Abstract

Landscape and Literature:
Louis L’Amour’s Four Corners

by Lawrence Wayne Hargrave

There are many authors of popular fiction, who have used the arid Southwestern United States as a principal character, even the protagonist. This study examines one such author, Louis L’Amour, who set many of his tales in this region. Examination of selected L’Amour novels; combined with field observations, compare the character of L’Amour’s physical landscape with professional geographers’ depictions to establish consistency between the two visions. This scrutiny of L’Amour’s work provides a view of the physical and historical geography of the ‘West’ and the rôle of place in his novels. The sense of place his readers obtain regarding this arid landscape is an invaluable asset to the classroom teacher endeavouring to help students achieve an insight regarding this arid region. Limitations within this study and future research directions are noted.
LANDSCAPE AND LITERATURE:
LOUIS L’AMOUR’S FOUR CORNERS

A Thesis

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The list of acknowledgements is almost more than the thesis, but I must commence with my dear wife, Linda. Her understanding and support when I suggested I wished to rethink my life plan at this stage in life was and is staggering. Then there are my daughters, Rene’ and Jill whose encouragement and nudging along the way has helped to keep me on task more than once. My grandchildren also come in for their share of accolades for their willingness to share “papa” for the time it has taken. Special thanks are due to my eldest grandson, TK, for accompanying me (leaving his video games) for those weeks in the desert of the American Southwest. Bill and Peggy Whitehead must be acknowledged for sharing so much of their time and special knowledge of the Southwest (inviting me to stay in their home in Denver for many days) during this process.

My advisor, Stan Toops willingly took on the project even during his year of sabbatical. Jerry Green, one of my readers, edited countless iterations and supplied a bottomless coffee pot. Howell Lloyd, my other reader, suggested the idea of geographical novels might be worth pursuing when I realised my research was not leading the direction I had expected. All the members of the geography department at Miami University were encouraging. Debbi White, the department secretary, provided many hours of assistance and introduced me to the evils of “toasted rolls.”

Duggan Brown, the US Forest Service volunteer in the Mancos, CO visitor centre was a wealth of information about the area as well as providing personal information about Louis L’Amour. The staff of Miami University library, including Ken Grabach, spent time and assisted mightily in the acquisition of material. The staff of the Denver City library was also particularly helpful. Last, but not least, the several members of the Oxford United Methodist Church who supported me during my absence from my family, especially John and Marilyn Douglas. All these people and many more have been important in the accomplishment of the finished product; though, of course, errors are mine.
Preface

“Navajo Mountain … biggest thing around, an’ settin’ in the roughest country you ever did see. Canyons so deep you have to look twice to see the bottom. You look as far as you can see, then you start from there an’ look again” (Haunted Mesa, 1987: 9).

I have read Louis L’Amour’s books for many years. The first time I picked one up, I recognised the setting he was using for the story. That first novel led me to a second and soon I was hooked. His landscape descriptions felt right. I could not speak as to whether they were accurate in every detail, but the settings were ones I knew, having explored many of the areas myself.

My parents annually took our family to the Colorado Rockies for vacations where we spent countless days wandering in the mountains, familiarising ourselves with the country. I never missed the Park Rangers’ talks at the evening campfire. They always had something new and fascinating to tell us about the world around us. Finding sand dunes in the middle of the Rocky Mountains was a surprise. That was the same trip I first saw the Royal Gorge, too. To think a river could cut a slice that deep in the rocks and I could almost throw a rock across the gorge (at least it looked like it to me)!

Some of the things I found most interesting were finding snow in August on the top of Trail Ridge Road in Rocky Mountain National Park and driving through trees that were two thousand years old. Why the ocean as far north as New Jersey was warmer than the ocean in Southern California was a puzzle. I remember the wonder I felt when someone showed me a bird that flew from Canada to the tropics every fall and back the next spring.

I was always interested in the natural landscape. Since our home didn’t have a television set until I was a teenager, I spent many happy hours reading adventure stories that described places very different from the landscapes of eastern Iowa where I was raised. One of the things I looked for in books was how the author described the setting. Edgar Rice Burroughs’ stories were particular favourites, along with Zane Grey, C. S. Forester and several science
fiction writers like Robert Heinlein, H. G. Wells and Jules Verne. Each of those authors described places very unlike the small towns of the Midwest where we lived. When, as an adult, I came across an author whose landscapes I recognised, I found myself enjoying the books almost as much for the descriptions of places as for the stories.

The natural landscape is, and always has been, interesting. My wife has often decried the fact so many of the pictures I take do not have any people in them. (Why muck up a perfectly good picture?) I was happy when I finally achieved an income sufficient to allow us to travel to some of the exotic places in the world. I was able to see in person some of those places I had read about as a youngster and as an adult. Watching (and listening to what the natives call “white thunder”) as an iceberg as large as our cruise ship calved off a glacier, or meandering through the bazaar in Casablanca, watching whales sound in the Inside Passage or snorkelling in the Caribbean were things in which I revelled.

It is to these things, personal, environmental and regional that I should like to turn for this study. That which we perceive is always a puzzle. How did it happen - and - how does one describe it? We each see the world through very different filters. Authors of fiction as well as the notes from explorers’ journals describe a different perspective than the native’s. Those are all legitimate avenues of examining how one sees a landscape.
Chapter 1

“Mojave Crossing was the first L’Amour book I read. I did not like it … So much for my ability to recognise a good thing when I saw it. But the reason I had a copy is important. My sister, who lives in the Mojave Desert, bought the novel for my father, knowing he would be interested since part of the action takes place in her area. Without being aware of it, my introduction to L’Amour came because of his authentic geographical settings – a major reason for his popularity” (Klaschus, 1980: 1).

“The putative attitude regarding westerns is to see them as adolescent, light entertainment, and escapist fare. One of the hallmarks of the genre, however, is an almost desperate earnestness. There is nothing trivial about the visions of life they portray. L’Amour’s popularity continues to be revealed in his extolling of those old-fashioned virtues of patriotism, loyalty, unflinching courage, and love of family. His vision of the Old West both as the arena of the famous American second chance and as humankind’s last, best hope certainly also contributes. These elements may seem banal, but they still ring true to the consuming public as his sales figures\(^1\) testify” (Gale, 1985: 2).

Introduction

The geographers Salter and Lloyd define the purpose of their monograph, Landscape and Literature, “to encourage geographers to consider the purposeful application of literary insights to their scholarly work” (1977: 1). They contend that incorporating literature, and the landscapes that authors employ in their work, could enhance much geographical study. This suggests, for instance, that classroom teachers may supplement their lectures with the added colour of the landscape descriptions found in fictional works. My purpose is to explore a specific region as described by a particular author, Louis L’Amour, to determine the nature of the landscape he employed in his works and to demonstrate the value of his landscapes for geographers.

Salter and Lloyd were not the first geographers to concern themselves with the question of landscapes used in literature. In the Geographical Review in 1924 J. K. Wright, one of the foremost geographers of the 20\(^{th}\) century, known for his multifaceted approach to the study of geography, praised British geographer H. R. Mill for his attempts to raise the stature of the ‘geographical novel’ to one

\(^1\) Current estimates from his publisher Bantam, reflect 121 titles and over 280 million copies sold.
equal with the ‘historical novel.’ (Salter and Lloyd, 1977) In his book, Guide to Geographical Books and Appliances, Mill devotes an entire chapter to advise us:

“An ordinary text-book is limited to concise and generally meagre statements, and it is very difficult to create a mental picture as a result of these statements; yet in the creation of such a mental picture lies the secret of real and lasting instruction.” (1910: 58)

Wright disparages geographers’ general failure to pay attention to the use of the works of fiction in the geography classroom as he informs us:

“Some men of letters are endowed with a highly developed geographical instinct. As writers, they have trained themselves to visualise even more clearly than the professional geographer those elements of the earth’s surface most significant to the general run of humanity.” (1924: 659) [Italics added for emphasis]

Much of our knowledge of these elements may very well come to us from the pens of authors who are not geographers. Authors of both fiction and non-fiction, in their attempts to characterise the setting for their work, have consciously or unconsciously helped define the reader’s understanding of a place. Authors who describe for us, the readers, their characters’ spatial experience often influence our historical and geographical understanding.

One such author, who set many of his tales in the North American Southwest, is Louis L’Amour. His novels were often situated in the Four Corners; where Utah, Colorado, New Mexico and Arizona join, a rugged area frequently depicted as inhospitable to humans. It is perhaps not surprising that he maintained a home in the area and was well acquainted with the region having spent many days and weeks exploring his surroundings on foot and on horseback. (Brown, 2002)

An attempt to understand L’Amour’s spatial definitions requires that we gain an understanding of his world. We must also acquire a corresponding familiarity with his characters, one of which was frequently the landscape itself. Gale, (1988) in a review of one of L’Amour’s books for the journal Western

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2 44 of his books and several of his short stories are based on locations within one or more of the states that comprise the Four Corners.
American Literature, talked about L’Amour’s “painterly rendering of the natural scene” when referring to the setting for the story. In his later biography on L’Amour, Gale (1992) describes the author as an artist for the manner in which he describes his physical settings. L’Amour’s language is redolent and emotion-charged when relating the backdrop for his stories, raising it to the level of an important ‘character’ in the stories. L’Amour (1988: 239) in The Sackett Companion tells us, “In writing stories I try to present as accurate a background as possible. The stories may be fictional but the settings are not.”

It is from this context then, that my research question arises: “How consistently does Louis L’Amour’s work portray the physical landscape of the American Southwest?” Contained within the primary question is recognition of such ancillary questions as:

1. What is L’Amour’s ‘sense of place’?
2. Is it recognisable?
3. Would it qualify as a ‘signature’ landscape, a distinctive image or quality that sets it apart?
4. What is the value to geographers and academicians of landscapes as described and defined within his literature?

