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# Proving Ground: Richard Harding Davis in the American West

Char Miller  
*Pomona College*

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## Proving Ground: Richard Harding Davis in the American West

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The idea of Texas staggered Richard Harding Davis. That, in any event, is how the youthful managing editor of *Harper's Weekly* portrayed his response to the Lone Star State after boarding a train in New York City and heading south in January 1892 for a three-month tour of Texas, Oklahoma, and Colorado. At twenty-eight, already a much-heralded journalist for his investigative reports on Philadelphia's underworld, and his gripping accounts of the devastating Johnstown Flood of 1889, Davis had been editing *Harper's* for a year and was eager for a change of pace. A western jaunt, he reasoned, would present a perfect opportunity to escape the grip of a dreary winter, explore new landscapes and warmer climes, and write a series of articles for his publisher, which would appear in its other major magazine, *Harper's Monthly*. They would then be bundled together into *The West from a Car-Window* (1892), the result of Davis's brief excursion into terra incognita.

Just how ignorant he was of this vast region of the United States dawned on him when he pored over a railroad-system map, an attempt at orientation that left him disoriented. That his first destination was to a state that "is one hundred thousand square miles larger than all the Eastern and Middle States, including Maryland and Delaware" was daunting, Davis confessed, knowing it would also boggle his readers' imaginations. The first-time traveler, he wrote, "might possibly feel equal to the fact that Texas is 'larger than all of the Eastern and Middle States,' but this easy addition of one hundred thousand square miles, and the casual throwing in of Maryland and Delaware like potatoes in a basket for good measure . . . make him wish he had sensibly confined observations to that part of the world bounded by Harlem and the Battery." Manhattan might be at the center of Davis's universe, but its significance relative to the whole had shrunk dramatically.

His epiphany smacks of a tall tale, in which a high-and-mighty Easterner encounters the rough-and-tumble West and is chastened by his encounter with its sheer volume of space, limitless sweep of sky, and confounding emptiness. And so he reacted in character to the rugged brush country of South Texas, Colorado's towering snow-capped peaks, and the rolling waves of tall-grass prairie of central Oklahoma, reactions that allow us to read *The West From a Car-Window* as yet another story of comeuppance, suitable for shelving alongside Bret Harte and Mark Twain. Yet like Harte and Twain, Davis was no fool. He knew full well what the literary conventions were, and his book plays to and against type. Admitting that what he dubbed the "Eastern mind" would profit from a little Western leavening, he did not hesitate to illustrate as well that by their thought, word, and deed many Westerners were as raw and as uncultivated as the land they inhabited; their lack of grace, unsophisticated mien, and material grasping marked them as louts to one who was the epitome of dapper.

"To the college boy of the early nineties," novelist Booth Tarkington remembered, "Richard Harding Davis was the 'beau ideal of jeunesse dorée.'" The gallant dressed sharp: shod in patent leather boots, wrapped in a double-breasted waistcoat, carrying a cane, and wearing gloves, he knew how to make an entrance. "When the Waldorf was wondrously completed . . . and [Davis] came into the Palm Room—then, oh, then our day was radiant. That was the top of our fortune," Tarkington sighed. "Of all the people of every continent, this was the one we most desired to see." Likewise, *The West from a Car-Window* affirms, even in the provinces there were standards to maintain.

That Davis set himself up as a moral arbiter—a pose he adopted in his journalism, as well as in his many essays, plays, and novels—was an outgrowth of his childhood. Born in Philadelphia on April 18, 1864, the first child of L. Clarke and Rebecca Harding Davis, he was raised in a loving household in which he was very much the focus of attention. From his doting parents, he gained his fascination with words, their power and drama, and understandably so. Clarke Davis, who was trained as a lawyer but hated the law, turned to journalism, becoming an editor of a Philadelphia daily; his wife, Rebecca, earned her fame pumping out pulp fiction, in novel and essay form. Because

the senior Davises periodically struggled to make ends meet, young Richard knew he would never enter into Philadelphia's Main Line society, and did not help his cause by flunking out of Lehigh and The Johns Hopkins universities. Still, those of wealth and standing became his models; their affectations became his.

