Eastern life of relative scholarly ease and privilege, and the romantic ruggedness of the West with its aura of barely-contained danger and potential heroism. Roosevelt, for instance, would typically “finish a day of hunting by seating himself next to the kill and reading an important book of verse or philosophy” (Will 302). The eastern men who went west, in other words, made no pretense of giving up their Ivy League educations, affection for fine clothes, or taste for high culture. There was nothing particularly inauthentic about them at all. They were in fact creating a whole new type of man—one that hadn’t been seen before in this precise model. This man embraced both worlds and could move with ease between them—being refined and rugged simultaneously.

The dichotomy between rugged strength and sensitivity is actually built right into the Mitchell cure. “Following Mitchell’s lead, a whole generation of nervous men accordingly

journeyed westward to recuperate not only by working on ranches and hunting game in the Rockies, but also by writing about their experiences” (Will 295). They worked—but they also wrote. This seems significant because this approach stands in stark contrast with the reality of the Western man—the real life rancher or cattle hand—who would not have typically had the leisure time or inclination to write poetry, novels or self-reflective journals. This further underscores the idea of the Western cowboy as an intentionally created persona, less an attempt at authenticity than one focused on the projection of an image. Will writes that, “Mitchell, Wister, and Roosevelt imagined an improbable yet potent new national hero, one produced by, and inseparable from, a neurasthenic view of the world” (Will, 296). What else could they do? There was no turning back the clock and actually returning to a simpler life—nor would many men from the large Eastern cities necessary want to give up the more sophisticated aspects of their lives permanently. Fast-paced American culture apparently drove many men to the point of nervous breakdown—but since it was impossible to deal with the root causes of this type of stress—while retaining the benefits of income and prestige it brought—a retreat back to nature, a holiday on a ranch, was the next best thing. After all, neurasthenia¹ was part of the culture, “particularly when manifested in men,” it provided “cultural proof of . . . exertion, a sign of the greatness and immensity of the effort” (Will 298).

THREE MEN, A DIVIDED COUNTRY, AND A CURE

Just like individuals, entire nations can experience crises of identity. Perhaps the Civil War could be viewed as America’s national mid-life crisis—or at the very least, the catalyst that caused the country to keel for a time, seemingly unable to find its bearings. William Deverall, who has written about the great migrations to California around this time in America’s history, points out that by the time the Civil War ended, the United States was broken and “in search of itself” (69). During the years leading up to the onset of the twentieth century, Americans from both the North and South traveled to the West, “because they wanted to get away, because they wanted to heal physically, emotionally, or otherwise” (64). Even before Wister became the most famous recipient of the Mitchell “West Cure,” the West had already become a “cure” for much of what was wrong with America—offering the nation a chance at rebirth, distinct from the animosity between the North and South. The post-war national identity crisis resulted in the brief but influential emergence of the West as the defining character of America, and, according to Marta Jackson who wrote about Frederic Remington, an artist who captured the same period in the West, it “has probably given birth to more American legends and folk heroes than any other single time or place in our past. It holds for us . . . the same kind of meaning that Camelot once held for England” (6). This re-creation of the American identity had a profound influence on the vision of the ideal man. According to Michael O’Malley, who has written about nervousness in American culture around the turn of the twentieth century, American men had previously been perceived—especially in Europe—as lazy and somewhat indolent, but the suffering of the war had shown them in a different and more impressive light. The “strenuous life . . . had made Americans strong, and prevented degeneracy and nervous collapse. It built (or revealed) a character that could withstand the pressures of modern life” (387).

Three pivotal characters in the creation of the ideal Western male that endures even now were President Theodore Roosevelt—who invented his own persona as a “rough rider,” avid hunter, and literary force, Owen Wister—creator of the modern Western novel, and Dr Silas Weir Mitchell—a physician, novelist and poet whose equally famous “Rest Cure,” for

1 Editor’s Note: “Neurasthenia” is defined as “an obsolete technical term for a neurosis characterized by extreme lassitude and inability to cope with any but the most trivial tasks” (<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/neurasthenia?s=t>).

a general psychological malaise, was mostly prescribed to women. These men had their literary interests in common—but they also shared remarkably similar health histories in that they had all been, at one point or another in their lives, sickly and emotionally distressed, and they turned to the West for a “cure” that would restore vigor, strength and a distinctly American brand of masculinity.