To answer those questions I will examine a sample of L’Amour’s books set in the Four Corners, using his portrayal (maps and texts) to compare the physical environment with other scholars’ and explorers’ descriptions of the area. The insights gained into (mis)conceptions of a particular area may be applicable to other regions and authors. An increased sensitivity to place is perhaps required and may very well be inspired by imaginative representation of places as described and defined by literature (Lutwack 1984). And I will suggest how these depictions can be useful to geographers and academia in general.

Research Locale

The area of this study is an amalgam of Hispano New Mexico settled in the 16th century by the Spanish with a corresponding two hundred plus years of
isolation from Euro-America and indeed to a large extent from their land of origin. A Mormon refugee population settled Utah with an unusual cohesion, formed out of persecution, expulsion, and migration, by design a self-sufficient group. Colorado was the last of the areas to be settled; centred on Denver and Central City and grew out of a combination of mining (placer, then lode), ranching, tourism and recreation, and irrigation agriculture. These nuclei eventually grew and coalesced to create (along with the several pre-existing native American groups) the unusual combination of cultures that make up the Four Corners regional culture. (Meinig, 1994)

Northern New Mexico provides an interesting case in point. There are at least seven distinct cultures residing in the area today: Hopi, Zuni, Navajo, Spanish-American, Mormons, Texans, and scientists. The native-Americans have occupied the area for many hundreds of years, the Spanish-Americans for some time less and the Anglo-Americans are fairly recent settlers. The greatest difference in environmental attitude, however, occurs between native-Americans and Anglo-Americans.

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3"The anthropologists and nuclear physicists bring their own culture with them to New Mexico. Los Alamos is the Midwest transplanted and except for the occasional cactus you can scarcely tell you are not in Ohio or Indiana” (Whitehead 2001).
“Zuni and Navajo have lived in the area for hundreds of years and have acquired a detailed knowledge of the land and its resources. Nature is not something to be subdued, rather it is lived with, gathering and hunting not only for their livelihood but also in support of their ceremonial life. Native-Americans see the sacred diffused among humans, animals, places and mythical beings, though some possess more of it than others. When all powers work together harmony follows. Much of Navajo and Zuni ritual is oriented to keeping the harmony and restoring it should it be disrupted.

“In contrast Mormons and Texans alike see nature as something to be subdued (‘Go forth and conquer’). God has commissioned man to transform the desert into a garden for the Mormon, though for the Texan, God is a little more remote. The Texans and Mormons both like to hunt. It is a male sport, a time to leave the women behind and assert one’s manliness by shooting a deer and lugging it back to the hearth.” (Tuan, 1974: 68 from Vogt & Alberts 1966).

The physical setting that is considered is a portion of the Colorado Plateau in the region of the Four Corners, especially San Juan County, Utah, the locale L’Amour utilised for many of his books and short stories. This particular corner of the Colorado Plateau has been called the “Sage Plain4,” the region north of the San Juan River and southeast of the Colorado River and so entitled on the map accompanying Powell’s report. Also Gregory, the geographer/geologist whose pioneering research in the area forms the background for much of the area research that follows, acknowledges that sagebrush, interspersed with piñon pine and juniper, is ubiquitous in the region.

The Colorado Plateau kept its basic geologic structure intact, apparently floating much like a raft on a subsurface sea of molten rock, while lands to the east and west margins rose and fell and twisted and tore apart over millions of years in response to the tectonic forces beneath them. It became not a single plateau, but rather a 335,000 kilometres-square, one-half billion-year-old complex of plateaus, canyons and mountain highlands, a colossal fairyland of phantasmagoric geologic formations, and a burial ground of the dinosaurs. (Brown 1995)

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4 Name given the area by J.S. Newberry; Report of Exploring Expedition from Santa Fe, N. Mex. to the Junture of the Green and Grand Rivers of the great Colorado of the West in 1859. Also, it is the apparent setting for Zane Grey’s “Riders of the Purple Sage.”
The Colorado Plateau and its layered depositional beds were carved, with infinite patience and persistence by nature’s practiced sculptors – wind and water – into a labyrinth of mesas, buttes, canyons, arches and abstract stone monuments. They have left us with such natural sculpture gardens as the Bisti Badlands of northwestern New Mexico, the Canyonlands in eastern Utah, Monument Valley in southeastern Utah, Bryce and Zion National Parks in southwestern Utah, Canyon de Chelly in northeastern Arizona and, of course, the incomparable Grand Canyon of northwestern Arizona. In other areas wind and water have laid bare the remnants of life from times so ancient that they seem otherworldly. In the Bisti Badlands, for example, you can see the petrified fragments of a coastal rain forest, including palm trees, from 70 million years ago. At Dinosaur National Monument, on the border of Utah and Colorado, you can see hundreds of fossilized bones of dinosaurs from 150 million years ago. At Petrified Forest, in northwestern Arizona, you will see an entire forest of petrified trunks of trees from 225 millions years ago. (Brown 1995)

While the presumed subsurface sea of molten rock never breached the overall structural integrity of the Colorado Plateau, it did jack them upward in some areas into 3,000 – to nearly 4,000 metres high – mountains. This tectonic activity and attendant volcanism resulted in the La Sal, Henry, and Abajo ranges of Utah; the San Francisco and White ranges of Arizona; and the Chuska range on the Arizona and New Mexico border. As in the Southern Rocky Mountains, volcanic activity, glaciation, and the erosional forces of wind and water all contributed to the shaping of the Colorado Plateau peaks (Brown 1995).

The Colorado Plateau falls away to basin and range country along its southern edge, the Mogollon Rim, an escarpment that extends for more than 320 km (200 mi) from west central New Mexico to northwestern Arizona. In some areas, the Rim, blanketed by the largest forest of ponderosa pine trees in the nation, stands as much as 600 metres (2000 ft) above the basin floor.
Perhaps more than any other physiographic province in North America, the Colorado Plateau summons the adventurous traveller to its natural bosom, to its wide range of stories from the earth. It moved Edward Abbey to write, in his essay about the Grand Canyon, “Forty Years as a Canyoneer,” in One Life at a Time, Please;

“When my own turn comes to lie down, die, and decay, nourishing in the process some higher form of life – a clump of sage, a coyote, a prickly pear, a pissed-on aspen tree – I hope that the blessed event takes place high on a canyon rim, with a final vision of red cliffs, magenta buttes, and purple mesas in my fading eyes.” (1988: 126)

The Colorado River system drains part of the Southern Rockies, all of the Colorado Plateau and much of the northern Sonoran Desert, an area of over 1 million square kilometres. It rises in the alpine meadows of Rocky Mountain National Park, in north central Colorado and flows some 2200 kilometres to the Gulf of California. Along its route, it receives the waters from six perennial tributary rivers including the San Juan, and from some other perennial and many intermittent streams.

Descending from mountain slopes and foothills, many of these streams – for example, the Mimbres River of southwestern New Mexico’s Gila Wilderness – discharge into open desert basins, the waters soaking into the sands or evaporating into the sky long before reaching the Colorado River.

Despite the aridity of the general region, perennial rivers and streams and the intermittent waterways wind for thousands of miles through the basin. Although the drainages ebb and flow, the rhythms of their waters regulated by the capricious rain and snowfall of the mountains and desert basins, they have cradled and nurtured the Southwest’s most robust biological systems.

Before the Europeans came, gallery forests, usually dominated by 60-foot tall, well-spaced Fremont cottonwoods and willows, occupied long stretches of river and stream banks. Beyond the flood plains, the stands of trees thinned, giving way to open savannahs, grassland and, quickly, the desert. Occasionally,
open, park-like mesquite savannas, or “bosques,” occupied the banks, the mesquites as tall as the cottonwoods (Aton & McPherson 2000).

The introduction to Northern Arizona University’s web pages concerning the “Land Use History of North America – Colorado Plateau” admirably states some of the feelings that are aroused by a close examination of the Colorado Plateau:

“Looking out over a dramatic landscape of forested mountain peaks, painted deserts, and profound canyons, one sees a sweeping vista that on a human time scale appears solid, monolithic, unchanging … Yet we know that this sense of permanence is far from a reality” (http://www.cpluhna.nau.edu).

Methodology

As will be seen in chapter 2, there have been numerous studies in recent years by geographers into how landscape is depicted in literature. Many of these studies have looked at popular fiction, thus opening the way for the inclusion of an investigation of the geographic themes that emerge from the novels of Louis L’Amour. L’Amour’s books have generated a large audience (current figures from his publisher indicate over 280 million copies in print) and the regional landscape created by L’Amour to which this audience has been exposed is worthy of examination.

Humanistic geography is described as an expansive view of what the human person is and can do (Tuan 1976). The rôle of humanistic geographer is one a person assumes with great care. It is not a mantle one takes upon oneself lightly. This rôle requires not only comfort with spatial analysis; but history, philosophy and human ethology as well play critical roles. Humanistic geography is a place for the person who is willing to probe into “people’s response to that part of their setting which is mediated by culture,” (Tuan, 1976: 275) the geographer given to introspection.

How does L’Amour convey ‘sense of place’? Since literature is not a standard source of geographic authentication, and authors are not under the same constraints as geographers for accuracy in their descriptions, I will need to
scrutinise the general validity of the depiction of the areas in question. The manner in which L’Amour draws his settings is explored. The area in question, the American Southwest consists not only of water balance deficits and entrenched meanders, it comprises home for the several characters in many of his novels. L’Amour’s works, both fictional as well as those that are autobiographical in nature, are starting points along with the biographical sources by Gale (1988; 1992), Hinds (1977), and Nesbitt. (1978; 1981) These combined with several critical analyses form the fundamental foundation for this inquiry.

Of the more than 100 L’Amour’s books I have read, I closely examined seven, all set in the Four Corners region; *The Haunted Mesa*, which has a venue in southeast Utah, in the vicinity of Lake Powell, and unlike many of L’Amour’s books has a contemporary setting. The balance of his stories I examined are set in the late 1800’s, *The Key-Lock Man* and *Son of a Wanted Man* (northeast Arizona and southeast Utah), *Dark Canyon* (southeast Utah), *Passin’ Through* (southwest Colorado), and *Flint* and *Showdown at Yellow Butte* (northwest New Mexico). A portion of this research, then, is devoted to the actual physical appearance of the Four Corners.