A dandy, he could also get down and dirty. Donning a laborer's garb—and, ever the Romantic, adopting the alias of a character in *The Romany Eye*, a contemporary London melodrama—he infiltrated a gang in Philadelphia. For a week, he and his new-found pals cruised the dives, bordellos, and saloons of working-class neighborhoods, and his dispatches about the demimonde, which appeared in the *Philadelphia Press*, brought him considerable renown.

Davis's ability to blend in with those very much unlike himself, whether top-drawer or bottom rung, down-and-out or up-and-coming, reflected his magnetic affability and fetching geniality; he was a hale fellow well met. People of all stripes liked him, and were very much liked in turn. A lover of pretense, he was not pretentious, a quality that caught the attention of Theodore Roosevelt, whose regiment Davis reported on, and fought with, in Cuba in 1898.

Joining TR's force shortly after it had landed in Cuba, he was credited with a critical piece of intelligence as the battle raged at La Guásimas: "it was he . . . with his field glasses, who first placed the trench from which the Spanish were firing at the right wing of the regiment," Roosevelt recalled. "We were then able to make out the trench, opened fire on it, and drove out the Spaniards." Because the journalist-cum-soldier "was indomitably cheerful under hardships and difficulties and entirely indifferent to his own personal safety or comfort," the chief Rough Rider asserted, he "won the esteem of the regiment [and] was one of three men we made honorary members of the regiment's association."

Had they thought of it, the men of Troop G, Third Cavalry might have similarly honored Davis, who in *The West from a Car-Window* depicts their energetic if futile chase of Mexican revolutionary Catarino Garza. On September 16, 1891, with a band of two hundred, Garza had crossed into Mexico from Starr County in deep South Texas, to wage war on the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz. Over the next couple of months, his cross-border raids elevated tensions between the United States and Mexico, and in December, after a

skirmish between U.S. troops and Garza's force, and a subsequent pitched battle in which the revolutionaries were clobbered, the federal army launched an extensive manhunt for the scattered remnants of Garza's outfit. One month later, in January 1892, Davis hitched up with Troop G, Third Cavalry, under the command of Captain Francis H. Hardie, and chronicled their pursuit of the fugitives they would never corral.

Put off by their ready resort to profanity, Davis nevertheless deeply respected the men with whom he rode, Hardie perhaps most of all: "He is a young, red-moustached, pointed-beard chap with light blue eyes, rough with living in the West but most kind hearted and enthusiastic," Davis wrote his mother. "He treats me as though I were his son which is rather absurd as he is only up to my shoulder." Size was not the issue, the New York reporter would discover: Hardie's paternal mien was essential to his command of youthful enlistees chasing a phantom in the wilderness.

And of the environmental rigors of South Texas, no one has written more evocatively than Davis; a place adrift, "it is more like the ocean than anything else and drives one crazy with its monotony and desolation." Even its winter heat left men flushed and dehydrated. "It is so hot," he confided to his mother, "I cannot make the words go straight and you must not mind if I wander." Cactus thickets shredded the riders' clothing, tearing into their patience and ripping their concentration. Far removed from supply depots, Troop G traveled light, and consequently its meals consisted of little beyond bacon, biscuits, and beans, a fare that Davis, a denizen of Delmonico's, home of New York's haute cuisine, would have found unappetizing; but ate it he did.

Yet for all the terrain's many deprivations, Davis was not distracted from his reportorial ambition, evoking small moments that he hoped would tell larger stories for the folks comfortably ensconced back home. Dismounting to eat, the riders lay within the thin shade cast by fence posts and tree trunks, adapting as they could to the scorching weather. In an arid land, the weary cavalry held up a "solitary train, in true road-agent fashion, to take the water from its boilers that their horses might not drop for lack of it." What really caught Davis's eye, however, was Troop G's gritty persistence as it trailed across a forbidding land that "is America's only in its possession."

