Cowboy Poetry Matters

From Abilene to the Mainstream

CONTEMPORARY COWBOY WRITING

EDITED BY

ROBERT McDOWELL

BORDERLANDS: COWBOY POETRY AND THE LITERARY CANON

One of the most frustrating aspects of discussing cowboy poetry is what might be called the "you had to be there" response. Really. You had to be there — Elko, Nevada, the last weekend in January at the Cowboy Poetry Gathering. To pick up a book of classic cowboy poems and read Bruce Kiskaddon's "When They Finish Shipping Cattle in the Fall" is an incomplete experience. You need to see ex-cowboss Waddie Mitchell recite it. You need to hear rancher poet Linda Hussa recite, "Under Hunter Moon," her soft voice a counterpoint to the first line of her poem: "I slip the rifle sling over my shoulder and step into the silence of dawn." You cannot get the full measure of "The Heavyweight Champion Pie Eatin' Cowboy of the West" when you read it. You need to hear the lusty comic intonations of cowboy poet and rodeo rider Paul Zarzyski as he recites it. And be prepared to shed a tear when Texan Joel Nelson recites "Anthem," the great poem of the much-mourned cowboy poet Buck Ramsey. It is this orality that relegates cowboy poetry to the borderlands. However interesting on the page, these poems cry out for recitation. A literary canon is a body of written texts, not performances.

Where in the literary canon does cowboy poetry belong? Does anyone in the literary world care? While the popular press has been fascinated by the success of cowboy poetry and the seeming paradox of the cowboy poet, literary critics, for the most part, have been silent. It is, however, time to consider the fundamental question of cowboy poetry's literary identity. I propose to begin this task by examining three important notions: the essential orality of cowboy poetry, some recent themes in the genre, and the persona of the cowboy poet.

My inquiry is based primarily on my observations over the years attending the Cowboy Poetry Gathering in Elko, Nevada; the programs, which have always contained both scholarly articles by state and university folklorists and good biographical notes of the cowboy poet presenters; more than thirty audio tapes I have collected of cowboy poetry sessions; and the work of poet and critic Dana Gioia, author of *Can Poetry Matter? Essays on Poetry and American Culture* and co-editor with X.J. Kennedy of *Introduction to Poetry*, a standard college textbook that actually mentions cowboy poetry. Gioia also kindly allowed me to use an unpublished paper, "Poetry at the End of Print Culture," which he first

presented as a Fales Lecture at New York University, invaluable in finding a fresh approach to the phenomenon of cowboy poetry.

Gioia puts the problem of orality into a larger context when he says, "Just as European literature changed two and a half millennia ago as it moved from oral to written culture, so has popular poetry transformed itself as it moves from print culture to our audio-visual culture in which writing exists but is no longer the primary means of public discourse."[1] He goes on to say that this epistemological change "transforms the identity of the author from writer to entertainer, from an invisible creator of typographic language to a physical presence performing aloud."[2] He also notes that "these new popular forms emerged outside literary life."[3] "Outside" is the key word here. If these forms were not learned primarily through print sources and as part of a standard poetry canon, where were they learned? Or, as a cowboy poet would say, "How do you come by a good poem?"

One of the most famous quotes referring to the oral dissemination of cowboy poetry is by Will James from his book *Cow Country* published in 1927: "Then in the evenings there'd be songs, old trailherd songs that some used to sing. There was even poetry at times, made right there at the cowcamp. It'd always be about some cowboy and some bad horse, and the whole outfit chipped in or suggested a word to make it up."[4] In the documentary video *Cowboy Poets* popular cowboy poet Waddie Mitchell tells a more recent anecdote of the same kind. "It was awful hard to come by a good poem," he says, and then tells the story of cowboying on an outfit where one of the hands, "an old guy named Keckie," recited a poem in the bunkhouse that had these "rough tough men that I idolized" moved to tears, or at least staring at the floor. Mitchell says, "I just knew I had to have that poem."[5]

