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A Tribute to Robert Cooperman

by James Silver

With the poem, "Finds the Path Mourns," *Westview's* presentation of *The Widow's Burden* comes to a close. We wish to express our gratitude to Robert Cooperman for allowing *Westview* to re-print his book serially. For the past few years, each issue of *Westview* has featured five of the sixty-seven poems from Cooperman's book, presented in their original order and usually placed conspicuously last to close an issue. We have decided to present the final seven poems in this last installment, rather than dividing them unevenly between two issues.

Many readers have expressed delight with Cooperman's work, calling it their favorite part of *Westview*, and the space that will be left behind, now that all of the poems have been re-printed, will be difficult to fill with material of equal merit.

The text presents a series of poems through which a story of the Wild West unfolds, complete with murder, treachery, love, and lust. Each poem appears as a dramatic monologue, spoken or thought by one of the various characters involved in the larger story that takes place in and around a Colorado gold mining town in 1871. Each poem reveals insights into the mind and heart of the given speaker and contributes also to a larger narrative that the character does not fully see or understand. This narrative design brings to mind Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, a novel that uses a series of monologues, or short narratives, to frame an all-encompassing narrative. A reader forms a view of the larger, unifying plot of the novel through inferences drawn from the dramatic, first-person speeches taken all together. Like a Faulkner novel, Cooperman's book requires a reader to work, but rewards a reader for working.

The story centers on the widow, Mrs. Burden, whose husband recruits John Sprockett, the notorious, badman killer, to murder her by tossing her down an abandoned mine shaft. Sprockett shows

his good side by throwing the preacher down the shaft instead. Eventually, William Eagle Feather arises as the hero of the story and as the lover of the widow, Lavinia Burden. This element, along with many others, takes the story in the direction of Romance. In the case of Lavinia and William, "true" love wins out over the lust and abuse of power that is associated with the villain, Sheriff Dennehy, who also wants to marry the preacher's widow. The story ends happily with the protagonists enjoying the fruits of their goodness, while the corrupted, poisoned spirit of Sheriff Dennehy becomes for him his own punishment.

One quality of *The Widow's Burden* that complements the other attractions of the story and the characters is the subtle humor, never absent entirely but not always immediately apparent. The last speech of Mary La France (page 62) injects a dose of much-needed comic relief to form a segue between representing the final defeat of Sheriff Dennehy and the triumphant escape of the true lovers.

But as shown by the closing monologues presented in this issue, the story does not end with smiles, and it does not support a happy-ever-after illusion. Lavinia Burden, re-named "Hair Filled with Sun," delivers the penultimate speech, which takes place some twenty-plus years after she and William had fled together. She reflects on many years of living in the wilderness with William, but her "aching bones and rasping breaths" tell her that she will soon be gone. The closing monologue comes from William Eagle Feather, re-named "Finds the Path," who mourns for his soulmate and yearns to be with her again, even if that would mean going to the white-man's hell. If that desire does not attest to the power and truthfulness of his love, then nothing can.