Seeking Garza within a 500-square-mile tangle of southern Texas was a fool's errand, for a "man could lie hidden in this brush and watch the country on every side of him, and see each of the few living objects which might pass over it in a day, as easily as he could note the approach of a three-masted schooner at sea. And even though troops come directly towards him, he had but to lie flat in the brush within twenty feet of them, and they would not know it."

Still, the improbability of their pursuit did not dash the men's enthusiasm. "That is why I admired, and why the readers in the East should admire," the reporter concluded, "the discipline and faithfulness with which the cavalry on the border of Texas did their duty the last time Trumpeter Tyler sounded 'Boots and Saddles,' and went forth as carefully equipped, and as eager and hopeful that *this* time meant fighting, as they did the first."

Davis would encounter other stalwart fellows as he toured the West, such as the Texas Rangers, who "were the largest men I saw in Texas, the State of big men," as quick on the draw as they were slow to speak; "big men cannot tell of the big things they do as well as other people can—they are handicapped by having to leave out the best part," an everyday humility Davis admired. Admirable, too, were the conscientious efforts of the officers stationed at Oklahoma's Forts Sill and Reno to ease the circumscribed situation of native American peoples, lives crimped by bureaucratic malfeasance and narrowed by social disdain. And in Colorado's high country, slogging down the mud-thick streets of the silver-strike town of Creede, the haphazard layout of which looked "like a box of spilled jackstraws," he ran into Ivy Leaguers of good cheer and legendary football players, men who could handle themselves in a tough crowd.

Not all Westerners were as resolute or capable or honorable. Some were downright nasty, such as the brutish Ben Thompson, the English-born marshal of Austin, a born killer who was gunned down in a San Antonio saloon, a tale Davis recounts with ill-disguised glee and purplish prose. Shot three times in the forehead—"they say you could have covered the three bullet-holes with a half-dollar"—the mortally wounded Thompson fell, but, like Rasputin, fought on: "holding his revolver at his hip," he killed one of his enemies, "and then, with every nerve jerking in agony, he emptied his revolver into the floor, ripping great gashes in the boards about." A tower of strength even

as his life slipped away, he died as "he would have elected to die, with his boots on, and with the report of his pistol the last sound to ring in his ears."

That was the West—transcendent and transgressive—that Davis wanted to confront, but never did. Instead, the region and its peoples were mostly undistinguished, a reality that unsettled his preconceptions about its picturesqueness. Unadorned in fashion, lacking in principle or outrage, the Wild West, which should have been filled with the kind of quirky folk replete in Bret Harte's fictionalized communities, was mundane, boring even.

Then there was Oklahoma City, for which Davis nursed a special horror, dubbing it a "freak of our civilization." Born of a bizarre giveaway of the public domain in the Oklahoma Territory, the town had grown so fast and in such slapdash fashion that he was dispirited as much by its red-clay streetscape as by the meanness of daily discourse. "Everyone in Oklahoma City seems to live, in part at least, by transferring real estate to someone else, and the lawyers and real estate agents are happy" to feed the speculative frenzy. His correspondence was more trenchant still: in this "mushroom city," life was "all raw and mean, and greedy for money." A troubled Davis could not understand why anyone, let alone the many talented Easterners he met in the bustling burg, would want to make his home so far from the hub of civilization: "it is exasperating and pathetic to see men who would excel in a great metropolis, and who could live where they could educate their children *and* themselves . . . wasting their energies in a desert of wooden houses in the middle of an ocean of prairie, where their point of view is bounded by the railroad tank and a barb-wire fence." No, a man "is much better off in every way in a tenement on Second Avenue" on New York's Lower East Side than as a homeowner on the windswept American Steppes.

Or so Davis thought before he arrived in Denver. Only in the Mile-High City did he come face-to-face with what had lured and retained the better class of people in the West; the burgeoning community "probably does more to keep the Eastern man who is mining and ranching from returning once a year to his own people," Davis exclaimed. Filled with great schools and great capitalists, social necessities he had not witnessed elsewhere in his travels, the city was home to an enchanting array of substantial abodes, "mile after mile

of separate houses . . . of the prettiest, strictest, and most proper architecture." This solidity was comforting, as was the presence of first-rate private clubs, public theaters, and other cultural institutions. The city at the "Heart of the Great Divide" was no mirage.

