

### Historical Myth v. Reality

*Historians try to find out what “really” happened in the past. But in the case of the history of cowboys and the West, it’s often hard to separate myth from reality. Read what two historians have to say about the difference between myth and reality.*

If we differentiate history from myth solely on the basis of facts, we will, however, run into conceptual difficulties over what a fact is and, more significantly, miss a larger difference. For a good historian, the past is, as the cliché goes, another country. People in the past operate in a different context than do we in the present; they often live by other logics. Any lessons the past teaches are those about processes and change; we cannot derive uniformly valid rules about our present situation from the past. Myth, for all its attention to the past, denies this and thus denies ‘history’ itself. Myth refuses to see the past as fundamentally different from the present. . . . Myth rips events out of context and drains them of their historicity. How a cowboy acts in myth is how an American male should act regardless of time or place. A man has to do what a man has to do. Myths thus are antihistory, for history above all depends on context. . . .

[However] as people accept and assimilate myths, they act on the myths, and the myths become the basis for actions that shape history. Historians find they cannot understand people’s actions without understanding their intentions, and those intentions are often shaped by cultural myths. The mythic West imagined by Americans has shaped the West of history just as the West of history has helped create the West Americans have imagined. The two cannot be neatly severed.

*Source: White, Richard. “It’s Your Misfortune and None of My Own.” University of Oklahoma Press, 1991. 616.*

[Historians have believed that] what we know about the cowboy and the cattleman can be stored in two bins: one marked *reality*, the other labeled *myth*. The historians have sought to add to the good stuff of the first bin; the fictionists, movie makers, and television producers have filled the second to overflowing. . . . Such a view, however, is not only simple, it is also simplistic. . . .

The historical cowboy, in the view of western historians, is his own man out of the past, not an image set in the past after being definitely shaped by present conceptions of what a cowman ought to be. . . . But how does the historian find that figure in the past? Consider his sources. A man writes an account of himself in his journal or his autobiography; his friend writes further accounts as biography, reminiscence, or tribute. But if there are facts here, there is also a molding to ideal and mythic images. Can we suppose that Roosevelt saw himself as historical object? . . .

Reality does not come, like gold nuggets or topaz crystals, already made. . . . It does not lie exposed in the clutter of history once some of the dust of time has been removed. . . . It is a truism that the historian seeks to know the way things were. But it is also a truism that a pile of apparent facts is no more the historical reality of the range than a pile of logs is a livable house. Obviously the historian builds history too, using the assumptions, the values by which the pieces are selected and fitted most rightly together. The result, he trusts, is a representation of reality.

Source: Walker, Don. "Riders and Reality: A Philosophical Problem in the Historiography of the Cattle Trade." *The Western Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 9, NO. 2. (April, 1978). 163-179.

#### Questions:

1. According to the first passage, why does the historian have to pay close attention to popular myths? Why can't myth and reality be easily separated?
2. According to the second passage, why is it impossible for the historian to simply tell a true story about "reality?"
3. Think about a historical movie that you've seen recently (e.g., *Forrest Gump*, *Titanic*, *Pearl Harbor*, etc.). How do you think those movies have shaped your understanding of American history?