- Physiographic descriptions are compared with those of the author’s. I have compared L’Amour with works from Powell (1878), Atwood (1940), Brown (1948), and Thomas (1989).

- For comparisons of vegetative descriptions I employed Barbour and Billings’ (2000), Vale (1975), Leopold (1951), and selected explorers’ notes from the 1800’s.

- To achieve a sense of how the characters convey the weather, I compared L’Amour’s text with Lawson (1974), Powell (1878), and others.

   To accomplish this I have examined L’Amour’s work to understand and define the rôle landscape plays in his novels. In addition I spent two weeks in
the field observing and recording with field notes and pictures the texture of the
landscape, comparing and contrasting L’Amour’s descriptions with the scholars’
work.

Conventional content analysis with its categorisation and measurement is
difficult to undertake given the unusual nature of literary works as a source of
subjective evidence. Further, content analysis with its high degree of objectivity
could easily obscure the subjective nature of fictional literature. Therefore,
discourse analysis as defined by Wood & Kroger (2000), as opposed to standard
conventional critique, is employed to compare L’Amour’s use of language with
the scholars’ and explorers’ work mentioned above. Mann’s (1999) very readable
thesis regarding the works of Tony Hillerman, another author who has written
many books sited in the American Southwest, provides a useful framework for
this study. Mann gives considerable attention to the landscape perceptions and
geographic themes in a specific conceptual framework analysing the narrative in
context of the story structure.

A review of the literature as outlined in the next chapter will help us
understand the terms and allow us to examine the manner in which landscape
has been treated by other authors. Because the purpose of this study derives
from the humanistic branch of geography, relevant professional literature
discussing landscape and its rôle in literature, as well as that literature defining
‘sense of place’ provides the framework for the balance of this paper.
Subsequent chapters then will centre on the individual elements of the landscape
found within L’Amour’s work. In Chapter 3 I will probe a number of the
individual geographic themes as well as the author’s attitude toward the
environment, illustrating his utilisation of existing landscapes. The conclusion in
Chapter 4 will summarise the analyses and demonstrate whether L’Amour’s use
of landscape contributes to a deeper appreciation of the Southwest while
enhancing popular geographical knowledge regarding those landscapes.
Chapter 2

“The beauty of travel, however, is that every true traveller is a pioneer. Adventures are to the adventurous and discovery for the discoverer … Besides, discoveries are of all kinds, found in books of exotic and unknown places, new horizons for the spirit … For the end of exploration and discovery is not the end of travel and romance” (James, 1920: 60).

“As regards tales written for boys, it would seem their value lies partly in giving vivid pictures and so imparting knowledge, but mainly in interesting readers in strange scenes and peoples … A keen interest on the part of students lightens teacher loads considerably” (Mill, 1910: 60).

Literature Review

Many geographers have scrutinized the landscapes of literature in an attempt to understand not only the author’s purpose, but even perhaps to gain insight into the author’s world. While it is not the intent of this work to explore any author’s psyche, it is certainly fair, even obligatory to examine the soundness of the author’s landscapes.

At this point it becomes necessary to come to an understanding of the term landscape as employed in this study. Sauer (1925) tells us landscape is an area made up of a distinct association of forms both physical and cultural. Integrant, dependent forms determine its structure and function. The physical area is the sum of all natural resources humans have at their disposal and the cultural is the impress of the works of humans upon the area.

Germans translate geography as *landschaftskunde* or the knowledge of landscape or of lands. Tuan (1979) defines landscape as “a construct of the mind and feeling that is at once objective and subjective.” Tuan opined the objective is the vertical view, that which encompasses landscape as a unit to be studied; while the subjective is the aesthetic and personal. These are then combined in the mind of the observer. Landscape …

“encompasses the abstractness of spatial distributions and the concreteness of intimately known places, emphasising in each the creative actions of mankind in forming and ordering the setting for its activities” (Salter and Lloyd, 1977: 2).

‘Sense of place’ is defined as an integral part of our environmental experience – an innate faculty (though it can be learned or enhanced.) It is that
which ties us to our surroundings. Historically there have been persistent attempts to destroy a place in the process of subjugation of a people. A testament to the effectiveness of this strategy is the attempt to rebuild by those who return, released from under the thumbs of their captors (Relph, 1997).

In addition we need to understand the term ‘signature landscape.’ Salter and Lloyd (1977) borrowed the term ‘signature’ from the language of remote sensing to denote an aspect of a landscape that carries a distinctive image or quality, or connotes a specific pattern. The ‘signature’ maintains a particular rôle in the creation of the final image.

Finally, we need to understand a term, the ‘geographical novel.’ Most people who read an author’s work, whether fiction or non-fiction, will never see the actual physical settings in person and rely on authors for the sense of place thus created.

“Creative literature is inherently evocative. It calls up within the reader essential images of the world, images that might remain elusive and intangible in the absence of the clarifying power of literature. Yet literature does this without sacrificing the richness of human experience. As geographers, we ought to benefit by capturing this power of literature and directing it toward a deeper understanding of the humanised, cultural landscapes of the earth.” (Salter and Lloyd, 1977: 1)

Salter and Lloyd go on to advise, “the strength of landscape in literature lies in its subtle human qualities, its potential for revealing the hidden dimensions of human meaning” (1977: 2). Where and how the actual wording and timing of landscape description appears in the novel imparts meaning that assists the author in character and theme development. This is a significant piece of Mill’s argument when he tells us:

“The scenes are frequently described at some length and, better still, they may form an integral part of the narrative, as when the peculiarities of the district or of the people influence the course of the story.” (1910: 58)

Ramsay (1921) in his guide to short story writing, Short Stories of America, asks rhetorically, “What is the background of the story, the setting?” He advises...
us every story must have three – local, temporal and social – although one or more may be comparatively ignored. When the local is the dominant, we have a local-colour story, a ‘geographical’ story or novel. We have an ‘historical’ novel when the temporal is dominant. And one could make the argument the social setting is ‘geographical’ also, when the dominant element, the social class, group or profession to which the characters belong, has a specific spatial significance. The local-colour story then is the physical geography and the social is human geography. If that is the case there may only be two possible settings, geographical or historical.

Popular understanding of the Southwest comes from several sources. Meinig tells us, “The ‘West’ is synonymous with frontier … it’s less a place than a process” (1994: 112). The dominance of the ‘frontier’ thesis has had a stultifying effect on our understanding of the West causing us to view places, events and people in terms of stereotypes. Settlement in the western U. S. had an insular quality with Native Americans, Mormons, Spanish Americans, Gold Rush, cowboys and other tumultuous societies each isolated by great distance and inhospitable country.

Civilisation requires water, but that often broke down in the ‘West’ in the face of relentless aridity. Aridity and tremendous wealth in the form of natural resources led to a boom/bust economy based on extraction and harvesting that in turn resulted in a migrant society. There were several nuclei widely separated and far removed from the advancing front of the ‘East’ that only gradually became linked5. (Hornbeck, 1987) The restlessness that expresses energy and a thirst for the new, coupled with American dynamism and opportunism and an aspiration toward freedom and personal fulfilment has just as often been a curse. Migrants deprive themselves of bonds both physical and spiritual that develop

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5 The Henry Mountains and the Canyonlands region was the last area discovered and explored by Euro-Americans when G. K. Gilbert did his geological work in the Henry’s in 1875.
in a place. (Tuan, 1974) ‘Place’ is also shared memory and ‘westerners’ often didn’t stay long enough to share.

Much of history and geography comes to us from the notes and journals written by people exploring a country or intending to settle there. The initial impressions of these people have provided us some valuable insights into these new settings. But once they settle down and become adapted, their notes become less about comparisons. Familiarity with a place is an important piece in this puzzle. Once settled, their environmental attitudes become more ensconced. The native has a history with a landscape and as a consequence sees that landscape very differently than the outsider without a history. It is these sources, and the ‘geographical’ and ‘historical’ novels that serve as important resources to our understanding.

What we are expressing, the difference between visitor and native, is closely akin to the association of actor and spectator. The actor participates while the spectator observes. Therefore the spectator must be given, or create on his own, a set of rules or conventions to understand what the actor understands or intends. Of course, often the language is one the spectator can interpret from introspection into his or her own actions (He or she is an actor at the same time). But without these conventions, confusion results. With them the human geographer, as spectator, is able to achieve a measure of insight. (Tuan, 1974)

There is a fundamental contrast between the long-time resident’s experience of place and the visitor’s conventional means of description. Utilitarian value supersedes the aesthetic. For the outsider’s perspective land is reconstituted as landscape. Just as the individual response to landscape is discrete, cultural differences can impact the way a landscape is valued. In addition, while familiarity may not breed contempt, the native or long time resident may see things very differently from the visitor or new settler. But landscape can mask the land. Landscape for the resident may be less geographical and more biographical and personal.
“Generally speaking, we may say that only the visitor (and particularly the tourist) has a viewpoint; his perception is often a matter of using his eyes to compose pictures. The native, by contrast, has a complex attitude derived from his immersion in the totality of his environment” (Tuan 1974: 63).

Included among the studies of popular authors and their sense of place is Aiken’s (1979) exploration of Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha County in northern Mississippi. Aiken writes that Faulkner’s setting has been described both as a composite picture of the rural south and an actual existing locale, albeit renamed. There are characteristics of the setting Faulkner chose that could describe the American South in microcosm. However, the real place – Lafayette County and Oxford, Mississippi – has sufficient geographical parallels with Yoknapatawpha County and Jefferson as to belie the notion of a miniature South. Aiken underscores the evidence he finds to support his opinion, including a map of the actual area juxtaposed to the sketch map in Faulkner’s books. The bulk of his argument, however, is spent in comparing the cultural differences between the two “Souths,” the “Upland South” of the yeoman/farmer and “Lowland South” of plantations and sharecroppers, etc. Lafayette County’s unique location and physical setting permits an opportunity to explore both “Souths” in one place according to Aiken. The overlapping physical characteristics as well as the convoluted boundary between cultural areas found in this one place in Northern Mississippi permits Faulkner to bring his mix of characters into contact with each other with minimal effort. Further, it is no stretch of the imagination to relocate his characters to an urban setting, since Memphis is not far from Oxford (or Jefferson). It is thus Faulkner defines his ‘sense of place’ in Aiken’s view.