The “West Cure”—although widely associated with Mitchell and popular during the post-Civil War era, was actually invented by Francis Parkman, who “helped to develop the idea of the West as a cure for ailing masculinity” earlier in the century and was actually an occasional patient of Mitchell’s (Tuttle 106). President Theodore Roosevelt was the best-known beneficiary of the cure—although in his case it was self-prescribed following the deaths of his mother and wife on the same day—February 14, 1884. His transformation into a hunting, big-stick-carrying “rough rider” was so complete that it is now somewhat startling to think of Roosevelt as a sickly child who suffered from severe asthma and poor eyesight that rendered him almost blind until the age of 14 when his vision was corrected with spectacles.

Young adulthood did not initially treat him much better; his first wife initially declined his offer of marriage, apparently unimpressed by the “thin, pale youngster with bad eyes and a weak heart” (Felsenthal 16). Longtime friend Owen Wister, in describing his first meeting with Roosevelt, tells of a man “in vigorous action” (4) at Harvard where he boxed as a light-weight, weighing only 135 pounds and taking a “heavy blow on his nose, which spurted blood” after which his “slender figure stood quiet” (5). Roosevelt was, of course, a prolific writer, and one often oddly obsessed with the correct features of both American femininity and masculinity. The ideal American man, according to him, “must not be a coward or a weakling, a bully, a shirk, or a prig. He must work hard and play hard” (“American Boy” 1), as well as “practice decency,” and be “clean and straight, honest and truthful, gentle and tender, as well as brave” (para. 6).

Of Wister, who suffered from the all-purpose emotional disorder labeled “neurasthenia,” Jennifer Tuttle explains that, “Before his trip West, Wister complained of exhaustion, vertigo, oversensitiveness, and other ailments. But after having settled into his cattle roundup routine in Wyoming he became ‘a picture of health,’ leading hunting expeditions and mounting horses to join the cowboys . . .” (104). Not only did he engage in vigorous outdoor pursuits; Wister wrote, penning his most famous novel *The Virginian*, “considered the prototype of the modern Western” in which he “fictionalized his own treatment by Mitchell” (104). Wister appears to have quickly shed the maladies that sent him out West in the first place, focusing in his published work on perfecting stories about an idealized version of himself.

Both Roosevelt’s and Wister’s experiences in the West helped form their careers—but in this case of Mitchell, it was more his career that helped form the West. While Mitchell’s cures were controversial and, for instance, Charlotte Perkin’s Gilman’s “struggle against the patriarchal medical establishment of the late nineteenth century” (Tuttle 103) is well documented, Wister’s enthusiasm for the “West Cure” is equally well-articulated and created in Mitchell a lifelong friend. This difference in male and female reactions to Mitchell is in itself interesting as much could—and has been—said about the inherent sexism evident in the two approaches, but the “West Cure” is particularly interesting because of the masculine image it helped create—an image that was born of an apparent compensation for emotional and physical weakness. Jennifer Tuttle writes “. . . the West Cure urged supposedly feminized men to embrace the more ‘masculine’ traits and pursuits embodied in a western model of manliness” (Tuttle 105)—an approach certainly evident in the cases of both Roosevelt and Wister, men who appear to have created powerful literary alter egos to speak for them—and to distance them from their weaknesses. Mitchell’s work as a writer—particularly his creative writing—is far less well known today than either Roosevelt’s or Wister’s. Yet his work is equally significant in the formation of the new-style Western man.

 THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING SILAS WEIR MITCHELL

There were probably few men better placed in the latter part of the nineteenth century to help other men create a persona of strength and vigor—based quite firmly, too, in the tradition of literature and writing—than Silas Weir Mitchell (1829-1914), a physician who “achieved great success in popularizing the idea of a correlation between mental activity and nerve strain” (Will, 293). Interestingly, according to his biographer and other sources, Mitchell himself had one point suffered from neurasthenia, which he attributed to the overemphasis on “mental work” evident in American society, a work he described as “more taxing in general in America than in Europe” (“Wear and Tear” 42) and advocated instead for an “open-air life” which he claimed “has a large share in protecting men who in many respects lead a most unhealthy existence” (50). Mitchell’s philosophy regarding good health for men can be summed up as follows:

The man who lives an outdoor life—who sleeps with the stars visible above him—who wins his bodily subsistence at first-hand from the earth and waters—is a being who defies rain and sun, has a strange sense of elastic strength, may drink if he likes, and may smoke all day long, and feel none the worse for it (“Wear and Tear” 5).

Trips to the West enabled Mitchell “to pursue what he saw as perhaps the most important reason for self-transplantation—putting experiences into writing” (Will 302). For an individual whose primary job was not writing, Mitchell appeared to have a strong need to express his unique voice through creative means; he achieved a staggering number of literary publications during his life—particularly during middle age—including fanciful children’s stories such as *Fuz-Buz the Fly* and *Mrs Grabem*, novels such as *Roland Blake*, and *The Adventures of François: Foundling, Thief, Juggler, and Fencing-master*, and volumes of poetry. At the same time, he rejected the literary establishment in his refusal to accept membership in the Academy of Arts and Letters, stating rather caustically, “I do not want to belong to the Academy or to any more institutions than I do at present” (Updike 21). Perhaps Mitchell had reason to be somewhat snobbish. His accomplishments, after all, led one enthusiastic biographer to describe him as, “almost a genius,” going on to note, “His contemporaries believed that he was one, an opinion Mitchell came to share” (Ernest v). His supposed genius aside, a perusal of youth and young adulthood offer some clues as to why health, vigor, and the masculinity of the classic cowboy may have been attractive to Mitchell, and why he may have felt that “an excess of physical labor is better borne than a like excess of mental labor” (“Wear and Tear” 10)—but also why he would have held onto the mental labor of writing with such passion.

A biography on Mitchell by Ernest Earnest reveals that while his boyhood contained the “ideal” elements of a vigorous outdoor life with “pranks . . . fights . . . constant scrapes . . . skating on a pond” (8) with his brothers, Mitchell was “a frail, bookish boy in the midst of a household of active, vigorous people” (11) who “once set a table on fire and burned his hand in an attempt to cast lead bullets” (9) and who, at the age of sixteen, “spat blood and was advised to spend as much time as possible indoors” (11). His graduation from the University of Pennsylvania was put on hold “by reason of ill health in his senior year” (Tucker 9). His illness at sixteen gave him the opportunity to buy a boat so that he could spend time outdoors in the fresh air. According to Earnest, “Here he learned that aesthetic appreciation of nature which was to last throughout his life” (16). As a student he was reported to have had “a certain modesty . . . as distinct as that of a girl which kept him from seeking the local prostitutes” (Earnest 16). All these details speak of a young man who fails to fit in with others and who actually stands out as particularly “lacking” in certain expected masculine traits and be-

haviors. Perhaps his generally sickliness contributed to other aspects of his personality, including his disinterest in seeking out women for sex—in apparent contrast to the norms of the other students he associated with.

Mitchell also had difficulty finding favor with his father, John, whom he idolized as “a model of manly beauty, of perfect courtesy, quick to resent the least imputation upon his honor, believing there was only one way to settle serious difficulties among gentlemen” (Earnest 6). While Mitchell was clearly intelligent and talented, he was not good at cricket—his father’s favorite sport (11)—and when he announced his intentions to pursue a career in medicine, his father replied, “You are wanting in nearly all the qualities that go to make a success in medicine. You have brains, but no industry,” later adding, “You have always been an undecided person,” (Ernest 18). Mitchell, described as “frail” and “imaginative,” may have “felt hesitant and inept” around his father, who may have initially been correct in his analysis of Mitchell’s aptitude for medicine. In medical school, Mitchell “fought his own horror of surgery,” repeatedly fainting, “awkward,” and “in despair” (Earnest 19). Although his medical skills eventually improved, his health became worse, and in the spring of 1849, “he developed severe jaundice, due, he believed, to overwork and lack of exercise” (Earnest 20). His ill health seems to have continued, with reports that he developed a tremor in his hand at about the age of forty (Louis 1220). In 1872, following the death of his mother, he reportedly developed neurasthenia—although whether this was self-diagnosed is not clear. Mitchell, described as a “harassed and unhappy man,” apparently “became very weak and was troubled with insomnia” (Earnest 20). By 1874, Mitchell had “lost a wife, three brothers, a mother, and his beloved sister” in just over a decade. With his sons away at school, Mitchell also suffered from loneliness (Earnest 72).