I gleaned from program notes, primarily in 1986, other examples of how presenters featured at the Gathering learned cowboy poetry.[6] Over fifty cowboy poets from eighteen states presented that year. Cowboy poet Ernie Fanning, from Fernley, Nevada, "picked up much of his large repertoire of cowboy poems from other cowboys." Fanning says "you had to teach one to learn one" and this sometimes led to all-night swapping sessions. Bill "Blackie" Black, from Adel, Oregon, " . . . learned his first three bunkhouse poems at the Ellison Ranch in Nevada." Bob Johnston, from Scottsbluff, Nebraska, says, "He heard cowboys recite poetry while he was growing up in the bunkhouses and after a day's

work on the ranch. He recalls rodeo cowboys singing and reciting in bars, in their pickups, and on casual occasions." Ross Knox, from Seligman, Arizona, developed a keen interest in cowboy poems which he heard old-timers recite in bars around Nevada. Leon Flick, from Plush, Oregon, first heard cowboy poems . . . at brandings and "as a kid, at the Plush general store." Presenters frequently mentioned family traditions. Yula Sue Whipple Hunting, from Beryl, Utah, says that "for at least four generations my family has written and recited poems." Some acknowledged their mothers as bearers of this oral culture. Charles A. Kortes, of Rawlins, Wyoming, states his poetry was "influenced by his mother." Don Bowman, of Fallon, Nevada, mentions his "grandmother who recited cowboy poetry."

Not all cowboy poetry was passed on orally. The print sources, however, were never part of the literary canon. For example, well-known Montana cowboy poet Wallace McRae says that "we liked poetry in our home back in the '40s when my sister, Marjorie, used to cut poems out of a livestock publication and glue them to a pale blue hair ribbon and hang them by a straight pin in her room."[7] Nevada cowboy Stan Lehman speaks of "his father's copy of Curley Fletcher's *'Songs of the Sage'*" and recalls seeing poetry in a magazine called *Ranch Romance* when he was young. Many cowboys referred to the older "cowboy canon that is, the recitations of Bruce Kiskaddon, Badger Clark, Gail Gardner, S. Omar Barker, and Curley Fletcher. Typical of this oral apprenticeship is Richard Smith, of Carson City, Nevada, whose interest in cowboy poetry began with a book of Bruce Kiskaddon's work. Later he became acquainted with the poetry of Curley Fletcher, Gail Gardner, and Robert Service. American humorist Will Rogers exemplifies this tradition. "Will's study was next to our room upstairs in the east end of the house. Books of cowboy songs and old ranch poetry were there. He bought every one he heard about. It was easy for him to memorize and he like to recite 'Sam Bass,' 'Hell in Texas,' and 'On the Banks of the Cimarron,'" says his wife in her 1941 biography.[8]

Some cowboy poets come from the more mainstream tradition of writing occasional verse. Barney Nelson, from Alpine, Texas, says, "I don't really consider myself a poet. I just write poems for our Christmas cards or to give with gifts to friends." Paul Schmitt, in Stagecoach, Nevada, also says he started writing songs and poems for friends. Others state that they wrote cowboy poetry simply for their own amusement. Jesse Smith, of Porterville, California, says "for lack of TV or radio," he started writing verse. Georgie Sicking, of Fallon, Nevada, states, "I guess it was loneliness that started me making up poems—living by myself, without

much to read, I had a lot of time to think." Vess Quinlan, who lives in Alamosa, Colorado, says, "I kept my interest in poetry pretty much to myself in the early years. Afraid, I guess, someone or everyone would make fun of the idea of making poems." Bill Sullivan, of Sheridan, Montana, recalls that he would "memorize the poems and then recite them to myself as I rode the trail."

This last image of Bill Sullivan in the Montana back country "riding and reciting" may be true to the reality of this oral tradition, but it doesn't fit with the cowboy myth. Jim Griffith, Director of the Southwest Folklore Center at the University of Arizona, asks the question, "Why has recitation never been given the place in the cowboy myth that singing has? The singing cowboy has become a commonplace Western image; the poetry-reciting cowboy is still a strange figure to outsiders."[9] He then gives some possible answers:

> In the first place, singing is a much more romantic occupation than recitation, which smacks, to outsiders, of the schoolroom and parlor. But even cowboys once went to school and the skills one learns in one's youth may be put to use in a number of ways later on. Singing to the cattle on night guard caught the imagination of readers of western stories; ballad singing was what folklorists of 70 years ago were looking for.
>
> For these and other reasons, cowboy songs became an important part of the Western image, while cowboy recitations were (and still are) largely unheard of . . . ."[10]

In the same article, Griffith gives further insights into the cultural traditions of recitation and their relationship to cowboy poetry:

> A hundred years ago, reciting poetry was a lot more widespread than it is today. In the first place, memorizing verses and reciting them was something school kids had to do. In the second, there wasn't the specialization we have in our society today. Poetry and many of the other art forms turned a corner in the early 1900s and became less and less accessible to the general public.[11]

Finally, the Cowboy Poetry Gathering itself has been an inspiration and impetus to cowboy poets and reciters. After attending the 1987 Elko Gathering, cowboy poet Kent Stockton, of Riverton, Wyoming, went home and organized the Wyoming Poetry Gathering. Bill Lowman, of Sentinel Butte, North Dakota, who says "I was writing cowboy rhymes for my own amusement long before the Elko Gathering," became the founder and director of the popular Dakota Poetry Gathering. Any number of ranch men and women had an experience similar to that of Connie Satterthwaite, from Tuscarora, Nevada, who came to the first Gathering in 1985, went back to the ranch inspired to write her own cowboy poetry, and has been a frequent presenter ever since.

So, these were the major ways today's cowboy poets came by their literary models: first, they heard them on the ranch, relaxing after work in the ranch house, bunkhouse, or at a bar; second, because recitation was a tradition in their families and they "just always heard" classics of the cowboy canon; third, they read the cowboy poetry in livestock magazines, or other rural publications; or, finally, since 1985, they attended the Cowboy Poetry Gathering in Elko, Nevada.

How does this essential orality affect the stature of cowboy poetry within the literary establishment? Several responses come to mind. One is to view cowboy poetry as a cultural artifact, a folk tradition like country fiddling or horsehair rope braiding. In some ways, the very creation of the Cowboy Poetry Gathering lends support to this view. The first reading of cowboy poetry in Elko was organized by a local community college art instructor, as part of an interest in ranch crafts and traditions. However, it was state and university folklorists, not art departments or English departments, who established the first Cowboy Poetry Gathering in 1985—and then were amazed by the vitality of what they found. Hal Cannon, long-time director of the Western Folklife Center, expert on folklife of the Great Basin, and one of the founders of the Gathering, said in the 1986 program, "When I first started working on cowboy poetry—reading it, collecting it, meeting the people who write it—I had no idea there was so much of it . . . ."[12] In many ways this "discovery" of cowboy poetry seems part of the cultural movements of the late 1960's to preserve traditional folkways. Cannon reinforces this when he says the following:

> The folklorists who organized the Gathering—who wrote letters to the editors of country papers, who looked through libraries for old books of cowboy poetry, who drove the backroads to get acquainted with the best cowboy poets they could find—care about cowboy po-

> etry because of its strong sense of tradition. It's a form of expression that reflects the broad experience of most ranch people, and it also has strong links to the past."[13]

A second, slightly more literary approach is to see cowboy poetry as folk poetry. This perspective is emphasized by the 1997 focus of the Gathering. Billed as the "Celtic Connection," the Gathering featured the poetry and storytelling traditions of the drover cultures of Ireland and Wales; 1998 focused on oral folk traditions in Scotland and England. The verbal virtuosity of the Irish and the Welsh habit of poetry-making for all kinds of occasions made a case for the kinship between cowboy poetry and traditional Celtic storytelling and poetry. Other commonalities include the prestige conferred upon the cowboy or the crofter with an extensive oral repertoire and the fact that, in both cultures, the traditions are more likely perpetuated in the pub and parlor than in the classroom.

A third approach is text-based but strongly evaluative: cowboy poetry as light popular verse with little craft and less substance, in other words, doggerel. In this argument, popularity becomes evidence of superficiality. In "Poetry at the End of Print Culture" Gioia says that, to a certain faction of literary critics, "the very expression 'popular poetry' sounds oxymoronic. Trained to identify the art of poetry with high literary culture, they immediately assume that popular poetry—new or old—is sentimental, subliterary drivel—superficial, derivative, or, at best, suavely mendacious."[14]

Gioia also notes that "the new popular poetry differentiates itself from mainstream poetry in the most radical way imaginable, by attracting a huge, paying public."[15] Charlie Seemann, the current director of the Western Folklife Center in Elko, recently told me that cowboy poet Baxter Black is the third best-selling poet in America, right behind Dr. Seuss and Rod McKuen. Good news for Black, who recently bought a ranch in Arizona; bad news for securing his place in the literary pantheon.