Mitchell (1998) has chosen the writings of several authors to take another look at the early twentieth century rural South. He selected excerpts from James Agee’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, various publications by Erskine Caldwell, Paul Green’s novel, *This Body the Earth*, and a black sharecropper’s diary. As he describes, the list is not exhaustive by any means, but he provides examples of how geographical concepts of ‘sense of place’ can be gleaned from a variety of
sources. The primary point of his article is that literature provides a valuable adjunct to the lecture in helping students understand and appreciate geography. He demonstrates this effectively, for instance, with the combination of a subjective climatological theme from the selected readings, (how it feels to the characters) and an objective explanation (adiabatic rates, convectional precipitation, etc.) that would be likely experienced in that time and place. An example from Agee’s, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, in which he demonstrates a summertime day in an Alabama cotton field, allows us to experience the subjective:

“Sunlight that stands and stacks itself upon you with the serene weight of deep sea water, and heat that makes the jointed and muscled body glow like one indiscriminate oil” (1941: 339).

Willa Cather’s Nebraska gets a very different treatment from Susan Rosowski. Rosowski’s chapter in Geography and Literature; A Meeting of the Disciplines, (Mallory & Simpson-Housley, eds. 1987) conjures up a fairy tale to describe the narrative by Ms. Cather from the book O Pioneers. Rosowski defines the limitless grassland as the “beast” and Alexandra, the heroine, as the “beauty.” When Alexandra comes to terms with the land, recognizes her love for it, and willingly succumbs to it, the land is transformed (order is imposed by the hand of the farmer) and all live happily ever after. Rosowski demonstrates Cather’s ‘sense of place’ in this quote she lifts from the opening of A Lost Lady:

The State of Nebraska is part of the great plain that stretches west of the Missouri River, gradually rising until it reaches the Rocky Mountains. The character of all this country between the river and the mountain is essentially the same throughout its extent: a rolling, alluvial plain, growing gradually more sandy toward the west, until it breaks into the white sand-hills of western Nebraska and Kansas and eastern Colorado. From east to west this plain measures something over five hundred miles. (Rosowski from Cather, 1987: 92)

Additionally, Cather gives dates and figures of growth and progress. We are told, however, there is another way of seeing the land, not as an object to be charted, but as a living part of nature. The landscape is treated as a character
with no secrets, its own identity and integrity. Cather writes metaphorically of
the land, yielding farms that “like neighbors in a natural community, rub
shoulders.” She continues, “We shape our environments, of course: we order
them in the fields we plow, the houses we build, the highways we survey. But
just as surely, our environment shapes us.” (Rosowski 1987: 93) Thus does
Rosowski define Cather’s ‘sense of place.’

Another author noted for his use of place was Thomas Hardy. There have
been numerous examinations of the metaphorical and structural uses of
landscape in Hardy’s writings by several different people, including Lawrence
Jones. Jones tells us of Hardy’s biographical connection to one site in A Pair of
Blue Eyes. Jones makes much of a certain “cliff without a name” that has not
been accurately located. Apparently Hardy, tongue-in-cheek, drew much delight
from allowing folk to carom over the countryside, map in hand, trying to match
up a place with his description. This was not atypical either, according to Jones.
Hardy seemed to have a penchant for not only misnaming places for dramatic
effect, but also combining features from more than one similar place, again for
dramatic purpose (Jones, 1987).

Each of the studies above employs different methods and has somewhat
different agendas. The point, however, is that in each case the understanding of
geography as a discipline is furthered. Regional study in fact, can be enhanced,
as each of these examples makes clear. As Mitchell (1998), Lutwack (1984), and
others tell us, much is added and dry studies fleshed out by the inclusion of
selected passages of literature into the study of geography. The few examples I
have included and others like them help with understanding the physical
landscape, but assuredly, similar arguments could be made for the cultural
landscape as well.

A recognition that the earth is being radically changed, perhaps rendered
uninhabitable by more pervasive and powerful technologies requires
examination of the question whether man can change his perception of himself in
relation to his surroundings. The Zeitgeist of the late 1800’s may have been very different from that described by Mr. L’Amour. Tuan tells us there was a deliberate attempt in the 1870’s to recreate the popular conception of mountains in the western U.S.; “drawing attention to their attractiveness, limpid air, dry soil, and mineral springs, Colorado was proclaimed to be the Switzerland of America” (1974: 74). Prior to that, presumably, the commonly held notion of mountains and wilderness in general was one of dread. We must wonder for instance, if that were true, whether L’Amour’s characters held such an opinion, were even aware of it, or plunged on in spite.

“I fancy that one cannot enjoy a pure aesthetic sensation for longer than one can enjoy the smell of an orange, which in my case is less than two minutes” (Clark 1960: 16). What Clark has described as happening in art appreciation is equally true for understanding landscape. To counter this ephemeralness of visual pleasure requires knowledge of the scene, the historical setting and the underlying geology and structure. To discuss a place we must freeze the dynamic process at some particular moment in order to take the still picture. The journals of early explorers often describe such moments of sudden revelations. We may also draw a parallel with ‘geographical novels.’

The likelihood that everyone appreciates the same view with identical reverence belies the differences in individuals, however. While we all depend on the same senses to enable us to understand the world around us, there is significant diversity in application of those senses. The differences in the responses are variable from person to person in every trait that has been observed and measured. We are encouraged to assume people possess highly distinctive minds and consequently their view of the world is decidedly idiosyncratic (Riley 1993).

There are specific historical and cultural forces that determine landscape as a way of seeing. A person’s environmental preferences may be subject to his or her biological heritage, upbringing, education, job, and physical surroundings.
It is also necessary to examine the history and experience of the culture of which the person is a part. The group history can play a significant rôle in the individual perceptions. Humans, to accommodate themselves, modify the landscape in varieties of ways and a careful reading often reveals recognisable patterns. The central theme in understanding a landscape is coming to terms with the impressions and meanings of the physical environment and a society’s imprint on it (Sauer 1925). Therefore, as Salter and Lloyd maintained, the use of literature to achieve a more complete understanding of the landscape is a “significant and worthwhile endeavour” (1989).
Chapter 3

“Man is tracked in his mind. Touring the West can be made more enjoyable by using maps, journals and texts to permit reconstructing L’Amour’s story’s time and place; to step back in time to see the actual sites as they are set out in the various L’Amour novels … For L’Amour, history and geography were exact.” (Murphy, 1999: 3)

Landscape Elements in L’Amour’s Works

There are many elements to landscape both physical and cultural that make a particular landscape unique. They include physical characteristics such as climate, vegetation, landforms, soils and others. Cultural qualities include peoples and human created structures like cities and towns, networks for transportation and communication, individual residences and work places among many others. Any of these plus others may be observed and reported in popular literature as well as the more academic venues. Additionally there is within literature an author’s tendency to use a particular landscape type. As asked earlier, does L’Amour employ distinctive images or qualities that set them apart? Those qualities may suggest a characteristic attitude concerning the environment as well as a typical sense of place. In addition there is the question of setting both spatial and temporal as Ramsay (1921) pointed out. It is these elements to which we shall now turn our attention.

Signature Landscapes

The following passage from the opening of The Key-Lock Man (1965) exemplifies the kind of experience L’Amour likes to put his readers through. It shows that whatever else he does, his stories are not getting away from seriousness, the demands of hard work, or from living a significant life.

“Before the man called Key-Lock lay a land fragmented and torn, a magnificent land, gnarled and ancient. It was a land of shattered battlements, broken towers, and the headless figures of vast and shapeless gods. An empty land, yet crowded with epics in stone, harried by wind and thunderstorm, ripped by flash floods, blistered by summer’s heat, frozen by winter’s cold … between himself and escape lay an almost waterless waste …” (L’Amour 1965: 2)
This is a typical opening for a L’Amour novel. A man is alone in a harsh environment with people on his trail. In The Key-Lock Man, the entire novel deals with the conflict not only between this man (and his wife) and the people who are trailing him, but also with the landscape. In many of Louis L’Amour’s stories the physical landscape has a central rôle. An important component is often the conflict between the hero (or heroine) and the environment.

In the novel Flint, the hero believes he is dying of cancer so he returns to the West …

“He was now on his way to a place of which he alone knew, and there he would die … like a wild animal which knows that death is upon it, he was seeking a dark and lonely place where he could die in peace, in his own way … Before him lay the lava beds, the dreaded malpais. Like a fat, enormous snake it lay stretched across the country, a black and ugly mass of twisted, rope-like rock, clinkers and piles of lava, that looked like hell with the fires out, filling its sterile sink and winding many miles. This was desolation.” (1960: 1, 30).

We are left with the unmistakeable impression that L’Amour’s intent is to challenge his readers at the same time he confronts his hero with a natural setting with barbs. The setting steals the show so continually from the characters that it almost doesn’t make sense to speak of it as a setting. The names of places L’Amour chooses for backdrop – Dark Canyon, Haunted Mesa – change them from backdrops against which events take place into events themselves. Even the colouration of the landscape activates it; the purple sage, the yellow dust, the amber spring, the silver aspens, the blue mountains with a hint of pine.

But even while his hero is being pursued, he takes the time to examine and appreciate the country through which he is travelling as seen in this passage from Passin’ Through.