None of these problems, however, appear to have stopped his acute mental energy or his ability to write—and in fact, it is likely that his loneliness and health problems encouraged his immersion in his work. Most of his creative work was completed past the age of forty and quickly became popular—with influential people counting themselves as fans. William Dean Howells, in writing of Mitchell’s work, notes, “I like nearness to life, and this is Life, portrayed with conscience, with knowledge, both deep and quick . . .” (Ernest 99). Of one of Mitchell’s novels, *Hugh Wynne, Free Quaker*—a best seller in 1896—Theodore Roosevelt himself apparently remarked, “I do not know when I have read a more interesting novel” (Louis “Neurologic Content” 403). Mitchell, however, did not appear to be equally impressed by Roosevelt. He wrote a note comparing him with President Taft, which read, “Talk of the strenuous life! This man wastes no time, as Roosevelt did—altogether a more balanced, thoughtful person” (Will 297). It’s not surprising that Roosevelt was an early fan—since the combination of strength and frailty in men, along with a value system very much in accordance with that of “the strenuous life” is evident in many of Mitchell’s characters—although it is perhaps more surprising that the two men never formed a stronger alliance. They shared strikingly similar ideas about what the American character should entail. According to Tim Armstrong, author of *American Bodies: Cultural Histories of the Physique*, in 1903, Roosevelt “introduced a stringent immigration act designed to ‘purify’ the American race” (88). This is very much in line with the thoughts of Mitchell, who “saw neurasthenia as a pathology linked to a demasculinized internal constitution, a physiological aberration which needed to be purged from the upper-class American body in order for the nation to assume its power over threatening primitives within a rapidly expanding world” (88).

LITTLE BOYS IN FAIRY-LAND

While he wrote explicitly about his concerns for men’s emotional and physical health

in his non-fiction work, these themes—not surprisingly—are evident in his creative work also. In spite of their differences, Mitchell's father instilled in him "the Virginia code of honor," a value system Weir carried throughout life and made a recurring theme in his novels" (Earnest 7). While this code of honor is largely reported as one in which "fighting a duel" with firearms (Victor 219) features prominently, it presumably also includes the attributes of the elder Mitchell that young Silas found admirable, including his literary interests, dignity and sense of excellence. And perhaps not unusual for a man who came of age with physical limitations, his works often highlight the emotional sensitivity—even frailness—undergirding the strength and swagger of the ideal Western version of masculinity. This is illustrated particularly well in a statement made by a character in the novel *When All the Woods Are Green*—and may provide an insight into Mitchell's motivations for writing fiction: "Folks complain that we women speak too loud. I am sure our men have lost their voices" (3). In addition to providing a vehicle for Mitchell to articulate his thoughts on character and national identity, writing may have also served as a way for him to regain his own voice in middle age—to escape the tedium of his summer holidays (Louis 406)—as well as a method of creating masculine alter egos that could speak for him, in the same way that Wister's Virginian and Roosevelt's "rough rider" persona spoke for them.

The "Virginia code of honor" favored by Mitchell's father may be evident in the character of Mr. Lyndsay in *When All the Woods Are Green*, who is the father of a large family of children spending some time in the country following the death of a child, and is described as "a fine figure . . . tall, strong, ruddy, with a face clean-shaven, except for side-whiskers" ("Woods" 23). Lyndsay is a devotee of Marcus Aurelius, the "Stoic Emperor," and references to Aurelius occur frequently throughout the book, usually in a situation that warrants some kind of moral lesson. Aurelius was said to have, "enjoyed the open-air life of the country, which did something to offset his bookishness, and lightened a little the seriousness of a nature which was in the last resort moralistic rather than intellectual" ("Meditations").