The fourth and most thought-provoking response comes from Gioia, who maintains the new popular poetry, including cowboy poetry, calls "into question many contemporary assumptions about the current state of poetry . . . and reflects the broad cultural forces that are now reshaping the literary arts."[16] He thinks that the orality and the popularity of cowboy poetry are two of the characteristics that place it in the avant

garde. He says that the "four trends that appear so obvious in rap, cowboy poetry, and poetry slams—its reliance on oral performance, its nonacademic origins, its revival of auditory form, and its popular appeal—also exist less overtly in the established literary world."[17] However, he maintains it is oral transmission versus the medium of print that creates the strongest distinction between popular poetry and "literary poetry."[18] About the orality of cowboy poetry, Gioia says that "it hearkens back to poetry's origins as an oral art form in pre-literate cultures, and it suggests how television, telephones, recordings, and radio have brought most Americans—consciously or unconsciously—into a new form of oral culture."[19] Certainly relevant to cowboy poetry is his observation that "the new popular poetry uses the apparatus of the musical entertainment world—recordings, radio, concert halls, night clubs, auditoriums, bars, and festivals."[20]

Gioia also notes the profound relationship between orality and formalism:

> . . . the practice of arranging some auditorily apprehensible feature such as stress, tone, quantity, alliteration, syllable count, or syntax into a regular pattern is so universal that it suggests that there is something primal and ineradicable at work. Metrical speech not only produces some heightened form of attention that increases mnemonic retention; it also seems to provide innate physical pleasure in both the auditor and orator. Typographic poetry may provide other pleasures, but it cannot rewire the circuitry of the human auditory perception to change a million years of pre-literate, sensory evolution.[21]

Although orality and formalism can be summoned to argue, as Gioia does, that cowboy poetry's place is in the future, a fifth perspective is to locate cowboy poetry within "the last Golden Age of poetry,";[22] that is, within the bardic, Homeric tradition. I would make a case to situate cowboy poetry in this lineage because of its orality formal structure, and because of the function of cowboy poetry.

In making a couple of points about the function of cowboy poetry, I would first claim that, even today, ranch cultures are essentially apprenticeship cultures. Professor Walter J. Ong describes such cultures in *Orality and Literacy*:

> Human beings in primary oral cultures, those untouched by writing in any form, learn a great deal and possess and practice great wisdom, but they do not study." They learn by apprenticeship—hunting with experienced hunters, for example, by discipleship, which is a kind of apprenticeship, by listening, by repeating what they hear, by mastering proverbs and ways of combining and recombining them, by assimilating other formulary materials, by participation in a kind of corporate retrospection—not by study in the strict sense.

Although I would not simplify contemporary ranching business nor suggest that these Westerners are in any way "untouched by writing," I would maintain that in day-to-day ranch work hearing and remembering are critical skills. Learning is more by memory than by memo. I think folklorist Mike Korn alludes to this link between the work and the poetry when he discusses the concept of repetition, mnemonics, and the conservative function of cowboy poetry:

> To many who aren't connected with cattle or ranching this repetition (of scenes or motifs) seems redundant. But what these people don't understand is that illustrations such as these "genre" pictures—like cowboy poetry—restate some very basic things about life around cattle and the West. These values, ideas, hazards, problems, jokes, lessons and morals are expressed time after time to teach, fortify, and underline the basic underpinning of a way of life. [23]

The most characteristic feature of oral poetry in the Homeric tradition is its constant repetitions. "They occur at the level of phrase and line (formulas) and whole scenes (typical scenes and themes) and are the building blocks of the oral poet's trade." Furthermore, this oral poetry served the collective memory and welfare of its culture. Although I do not want to overstate my claim, I think there is a valid comparison.[24]

Ranching always has been and still is a communal activity, stereotype of the lone cowboy notwithstanding. I think the bardic and communal nature of cowboy poetry is manifested in two ways: one, being a good reciter and having a lengthy repertoire of memorized poems has tremendous prestige; two, the perpetuation of the repertoire supersedes the importance of the individual poet. Having one's poem become a favorite recitation is more important than pride of authorship. For example,

Wallace McRae's poem, "Reincarnation," immediately became part of the cowboy poetry canon. Although reciters usually acknowledge McRae as the author, it's not a sin if they don't. Colen H. Sweeten, Jr.'s poem, "Dad's Old Hat," is a favorite of cowboy poets. The poem is frequently recited, even on occasions when the poet's name is forgotten. The classic example of the course from authorship, to relative anonymity, to a central place in western folk tradtion is the history of Curley Fletcher's poem,"The Outlaw Bronco," into the "folk" song, "The Strawberry Roan."