“It was a wide land, and empty land, with a vast distance before the mountains came, mountains that knuckled against the sky like doubled fists. Clouds gathered there, hinting of the late-afternoon rains that came often to these hills. Glancing back, I saw no dust, yet I knew the manner of men they were, and they would be coming to hang me (1985: 4).
Another aspect of L’Amour’s signature landscapes is where and how his characters build their homes. His characters are often builders, people who are creating a home in a new environment. In such instances his characters frequently create “homes to last” and homes with a command of a sweep of country. I believe a real insight into the author’s landscape perception can be drawn from the locations he chooses for his characters to build their homes. There are many examples from the stories L’Amour created to give us a sense of his command of the landscape. The hero of *Dark Canyon* is just such a builder:

Near the head of Fable Canyon, on a bench at the foot of the Sweet Alice Hills, he began the house that would be home. On every side the land fell away, offering an unimpaired view … Fifteen miles away lay the Colorado River, to the north a vast basin of several thousand acres. On the south lay a jumble of canyons, cliffs, and pinnacles that stretched away for a vast distance to end finally in the Painted Desert” (1963: 15).

These then help us define L’Amour’s signature setting. His choice of locations for his action present as much if not more challenge than the antagonist. He employs the often-harsh local environment as an opportunity for his hero to come to terms with not only the human forces arrayed against him, but the natural environs as well. We are left with the impression that the hero (and vicariously L’Amour’s readers) is the stronger for having accepted both challenges and it is indicative of the tough-it-out-against-all-odds philosophy that characterised much of L’Amour’s writing. And his description of home sites allows him to create a picture with words about the locale.

**Maps**

Having examined the importance of the landscape to his novels, we should now scrutinize the manner in which it is portrayed. The first items are the maps in the frontispiece of many of his novels. While the characters in his stories rarely\(^6\) employ the use of printed maps, L’Amour often tells us his characters are especially aware of the physical composition of the setting. He

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\(^6\) There are exceptions, i.e. the antagonists in *Showdown at Yellow Butte*, and the hero in *Haunted Mesa* among those I examined closely for this paper.
frequently has his characters stop to look back the way they had come, for instance because, “you never know when you might come back this way and landmarks look mighty different coming from the opposite direction.”

Murphy (1999) tells us L’Amour’s knowledge of the areas he wrote about could have come from a study of maps. He owned an extensive collection of topographic maps, and as a seaman and soldier would have been expert with maps. Company grade officers, of whom L’Amour was one having served as a tank officer during World War II, were expected to be fluent in map interpretation and navigation.

The awareness that L’Amour characters have of their surroundings is another hallmark of his novels. At some point in many of his stories he has his hero (or heroine) spend considerable time at some vantage point looking over the terrain in order to get his or her bearings. As L’Amour tells us repeatedly, the best time to do this is at sunrise and/or sunset when the shadows reveal hidden recesses or hollows of an otherwise featureless terrain.

“There was no actual peak here, but the place was high enough to allow him to look across the canyons and down the valley toward Castle Butte and the sand dunes. He had a fair sweep of country before him … it was not yet daylight … He remained where he was for almost an hour while the sun rose behind him and swept the shadows from the broad land.” (1965: 45)

Jonsson (2002) in his book *Inner Navigation* gives us an explanation for this habit. He tells us people with good spatial awareness don’t need landmarks to find their way. Rather, the landmarks confirm for such a person that their spatial system is working correctly; they are reassured. The purpose then for the survey, is to establish the landmarks, marking them onto their mental map.

Occasionally L’Amour’s characters, often those who are in pursuit, create a rough sketch map in an attempt to get inside the head of the hero who has given them the slip, as in this scene from *The Key-Lock Man*.

“Hardin drew a rough pattern on the sand with a twig. ‘If this Key-Lock man is going east or northeast he will head for that pass. Otherwise he has to cross the river, and there’s [sic] only two places he can do that, both of them west of here.
Lee’s Ferry,’ he went on, and indicated it on the map, ‘is away over northwest, and the Crossing of the Fathers is northwest too, only not so far.’ … Neill held his peace, watching Chesney who was studying the sand map …” (1965: 24)

As stated earlier many of L’Amour’s books come with maps in the frontispiece to assist the reader establish the locale of the story. However, those maps are not referred to in the course of the story. In addition, they are very small-scale and hence have little detail. They do, however, create a level of credibility in that L’Amour is using real places that we can locate by name. And while the maps are small-scale, it is still incumbent upon us to compare them to other maps of the region to ascertain consistency. The difficulty with comparison is that L’Amour makes no claims for accuracy i.e., National Map Accuracy Standards (NMAS) that were established by the U.S. Government in 1941, and revised in 1943 and 1947. The standards as described in Maps for America, 2nd ed. include the statements:

“Published maps meeting these accuracy requirements shall note this fact on their legends … Published maps whose errors exceed those aforestated shall omit from their legends all mention of standard accuracy” (Thompson 1981: 104).

Comparing the map from Haunted Mesa for instance, with the Utah Atlas & Gazetteer (DeLorme, 2000: 21) map of the same area, reveals a couple of interesting differences. First the “Jeep Road” shown in L’Amour’s map (fig #2, pg 27), which presumably leads to the mesa at the centre of the story, is not the one that does. As my grandson and I discovered, the road that follows Castle Creek is more likely to be the correct one, as it is the one that dead ends at the mesa L’Amour has entitled “Haunted Mesa.”

Secondly, “Johnny’s Hole” is shown to the west of Nokia Dome on L’Amour’s map and east of it on the DeLorme map. In my opinion, having

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7 E.g. the maps used in Haunted Mesa: the larger scale inset map is approximately 1:900,000 and the smaller scale map is approximately 1:4,000,000. Contour intervals are 500 and 3000 feet respectively.

8 It should be noted that DeLorme does not make any claims for accuracy either, i.e. NMAS.

9 One of countless smaller, hidden valleys known as “holes” in cowboy vernacular.
Figures 2a & 2b: L’Amour’s map (a) of Haunted Mesa matches DeLorme map (b) of same area. Note location of Johnnie’s Hole and Jeep Road.
explored the area on foot, it is probably more likely located to the east based on the novel’s description. The distance from the mesa is about two miles as described by the narrator, and the match of the physical characteristics generally confirms it. The valley we discovered is about two miles long with a small forest of cottonwoods interspersed with a few patches of open ground with bunch grass and what appears to be an Anasazi shelter for storing grain high up on the east wall, similar to that described by L’Amour (1987: 149,161). The caveat is that the “hole” is not mentioned by name when the protagonist is exploring it. Also, there may easily be another hole to the west of Nokia Dome that also matches the description. We were unable to reach the second area because of time constraints.

Rather than leave the reader with the impression that L’Amour’s maps are rife with error, I should hasten to add the maps give every evidence of accuracy even though it is unclaimed. The general topography is consistent with the maps from the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS). Allowing for scale, the areas in question appear to be quite accurate as can be seen in figure 4 (pg. 32). Utilising ESRI ArcMap I was able to overlay the map L’Amour provided, onto the USGS map of the same area and prominent landmarks such as the San Juan River, Navajo Mountain, and the community of Oljeto matched up very well, in addition to the namesake mesa, “Haunted Mesa.” Additionally, the map in Passin’ Through matches the USGS map of the same area in southwestern Colorado with similar alignment of prominent local landmarks.

**Historical Settings**

One of the features of Louis L’Amour’s work is his use of historical material. He maintained a point of pride in his geographic authenticity. He used trails exactly as they existed; he hiked, rode, drove, and took a helicopter into remote areas to study them (Brown, 2002). It’s not clear how many of them did exist, but as L’Amour often pointed out, trails were well established long before Europeans arrived. Earlier residents of the area learned through trial and error
the most efficient and effective routes; taking into account available water and
food, shelter and safety. Modern highways, especially older routes often follow
these ancient trails (Murphy, 1999).

In addition, L’Amour delighted in putting his stories into real towns, inns,
or cantinas populated by the actual innkeepers or townspeople of the period
(Murphy, 1999). The principal community in Showdown at Yellow Butte is
Mustang, though it would appear L’Amour is using the settlement of Cimarron
and this may be one of the few times he moved a community from its actual
location to facilitate his story. Cimarron is actually over 200 miles from Yellow
Butte, or a hard 5 days' ride. But there is much about the community’s history to
suggest that it is, in fact, Mustang. Cimarron was established in 1841 as the
headquarters of the Maxwell Land Grant Company that oversaw over 2600
square miles in northern New Mexico and southern Colorado. The St. James
Hotel, across from the Maxwell’s house, was a plush establishment whose chef
and manager served Abraham Lincoln and General Grant. The hotel was a
hangout for many outlaws and was the scene for 25 killings. It was a dangerous
place to try and sleep above the bar, though finally in 1903, three layers of oak
flooring were installed in the ceiling to stop wayward bullets (Murphy, 1999).

Showdown at Yellow Butte is L’Amour’s second or third novel10, and the
first of a dozen or so novels and short stories located near the Four Corners
(Klaschus, 1980). In subsequent novels such as Flint and Passin’ Through he used
existing communities in the actual location, but like in the case of “Alamitos” he
used the original name for the community that today is known as Grants. The
name was officially changed in 1935 to honour the Grant railroad-building
brothers who arrived in the area in 1881 and used the community as a
headquarters for their operations. Grants was originally named Los Alamitos, or

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10 L’Amour’s first novel was actually Westward the Tide, published in London in 1950. Then
He had already published Showdown under a pseudonym, Jim Mayo and four Hopalong Cassidy
books under another pseudonym, Tex Burns (Klaschus, 1980).
“little cottonwoods,” by the founder, Don Jesus Blea who established his home there in 1872 (Murphy, 1999). McCartys, the telegraph station Flint used in the novel of the same name (fig. 3), is located about 13 miles southeast of Grants, NM. It was a trading community established while the railroad was being built through the area (http://www.ghosttows.com).

Figure 3: One of several abandoned buildings in McCartys. (Used by permission: © Bert Murphy)

Passin’ Through, the nom de guerre for the hero in the novel of the same name, spent much of his time in Parrot City (fig #4, pg 32). Parrot City was named for Tiburcio Parrot¹¹, a San Francisco banker who provided the funding to develop the mine established by John Moss. It was Moss who first discovered the ore and founded the town near the confluence of Deadwood Creek and the La Plata River in La Plata County, CO (http://www.ghosttows.com).

