

THE "WILD WEST" IN SPAIN

by

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LIKE MANY PEOPLE in all parts of the world, the Spaniards have long been fascinated by the image of the American West. The beginnings of their interest in this image reach back before the advent of massive tourism, the vogue of Hollywood, and the construction of extensive defense establishments to an older and more profound phenomenon — the Western novel. In the late 1920s, a period of intellectual unrest, the Spanish reading public "discovered" the Western writings of Zane Grey, and in the years that followed developed a seemingly unquenchable thirst for the pulp "Westerns" that were written by Spaniards using American pseudonyms and published in the hundreds. So pervading was this interest in the American Wild West that it became a significant factor in shaping the image of America abroad.

Spanish interest in the American West arose during the period of the great depression that struck Spain in the late 1920s. The decade began with Spain, under the capricious dictatorship of Primo de Rivera, plunging into feverish industrial activity and accumulating the second largest gold reserves in the world. At the same time, however, Spanish labor organizations became increasingly radical. Caught in the middle, the literate middle class, more affluent but less secure, sought adventure, romance, and escape in its reading. Then came the great depression, or *crac*, as the Spaniards aptly called it. The activity of the political radicals intensified, commercial and industrial movement slowed, and

the demand for escape literature increased. The search for escape reached in all directions and into all countries. Detective stories, sentimental novels, Salgari-type chronicles of adventure and intrigue, and American Westerns began flowing from the translators' pens. Such was the international character of the demand, in fact, that one publishing house found it economically feasible to issue in 1931 a *Handbook for the Translator of English*.

In 1928 the Western in Spain emerged suddenly with translations of the novels of Zane Grey. Zane Grey not only was the beginning but also for many years the substance of a lasting Western vogue. In the years 1928–1930 twenty-three of his titles were listed, all published by the prolific Editorial Juventud of Barcelona, all selling at an average of three pesetas, a modest price. This interest did not go unnoticed by American observers. As early as 1929 a commentator in *Books Abroad* noted that within a matter of a few weeks Juventud had published half a dozen novels of Zane Grey. Another reviewer, commenting on these books, characterized their appearance as “yet another step in the triumphal march of Zane Grey toward a complete *corpus* in Spanish.” Among the popular translations during the early years were *Riders of the Purple Sage*, *The Rainbow Trail*, *The Mysterious Rider*, *Nevada*, and *The Light of Western Stars*. Before 1944 there were almost no other Westerns in Spain. American authors such as Owen Wister were practically unknown. The celluloid West was yet in the future. For many Spaniards, as for many Americans during those years, the image of the West created by Zane Grey was the only image of that bygone era.

The popularity of Zane Grey in Spain continued unabated through the ensuing years. During the war years (1936–1945) there was little publishing activity, but by 1950 new translations and reprintings of Zane Grey were appearing and meeting with wide success. In 1953, for example, there were forty-nine Zane Grey titles in print, all published earlier in Barcelona by Juventud or Bruguera. In 1958 there were fewer titles, only five, but all were in their sixth, seventh, or eighth printings. In the early 1960s popular titles were *The Spirit of the Border* (sixth printing), *The Heritage of the Desert* (ninth printing), and *Nevada* (eleventh printing). Prices for these volumes averaged twenty-two pesetas, reasonable for full-length fiction, although about three times higher than the cheapest pulp paperback. More recently six titles by Zane Grey have become available in special clothbound editions.

Such editions are not common in Spain, and certainly not for popular fiction. Priced at sixty pesetas a volume, they are comparable to the price of a small, learned paperback in the limited Spanish market.

Why the American West had a particular appeal in Spain is impossible to say. In America, of course, the American regards the West as a national epic that brings to the popular mind a heady combination of frontier vigor and colonial authority, with the added attraction of history less than a century old. In Spain the Spaniard can look to the reconquest of the Moorish dominions during the Middle Ages. Certainly the elements of color, violence, and intrigue are not lacking in the outlines of the conflict with the Moors, and, indeed, historical fiction based on the Moorish kingdom of Granada dates back to the middle of the sixteenth century. It is true that over the years the image of the *cristiano-moro* conflict remained alive in the popular mind, with Spanish villagers regularly re-enacting in folk rituals the struggles of their national past. But the Moors never became a subject of popular fiction, and though native to Spain, they were replaced by a foreign import. As in so many other realms of Spanish culture, what was foreign was automatically considered by some to be superior to what was Spanish.