I think the aesthetic is effective, Tolstoyan: the function of cowboy poetry is to serve the greater good of the community.[25] Many cowboy poets would essentially agree with the remarks of poet and literary magazine publisher Scott Preston:

> . . . poetry in ranchlife has helped braid a much richer expression of culture where visual arts, handicrafts, political discussion, good cooking, physical dexterity and, above all else, serious fellowship are plaited together in a full celebration of being alive. It's an accomplishment that any other school of American poetry should envy. It is where the sacred potential of poems and songs and stories reside.[26]

If oral dissemination is the medium, what about the message? Especially in the last ten years the themes of poetry serve to reinforce the value, and, to a certain extent, bolster the tenuous existence of the culture itself. Cowboy poetry has become increasingly political in its themes. As Nevada cowboy poet Rod McQueary succinctly expresses, "My poetry tries to tell the truth about my culture and my profession. The only thing ranch families can be sure of is that they are misunderstood" And, after reciting "The Lease Hounds" and "Intrinsic Worth," Wallace McRae concludes the *Cowboy Poets* documentary video by looking straight into the camera and saying, "We think that our way of life is important . . . . Who's going to tell our story? Who's going to get across the way we feel to other people?"

In 1986, Western Folklife Director Hal Cannon noted the following:

> In recent years cowboy poets have seemed to feel an urgency to let those who work outside the sheep and cattle industries know what it is like to have a way of life threatened by mining, by urbanization, by government policies, by consumer concerns, by environmental concerns—in short by all the pressures of a changing physical and political landscape.[27]

That was more than a decade ago. The issues have intensified. For example, as recent as September 6, 1998, the cover of the *New York Times Book Review* proclaims, "How the West Was Lost" and briefly describes two featured reviews as follows: "'Alienation and Urbanization,' Robert Kaplan says in *An Empire Wilderness* and "'Reckless Exploitation,' according to Timothy Egan in *Lasso the Wind*." In the actual review of *Lasso the Wind*, the reviewer describes Egan as raging against "big ranches, mine owners, dam builders, real estate moguls, timbermen, and, of course, the dead-hand grip still exerted by the Legend of the Old West, which he sees as a 'pitiful excuse for history, a brief shameful period (1846—90) driven by greed, lawlessness and attempted genocide.'"

In a way, the beleaguered status of the family ranch or farm exacerbates the problem of where to place the poetry, ideologically, in the canon. Are we talking about right wing propaganda or the poetry of resistance? Does the conservative function of the poetry necessarily mean a collective, reactionary response, as is the case with some western political movements such as the Sagebrush Rebellion? Or does Dana Gioia have a point when he notes in his discussion of popular poetry that one faction of critics "characteristically views popular poetry ideologically as an expression of democratic revolutionary, or marginalized class consciousness."[28] It is worth mentioning that agriculture presently involves less than 3% of the American workforce, a minority group by anyone's standards.

What about the persona of the cowboy poet? How do the practitioners, the men and women who write and recite cowboy poetry, see themselves? A few, like Baxter Black or Waddie Mitchell, have made the transition from rancher-veterinarian or cow boss to professional cowboy poet. And, as professional entertainers, they are immersed in a world of performance schedules, book deals, audio tape and cd contracts. However, most of the regulars at the Gathering have heeded the country advice, "Don't give up your day job," and, in my opinion, are most likely to identify themselves in three ways: as being from a particular region in the West; by their specific occupations within the livestock industry; and, most importantly, as cowboy or rancher. One of the best cowboy poets, Joel Nelson, from Alpine, Texas, exemplifies this strong affiliation in his remarks for the 1986 program:

> I have a bachelor's degree in forestry and range management and a year in graduate school in my past . . . . But my education has been picked up on the ranches where I've worked . . . . I've received a good

> education every place I ever worked and I've been fortunate in working on some good outfits with good men . . . . I don't even hope to be anything but a cowboy. To me, that's the ultimate. My family is happy with that and all the men I admire are "just cowboys."