The Emperor also claimed to have learned certain virtues from friends and members of his family that tie in very closely with the ideals expressed by Roosevelt, Wister and Mitchell. From his grandfather, he learned "the lessons of noble character and even temper," from his father, "modesty and manliness," from his mother "piety and beneficence, and abstinence, not only from evil deeds, but even from evil thoughts; and further, simplicity in my way of living, far removed from the habits of the rich," from Apollonius, "to see clearly in a living example that the same man can be both most resolute and yielding," and "how to receive from friends what are esteemed favours, without being either humbled by them or letting them pass unnoticed." From Maximus, he learned "self-government, and not to be led aside by anything; and cheerfulness in all circumstances, as well as in illness; and a just mix in the moral character of sweetness and dignity, and to do what was set before me without complaining. Of Maximus, he also says, "He was accustomed to do acts of beneficence, and was ready to forgive, and was free from all falsehood; and he presented the appearance of a man who could not be diverted from right rather than of a man who had been improved" ("Meditations").

Mr Lyndsay is a man of clear principles whose admiration for Aurelius evidently runs deep. At one point in the story, when visiting the home of a dying child, he remarks indignantly to the drunken father, "Good Lord, my man, that child is dying,—will be dead, I am sure, before night; and here you are in liquor just when that poor woman most wants help" ("Woods" 57). But although he upbraids the man for his lack of sensitivity to his wife, Lyndsay is also said to have seen enough of life "not to wonder that drink could be distinctly regarded as, under stress of circumstances, an available resource" (59). Furthermore, in a show of big-heartedness, he notes that, "Respect for the moods of men is one of the delica-

delicacies of the best manners” (58). When describing a friend who appears to meet all the ideal qualities of masculinity with a “genius for friendship,” who attracted friends wherever he went though “they could hardly say why,” Lyndsay remarks, “He was quick of temper, cultivated, but not a profound man,—unselfish. I think it must have been chiefly because he took a large and unfailing interest in other men’s pursuits, and was not troubled if they made no return in kind. He gave interest and affection, being easily pleased, and exacted no return” (“Woods” 96). Lyndsay is careful to reinforce the principles of manly virtue in his sons—when one of them gives up claim to a fish, “Lyndsay nodded gently, smiling at the youngest son, and no more was said; but the boys understood well enough that neither the selfishness nor the self-denial had gone unnoticed” (“Woods” 107).

This attention to morality is evident in many of the short stories in *Little Stories*, all of which have a male central character trying to do the right thing. “The Consultation” contains a conversation between two men in which one confesses that he is caring for the sickly and much older husband of the woman he loves. Should he help speed along the man’s demise? When the husband eventually dies of natural causes, the man does not marry the woman. When his friend, an older doctor, is pressed to explain this behavior, replies that the answer is “clearly set forth in the New Testament” (12), and while this is somewhat cryptic, it does imply a strong commitment to a Biblical Christian belief system. In “Two Men” a “pale young man” (15) with a bag of tools meets up with a “small sallow man” (15) who tries to steal the tools. One has just been released from hospital, the other from prison. The ex-con is already set up with a job (“There’s a society helps a fellow. . . . Gives you good clothes, too,” 16) on the outside, whereas the man released from the hospital, who is by trade an iron worker, has no work. The ex-con advises him to “Go and grab somethin’. Get a short sentence; first crime. Come out, and get looked after by nice ladies” (16). The pale man has not been provided any assistance on his release from hospital because he is “only an honest mechanic” (17). In “A Man and a Woman,” a man throws himself into the water, but when a woman does the same, “Something stronger than the longing for death mastered him. He caught at the woman, and held up her head. He must save her—he knew that” (46). But after he drags her to the shore, he wonders, “Why did I save her? She had a right to choose death” (46). “Then he laughed low, and said aloud: “But it is she who has saved me” (47). When she begins to breathe, “the man knew that he had here a thing to care for and assist” (47-48). In all of these situations, men are dealing with temptations and circumstances that test their virtue, their courage, their sense of honor and their masculinity. Should a man take the woman he wants? Should he commit a crime in order to get work? Should he interfere in the wishes of another human being? These kinds of questions appear important to Mitchell and often feature in his work, underscoring a fascination with defining just what it means to be a “good” man or a man of honor.