The years 1936–1939 saw practically all literary production in Spain come to a standstill. Internal political strife caused the death or exile of many writers and publishers. On every hand there were depressed economic conditions. During most of World War II there was little change. The Allied embargo of Spain, the mounting difficulties of Franco's protectors, the Axis, and repeated crop failures made restoration of a stable literary environment slow and painful. Spain emerged from the war with the Nationalists under Franco firmly in control, and, in spite of profound political grievances and a severely strained economy, a kind of normalcy soon was attained. By 1944, there was clearly a demand for what may be called leisure goods on a mass basis. In literature, particularly, there was a demand for cheap, fast-moving fiction.

The year 1944 seems to have been a key year for the reappearance of many kinds of Spanish literature. A new generation of poets became known. The serious novel made valiant efforts to reestablish itself. All kinds of popular fiction, including Westerns, began appearing in the form of pulp books. Perhaps the term "book" was a misnomer, for

many of these publications did not exceed thirty pages, although catalog listings included them with full-length books. The average length seems to have been about sixty-four pages. The shortness of the indigenous pulp Westerns reflected the same lack of imagination so evident in such titles as *Outside the Law* and *Arizona Rustlers*. Judging by the number of pages and their presumed buying public, the early pulp Westerns may well have resembled magazines or even comic books in format. Certainly they were the products of an important industry making a start under the most difficult economic circumstances, with not the slightest attempt to create an image of prestige.

By 1950 the Western publishing industry in Spain apparently hit its stride. The number of titles steadily increased, reflecting both the general economic improvement in Spain and the stabilization of the reading public demand. Clíper, in Barcelona, and Cíes, in Vigo, produced the first indigenous Western novels, but within a very few years they were overwhelmed by the famous firms of Bruguera, of Barcelona, and Rollán, of Madrid. In fact, Bruguera and Rollán, together with Toray, of Barcelona, soon dominated the pulp fiction field. Today, Bruguera and Toray Westerns are readily available in Mexico, and Bruguera alone lists representatives in sixteen Latin American countries.

The Spanish pulp Westerns published by Bruguera and Toray have a consistently uniform format. They are slightly shorter than the American pocket book, measuring about four by six inches in size, and are approximately one hundred and twenty pages in length. The front cover is in color, and the title is in large letters with the author's name usually less prominent. The graphic scene occupying the cover may, or may not, be readily identified with the action narrated in the text. The back cover has an advertisement for another novel, or the picture of a movie star with a few words of biography. The inside front pages may include a list of the author's other works, as well as several illustrations relating to the text. The pages following the text are far more interesting. They contain listings or full-page advertisements of other Westerns published by the same company, and of other types of books of interest to the reader of Westerns, such as mysteries, children's classics, radio repair, and dreams explained.

The most important selling feature of the Spanish Western is the cover illustration. The author's name, with few exceptions, suggests nothing of the nature of the book, as the authors have neither

the time nor the desire to develop a personal style or even a set of identifiable quirks. The titles are scarcely more revealing, though all are designed to imply violence and death. Sample titles are: *Gunman's Grave*, *The Killer Wears Another Face*, *The Gallows Can Wait*, *Two Men Too Many in Tucson*, and *Violent Territory*. Even the series title, or *colección*, is apparently of no importance. For example, such series names as Arizona, Buffalo, Wild West, and Savage Texas are related in no way to the novel they caption.

The scenes depicted on the covers will be no surprise to anyone who is familiar, however superficially, with the American Western paperback. Most show a six-gun — often actually being fired. There may also be one person shown dead, dying, or in immediate danger of death. Other props may include a horse and/or stagecoach. Less common is a Western town, which is usually symbolized by the front or interior of a saloon. Perhaps because of the traditional Spanish concepts of modesty in public, the few women who appear on Western covers are decently attired and give no indication of being anything but eminently reputable. In general the cover illustrations are somewhat garish and always simple. They are designed to catch the fleeting attention of a poorly educated passer-by whose glance falls on the racks of a newspaper vendor's stand.

With rare exceptions, the writers who produce Western fiction in Spain are unknown in the realm of serious literature. Pulp fiction is the medium to which they restrict themselves generally, although a writer of Westerns may also turn out science fiction or mysteries under different pen names. An exception is Enrique Cuenca Granch, who writes under the name of H. C. Granch. During the years 1931–1950 Granch is credited with a number of Westerns and original mysteries, along with other works. In addition, he has translated the writings of such authors as Jules Verne, Nietzsche, Earle Stanley Gardner, Dickens, Hans Christian Andersen, and Dostoevsky. He has not been "typed," then, as simply a pulp man. His long activity indicates the success of his work and the successful appeal of his name.