It resembled none other than Gotham itself: "I arrived in Denver Friday night," he wrote his parents on March 7, "and realized I was in a city again where the more you order people about the more they do for you, being civilized and so understanding that you mean to tip them." That the town sustained a burlesque show added to its allure. With his baggage in transit, and still dust-encased from the long, bone-rattling stagecoach ride, Davis rushed to the theater, bought a ticket for the "'Front Row, End Seat,' just as naturally as though I was in evening dress and high hat—and then I sank into a beautiful deep velvet chair and saw Amazon marches and ladies in tights and heard the old old jokes and the old old songs we know so well and sing so badly."

Not the only one so transported by Denver's cultural delights, Davis noted that the city had another special appeal to the Easterner: their kind had already arrived and were "turning it into a thoroughly Eastern city—a smaller New York in an encircling ring of white-capped mountains." There was no place like home.

In this claim of the potential transmigration of the West into the East lies the organizing structure of *The West from a Car-Window*: its author's frame of reference is the urban milieu from which he hailed and the urbane poise he embodied, standards against which the West was tested—and with few exceptions—found wanting. The book opens in historic San Antonio which, for all its heralded past, is a grubby little town that "needs . . . a good hotel and a more proper pride in its history and the monuments to it." Rattling south by rail, Davis descends into a howling wilderness of the Rio Grande Valley, off the map and beyond the pale. Only slightly more civilized were Creede, Colorado, and Oklahoma City, but whatever their size and stature, or those of peer settlements, the "Eastern mind" should not mistake them for the real thing: "Seven houses in the West make a city." Only Denver was up to snuff, yet even its charms, wealth, and energy did not disabuse Davis of his larger perception of the West as a wasteland, a point he underscored in the book's final words: "The West is a wonderful, large, unfinished, and out-of-doors portion of

our country, and a most delightful place to *visit*." He expressed the hope of returning (but never did), encouraged his readers to tour the region, and knew, too, that many of those who visited might put down roots. As these new residents multiplied, their rising numbers would in time fulfill Bishop George Berkeley's famous dictum, which Davis paraphrased: "the course of empire will eventually take its way." Yet should that vaunted day ever come, he laughed, "it will leave one individual behind clinging closely to the Atlantic seaboard. Little old New York is good enough for him."

There is a touch of self-mockery in this and much of what he wrote over the course of his remarkable career, one reason he is so oft-lauded as the leading journalist of his time; he took his subjects more seriously than himself. As a title, *The West from a Car-Window* was itself a modest send-up of Davis's earlier parody of Mathew Arnold's infamous (and whirlwind) railroad tour of the United States in the late 1880s, at the conclusion of which the famed English critic had dismissed the country he had barely seen as without even passing interest. Davis's comic rebuttal, published in the *Philadelphia Evening Sun*, had detailed all the landmarks between Philadelphia and New York City, or those visible at least through a smudged rail-car window. What he disdained in Arnold, biographer Arthur Lubow points out in *The Reporter Who Would be King* (1992), Davis would replicate in his rapid journey through the American West, and the "only way to deal with this conspicuous shortcoming was to joke about it" through his book's self-deprecating title.

Alas, no one got the punch line. Reviewers thought that *The West Through a Car-Window* was at once unflattering and inaccurate. It "is an unfortunate [choice] in that it does scant justice to the really graphic and pithy quality of [the book's] contents," observed *The Dial*, an observation with which *The Nation* concurred, asserting in the lead paragraph of its otherwise positive review: "The only poor thing about this book is its title. It is not the West from a car window. It is the West from the inside, from among the sunflowers, the cacti, the mountain peaks."

