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“Lions of the West,” by Robert Morgan

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Robert Morgan. ***Lions of the West: Heroes and Villains of the Westward Expansion.*** **Chapel Hill, North Carolina: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2011.**

Good histories don’t just tell stories; they make arguments. Robert Morgan’s arguments in *Lions of the West*, subtle though they are, run as follows: historians and storytellers cannot help but view dramatic shifts of history as products of the actions of famous individuals; nevertheless, what happens in the course of history is attributable to numerous common folk acting independently and with disparate motivations. Even the most comprehensive history cannot tell the stories of all these individuals, each of whom, in the narrative of the American West, could be numbered among the great “lions.”

“While it is understandable,” Morgan explains, “that we see history mostly in terms of the deeds of a few, our grasp of what actually happened will be flawed and limited if we do not consider the story of the almost invisible many who made the notable deeds possible, even inevitable.” Despite this claim, Morgan seems taken by the Great Man theory of history, and one of the epigrams to his book, which gets repeated in the Prologue, is Emerson’s remark that there is “properly no history; only biography.”

Morgan's stated purpose is to "create a living sense of the westward expansion of the United States through brief biographies of some of the men involved." In realizing this goal, he offers a nod to other popular historians and storytellers such as Joseph J. Ellis, Gordon S. Wood, and David McCullough. Each of these men writes histories free of the monotony and tendentious urgency of academic historians, yet each is also committed to facts and small details as indicia of greater narrative patterns.

Morgan admits, as he must, that *Lions of the West* is, at best, "only a partial story." That's not a shortcoming peculiar to Morgan's narrative but a reality of human experience: *all* histories, like all memories, are partial. Morgan himself submits that "written history is distortion through selection," and that by its nature "narrative can represent only by implication, explicit about some parts, suggesting the many." No history could recount all the constituent parts that make up the whole; no history, in other words, could recreate the past. For that reason, an author's values and priorities are reflected in the subjects he or she chooses to undertake.

Morgan's values and priorities can be gleaned from his decision to profile ten individuals whose lives and toils characterize the American West in all its outlandishness and glory: Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, John Chapman ("Johnny Appleseed"), David ("Davy") Crockett, Sam Houston, James K. Polk, Winfield Scott, Kit Carson, Nicholas Trist, and John Quincy Adams. Of these, all but Chapman and Adams maintained significant ties to the South or would have considered themselves, or by others would have been considered, Southerners.

The story of the Western frontier cannot be told apart from the experiences and contributions of Southerners, and to a certain extent, the story of the American West *is* the story of the American South, which for a long time constituted the West as much as the East. As celebratory as it is cautionary, this story is fraught with paradox. Jefferson, for instance, extolled liberty but held slaves and at times promoted imperial power with the phrase "Empire of Liberty." Jackson championed the cause of the disenfranchised and the common man yet perhaps did more than anyone else to exploit, disempower, and exile Native Americans. Crockett's most lasting legacies come to us in the form of his mistakes, not his triumphs. And Trist would perform Herculean tasks such as negotiating improbable treaties, but having accomplished these, he would act sheepish and irrational and therefore confuse later biographers with his inconsistent behavior. In short, the American West, as it is known and loved today, is a bundle of personalities with contradictions that reveal as much about the way we receive history as they do about the historical figures and events themselves.

The inclusion of Adams—an urbane, cosmopolitan, Harvard elitist who stood at five feet, seven inches high and who was prone to antisocial behavior—among a cast of virile, rough-and-tumble soldiers and frontiersmen, ought to strike readers as odd. That's because it *is* odd. Perhaps anticipating this criticism, Morgan defends his Adams chapter on the grounds that to "understand almost any controversial issue, it is necessary to study the opposing points of view," and Adams, the "most passionate, sustained, and effective critic of Jacksonian politics," sits in contradistinction to the "Great Lion" manner of living and politicking. That the Adams chapter appears in epilogue suggests something—probably many things—about the privilege Morgan accords Adams in the narrative of Westward expansion. (Adams is important, but ultimately a minor player.)

An elected member of the Fellowship of Southern Writers who has received NEA and Guggenheim Fellowships, and who recently was inducted into the North Carolina Literary Hall of Fame, Morgan is a literary historian. The author of eight books of fiction, thirteen books of poetry, and, before *Lions of the West*, two books of nonfiction, he is a seasoned author whose prose reads like poetry and whose nonfiction reads like novels. *Lions of the West* is above all a literary achievement: it is beautiful and engaging and brings a poet's flair and precision to bear on the writing of history.

Morgan has reminded us that in a frontier democracy cultivated erudition (say, in the person of Jefferson) can be compatible with vulgar bravado (in the person of Carson); that a man's reputation for military triumph (consider Scott's conquest of Mexico) can be eclipsed by his subsequent failures at bureaucratic administration; that both aristocrats (like Polk) and ruffians (like Jackson) can rise to occupy the most distinguished offices in America, including the presidency; that often men are great because of their letdowns as much as their successes; and that a preoccupation with the future is not always best for the present.

Nobody writes history like Morgan. His books teach and inspire. He gives the past, with all its heroes and villains, a new life, if not a new purpose.