The common case, however, is that of the unknown Western writer who peddles his work under a distinctly American-sounding pseudonym. The pseudonym may be a translation or a scrambled version of the author's name, which in any event is of no importance to the reading public. Typical pseudonyms are Joe Bennett (José Luis

Benet Sanchís), Clark Carrados (Luis García Lecha), Keith Luger (Miguel Oliveros Tovar), A. Rolcest (Arsemio Olcina Esteve), Med Ryman (Manuel Medina Marín), Leo Mason (Pascual Gómez Rueda), Orland Garr (Orlando García Mateos), Joe Mogar (José-María Moreno García), and Raf Seggram (Rafael Segovia Ramos). Although it seems to be an arbitrary invention, the pseudonym is a transparent and evidently successful device designed to cater to the notorious preference of many Spaniards for anything imported.

Not all Western authors feel it necessary to disguise their Spanish nationality, however. In some cases the pseudonym itself is Spanish: Corín Tellado, for Ma. del S. Tellado Lopez, for example. One writer clings to his real name, its length suggesting his voluminous production. Marcial Antonio Lafuente Estefanía produces dozens of Westerns each year without duplication of title. In 1958, certainly a banner year for him, Lafuente is credited with ninety-four Western titles. Lafuente's success is exceptional in the industry, however. Other writers, although adapting themselves to the standard format, generally produce from ten to sixty Western titles annually.

The reader who opens one of the hurriedly written Spanish Westerns hoping for some insight into the American West will be disappointed. In most cases there is not the slightest attempt to create historical, geographical, or even common sense verisimilitude in the physical setting for the story. Landscape description is limited to mention of factors essential to the immediate action, such as trees, a river, a narrow canyon, or a dusty street. Presumably the Spanish reader knows little and cares less about accuracy or detail in such matters. The American reader will easily recognize certain stereotyped features: the fast-draw motif, the dashing stranger-hero, the maiden in distress, and the chain of coincidence which tests the hero by fire, wind, water, and Indians before he can vanquish the enemy and claim his reward.

By contrast, some American Western novels often strive for literary achievement. For example, in *Texas Outlaw* by Archie Joscelyn (published as *Bad Hombre* in 1950 and republished in 1952 under a new title), important characters think, talk, and act like individual human beings, not simply like types. Joscelyn takes pains in the early pages of the novel to lead the reader into one character's mind, showing his musings and meditations. Sizable paragraphs are devoted to the hero's thoughts on the landscape, his horse, his past, or his philosophy

of freedom and the wide open spaces. There is nothing highly original, but such a quiet beginning is quite unknown in the Spanish action-packed adventure, where gunfire or dialog may appear in the opening lines.

Another significant point of contrast is that in the American Western, geography and history are relatively accurate. Even the least-instructed American reader has some notion of where mountains, deserts, plains, or cities are found. He also is well aware of the Hispanic heritage of the Southwest, and of the Indian wars. *Texas Outlaw* stresses the Hispanic heritage of its locale accurately and far beyond what the casual reader might demand or expect.

In minor details, which may be irrelevant to the course of the novel, it is clear that the author has done collateral reading. For example, in the story a man offers to guide a wagon train over the mountains, and mentions among his qualifications that he has been a trapper and thus knows the area well. This remark is historically accurate. It indicates that the author is aware, at least in outline, of the pattern and sequence of exploration and settlement in the West. Yet it is also a gratuitous remark; nothing is made of it later in the novel. By itself it typifies as well as anything can the nature of the difference of verisimilitude in detail between Spanish and American Westerns. The American Western, even one as common and predictable as *Texas Outlaw*, betrays at times a flash of craftsmanship and care indicating that the author has consciously worked at his task, and that he has a certain personal interest in the material he is handling. Notable by contrast is the Spaniard's lack of interest in his material.

Even when the action is set in Arizona, New Mexico, or Texas, the novels written in the *madre patria* by and for the descendants of the Conquistadores ignore almost entirely the Hispanic heritage of the Southwest. There is no reference or importance given to Spanish-speaking people, people with Spanish names, the proximity of Mexico, or the remains of the empire. Even purely American problems, less galling to Spanish pride, play little part in these novels. The struggle to pacify marauding Indians, a theme rich in possibilities for fast adventure and bloody violence, is completely ignored by the Spanish novelist. In fact, Indians appear hardly at all under any circumstances. Nor would the reader suspect, for example, that the coming of the railroads was in any way important, or that there was

any controversy involved. Cattlemen are not worried about railroads. Their only disagreement is with a few rustlers, or with certain good or bad individuals. Nor do sheepherders, homesteaders, or prospectors form a part of their novelistic world.