Davis himself had second thoughts about what he hoped to convey by his book's appellation, a reconsideration brought on by the land itself. "I confess I had an idea that after I had travelled four days in a straight line due west, every minute of my time would be of

value, and that if each man I met were not a character he would tell stories of others who were, and that it would merely be necessary for me to keep my eyes open to have picturesque and dramatic people and scenes pass obligingly before them." It did not work out that way, and, much to his chagrin, he had to step off the fast track and head into the back country to find the quirky and quaint, paying "for an hour of interest with days of the most unprofitable travel."

This cost-benefit analysis, and the mind-numbing experience on which it was based, forced Davis to take back his youthful rejection of Matthew Arnold's claim that the United States was "uninteresting." Had Arnold followed Davis's trek, and seen what he had seen while traveling "from Pittsburg to St. Louis, from St. Louis to Corpus Christi, and from Corpus Christi back through Texas to the Indian Territory, he not only has my sympathy," Davis now allowed, "but I admire him as a descriptive writer."

Davis's depiction of the world beyond the rail line was not alone what drew readers to his book; it was as well how he described what he gazed upon. Conspicuous by his presence on every page, Davis inserted himself throughout the text as part of a narrative strategy he had developed as a cub reporter in Philadelphia, honed thereafter, and which was on full display in *The West from a Car-Window*. He had adopted this literary persona because it seemed an effective way to capture and disseminate his impressions of what he assumed were exotic locales and odd customs. His legion of devoted readers embraced the format (one reason why *Harper's* indulged his wanderlust).

Critics were another matter. They challenged Davis's choice of voice, its suggestion of authorial omniscience and presumptive claim of discovery. Others mocked what they thought was his glib affect and facile tone. In 1894, a ditty about Davis made the rounds, first published in the August 15 issue of *The Chap-Book*, and then reprinted three weeks later in *The Critic*:

*'Good morning, Mr. Davis.' 'Harding Davis, if you please.'*  
*'Oh! pardon! Mr. Harding Hyphen Davis, if you please.*  
*I only called to say how much I liked your journalese,*  
*A little more familiar and a little less at ease*  
*With the rules of English grammar than would sit a Bostonese,*  
*'Tis yet a fitting instrument to render thoughts like these—*  
*The thoughts of Mr. Davis.' 'Harding Davis, if you please.'*

Although *The Critic's* editor was certain that this "jibe at the expense of Mr. Richard Harding Davis . . . touches his weak point," Davis never wavered in his conviction that a fluent, first person narrative worked to his strength and best suited his reader's needs. Those who carped missed the point, he declared in an 1896 *Boston Sunday Herald* interview. "Now, they mean that I talk about [a setting] as if no one had had any previous impressions concerning it," but in fact "I record my first impression . . . exactly as it appears to me . . . I describe it exactly as I find it." By refusing to reimagine a situation so that it better conformed to prevailing wisdom, Davis wrote "not as I happen to think it ought to impress either me or the public or anyone else, nor as I expected it to impress me."

That was not strictly true. Davis did not simply transcribe what he saw, and did not publish everything he witnessed, as is clear from his letters home, which functioned as a first draft of his *Harper's Monthly* articles and thus of *The West from a Car-Window*. In his initial missive, dated January 1892, he set down his unfiltered reactions to San Antonio. "It is raw, ugly, and muddy, the Mexicans are merely dirty and not picturesque. I am greatly disappointed." So much so that he had to bite back the urge to catch the next train north. "I have set my teeth hard and I will go on and see it through to the bitter end," a gritty determination that stayed his hand. "I will not write anything for publication until I can take a more cheerful view of it. I have already reached the stage where I admit the laugh is on me," and if nothing materialized out of his journey he found solace in his forthcoming European jaunt—"there is still London to look forward to, and this may get better when the sun comes out." Some impressions were more valuable than others, and Davis was a cunning enough writer to bide his time until he came upon more compelling, because they were more impressive, tales to narrate.