Identification with place is strong in the cowboy culture, a culture richly varied from locale to locale. However, whether a Hispanic cowboy poet from West Texas, an Indian cowboy from eastern Montana, or a woman rancher from a remote corner of Nevada, most cowboy poets view themselves as keepers of the flame, practicing an art form or a tradition that helps, in some measure, to preserve and perpetuate a way of life—even as much of the poetry mourns its passing. In his keynote address for the 1990 Cowboy Poetry Gathering, Wallace McRae said, "We live and work in the last best place. We poets continue to value the inspiration and positive reinforcement that we get from the Gathering being a sharing rather than a competition. Let's hope that some things never change."[29]

What threatens cowboy poetry most is the increasingly urban audience and the fact that popularity brings the pressures of conformity. From the beginning, cowboy poets have had to deal with the bias that made "cowboy" and "poet," to use Gioia's word, "oxymoronic." Writing in 1990 about "real" cowboys who "annually gather in Elko, Nevada, to read their poems to one another," the late Wallace Stegner noted the public pressure to make Westerners fit into stereotypes:

> Their trouble is that if they write with honesty about exploitation, insecurity, hard work, injuries and cows, none of which make even a walk-on appearance in *The Virginian* and most of the horse operas it has spawned, they will find a smaller and less-enthusiastic audience than if they had written about crooked sheriffs and six-guns".

The cliched images still exist. For example, whenever I show the *Cowboy Poets* documentary in my literature class, students often respond with stereotypes of their own. After a recent viewing, one female student said, "I find it interesting that these macho Marlboro men of the West find time and enjoy creating poetry. It just does not seem likely that tending cows and writing poetry would go together well." A young linebacker

on the college football team wrote: "When I think of cowboys I think of Clint Eastwood shooting everybody, not a clean-shaven man reciting poetry." And a bright re-entry student commented, "I can't believe a cowboy would actually write a poem!"

Writing to an audience, as Wallace McRae says, "to get across the way we feel," is one thing. To fall victim to the myths and stereotypes of that audience is another. I see this with the issue of gender and cowboy poetry. Hal Cannon has an interesting perspective on ethnicity that holds true, to a certain extent, for gender:

> Cowboys are generally stereotyped, thanks to Hollywood, as exclusively Anglo-American, yet the truth is that this occupational group has always consisted of a varied mix of ethnic backgrounds. The cowboy's work is so charged with cultural elements that it pervades the life of anyone who participates in it. With its own creed, dress, fancy gear, language, poetry and songs, it often outwardly replaces ethnicity altogether.[30]

I remember at the 1997 Gathering, during a session on women and cowboy poetry, an articulate urban woman wondering aloud: "Where are the women's voices?" They were there. I'm not sure she was hearing them. That gender and ethnicity could be subordinated to occupation is not an easy concept for many outsiders to accept.

At this point in our inquiry into the nature of cowboy poetry and where it belongs, one question remains: is it any good? What have the literary critics had to say? Gioia notes the following:

> While the new popular poetry has received immense coverage from the electronic media and general press, it has garnered relatively little attention from intellectuals and virtually none from established poetry critics. One can understand the reluctance of academic critics. If they have noticed the new popular poetry at all, they immediately see how little it has in common with the kinds of poetry they have been trained to consider worthy of study.[31]

He continues, "Genuinely new artistic developments—be they the revival of popular poetry or the reemergence of form—tend to move dialectically from the margins of established culture rather than smoothly from the central consensus.[32] He is more interested in the phenomenon of cowboy poetry than merits of individual poems. As a matter of fact,

he thinks that "individually considered as works of literary art, most of the new popular poetry is undistinguished or worse."[33]

Much of cowboy poetry does have an insider's feel to it. Not everyone responds to a poem about a cow with a prolapsed uterus. Not everyone finds the charm in the "lingo of our calling" as Wallace McRae describes the "purt nears" and "aint's," the references to "kack" and "hackamore." For some, end rhymes are not musical but monotonous. However, in spite of the external pressures to be understood and the pressures of popularity, "Cowboys write for cowboys, not for critics," as cowboy poetry scholar Guy Logsdon observes.[34]

I've listened to hours and hours of cowboy poetry over the years, live and on audiotapes. What would I say about the quality of the poems? That it varies wildly. I particularly like poems about the range, about everyday life, and the poems that celebrate a particular set of values. I've heard some awful poems in each of these categories. The poems of everyday life are often humorous, sometimes scatological, sometimes misogynistic, often echoing themes and motifs at least as old as "The Canterbury Tales." In any of the categories the poems can be sentimental, corny, close-minded. At their best, the poems are ". . . music—a determined, persuasive, reliable, enthusiastic, and crafted music," as Pulitzer poet Mary Oliver defines a poem. At their best, the poems are rich in detail, complex and subtle in their formal elements, and metaphysical truths are revealed in the commonplace.

