In the untamed West, pioneers came to test their fortunes -- and their wills. The Wyoming territory was a harsh, unforgiving land, with its own unwritten code of honor by which men lived and died. Into this rough landscape rides the Virginian, a solitary man whose unbending will is his only guide through life. The Virginians unwavering beliefs in right and wrong are soon tested as he tries to prove his love for a woman who cannot accept his sense of justice; at the same time, a betrayal by his most trusted friend forces him to fight against the corruption that rules the land. Still as exciting and meaningful as it was when first published one hundred years ago, Owen Wisters epic tale of a man caught between his love for a woman and his quest for justice exemplifies one of the most significant and enduring themes in all of American literature. With remarkable character depth and vivid passages, The Virginian stands not only as the first great novel of American Western literature, but as a testament to the eternal struggle between good and evil in humanity. With an engaging new introduction by Gary Scharnhorst, professor of English at the University of New Mexico, this volume is an indispensable addition to the library of American Western literature.

My Personal Review:
The Virginian is a masterpiece. While it is a novel, based largely on Wisters conception of the cowboy, the Virginian had a face to him; and its story line is firmly based in fact. Some of the original sites, such as the Goose Egg ranch (the dance and switching of the babies) are actual historical spots - parts of the the old stone ranch house were still standing in the 1960s and perhaps some remnants of it remain today, although it is all on private property now along Bessemer Bend along the Platte River. The Occidental Hotel, in Buffalo, a well-made ancient brick building, is still standing in remarkable condition and still in use today, and was the scene of the shoot-out between the Virginian and Trampas. The little town of Medicine Bow still holds physical remnants of the Virginians story in historical significance to be seen and felt. As is the song High Noon, sung
by Tex Ritter, a reminder of this unforgettable story that crosses from literature into song and legend.

The Virginian, like the legendary movie Shane has much of its subtle nuances revolving around the nefarious Johnson County Cattle War. (Buffalo, Wyoming) This was during a wild, untamed era when the range was unfenced, big cattle empires, some of whom were English Lords rather than Americans (Frewens Castle is a prime example of another historical Wyoming ruin near Buffalo - owned by an Englishman and now also on private property) ran huge herds of cattle on free grass and fattened their wallets as much as they fattened the cattle; somehow, these big cattlemen decided they owned the entire state without benefit of deed or law. When the Homestead Act brought in settlers to this vast land, the end of the free grass became quite apparent to these individuals, who had laid claim to the land without benefit of deed. They decided that the fastest way to deal with the problem was to eliminate it and hired guns from Texas and Oklahoma were brought in with the blessing of the governor of the state of Wyoming at that time, Gov. Barber.

There was, indeed, as there always is, two sides to the story, and the settlers did rustle some cattle, no doubt. The subtle references to this problem appear during Judge Henrys dialogue in the Virginian. The Virginians dearest friend, Steve, comrade of his youth, was caught up in it; and was caught with stolen horses. The chapter that dealt with this is especially poignant and emotional; the hanging and the scene of the Virginians torment of the night before; the grim foreboding sight of the cottonwood looming in the shadows, where vigilante justice is to be served up in the morning; and Steves stilted, cowhands way of sending the Virginian his farewell - is very moving.

It is also a tale of lost individuals attaching themselves to predators because they need someone to guide them and there is no one else in their fragmented lives; the character of Shorty is one of these - the boy/man who is ill-equipped to make his way in the world of men, hence is an easy mark for Trampas - yet is always good to his horse.

There is much to this book, both as a novel based in fact and history, and as a literary accomplishment. Wister dresses up his narration a bit, of course, but essentially, the picture of life out here is fairly close to being accurate at that time. Unlike Shane, whose splendid film treatment will go down in its own history as being one of a kind, The Virginian has never had a worthy movie made of it, in my view.

I recommend this to anyone wishing to read an old book that is still vastly worthwhile, even though its subjects are long gone and only their shadows remain. Look deep into its pages because there is a lot stirring there that takes a second look.

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