Trumpeter Tyler of Troop G provided one such high note. Charged with leading the reporter from a tiny freight station in Pena, Texas twenty-five miles back to base camp, Tyler was so unlike any soldier an Easterner would likely see that Davis took pains to describe his guide's kit for a two-month-long bivouac in South Texas. These were the things he carried: "a blanket, an overcoat, a carbine, a feed-bag, lariat and iron stake, a canteen, saddle-bags filled with rations on one side and a change of under-clothing on the other, a shelter-tent

done up in a roll, a sword, and a revolver, with rounds of ammunition for it and the carbine worn in a belt around the waist. All of this, with the saddle, weighed about eighty pounds, and when the weight of the man is added to it, one can see that it is well, as Trumpeter Tyler suggested, to think of the horse."

Davis's appreciation for the telling detail is evident, too, in the distressing day he spent at Anadarko, Oklahoma. There, he observed the bi-monthly distribution of non-perishable rations and cattle to local tribes, and his account ought to be required reading for those who want a sharper sense of the disturbing relationships between whites and Indians, and of the degradation that late nineteenth century reservations imposed.

While the men "galloped off to the cattle-pen, the women gathered in a line in front of the agent's store" awaiting the distribution of supplies. A curious collection of girls, "very proud of the little babies in beaded knapsacks on their backs," and "wrinkled, bent old squaws . . . with coarse white hair and hands worn almost out of shape with work," moved slowly through a door, and then passed before a lengthy counter. Bearing a tag that identified the size of her family, and "the amount of grain, flour, baking powder, and soap to which [it] was entitled," each held open her apron into which then was dumped the requisite necessities. Although Davis did not press the point, the women's conveyor-like movement through the store, like the foodstuffs themselves, signaled these once nomadic people's uneasy evolution into a regiment of consumers dependent on market forces and political agents well beyond their control.

The "beef issue" only underscored what Davis sensed was the Indian peoples' debilitating loss of dignity and self-worth. Spotting young Caddoes and Kiowa clustered around the cattle-pen gate, anxious for the release of their family's scrawny steer (often one-quarter the size actually allotted), Davis became indignant at the government's connivance in the fraudulent distribution of meat rations. But he was even more appalled at its acquiescence in the "wantonly cruel exhibition" that occurred when the cattle stumbled through the gate and into the open. Waiting for them were "handsome, mischievous boys, with leather leggings, colored green and blue and with silver buttons down the side, and beaded buckskin shirts," sitting two to a pony. As the bewildered animal entered the

pen, they drew back their arrows and let fly. Not propelled with enough force to kill, "they merely hurt, and the steer would rush off into a clumsy gallop for fifty yards." To bring it down required a rifle, and, as one of the fathers commenced firing, dogs leaped in to nip at the bellowing animal. "The field grew thick with these miniature butcheries, the Winchesters cracking, and the spurts of smoke rising and drifting away, the dogs yelping, and the Indians wheeling in quick circles around the steer, shooting as they rode, and hitting the mark once in a half-dozen shots." The native peoples, whose lives Davis had hoped to find picturesque, foreign, and colorful, proved gruesome, exploited, and dark.

Life in Creede, Colorado could be just as disconcerting, upending another set of fanciful expectations. As the train pulled into the mining town built within the tight confines of a high, narrow river valley, (and through which the surging spring runoff, Davis predicted, would splinter the community much as had the killer Johnstown flood), he met many who were not what they appeared to be. Young men "in Astrakan fur coats and new top boots laced at the ankles, trying to look desperate and rough;" others whispered to Davis, "when they found that I, too, was going to Creede, and not in top-boots and revolvers and a flannel shirt, that they had never worn such things before, and really had decent clothes at home." Their sweet and painful innocence jostled Davis out of his own naïvete: the West was not then, if it ever had been, a Bret Harte triptych. Still, if you seek a snapshot of those who hustled after the booming silver strikes, turn not to Harte, before whom Davis bowed in obeisance, but to Davis himself. Assuming that what he witnessed in Creede "lacked the sharp clear-cut personality of Bret Harte's men and scenes," Davis gets off the best line of those "dim and commonplace," newfound Coloradans: "They were like the negative of a photograph which has been under-exposed."