So, where does cowboy poetry belong? Baxter Black may be right when he says that "Cowboy poetry is someplace between good taste and throwing up in your hat." Kim Stafford has a more eloquent response when he says, "Poetry can serve any cause, but at its best it speaks out of a working life, and tells the worth of the individual, the abundance and wonder of creation, and the politics of the range in the terms of that working life alone."[35] For my own part, I thought of cowboy poetry when I first read this definition by Robert Frost: "Poetry is a way of remembering what it would impoverish us to forget."

Time will tell. For me, the experience of cowboy poetry changed the way I teach literature. After returning to my college classroom from the 1986 Cowboy Poetry Gathering, I started giving students an extra credit assignment: a hundred points for a hundred lines of memorized poetry. Now, after more than a decade of "having been there" that last, often below-zero weekend in January at the Cowboy Poetry Gathering in Elko, I am committed to the virtues of recitation. Now I end "Intro to Lit" with a performance. We discuss the poems the students have cho-

sen from the text, looking at rhyme, meter, symbols, imagery—all the usual. The students rehearse in front of one another. On the last day of class we give a performance. By the time they stand to recite "Lady Lazarus" or "The Road Not Taken" or "We Real Cool," many students have memorized "their" poems. It took a thousand mile trip to get it: poetry is meant to be spoken, seen, and heard. And the best poems are the ones you know by heart.

NOTES

[1] Gioia, Dana."Poetry at the End of Print Culture." Unpublished manuscript. Gioia first presented this critical essay as a guest lecturer at NYU. He has also delivered it at Chapel Hill, Lyons College, University of Galway, and several other schools.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Qtd. in 1995 Cowboy Poetry Gathering program. Programs from 1995 to the present can be found in the Western Folklife Center Archives: 501 Railroad Street / Elko, Nevada 89801 / 702-738-7508 / http://www.westfolk.org

[5] The documentary video "Cowboy Poets" can be found in the Western Folklife Center Archives.

[6] All quoted biographical information on cowboy poet presenters comes from the 1986 or 1990 Cowboy Poetry Gathering programs.

[7] McRae, Wallace. "Some Things Never Change." 1995 Cowboy Poetry Gathering program, 2.

[8] Qtd. in 1997 Cowboy Poetry Gathering program, 32.

[9] Griffith, Jim. "Cowboy Poetry—The First Hundred Years." 1995 Cowboy Poetry Gathering program, 6.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid., 7.

[12] Cannon, Hal. "Cowboy Poets and the Modern World." 1985 Cowboy Poetry Gathering program, 4.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Gioia, Dana. "Poetry at the End of Print Culture," 7.

[15] Ibid., 8.

[16] Ibid., 5.

[17] Ibid., 20

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid., 8.

[20] Ibid., 9

[21] Ibid., 13

[22] Respected "literary" poet Jane Hirschfield alluded to pre-classical Greece in reference to the function of poetry at a recent poetry reading Mendocino College at Ukiah, California, September 11, 1998.

[23] Korn, Mike. "Cowboy Poetry: Drawing the Line." 1986 Cowboy Poetry Gathering program, 5.

[24] The appearance in recent years of professor Clay Jenkinson, from, University of Nevada, Reno, reinforces the thematic connection between cowboy poetry and the poetry of classical antiquity. Professor Jenkinson presents a Chautauqua-style program, "Thomas Jefferson and Pastoral Poets," in which he and cowboy poets present the works of pastoral writers such as Horace and Theocritus.

[25] I see a similarity between this excerpt from Tolstoy's *What Is Art?* and Preston's claim for the social usefulness of cowboy poetry: "The task of art is enormous. Through the influence of real art, aided by science, guided by religion, that peaceful co-operation of man which is now maintained by external means . . . by our law courts, police, charitable institutions, factory inspection, and so forth—should be obtained by man's free and joyous activity. Art should cause violence to be set aside."

[26] Preston, Scott. "Cowboy Poetry, Honest American Poetry." 1995 Cowboy Poetry Gathering program, 5.