There are fine distinctions in how appropriate masculine behavior presents itself. In *The Youth of Washington*, written in the form of an autobiography of George Washington, Mitchell has Washington confess, “I flatter myself that I have now learned to command my temper, although it is still on rare occasions likely to become mutinous. I do not observe that mere abuse ever trouble me long, but in the presence of cowardice or ingratitude I am subject to fits of rage” (“Youth” 10). He goes on to comment on the qualities he has in common with his great-grandfather—“great personal strength, inclined to war, very resolute, and of a masterful and very violent temper” (15). It would seem acceptable—even appropriately manly—for a man to have a temper so long as he has learned to control it, the way he has learned to control all his other base instincts in the pursuit of gentlemanly honor. Impulse control and attention to decorum are emphasized, as in the case of the surgeon character in *In War Time*, for instance, who makes certain to offer a salute of “excessive military accuracy” (2) to every

ill man brought into his hospital and states that “nothing less than paralysis” (2) would prevent him from doing so. Honor and morality are largely to be found in nature, in what Roosevelt would have called “the strenuous life.” According to Barbara Will, “For Mitchell, male nervousness was a question of will, a quality put to the test ‘only by the sturdy contest with Nature’ tempered by a ‘healthful’ engagement with literature of moral uplift” (294). Mitchell himself wrote, in *Camp Cure*, “The surest remedy for the ills of civilized life is to be found in some form of return to barbarism” (Will 301), which falls very much in line with the romanticized view of the West with noble savages living close to and in accordance with nature. *Harper’s Monthly*, in a 1884 review of *The Hill of Stones, and Other Poems*, notes that, “Few of our poets have penetrated as closely as he to the heart of Nature.” Many of Mitchell’s characters and themes represent a distinct pro-nature and anti-city perspective, seeming to agree with the statement, “The restlessness of cities, their excited pleasures and harsh ambitions, seem foolish and intangible” (Tucker 348). Lyndsay notes that, “the pleasantest people for a woodland walk are those naturalists who see far more than the poet, and combine with their science, or have with it, the love of things for the mere beauty in them” (88). When the young daughter, Rose, asks her father how long it takes him to adjust to life in nature, away from work, he replies

“Three or four days; not more. I like at once the feeling that I have nothing I must do. After awhile the habit of using the mind in some way reasserts its sway. At home I watch men, It is part of my stock in the business of the law. Here I readjust my mind, and it is nature I have learned to watch, I was not a born observer; I have made myself one. After a day or two on the water, I begin to notice the life of the woods; the birds, the insects. This grows on me day by day, and, and, I think, year by year. It is a very mild form of mental industry, but it suffices to fill the intervals of time when salmon will not rise” (33).

Nature is clearly free from the hustle and bustle that seems to have caused neurotic men so much stress and unease. Lyndsay notes that “Nobody elbows you here; no rude world jostles your moods . . . You may be gay and noisy,—no is shocked, and then, the noble freedom of a flannel shirt and knickerbockers! Why do we ever go back!” (34). Harkins, in writing about Mitchell’s work and perspectives notes that “The restlessness of cities, their excited pleasures and harsh ambitions, seem foolish and intangible” (348). Some lines of Mitchell’s poetry also speak to the benefits of nature over the city. In “Elk Country” he writes

“To think of the camp fires we builded
To baffle those terrible pungies;
To think how we wandered, bewildered
With wood-dreams and delicate fancies
Unknown to the life of the city” (“Hill of Stones” 61)

The poem continues with:
“Ay, here in the face of the woodman,
You see how the woods have been preaching,
As he leans on the logs of his cabin
To watch the prim city-folks coming” (“Hill of Stones” 62).

