

On the Invention of the West

by Rick Foster

We know the past through the stories we hear. Often when we think we are discovering the past we are only making the acquaintance of someone's earlier invention of it.

For another project I happened to study a memoir by one J.J. McCloskey, an actor who worked in California in the early 1850s. He tells the story of Lizzy Bingham who, he claims, was the first English-speaking actress in California. He toured the mines with Lizzy and her husband, so there should be a lot of truth in his account. But he's writing forty years after the events and the historical record shows him to be wrong in many factual details. In itself that is not very interesting, but what fascinates me is that when he embroiders the story away from the facts, he takes it in the direction of a narrative by Bret Harte.

I don't mean to suggest that McCloskey was intentionally telling an untruth. Rather, I think that the kinds of incidents that Harte wove into his stories had so pervaded the popular imagination that McCloskey's memory started weaving them into his own memory of Lizzy. After all, he wanted to tell a convincing and entertaining story, so why shouldn't his imagination pour itself into the Bret Harte forms that had proven

so successful?

And indeed the forms would prove more successful than the stories themselves. Long after Harte's death the critic Henry Seidel Canby wrote: "Waves of influence run from the man and indeed the literary West may be said to have founded itself upon the imagination of Bret Harte."

Not least of Harte's achievements was his mentoring of Mark Twain. It was Harte who upon first hearing the Jumping Frog story insisted that Twain had to write it down. It was Harte who helped Twain evolve his voice from the bar room blarney of the rough Nevada reporter to the miraculously variable instrument that made Twain one of the great American writers – and he did it without trying to scrub away the primitive energy that makes that voice so vital.

In the Jumping Frog story and in the later *Roughing It* Twain perfected the tones of voice that are still representative of the humor of the West. But even in *Roughing It*, as Twain was approaching literary maturity, there are passages that seem imitative of Harte's style. Though unquestionably the greater writer, it seems clear that Twain owed more to Harte than the other way around – and that we all owe a great deal to both of them for the literary and, later, cinematic landscapes that were fashioned on their foundations.