[27] Cannon, Hal. "Cowboy Poets and the Modern World." 1985 Cowboy Poetry Gathering program, 4.

[28] Gioia, Dana. "Poetry at the End of Print Culture," 7.

[29] McRae, Wallace. "Some Things Never Change." 1995 Cowboy Poetry Gathering program, 3.

[30] Cannon, Hal. "'They ain't very much I would change.' The Life of Curley Fletcher." 1990 Cowboy Poetry Gathering program, 6.

[31] Gioia, Dana. "Poetry at the End of Print Culture," 7.

[32] Ibid., 34.

[33] Ibid., 6.

[34] Logsdon, Guy. "The Qualities of Cowboy Poetry." Keynote address. 1988 Cowboy Poetry Gathering, audiotape, Western Folklife Center Archives.

[35] Stafford, Kim. "How You Came By What You Got." 1995 Cowboy Poetry Gathering program, 11.

WORKS CITED

Egan, Timothy. "The Rape of the West." *The New York Times Book Review*. 6 Sept. 1998:5-6.

Jones, Peter V. *Homer's Odyssey: A Companion to the Translation of Richmond Lattimore*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 1988.

Kennedy, X.J. and Dana Gioia. *An Introduction to Poetry*, 9th ed. New York: Longman, 1998.

Oliver, Mary. *Rules for the Dance: A Handbook for Writing and Reading Metrical Verse*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1998.

Ong, Walter. *Orality and Literacy. The Technologizing of the Word*. London: Routledge, 1982.

Stegner, Wallace."The New Literary Frontier." *San Francisco Examiner*. 5 August 1990.

Widmark, Ann. *Poets of the Cowboy West*. New York: Norton, 1995.

WORKS CONSULTED

Bate, Walter Jackson. *Prefaces to Criticism*. New York: Doubleday, 1959.

Cannon, Hal. ed. *Cowboy Poetry*. Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books, 1985.

Gioia, Dana. *Can Poetry Matter? Essays on Poetry and American Culture*. St. Paul: Greywolf Press, 1992.

"Notes Toward a New Bohemia." Grantmakers in the Arts. 5.4., 1994.

Rubin, David C. *Memory in Oral Traditions*. New York: Oxford, 1995.

POETRY ANTHOLOGY / COWBOY

For years, Cowboy Poetry has been seen by readers of mainstream American poetry as a marginal art. *Cowboy Poetry Matters* is the first book of its kind to dispel this idea by creating a dialogue between contemporary mainstream poets and traditional Cowboy poets. Spurred by Dana Gioia's essay, "Can Poetry Matter?," Paul Zarzyski responds with "The Lariati Versus/Verses the Literati: Loping Towards Dana Gioia's Dream Come Real," a compelling essay in which an historical bridge is built between the urban contemporary canon and the rural pasture land. *Cowboy Poetry Matters* brings together the work of poets whose common ground is their love of horses and their dedication to their own style of "cowboying." Whether it be Maxine Kumin's depiction of her horse being shod, Linda McCarriston's haunting vision of Joan of Arc's horse burned before her eyes, or Laurie Wagner Buyer's song of "Wooing the Wanton Mare," this anthology expands the boundaries as to what constitutes a Cowboy poem. Those who do not consider themselves lovers of traditional Cowboy Poetry, will be utterly surprised by what they find inside. Donald Hall, Wallace McRae and Buck Ramsey riding their horses side by side.

Contributors include: I. B. Allen, Virginia Bennett, Jon Bowerman, Robert R. Brown, Laurie Wagner Buyer, John C. Dofflemyer, Dana Gioia, Tami Haaland, Donald Hall, Linda M. Hasselstrom, Linda Hussa, Tony Johnston, Maxine Kumin, Linda McCarriston, Nancy McLelland, Wallace McRae, Joel Nelson, Kathy Ogren, Thelma Poirier, Buck Ramsey, Liam Rector, Andy Wilkinson, Paul Zarzyski

Robert McDowell is the founding editor and publisher of Story Line Press. He has written, edited or translated seven books, including *Quiet Money, The Diviners, Poetry After Modernism, The Reaper Essays,* and *How I Came to Know Fish.* His poems and essays are widely anthologized, and appear in several literary journals such as *Harvard Magazine, The Hudson Review, The New Criterion, Ploughshares, Poetry* and many others. He lives with his wife, their three children and a horse in Talent, Oregon.