The lines “unknown to the life of the city” and “to watch the prim city-folks coming” are especially revealing here. Clearly there is a whole system of life in nature that is foreign—at

least initially—to those used to an urban existence. Nature contains “wood-dreams and delicate fancies,” and the “woods have been preaching”—a fact evident on “the face of the woodman” who is comfortable and at one with his environment, so much so that he “leans on the logs of his cabin.” The city folks are “prim”—implying a certain level of discomfort with the new environment. As they approach they are watched and assessed by the woodman who, one imagines, finds their primness amusing.

In addition to their noble aspirations and love of nature, many of Mitchell’s male characters exhibit sensitivity, weakness, or illness. In “Prince Little Boy,” the main character “Little Boy” likes to visit a place he calls “Fairy-land.” This does not sit well with his father, who responds that the “boy was only fit to sing songs and be in the sun, and would never make bricks worth a penny” (“Prince Little Boy” 8), and forces him to go to work making “bricks for a palace which the King was building” (8). Francois, the main character in *The Adventures of Francois*, is described as “emotional and imaginative, fond of color, and sensitive to music” (4). Earnest claims that the most interesting character in the novel *In War Time*, “is a man of unusual sensitivity and imagination, but with a fatal strain of weakness” (96). This fictional character had “the same first name” as Mitchell’s brother and “both yearn to go to war but are prevented by illness” (Earnest 108-109). Mitchell wrote the following lines of poetry about his brother:

“Painfully He sickened, yearning for the strife of War
That went its thunderous way unhelped of him;
And then he died. A little duty done; A little love for many, much for me,
And that was all beneath this earthly sun” (Earnest 109)

Here, war is obviously a terrible thing, “thunderous” and containing “strife,” but it is nonetheless a force healthy young men “yearn” to be part of. Only sickness will present a young man from his duty—and there is a sense of having been cheated when one can only do “a little duty.” These lines contain a terrible sense of finality and regret—of a young man gone before he could fully realize his potential. He had a “little love for many” although “much” for his brother—“and that was all beneath this earthly sun”—implying that these small tokens of love and duty were all he was able to accomplish in his short life. They are valued, but incomplete.

Even when boys and men are portrayed in potential negative ways—as spirited and perhaps careless—these attributes invariably come across as desirable and evidence of robust energy and vitality. Mr Lyndsay remarks, “Remember, boys, no nonsense in the canoe, mind. This waster is too cold and too swift to trifle with. You are a pretty bad lot but I should not like to have to choose which I would part with. As Marcus Aurelius said, “Girls make existence difficult, but boys make it impossible” (16). Another character is described as one who “hates books but he also hates defeat—a first rate quality. He is one of the three people I have seen in my life who honestly enjoy peril” (20). The pride the speakers take in describing boys this way is evident. Francois is said to be, “a long-legged, active fellow, a keen-witted domestic brigand, expert in providing for his wants, and eagerly desirous of seeing more of the outside world, of the ways of which he was so ignorant” (11). But in a group of boys or men, there is often at least one—in this case another Ned, just like Mitchell’s brother—who is different from the others. Ned is described as “sure to see certain things and not others. He is a dreamer” (19), and “too absent-minded for this world’s uses” (20). However, all three brothers have reflective qualities, with Dick “diligently counting a beetle’s legs—a process the animal seemed to resent. Ned, at a window . . . staring at the falling shadows on the farther hills, and Jack, at the door . . . deep in a gruesome book of adventures by sea and land” (“Woods” 94). Mitchell seems to find value in each of these manifestations—probably at least partly

because they each represent a part of himself—scientist and doctor, imaginative dreamer, reader and writer.

