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The Southwestern Novels of Harvey Fergusson

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Since 1921, Harvey Fergusson has published, in addition to several volumes of nonfiction, ten novels. The best of these novels, eight of the ten, are set in the Southwest. All are creations of an exceptional writer, a craftsman and prose stylist of the first rank, and two or three of them are as strikingly graceful and polished fiction as any that has appeared in this country in many years. Such books as Grant of Kingdom and The Conquest of Don Pedro are ripe, mature works, written in the wisdom of experience and with fidelity to both art and human nature. These two novels, says Lawrence Clark Powell, are "the pinnacle of Southwestern fiction, true to life and love and landscape." Fergusson's books are also significant contributions to American literature as a whole, a fact which undoubtedly will be more widely recognized in years to come. But it is nonetheless true, as Powell's comment suggests, that they are better appreciated in the context of their New Mexico settings.

Though he has not lived in the region for several decades, Fergusson's roots are deeply embedded in Southwestern soil, and his fiction, at least that part of it which will endure, is profoundly embued with the atmosphere of New Mexico. Born in Albuquerque, Fergusson is descended from men prominent in the state's commerce and politics and, it should be noted, is a member of a family of talented writers—his sister Erna and brother Francis having published many admirable books. Fergusson's attitude toward his native region is memorably expressed in his autobiography, Home in the West. "To me," he writes, "home is less a town or a house or a society than a region—this piece of earth. I must begin with this emotion because it is a primary fact of my experience and seems to have determined the pattern of my life." Of northern New Mexico, he says: "In a world of flux this time-defying landscape gives me a feeling of peace and reassurance, lends my life a continuity it would otherwise lack."

Fergusson, then, is a regional writer. His novels, though, are far
from being quaint or provincial, for, in the miraculous way of all last-
ing literature, their truth and beauty transcend the limits of regional
settings. He has resisted—or, more accurately, has modified and
adapted to his own purposes—the two almost overwhelming tempta-
tions that confront the Western or Southwestern writer: he is neither
lyrical about the region's scenery nor romantic about its past. With
regard to the first, it is clear that Fergusson is captivated by the arid,
picturesque land of his birth, that he is sensitive to the lure of its
climate and landscape, and that his characters, like himself, feel its
magnetic pull. But, though his powers of evocation are considerable,
overtly rhapsodic descriptions of landscape are rare in his narratives.
His passion for the land goes deeper than conscious literary ecstasy;
it is implicit in virtually every word he has written, but it is never ob-
trusive and very seldom is it precisely stated. It is, in short, something
felt in the blood rather than comprehended by the intellect.

Fergusson is also interested in the Southwest's undeniably.colorful
history, and he utilizes the region's past in much of his fiction; but
he has been able to employ a dangerous medium without his work
being cheapened by it. Rejecting the improbable and the superficially
romantic, he deals with historical materials in an honest and con-
vincing manner. His success as a writer of historical fiction is perhaps
explained by his approach, not only to the past, but to contemporary
matters as well. "The proper business of a novelist," he states in his
introduction to Followers of the Sun, "is to reduce themes of social
significance to terms of individual destiny and so to give them life." And his novels, whether they occur in past or present, concentrate on
their characters—living, breathing men and women who provide a
human contrast to what is impersonal or merely spectacular. As is true
of most good fiction, sympathetic and believable characters are the
bedrock foundation of Fergusson's novels.

The themes which inform Fergusson's Southwestern books are
generally familiar ones to the region's literature: the history and devel-
ment of the area; the sometimes open, sometimes subtle, conflict be-
tween races; an almost ineffable feeling for the land. But even more
pervasive than these is the writer's vision of life, which appears to be
compounded of equal measures of a belief that man must continually
struggle for sex and power and a seemingly paradoxical conviction that
he must at the same time submit to his destiny, whether it be good or
ill. "Destiny" is a critical word in Fergusson's vocabulary, and each of
his characters exists within a larger purpose which he ignores at his
peril. "I have been impressed all my life," says the lawyer James Lane Morgan in *Grant of Kingdom*, "by the fact that no man can escape the inner drive of his destiny. Whatever kind of power is in him, that he must use, for better or worse, and even though it consume or destroy him." To Fergusson, destiny is the interworking of external forces with the internal compulsion of an individual's mental and physical makeup, and it is usually elusive and enigmatic even to those who yield to its direction. Leo Mendes, the storekeeper in *The Conquest of Don Pedro*, "believed a man's destiny is a thing he discovers, a mystery that unfolds, and he pursued his ends always in the spirit of inquiry rather than heroic determination." One of the things which makes Leo such a formidable antagonist in business and in love is his calm, fatalistic acceptance of what has to be, combined with an unflinching combativeness.