Trails

The hero in Passin’ Through, when leaving Parrot City near the end of the book, demonstrates another one of L’Amour’s characteristic story features. Mr.

¹¹ Tiburcio (1840-1894) built the Spring Mountain Winery and his home, Villa Maraville, served as the set for the 1980’s TV series “Falcon Crest.”
Passin’ goes north out of town up the trail and over the mountains. In the process L’Amour gives us a very specific route description that allows his readers to directly track the movements of his hero from his departure until the hero and heroine are reunited (Passin’ Through: 172-186). It is presumed, though difficult to confirm now, that L’Amour must have hiked or ridden over this exact route in one of his numerous trips in and around the area with Don Demarest\(^\text{12}\), a guide who resides in nearby Hesperus, CO (Brown, 2002).

“Arriving at his former stopping place, he studied the terrain and found he could drive a half mile closer to Erik’s ruin. Swinging the car around, he pointed it toward a clump of cedar. When he reached it, he turned the car to face in the direction from which he had come and then backed into partial hiding behind the cedar” (Haunted Mesa: 137).

Another instance of specific routes occurs in Haunted Mesa. This time, my grandson and I were able to follow the route as described, though not necessarily as shown on the map\(^\text{13}\). Castle Creek Rd splits off Nokai Dome Road (the road shown on the map (fig #2, pg 27) at milepost 63 on State Route 276. We drove south past Rock Spring (fig #2, pg 27) to the north end of “Haunted Mesa”, an unnamed mesa on the DeLorme map. Having arrived late in the afternoon we did not have much time to explore, but we did walk up to the mesa after parking under the same? clump of cedars L’Amour had described in his book.

The hero of The Key-Lock Man spent considerable time moving about between Navajo Mountain and Monument Valley. The book mentions many prominent landmarks in the area, and it concludes on the top of No Man’s Mesa, which is directly across the San Juan River from Haunted Mesa. In fact, it is the mention of No Man’s and its location in relationship that helped my grandson and I establish the location of Haunted Mesa (fig 5, pg 33).

\(^{12}\) L’Amour dedicated the book Over on the Dry Side to his “Companion of the High Country.”

\(^{13}\) See section on maps above.
Figures 4a & 4b: Comparison of L’Amour map and USGS map of the same area. Note Maggie Rock in lower left, The Hogback upper left, Mt. Baldy right centre, and Madden Peak at upper centre of both maps.
Another L’Amour characteristic is his attitude toward the environment that is often well documented by his characters. In *Guns of the Timberland* the hero, Clay Bell is attempting to forestall the loss of his land to a man who’s stated intent is to log off the land on which Bell has been feeding his cattle. The area is the ponderosa pine forest found on the Mogollon uplands:

“Once the trees were gone, the washing away of the topsoil would ruin the plateau and the valley for grazing. Encroaching brush would finish it for good” (1955: 20).

L’Amour often uses his characters to moralise, but he teaches us some interesting lessons as well. The website managed by his son Beau L’Amour, [www.louislamour.com](http://www.louislamour.com), offers several lessons for teachers (they recommend 11th or 12th grade students in this case). “Merrano of the Dry Country,” is a lesson in environmental awareness, racism and hypocrisy. The short story from the collection *The Strong Shall Live* provides another lesson from L’Amour in which
the hero is a newcomer to an area dominated by ranchers of the old school who have been overgrazing their land. The new resident of Mirror Valley is a young Mexican rancher who has some different ideas:

“Once there was good grass everywhere but you overstocked your land and fed it out of existence. Then the brush came in and the underlying roots killed off more grass. When the grass thinned out your stock started eating poison weeds. There’s nothing wrong with your land that a few good years won’t cure” (1980: 44).

Sense of Place

Louis L’Amour knew the West. Much of his knowledge came first hand from his “yondering” days. Indeed, everything he did before he became a writer seems to have been “grist for his mill,” to employ one of his favourite clichés. As Hinds (1977) tells us in the preface to an essay on L’Amour’s novels:

“During the Depression he quit school when he was 15, and by the time he was 19 he had skinned cattle in Texas, lived with bandits in Sinkiang and Tibet, and served as a second mate on an East Indian schooner. Over the years he tried his hand at a wide variety of picaresque occupations, among them professional boxer, longshoreman, lumberjack, elephant handler, fruit picker, hay schocker [sic], gold prospector, and tank officer during World War II. In short, he was a jack-of-all-trades, the self-reliant man who could survive on any frontier” (129-130).

Bantam Books, L’Amour’s publisher, included “About the Author” notes on the endpapers of his books that added more of his exploits, to wit:

“He studied archaeology, lectured widely, compiled biographies of a thousand western gunfighters, sailed a dhow on the Red Sea, was shipwrecked in the West Indies, was stranded in the Mojave Desert, won 51 of 59 professional prize-fights, pinch-hit for vacationing columnist Dorothy Kilgallen, and could count 33 writers among his family members” (Gale, 1992: 6).

Most telling of L’Amour’s settings is the verisimilitude with which he treats the historic landscape. Tell Sackett, a member of L’Amour’s Sackett family, perhaps best describes L’Amour’s attitude about the West in this passage from Treasure Mountain:

“I don’t know what it is you are wishful for in this life, but you set down of a night and you pray to God that he’ll let you walk alone across a mountain meadow when the wild flowers are blooming … You pray he’ll let you set by a
mountain stream with sunlight falling through the aspens, or that he’ll let you ride across an above-timberline plateau with the strong bare peaks around you – great, swelling rain clouds ready to turn the meadow into a swamp in a minute or two ... There’s majesty in those peaks, ma’am, and grandeur in the clouds, and there’s a far and wonderful beauty in the distance” (1972: 33).

No other single passage I have discovered in any L’Amour novel comes close to matching this speech by Tell Sackett in capturing how strongly L’Amour feels about the beauty and power of the West.

Ronan Chantry, the hero of *The Ferguson Rifle*, gives a particularly good explanation for the westward migration about which L’Amour is writing. Chantry, a member of another of L’Amour’s families, is a professor of history, and is nicknamed “Scholar” by his companions. Chantry muses about the effects of climate on the movements of the Huns, Goths, and Celts when he asks:

“What occasioned these moves? Was it pressure of other tribes, increasing numbers? Or was it drought, or the ever-present move toward the sun” (1973: 20)?

Chantry attributes human migration to natural causes, suggesting such movements are inevitable. He, Chantry, then goes on to express the idea that though similarities exist between migrating tribes, there is a significant difference in the movement of people into and through North America. It is his contention this stems from an inherent quality that is unique to the American character:

“Perhaps this of which I was a part would be the last great migration. Yet this was different. This was no organised movement of tribes, nations, or conquering armies; it was a migration of individuals, each making his own decision, gathering his own supplies and equipment. From a thousand villages and cities they came, strangers to each other, yet with a common goal” (1973: 15).

The nature the immigrants confront is not always beneficent, however. There is a darker side that becomes evident, as we have already seen. The barbed landscape his protagonist meets does not reciprocate love. In L’Amour’s world nature is clearly without sentiment. “Whatever else nature was, it was impersonal, inexorable,” thinks Shalako Carlin (*Shalako*, 1962: 4). Again Tell
Sackett, the philosopher we met earlier gives us further insight into the lessons L’Amour wishes us to learn from nature:

“Man had enemies, that was in the nature of things, but when it comes right down to it his battle to live is with that world out there, the cold, the rain, the wind, the heat, the drought, and the sun parched pools where water had been … Hunger, thirst, and cold – man’s first enemies, and no doubt his last” (1972: 132).

As Shalako says:

“All the mountains lasted, and even they changed. Their lasting was only an idea in the minds of men because they lasted a little longer than men” (1962: 4).

So in a sense, we have come full circle. L’Amour’s sense of place and his signature landscapes derive from the same source. The question that then remains is how consistent is L’Amour’s landscape description, with its various elements, to the text of the explorers and academics who have also given us a definition of the area? To that end I should like to call on no less a personage than John Wesley Powell, whose reporting on the region serves as a foundation for many of those who followed:

“Walled by high ridges and peaks, many elevated valleys are found. In the midsummer months these valleys are favoured with a pleasant, invigorating climate. Occasionally showers of rain fall. Vegetation is vigorous. The distant mountain slopes bear forests of spruce, pine and fir; the broken foothills are often covered by low, ragged piñon pines and cedars; and the flood plains of the streams are natural meadows. About the springs and streamlets groves of aspen stand, and the streams are bordered with willows, box elders, and cottonwoods” (1878: 110).

And again:

“… Autumn verdure presents only the sombre tints of the evergreens … elevated tablelands, in general bounded by bold, precipitous escarpments … the gnarled, sombre forests are often beset with fallen timber and a vigorous second growth, forming together a dead and living tangle difficult to penetrate. But often the forest aisles are open from glade to glade, or from border cliff to border cliff. In the midst of the glades are many beautiful lakelets, and from the cliffs that bound the plateaus on every hand waters break out in innumerable springs” (1878: 111).
Vegetation

Of course, what we have examined so far does not represent the entirety of L’Amour’s writing, but it does provide a sense of his understanding of the area. It remains to be seen how he describes the individual elements that comprise this regional landscape. And one of the more important elements is the pattern of vegetation. Vegetation serves as one of the key indicators of an area’s climate and for that reason is the first of the elements to which we will look.

In *The Key-Lock Man* L’Amour has the wife of the hero looking for an area in which to plant some corn and melons like what the Native Americans had grown before. Clearing it meant simply taking an axe to... “some sparse growth, just brush and canyon growth” (1965: 47). We are given no guidance to what “canyon growth” might be.

On the other hand, L’Amour gives us a good description of the vegetation in the story of a cattle drive across central New Mexico in *Killoe*. As he tells it, the drive got a late start and the streams and waterholes had already commenced to dry up. The occasional stream that still had water in it...