The action of the Spanish Western, like that of its American counterpart, is invariably set in ranch country, or more commonly, in a town or city in the West, with the reader being given only a glimpse of the routine activities necessary to sustain life in such an environment. Ranching seems to consist entirely of an occasional branding episode, and a great deal of open range rustling. Town life centers around the bank and the saloons, although presumably there are other commercial establishments — and apparently a large population. The arrival of a handsome young stranger is never noticed, nor are local or outside gunmen identified by the townsfolk until near the end of the story. In one case of multiple mistaken identity, a Western town supports a cosmetic store that has a stock sufficient to provide a variety of elaborate disguises. Two disguised individuals that appear are a wheelchair cripple and a blind man in dark glasses. Furthermore, still another disguised figure appears and disappears several times in the course of the novel, without occasioning the slightest comment from the townspeople.

In general, the plot itself is Western in only a superficial way. There is the usual conflict between a good guy appearing from nowhere on a mysterious mission, and an outlaw or band of outlaws. The action is vaguely located in the West, which is identified principally by the prevalence of six-guns, saloons, horses, and sheriffs. Any broader conflict involving whole segments of the populace, any hint of the scope of the epic West, is completely absent.

What are some of the typical plots? Three examples will suffice. In *Judge Checkers* Josh Ladd, riding to Tucson, is apprehended in Malameda; his trial consists of a game of checkers with Judge "Checkers." Thanks to the timely intervention of the fiery widow Thorke, Ladd is saved. He spends the rest of the novel working on the ranch of young Judith Scarley, the adopted daughter of an Apache tribe, plotting to rid the town of "Checkers" and his ilk. A pitched gun battle in the final pages does it. In *The Killer Wears Another Face* Ken Halakay, notorious gunman and disguise artist, impersonates his way through the West until fast-shooting, fast-talking Alan Baxter outwits him by

using a ventriloquist's trick. In *Gunman's Grave* Wade Bird arrives suddenly at Talltrees, taunts the sheriff, and opens the grave of outlaw Winston Manley, killed the previous summer. As he suspected, the corpse is that of his friend John Gardner. Bird sets out to find Manley, avenge his friend's death, and clean up the town.

The emphasis is always on violence and on individual conflicts. Occasionally, as in *The Fastest Gun*, there is a more ambitious beginning. Walter Benning, cattle baron of Colorado, makes a cash purchase of 25,000 head of cattle from neighboring ranchers. He has the backing of the local Ramsay Bank, called "the safest private bank in the West" because it places as much emphasis on armed guards as on dividends. Benning's purpose is to bring Chicago's Monarch Packing Company to terms by controlling its source of supply. Within a very few pages, however, this promising beginning degenerates into a story of ambush and robbery by four outlaws. After the final gun battle the surviving outlaw, Texan Chess Carter, is nursed back to health by Leticia McMullen. He concedes that she did right in returning the stolen money, and promises to begin a new life with her.

Since the action of the Spanish Western is fast and simple, there are no long, exciting chases, no stealthy stalkings, no elaborate intrigues. There is nothing that cannot be presented on one page, and forgotten on the next. Most action consists of direct confrontation between two characters or groups of characters. The resulting dialog is occasionally witty, and is apt to be punctuated by bullets and/or kisses. In *The Killer Wears Another Face*, for example, fat, lecherous Ormand meets and pursues a coquettish redhead who entices him into her boudoir. She pretends interest, then suddenly draws a revolver from her garter. "She" proves to be the vicious Ken Halakay in disguise, who disposes of his victim in a burst of gunfire. The adventures of the masquerading Ken Halakay are unusual, however. A much more common form of violence is the fast-draw duel. So widespread has the knowledge of this aspect of the West become in Spanish Westerns, that at times it seems to be the only requisite of the successful gunman, good or bad. The fast-draw duel is supplemented by other kinds of violence. Revolvers boom at any or no provocation; bullets whine and thud; jaws and noses splinter; and men and horses roll in the dust. Violent language often parallels the action, with the dialog abounding in the tritest profanity.