That arresting image reveals one of the influences shaping Davis's narrative style. Because he carried a camera everywhere he traveled, (and many of the illustrations in *The West Through a Car-Window* were his exposures), he learned to think photographically. That skill, fellow writer and friend Gouverneur Morris later asserted, marked Davis as a modern man, adept in the tools of contemporary communication. "Until the invention of moving pictures the world had

nothing in the least like his talk," word pictures Davis carefully transformed into type. He wrote as his "eye had photographed," and as his mind then "developed and prepared the slides, his words sent the light through them and, lo and behold, they were reproduced on the screen on your own mind, exact in drawing and color." If overwrought, Morris's insight confirms Davis's click-and-shoot approach to the world through which he moved.

The camera-like clarity of his prose caught the attention of Western readers. When Davis arrived in Denver in early March, the first installment of his *Harper's Monthly* articles had already appeared on the newsstands, and he took pleasure at its appearance; "the proof was perfect," he wrote his family, "and if there had been more pictures I would have been entirely satisfied, as it was I was very much pleased." He was even more tickled at the reception the piece received, and the reputation it built for him, in Colorado. Seeking a draft on his New York bank, he submitted a letter of introduction to a local financier, who, taking note of his signature, blurted out: "'Good Heavens are you that Mr. Davis?'" The surprised man, a bemused Davis recounted, "then rushed off and brought back the entire establishment brokers, bankers and mine owners and they all sat around and told me funny stories and planned more things for me to do and eat than I could dispose of in a month." It was, Davis beamed, "a relief to get back to a place where people know you."

A year later, he would revel again in the attention the now-book conferred upon him. In early February 1893, while on a Mediterranean cruise, he spied many of his fellow passengers reading *The West from a Car-Window*; a giddy Davis exulted that when people learned its dashing author was on board, "young women in yachting caps" flocked around, "constantly holding me up for autographs and favorite quotations."

Their interest had no doubt been fanned by the only slightly more measured reception that had greeted the book's publication the previous October. In this "unambitious but entertaining volume," *The Sewanee Review* noted, Davis "does not offer what he saw as more than what it is, and yet his book is valuable" chiefly due to his "publicist eye." His field of vision also caught the attention of *The Dial*, which lauded the reporter as "an alert and eager observer, with an unusually keen eye for local and individual peculiarities." It was

the breezy character of Davis's sketches, suggested the *New York Times*, that allowed him to show "things in a quick, bright manner, giving what is pleasant, and a little which is not." Even the *Nation* praised Davis's forceful insights and cheered his ability to "expose for the consideration of the thoughtful a serious subject without burying it under solemnity or making it ridiculous by burlesque."

He liked being thought serious, and *The West Through a Car-Window*, for all its snap judgments and fleeting images, captured some of the powerful forces buffeting the American West of the late nineteenth century. The region's modern outlines, just coming into shape, were not the consequence of the labor of small-plot farmers with wagon and plow; stolid sheriffs with badge and pistol; or grub-stake prospectors with pick and shovel. Far more profound were the extensive transportation networks Davis rode along, the burgeoning cities he investigated, the resource-extraction industries he recognized were dominating its economic activities, and the order imposed through federal power that he saluted in his praise of the soldiers and officers with whom he fraternized. His misgivings about the modernization of the West were framed in this studied elegy: the "coming of the barb-wire and the railroad killed the cowboy as a picturesque element of recklessness and lawlessness in southwest Texas. It suppressed him and localized him and limited him to his own range, and made his revolver merely an ornament." Yet in totting up these losses, Davis could not help but tally the constituent elements of the emerging new West, passing along their initial manifestations to his audience, certain that most readers knew next-to-nothing about the complex expanse beyond the Mississippi (or, for that matter, the Hudson).

Along with a richer appreciation for his own country, he also culled from his journey the sober story line that henceforth would become the Richard Harding Davis byline: war and warriors. No class of people, no set of individuals received greater praise in his travelogue than the many soldiers and officers with whom he spoke, rode, or camped. Their profound sense of duty, and self-sacrifice, when bound up with the dangers accompanying their rounds, was ennobling, he confirmed; they inhabited a strenuous arena in which to test their moxie and masculinity, a perspective that would become the leitmotif of Davis's subsequent writings.