“had a narrow line of rushes, but only just a few feet away a sparse growth of greasewood, dwarf mesquite, and occasional clumps of bear grass grew on the thin, sandy soil” (1962: 97).

Captain Marcy’s account of the trip from Fort Smith, Arkansas across the southern route to the gold fields in 1849 is one of the few accounts of that particular region, but fortunately for us it is an informative, detailed, and scholarly narrative. Captain R. B. Marcy was in charge of the military escort for one of the large groups of emigrants that used the southern route rather than the more well-known, northern route from Independence. In his report (which Congress found so interesting and valuable that it was ordered to be printed) Marcy presents us with a detailed description of the difficulties encountered in the “Indian Territories,” the Llano Estacado (Staked Plains of Texas and eastern New Mexico), the southern Colorado Plateau, and the desert of southern
California. His record of the trip from Touson [sic] to the Gila River, while somewhat outside my study area, is typical:

“The next 75 miles of our road to the Gila River, was through a perfect desert. In the dry season, there is not a drop of water, and but little or no grass; but luckily for us, there had been several rains, and we found holes of water all along the road; and there was considerable young grass springing up, which helped **amazingly**; but it was only in spots that we found this. In the midst of this barren waste … it took us four or five days to make the Gila” (Foreman, 1939: 282).

A more complete description of presettlement vegetation of the Intermountain West I located was an article by Leopold from the “Geographical Review,” in which he assembled information from thirty journals and diaries from explorers to the region. Vale examined nearly as many for an article in “Journal of Range Management.” Vale quotes Beckwith (1855) from “Reports of Explorations and Surveys to Ascertain the Most Practical and Economical Route for a Railroad from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean:”

> “Beyond [i.e., west of Bent’s Fort, CO.] this the variety of artemisia known as sage first begins to appear in quantity; and grass and water away from the main water-courses becomes scarce” (Beckwith, 1855).

And again from Beckwith, west of the Sangre de Cristo Range:

> “The grass along our path was scattered, and we experienced considerable difficulty in driving over the thick masses of sage … the ridge was rough and thickly covered with several varieties of artemisia – the sage so large and stiff that our animals were very reluctant to pass through it” (Beckwith, 1855).

Farnham, (1843) whose journal of “Travels in the great western prairies, the Anahuac and Rocky Mountains and in the Oregon Territory,” provides additional verification:

> “The hills were destitute of timber and grasses; the plains bore nothing but prickly pear and will wormwood … It [sagebrush] stands so thickly over thousands of acres of the mountain valleys, that it is nigh impossible to urge a horse through it; and the individual who is rash enough to attempt it will himself likely to be deprived of his moccasins, and his horse of his natural covering of his legs” (Farnham, 1843).

Vale’s conclusion tells us the explorers of the Intermountain West, which includes the Colorado Plateau, found the vegetation dominated by shrubs.
Frequent references by these explorers to the lack of forage for livestock implies even a scarcity of that, though valley bottoms and moist canyons and mountain slopes often supported stands of grasses:

“However, the major area of the Intermountain West was covered not by grass, but by thick stands of brush, when the first Europeans began probing those unknown regions” (Vale, 1975).

Climate

Our narrator from the cattle drive in Killoe continues his story with a description of a cloudburst and major storm that catches them after they have been on the trail for about six weeks. They have been struggling with a lack of water for many days and lost several hundred head of cattle to thirst before arriving at a perennial stream. Then they are hit with the storm.

The implication is that late spring and early summer in the area is less likely to see precipitation. For comparisons, the climate for the area as described by the Northern Arizona University website dedicated to information concerning the Colorado Plateau tells us:

“Precipitation is low to moderate in the early winter, increasing in February and March, and then dropping off quickly into April. May through June is very dry throughout the region. Precipitation increases in July with the advent of the Arizona summer monsoon, particularly on the southern plateau, but then drops off again with the onset of autumn in early September. Conditions remain dry until the winter cyclonic storms develop and periodically pass through the region beginning roughly in November in the north and December to the south” (http://www.cpluhna.nau.edu).

They conclude by informing us that much of the Colorado Plateau is considered arid or semi-arid with precipitation averaging less than 10 inches in most places. The higher plateaus and smaller mountain ranges of 8000 feet elevation see 20-25 inches and the highest mountains, those over 11,000 feet, may receive 35 inches per year (http://www.cpluhna.nau.edu).

The hero in the short story “Here Ends the Trail” gives us an excellent description of a summer thunderstorm in the mountains. Again we have
someone being chased so he’s out in weather during which he might usually lay up under ordinary circumstances:

“Gigantic thunder bottled itself up in the mighty canyons of cloud and then exploded in jagged streaks of lightning, cannon flashes of lightning that stabbed and glanced and shimmered among the rock-sided hills. Night and the iron rain and wet rock for a trail and the thunder of slides and the echoing canyons where they ended, the roaring streams below and the poised boulders, revealed starkly by some momentary flash, then concealed but waiting to go crashing down when the moment came” (Monument Rock, 1998: 56-57).

The other element of climate in this arid or semi-arid region is the aridity itself and how the characters perceive it – how they react to it. Here there are many descriptions to be found within L’Amour’s work as we have already seen to some degree when looking at his ‘signature landscape.’ Water, or rather its lack, present a significant piece of these barbed landscapes with which his characters must deal. The heroine in the short story “The Man from the Dead Hills” is looking for someone while observing:

“The sagebrush flats shimmered in the white heat of a late-summer sun, and a gray powder of dust lay thick upon the trail. Far away the hills loomed purple against the horizon, but the miles between were endless flats dancing with heat waves” (1998: 95)

A similar description from Showdown at Yellow Butte defines a waiting period in this story of a land ownership conflict:

“Heat waves danced out over the bottom land, and shadows gathered under the red wall. A dust devil lifted and danced weirdly across the desert, then lost itself among the thick antelope brush and catclaw … the tall spire of Chimney Rock lifted in the distance, its heavier shouldered companion looming beside and beyond it” (1953: 91).

Aridity is a fact of daily awareness in the West and government land policy forced people to create some interesting means for dealing with it. Cattle ranching requires at least some water, though not necessarily strictly for grass. Cattle can and do survive on the brush that is autochthonous to the region, but permanent water is still necessary. In Flint, the heroine ranch owner asks some of her riders to file on some of the permanent water sources that the ranch has been
utilising (1960: 26). This is, strictly speaking illegal, but was not uncommon at
the time and the ranch owner then made provision to buy the land from the filer
at some later date (Peterson, 1975). The reason, of course, is that the person who
controls the water sources in effect controls the grazing land around it, especially
in the days before barbed wire. Many of the difficulties in the Old West revolved
around the issues of water rights, and much of water rights law was formulated
as a result of these concerns.

**Landforms**

An important component of any landscape is the shape and texture, as
well as colour and size of its various pieces. Again *Flint* provides an interesting
example of L’Amour’s descriptive powers. The narrator describes for us the lava
beds, the dreaded malpais of west central New Mexico to which the hero is
making his way:

“Like a fat, enormous snake it lay stretched across the country, a black and ugly
mass of twisted, rope-like rock, clinkers and piles of lava, that looked like hell
with the fires out, filling its sterile sink and winding south and north for many
miles … This was desolation. This was what remained after Mount Taylor and El
Tintero spewed forth their flaming rock and drenched the country with liquid
fire … The river of lava had flowed southward … flowing down hill, piling up to
cross over hills, falling in cascades down steep cliffs, until finally it solidified into
a great stream of natural glass. Hardening from the outside, often the lava
continued to flow beneath the surface and left vast caverns, roofed over in places
by blisters of apparently solid rock that was actually eggshell thin. Splitting at
places into separate streams it left island of grass like sunken parks, dotted with
trees and surrounded by walls of lava sometimes fifty feet high” (1960: 30).

Another example on a more micro scale comes from *Haunted Mesa* in
which the narrator-hero is reading a diary entry made by another character
whom we meet much later, but who is the midst of building a home on the top of
the subject mesa:

“The top a rough oval, absolutely flat and tufted with short bunches of
vegetation. Soil deep but seems to have been badly leached. Along one side an
edging of crags, yet the rocks themselves are smooth. The mesa falls off steeply
on that side. On the other sides it also falls steeply away. Oddly enough, seems
to have been purposely ringed with slabs of rock. Most unusual. My impression,
which may be mistaken, is that the mesa top may have been cultivated in the far-distant past” (1987: 20).

The mesa top is within the region that was occupied a millennium ago by the “Ancient Ones,” the Anasazi of the Four Corners. The possibility the mesa top was cultivated is perhaps not unreasonable, though it may also only be wild speculation. The author, however, goes on to describe mesa tops in general thusly:

“Mesas with any amount of soil on top were few. More often than not, in this part of the country, mesas were almost flat rock with occasional patches of earth supporting a meager growth of brush and occasional small trees, usually juniper” (1987: 79).

Geologist John S. Newberry whom we met earlier and who named the “Sage Plains,” accompanied Captain John Macomb of the Topographical Corps in 1859 exploring the region north and west of Santa Fe, NM to the confluence of the Green and Grand Rivers in east central Utah. Newberry’s rhapsodic description of the area Macomb characterised as “a worthless and impracticable region” is worthy of note for comparison with L’Amour and contrast with Macomb. Newberry waxed particularly eloquent as he talked about the area where the San Juan flows through Comb Ridge:

“Illuminated by the setting sun, the outlines of these singular objects came out sharp and distinct, with such exact similitude of art, and contrast with nature as usually displayed, that we could hardly resist the conviction that we beheld the walls and towers of some Cyclopean city hitherto undiscovered in this far-off region” (Macomb, 1859: 103).