HEROES WITHOUT WINGS

The novel *Roland Blake* received its title as “combination of the names of the chivalric hero Roland and the mystic poet and artist William Blake” (Ernest, 100). Roland, of course, refused to surrender to the overwhelming force of a stronger enemy, finally giving his life and causing himself to be “transformed into the saintly through the martyrdom of his death in a battle of ultimate Christian purpose” (Huppé 16). William Blake’s work contains “recurring themes of good and evil, heaven and hell, knowledge and innocence, and external reality versus inner” (“Online Literature”). Silas Weir Mitchell’s *Roland Blake*, the title character in the novel of the same name is described as, “A thoughtful, quiet young fellow, he lived a wholesome outdoor life, with sea and winds for comrades, while his uncle’s personal attention to his education amply prepared him for his life at Harvard” (“*Roland Blake*” 1). This description could easily sum up the approach to life of Roosevelt, Wister and Mitchell—all of whom aspired to be Harvard-style cowboys—men who could hold their own in both the East and West, roping cattle in the morning and writing in their journals at night. They aspired—perhaps as a result of the horrors of the Civil War—to be men who could stand against an enemy, no matter how fierce, as the legendary Roland did, while retaining a strong sense of social justice (albeit one, in keeping with the times, skewed in favor of the white male!) reminiscent of Blake. One of Mitchell’s poems, titled “*Elk Country*” contains the following lines that illuminate the essence of the dual character of the new American male:

“Ay, he too has learned in the forest,
 One half of him Nimrod and slayer,
 Unsparing, enduring, and tireless,
 In wait for the deer at the salt lick;
 Yet one stronger half of his nature—
 This rough and bold out-of-door nature
 Hath touches of sadness upon it,
 And is grown to the ways of the forest,
 Till wildness and softness together
 Are one with the sap of his being” (“*Hill of Stones*” 63).

Nimrod is, of course, a Biblical character—the great-grandson of Noah and a legendary hunter, said to be the first “hero” in the Bible—and his image is juxtaposed against the idea of “touches of sadness” and a nature that has brought “wildness and softness together.” The “rough and bold out-of-door nature” of this man is tamed and “grown in the ways of the forest” until the two parts of his nature (“wildness and softness together”) are merged as part of his whole—they are “one with the sap of his being.” In addition to being named as a great warrior, Nimrod also apparently bears some blame for conceit and arrogance, as well as for the Tower of Babel incident in which the early people demonstrated their lack of faith in God by building a tower they could escape to if he should choose to destroy the earth again by flood. Perhaps the American male at this time also felt some responsibility for having brought horrors upon the nation in the form of the Civil War. The sadness comes as a result of this guilt—and from the knowledge that “wildness and sadness” will have to co-exist, that the neurosthenic condition is an inextricable result of the society American men have created and that the role of the cowboy can only ever be a weekend gig, temporary and temporal, serving only to hold the unbearable stress of modern in life momentarily in check.

One wonders whether Harvard cowboys created much of their own neurasthenic stress through their seemingly rigid and unrealistic expectations of themselves as men. In reading Roosevelt's, Wister's and Mitchell's ideas about what men should ideally be like, I am continually reminded of the concept of the "superwoman" which has recently (or maybe not so recently!) taken hold in American culture. Such women—typically upper middle-class—are supposedly meant to marry, raise several high-achieving children, enjoy a fabulously successful career, stay slim, fit, well-groomed and well-clothed, and able to bring home-baked scones to a school event at short notice. They have to effortlessly straddle the worlds of motherhood/home and career/achievement. E. F. Harkins writes that although, "the cowboy has gone, the stuff out of which he was made remains. . . . His wild kind has been among us always, since the beginning: a young man with his temptations, a hero without wings" (355-356). This is perhaps true—but what has also remained with us is the American tendency for overreaching and excess, for going to extremes, for creating the very situations that cause us to forever strain to define and redefine ourselves, both as individuals and as a nation. Roosevelt summed up his philosophy of life as follows: "In short, in life, as in a football game, the principle to follow is: "Hit the line hard; don't foul and don't shirk, but hit the line hard!" (para. 11). This is a good metaphor for the American identity over at least the past hundred years—or at least the perception Americans have tried to maintain in their own minds—hard working and fair; good sportsmen. Like the "Virginian" who has "slashed his own way against hostility" and in whose "careless figure" resides the "strong young West, alert and watchful and commanding" (Harkins 348) the American faces the world. This man, also like the Virginian, is "thoroughly the result of his calling and his environment" (349). He knows that he is a hero, but too often forgets that he doesn't have wings—and is therefore limited in what he can achieve. Like a boisterous child leaping off the garage roof to see whether he can fly through sheer force of will, the hero takes a great leap realizing just a second too late that he is hurtling all too quickly toward a devastating contact with the earth.

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