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Review of *The Crowded Prairie: American National Identity in the Hollywood Western* by Michael Coyne

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The Crowded Prairie: American National Identity in the Hollywood Western. By Michael Coyne. London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 1997. Illustrations, notes, filmography, bibliography, index. xi + 239 pp. \$29.95 cloth, \$18.95 paper.

English and French scholars began to write serious critical commentaries on the American Western almost before Americans did. Beginning with André Bazin's important essays of the 1950s, the analyses of Jean Mitry and Jean-Louis Rieuepeyrou, and coming down to Paul Bleton's 1997 collection *Les hauts et les bas de l'imaginaire western*, the French have helped us realize the artistic importance of the generic Western just as they showed Americans how to appreciate Edgar Allan Poe, William Faulkner, and many other major figures. The English critical tradition on the Western has been equally rich but different in its orientation. Beginning with Philip French's pioneering 1977 *Westerns: Aspects of a Movie Genre*, English scholars like Jim Kitses, Christopher Frayling, Phil Hardy, and Ed Buscombe have been particularly interested in how the Western treats cultural myths and political issues.

Michael Coyne's *The Crowded Prairie: American National Identity in the Hollywood Western* is very much in this British tradition. He begins by distinguishing between mythic, auteurist, structuralist and political/allegorical approaches to the Western and opts for the last, which, he believes, has been neglected in treatments of the genre. For his texts, Coyne selects Western films that have been both highly successful at the box office and also liked by reviewers and critics. Coyne not only applies his own socio-cultural analysis to these films, but also substantiates his own interpretations through systematic use of contemporaneous criticism from a variety of newspapers and magazines. This last aspect of his inquiry is particularly interesting and useful, since most other studies of the Western have made only sporadic use of the valuable evidence to be found in such sources.

Treating a number of Westerns from the '40s and '50s, Coyne shows how these films dealt critically if indirectly with such contemporary social and cultural issues as the new sexual mores and residual puritanism, generational conflict and the erosion of the family, conformity and racism, and traditions of patriarchy and masculinity. Coyne sees the genre undergoing major changes in the 1960s with Hollywood increasingly realizing that the Western was becoming "hopelessly old-fashioned and irrelevant" in the face of radical changes in the American experience. The result was more elegiac and backward-looking Westerns, as well as a use of the genre to criticize the Vietnam War and to lament the violence and inhumanity of an age increasingly dominated by technology and massive corporations. Finally, in the 1970s, the Western in decline generated a series of films like *Buffalo Bill and the Indians*, *The Outlaw Josey Wales*, and *The Shootist* in which "one legend continues his tawdry self-mythology; the second rides off into obscurity and contentment; but the third lies dead and bloody in an ornate saloon." In these films, the western experience itself is seen as an outdated mythology no longer relevant to modern America.

There's not a lot that is new in Coyne's analysis. His overall account of the development of the Hollywood Western from 1939 to the present is similar to that of many other recent historians of the genre. In addition, recent studies like Lee Clark Mitchell's *Westerns* (1996) deal with the Western's treatment of issues like masculinity and patriarchy in a richer and more complex way. Though he chose rightly to concentrate on the Hollywood Western from 1939 to the present, Coyne's study fails to set this period of the genre in the context of the long tradition of early films and novels about the West. Though he became aware of Richard Slotkin's major three-volume history of the myth of the frontier after he had written most of his own, he does not make much use of Slotkin's work. In spite of these limitations, Coyne's study does a good job in showing the range and complexity of social

and cultural themes that informed the Western film in its most significant period.

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