Over a century later Ann Zwinger, in Wind in the Rock, echoed Newberry’s sentiments when she wrote:

“To me there is an enchantment in these dry canyons that once roared with water and still sometimes do, that absorbed voices of those who came before, something of massive dignity about sandstone beds that tell of a past long before human breathing. That bear the patterns of ancient winds and water in their crossbeddings … Here I find something of necessity. Were I to discover that I could not walk here again, something essential would be missing from my life” (1978: 7).
In summary, I have examined several features that comprise a particular landscape. I looked at L’Amour’s overall sense of place and his signature landscapes, which may be characterised as sense of place particularised to specific stories and settings. In addition this study examined the maps provided, and texts, to determine their consistency with the actual and historical locations. Beyond that I explored the concept of trails both for purposes of travelling from place to place, but also as a means to provide a commentary of changing landscape features. Finally, I have inspected several of the discrete elements that go to making up individual landscapes such as climate, vegetation, and landforms. While the list is hardly exhaustive, the intent has been to scrutinise as representative a sample of the features that comprise a physical landscape as is sufficient to establish the consistency of L’Amour’s landscapes with professional geographers.
Chapter 4

What shall we tell you? Tales, marvellous tales,
Of ships and stars and isles where good men rest,
Where nevermore the rose of sunset pales,
And winds and shadows fall towards the West.

And how beguile you? Death has no repose,
Warmer and deeper than the Orient sand
Which hides the beauty and bright faith of those
Who made the Golden Journey to Samarkand. (James, 1920: 60)

Conclusion

L’Amour took great pride in creating a realistic picture of the settings he employed for his various novels and short stories. Klaschus (1980: 93) tells us L’Amour’s intentional verisimilitude very probably dates from a letter he received from a sheepherder early in his writing career who wrote describing his excitement at reading an exact description of the area in which he was living and working. L’Amour took considerable pleasure in that particular letter and it may well have served as a catalyst for his continuing quest for accuracy.

The question I asked was, “How consistently does Louis L’Amour’s work portray the physical landscape of the American Southwest?” The vehicle chosen to make that determination was the consistency with which L’Amour’s descriptive language corresponds or compares with the explorers and academics who have written about the same area. The survey of the literature revealed a long tradition of landscape study that emphasises the sense of place. The difficulty lies in the fact that the meaning of landscape has proven to be particularly nebulous, reflective of the individuality of each scholar’s perceptions. Landscape passages in literature are open to a multitude of understandings. Author’s descriptions are subject to a range of interpretation. The evocative nature of their work emphasises their effort to “fill the gaps in the historical knowledge of landscapes for which other, more objective sources are either missing or inappropriate” (Salter and Lloyd, 1977).
I believe, however, the common thread within the body of work that is devoted to the understanding of landscape is the perception that there is an overlap, or interdependence between the physical and the human attributes. This study spent only a cursory amount of time exploring the human elements of L’Amour’s landscape, but the “local-colour” aspects, including the climatology, biogeography, and the geomorphology were key ingredients of L’Amour’s work. He has integrated these processes with his characters’ sense of place in ways that enhance his readers’ appreciation of the landscape, providing detailed geographic facts of the settings. A conspectus of L’Amour’s work has demonstrated the truth of Wright’s assertion. Some writers of fiction have a clearer conception of geography and geographical concepts in the estimation of the general reader than do many academic writers (Wright, 1924).

This study found that L’Amour’s signature landscapes incorporate the positive experience of landscape with an attendant pleasant sense of place; and negative landscape experience engendering an opposite reaction. The result was that his characters displayed a strength of purpose that allows his audience to see good triumph, “the thirty-dollar-a-month cowboy gains the ranch because he made the right moral choices” (Klaschus, 1980: 7). L’Amour’s settings with all its barbs was a good place to be:

“L’Amour convinces readers his West is real. Credibility plays a major rôle in a writer’s popularity, whether the genre is Westerns, science fiction, mysteries, or romances. Fans of the Georgian romance are often as knowledgeable about that period as readers of Westerns are about the West. Be it ball gowns or shotguns, the author must convince the reader he knows his subject” (Klaschus, 1980: 9).

Escapism is an element in L’Amour’s popularity. His ‘Old West,’ for all its hardships, challenges his readers vicariously. His heroes are tough, competent, and “wear their clothes out from the inside.” But the vicissitudes of everyday lives may be made more bearable by reading the exploits of L’Amour’s heroes.
Geographers have found that authors of popular fiction frequently include descriptions of physical and cultural geography integrated into their plots such that the setting comes to life. At the same time, analysis demonstrates a respect for detailed geographic facts that can be more easily digested by the average lay readers. Too often, geographers do not write for the lay reader, having gone beyond the basic facts of geography into the advanced theory and philosophical elements that are meaningless to the person without a background in academic geography. It has been stated the basic appeal of L’Amour’s work rests with his story telling. His plots are uncomplicated, and “take off like a bullet,” to borrow another of his clichés. Another reason may be his recurring characters, the Sackett, Talon, and Chantry families, two of whom we have met. He has employed these families to tell stories in different time periods consistent with his migration theory that Chantry introduced to us. It is against this backdrop of intentional historical and geographical verisimilitude that L’Amour has cast his stories. That is what this study has explored.

One of the several elements of geographical themes this study explored was the paradigm of the map. What we were able to establish is the maps employed were most often of the cognitive variety. L’Amour’s characters were principally operating on a mental picture of an area established by long experience with similar landscapes and by careful, deliberate surveys. As Jonsson (2002) pointed out, this deliberation is a hallmark of people with good spatial awareness. The maps in the frontispiece, while never employed, apparently were provided to allow the reader to locate approximate settings that were then refined within the body of the story. The cartographic representation allows L’Amour to sensitize his readers to the basic geomorphology of the area. It could be argued that L’Amour deliberately chose the settings to further challenge his protagonist, thus establishing his signature landscapes.

Another element this study assessed was the concept of trails. As Murphy (1999) pointed out, trails were well established by earlier residents of the
Routes learned through trial and error established the most efficient and effective routes; taking into account available water and food, shelter and safety. In addition, L’Amour was often able to utilise his characters movement over a trail to give his readers a commentary of changing environmental conditions like geomorphological patterns as well as altitudinal zonation in vegetation patterns. His book, *Over on the Dry Side*, allowed him to differentiate between windward and leeward precipitation patterns by informing his readers of the simple fact that the windward side of the mountains displays lusher vegetation than the other. Again, L’Amour was able to subliminally teach his readers of the orographic effect in precipitation patterns, climatological regimes.

While the geographic themes contained within L’Amour’s landscapes that have been the focus of this study are by no means exhaustive, those examined represent some of the major concepts with which geographers have been interested traditionally. Additional themes contained within L’Amour’s works that could comprise additional research include land use patterns, the inclusion of ethnic conflicts, and the strength of L’Amour’s migration theory.

In addition, much further research is implied by the sheer magnitude of L’Amour’s work. The diversity of his subject matter, from twelfth century Europe and the Middle East to twentieth century Siberia (even though most of his work was devoted to frontier stories) suggests much time could be spent just within L’Amour’s work. Beyond that is a comparative analysis with various writers who have utilised the same general regions and/or time periods.

A major purpose for this study was to determine whether L’Amour’s novels and short stories would qualify for the designation ‘geographical novels’ as defined by Ramsay and Mill. Mill (1910) asserts “when the peculiarities of the district influence the course of the story,” the geography or landscape takes a rôle and in Ramsay’s definition, we have a local-colour story, a ‘geographical’ story or novel (1921). Ramsay continues by recounting several means of achieving local colour for a story including: 1) character selection; 2) dialect; 3)
customs; 4) traditions; and 5) description, which he defines in part as *portrayal of the natural background* (1921: 334). Of course, Ramsay compiled his list of qualifying authors well before L’Amour started writing, but the results of this study suggest L’Amour’s work would conform to this profile very comfortably.

Finally, this study has established the efficacy of exploring the works of popular authors for support for classroom teachers in amplifying regional understanding. There are several lists of books and stories that have been created of excellent regional descriptions, including the one compiled by Ramsay (1921). Mill (1910) also has assembled an impressive list of authors whose works describe particular regions and/or geographic themes. Some writers are not above suspicion, but others are trustworthy and evocative in their treatment of lands and peoples. While it is incumbent upon teachers to familiarise themselves with the body of literature that exists pertinent to the area under study, it can, as Mill told us so eloquently, “lighten teacher loads considerably.”

The review of the literature that is examined above demonstrates there is a relationship between academic texts and geographical novels worthy of a closer scrutiny. As stated earlier some authors of fiction are particularly adept at their treatment of scenes and people, though there remain some whose work may be suspect. Numerous people have examined landscape portrayals of authors over many years, commencing over a century ago, at least. For purposes of this study, in the literature review, I discussed Aiken’s assessment of Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha County, Mitchell’s exploration of several authors’ interpretation of the Deep South, Rosowski’s look at Cather, and several others. The differences between their studies were considerable as each had very different agendas. The constant with those studies and this examination was that each

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14 e.g. Atherton’s *The Conqueror* describes the effects of a West Indies hurricane on people and vegetation, or Rudyard Kipling’s *Jungle Books* wherein he details plant and animal life in South Asia. Mitchell (1998) has demonstrated the use of several authors to examine various aspects of the American South.
sought to establish consistency with geographers and other professional’s portrayals of the subject areas.

This study was focussed on the landscape descriptions contained within the many works from the pen of Louis L’Amour. The issue was to determine the consistency of his landscape portrayals of the American Southwest. The results demonstrate L’Amour does more than an adequate job. His physical landscapes, the primary concern of this study, have all the elements included in academic texts plus the subjective. His signature landscapes, with all their barbs, allow the reader to envision the area and at the same time experience it. Plus, this study has established that L’Amour’s Southwest provides a meaningful complement for the classroom teacher who is searching for an alternative means for teaching a class the peculiarities of a particular region.

In summary, this study has provided a template for the survey of other authors’ landscapes. As Mill stated:

“A little careful search through good novels would furnish examples of most of the important phenomena and their relations ... Having once realised the phenomenon by an aid of this kind, the student can more easily understand and fully appreciate the diagrams and statistics given in books on physical geography” (1910: 48).
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Appendix A

L’Amour Books