After his 1892 tour of the American West, and whenever possible,

Davis raced to the front lines, becoming among the nation's most celebrated combat correspondents. Failing to get to the Far East in time to cover the brief Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95, he did not make the same mistake with the equally swift Spanish-American War of 1898. A year later, he landed in South Africa to report on the Boer insurgency against British colonial rule. Its brutalities, which he documented in his journalistic accounts, and later folded into *With Both Armies in South Africa* (1900), damaged Davis's once-unquestioned admiration for all things British and imperial. As he lashed out at the empire, and stuck up for the outnumbered Dutch settlers, he enumerated the exacting penalties that empire inflicted on the métropole: the British were far poorer for their South African land grab, he averred, an argument that lost him many friends in London, but which found its source in his shocked reactions to the moral decay visited alike on Oklahoma's native Americans and their white keepers. For all the glory he granted to men-at-arms, by the early twentieth century Davis was increasingly disillusioned by the possibility of wartime heroes and heroism.

World War One impressed upon him even more forcefully that a new barbarism had taken root in Western civilization. But rather than trumpet an isolationist response, then dominant in American political culture of 1914, Davis called on his fellow citizens to do battle with those threatening to destroy the moral order. His bugle cry for war preparedness was largely devoid of the "romantic aura" and "transcendent righteousness" that literary biographer John Seelye argues had colored Davis's earlier Cuban correspondence. His new, leaner prose, and the realpolitik that lay beneath it, dovetailed with Theodore Roosevelt's bellicose demands that a reluctant President Woodrow Wilson beef up military spending, leading the former chief executive to champion Davis's animated dispatches from war-torn Europe: "His writings form a text-book of Americanism which all our people would do well to read at the present time."

The early days of the Great War had found Davis in Belgium, and because he positioned himself in Brussels, suspecting that it would be a prime target, he witnessed the German Army as it pounded through on its way to the Western Front. His chilling account, much reprinted ever since, caught the horrifying portent embedded within the frightening cadence of the German advance. "All through the

night, like the tumult of a river when it races between the cliffs of a canyon, in my sleep I could hear the steady roar of the passing army," he wrote. "This was a machine, endless, tireless, with the delicate organization of a watch and the brute power of a steam-roller. And for three days through Brussels it roared and rumbled, a cataract of molten lead." As the soldiers marched, they sang, "with their iron-shod boots beating out the time. In each regiment there were two thousand men and at the same instant, in perfect unison, two thousand sand iron brogans struck the granite street. It was like blows from giant pile-drivers." The thunderous clatter of cavalry surged behind, and in their wake, more ominous still, rolled the "giant siege-guns rumbling, growling, the mitrailleuse with drag-chains clanking, the field pieces with creaking axles . . . echoing and re-echoing from the house-front." The Germans' unimpeded western thrust seemed to spell disaster: "For three days and nights the column of gray, with fifty thousand bayonets and fifty thousand lances, with gray transport wagons, gray ammunition-carts, gray ambulances, gray cannon, like a river of steel cut Brussels in two."

Although the Kaiser's juggernaut would be ground down in bloody trench warfare, Davis did not live to see the final armistice. In January 1916, he had sailed from France to the United States, taking leave to spend time with his new wife and baby daughter; on April 11, after ignoring nagging chest pains, the fifty-one-year-old reporter suffered a fatal heart attack.

"His going out of this world seemed like a boy interrupted in a game he loved," mourned illustrator Charles Dana Gibson, whose drawings of the elegant "Gibson Girls" often were accompanied by an equally debonair male, modeled on the square-jawed, clean-cut Richard Harding Davis. "Surely no one deserved success more than Dick. And it is a consolation to know he had more than fifty of just what he wanted." Loyal, unselfish, and generous, a charming man who had led a charmed life, his days were "filled with just the sort of adventure he like best . . . And it took the largest war in all history to wear out that stout heart."

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