Some authors delight in the use of grotesque euphemisms. A bullet

in the face, for example, is described as "a third nostril appearing beside the other two." At another point, bullet wounds are called "red flowers appearing on a cowboy's white shirt"; this is perhaps a more literary euphemism, but no less grotesque. To the literary scholar, in fact, the red-on-white motif seems to be a parody on a well-known and over-used poetic device of the seventeenth century. It is an isolated case, however. Literary pretensions, the least literary awareness, are noticeably absent from the Spanish pulp Westerns.

The characters that populate the Spanish Western novel fall into easily recognized categories. The male lead is invariably young, brave, handsome, mysterious — as are his buddies or allies if he has any; and the female lead is usually young, attractive, and helpless. The evil lead is either a crude outlaw or a respectable but despicable individual, while assorted gunmen, ranch hands, and other supporting actors are presented in only sketchy outline. The male lead himself is seldom presented through description; only because of his words and actions does he stand out. For example, in *The Gallows Can Wait*, Dav Snead sees a young lady apparently being kidnapped:

Dav Snead ran quickly and interposed himself between the girl and her two assailants. He had a vague idea she was pretty, but this was not what impelled him to get into the fray. It was simply that it didn't seem right for those two men to bother a woman, especially with such lack of grace. He fired the first punch at the one who had spoken. . . . the fellow lifted half a foot or so off the ground, flew backwards a few yards, and fell on his back with his arms outstretched.

For the most part, characterization of the male lead is restricted to such encounters. There is no change or development, either in his personality or in the reader's knowledge of him.

The representatives of the powers of evil are given more attention, probably because more details are desired to reinforce crudity or decadence. For example, in *Gunman's Grave*, Sheriff Jas comes to talk to his shady backers in their pleasant forest retreat:

The inside of the house was almost luxurious: walnut furniture, a large carpet covering the floor, and comfortable armchairs around the fireplace, where a fire was burning. Stretched out on the long sofa was another man. He must have been about forty, not very tall, with wide shoulders and a delicate face. He was not a type who gave the impression of having worked much in his life. At least not at hard jobs, physical, in contact with the sun and air. A fine moustache, straw-colored like his hair, adorned his prominent upper lip, giving him an air of stubborn petulance.

Although such scenes approach the level of caricature, they are stark realism when compared to the characterizations of the heroine. Apparently all Western girls look very much alike. At any rate they are invariably presented to the reader with attention to the same details of pulchritude and dress. Their range of emotion is limited almost entirely to anger and incipient desire, the latter manifested usually by labored breathing, much as in the days of the silent screen.

What relation is there between the rise of the Spanish Western novel, whether indigenous or in translation, and the development of the serious Spanish novel of the twentieth century? What influence of the Western novel is recognized and noted in the literary journals, In a word, none. In Spain, even more than in the United States, the literary public is quite distinct from the literate public; it considers itself distinct, and works to preserve this distinction. Realizing this, one can understand why the Spanish Western novel, in spite of the spectacular interest in Zane Grey and the phenomenon of the indigenous pulp, is never once mentioned by those who have followed the novel during the period 1920-1960. One student of the Spanish novel, Joaquín de Entrambasaguas, commenting specifically on the novel of the 1920s and 1930s, notes among other things the poor production and low caliber of novels in general, and goes on to deplore the prevalence of cheap tales of adventure and romance. Yet even in this context he makes no mention of Westerns, or of any other kind of translation or imitation designed for the "consumer" of fiction. Quite simply, it can be assumed that Spanish literary commentators, reviewers, and critics do not deem the Western worthy of serious attention. But the phenomenon still exists. The number of titles, the number of authors, and the insistent demand all stand as a manifestation of one aspect of Spanish culture.

The situation is certainly little different in the United States. Let the literary, not simply literate, reader ponder the vast distance commonly thought to exist between Hemingway, Faulkner, or F. Scott Fitzgerald on the one hand, and Archie Joscelyn, Jack Shaefer, or even Zane Grey, on the other hand. "Serious literature" is felt to be a fairly well defined preserve, accessible only to those who readily recognize its boundaries, and open only to those influences and currents which exist within its boundaries. Exceptions are few and notable — but the Western novel is not one of these exceptions.

The Western novel in Spain began as a response to a demand for escape literature and an interest in things foreign. It coincided with a period of intellectual and political unrest evidenced in other parts of Europe and in Spain by “revolutionary” literature. After World War II the pulp Western appeared in Spain, and the demand increased, reflecting a specific interest in things American, including movies, gadgets, music, and technology. Today in Spain the Western novel ranks high among the most popular types of commercial fiction.