And the competitive spirit is necessary, for, though man must comply with the decrees of fate, he must also, in Fergusson's view, struggle unceasingly. Along with "destiny," "conquest" and "kingdom" are perhaps the most significant words, not just in his final two novels, but in his works as a whole. Most of his characters labor and strive to conquer, to reach some desired goal; it may be the accumulation of money, land, and power, or, on a less grandiose plane, the infiltration of a small town's feudal society. Whatever it is, it is both a means of self-proof and, since man's natural impulse is to work toward the attainment of a difficult objective, an end in itself. The people in Fergusson's books who seem to have less than his full sympathy are those footloose wanderers, such as Alec McGarnigal and Morgan Riley, who amble through life with no deeply felt goals, no conscious and directing purposes. The "conqueror" and the "drifter" are prototypes who appear often in Fergusson's novels.

It is significant that the conquerors are usually those men who find fulfillment and completion in the right woman. A strong man, such as Jean Ballard in *Grant of Kingdom*, needs a strong woman, "not merely as a complement to his flesh, but as an anchor to the earth and a center to his being. For man alone may be a conqueror but everything that lasts is built around a woman." Sexual union is one of the basic human drives, and Fergusson honestly and openly confronts this fact. His description of sexual encounters, however, are tastefully detached and restrained. They are never designed for erotic titillation, but are prompted by and are integral to the demands of character and plot. Occasionally, especially in the sketches of those
decisive meetings which consummate the workings of destiny, they rise to the level of poetry—almost, one feels, to myth. Fergusson’s world, though, remains an essentially masculine one. Though the women in his books are realistically presented, the writer’s most successful vantage points are the minds of his male characters.

FERGUSSON’S FIRST NOVEL, The Blood of the Conquerors (1921), is, by any standard, an auspicious beginning, and it clearly sets forth those themes which reappear many times in his later works. The action takes place around the turn of the century in a small Southwestern city and is the account of the rising and declining fortunes of Ramon Delcasar. Ramon is the descendant, the last of a line, of ricos, proud Spanish gentlemen who once controlled a good part of the land and people of New Mexico. With the advent of the twentieth century, the only member of the ancient house who retains any of the family’s once enormous wealth is Ramon’s Uncle Diego, and Diego is in the final stages of degeneration. Uncle Diego is one of those lackadaisical types whom, in their most extreme form, Fergusson appears to despise. This kind of man has no head for business and dissipates himself and his wealth in idle pleasure-seeking and, what is worse, seems not to care. Ramon, for his part, is reduced to toiling in a law office and protecting himself against an ambiguous social position. The crucial event in his life occurs when he meets and falls in love with Julia Roth, a cultured Eastern girl whose family disapproves of her seeing him.

This fateful meeting is followed by one of those quests for love and power which arise so often in Fergusson’s books. Ramon easily wins Julia, and he sets himself to amassing money and power in the hope of establishing a basis on which to deal with her family. He shrewdly encourages an enemy of his weakling uncle to murder the old man after which he inherits what is left of the Delcasar property. In an attempt to gain control of a northern county, he cynically undergoes the painful initiation of the Penitente cult and travels across the area “preaching the race issue.” Ramon’s efforts are to some degree successful, and, Fergusson tells us, “the hunger for owning land, for dominating a part of the earth, became as much a part of him as his right hand.” His elaborate plans, however, are abruptly shattered when Julia returns East and reluctantly marries within her own race and class. Ramon eventually realizes that she will never be his, whereupon he begins to squander his money on drink and poker, and toward the end, his careless words echo with startling exactitude the indifference
of his dissolute uncle. When last we see him, he has retired with his common-law wife to a small farm, where he is living a life of idleness and sloth. Playing the Anglo game, it seems, was as disastrous for Ramon as it had been for his immediate ancestors.

The Blood of the Conquerors is written in Fergusson's limpid, flowing style, always one of the most attractive aspects of his books. This novel is well-plotted and flawlessly executed. In addition it is a suggestive (though, perhaps, not very penetrating) study of some of the problems that have tormented the Southwest for more than a century, and no doubt will continue to do so in the future—the clash of cultures, for example, and the persistence of racial prejudice. In a way, the most striking effect of the novel, and of much of Fergusson's later fiction, is the ironic use it makes of the contradictory nature of the Southwest, of the fact that the region is both old and new and that, in one sense, it has been civilized for hundreds of years. Judged by the commercial values of the Anglo, its development is recent and as yet incomplete. The Blood of the Conquerors is an honest book and a highly readable one, but it is not on the highest level of its author's fiction.

In 1923 and 1924, Fergusson published two run-of-the-mill novels, Capitol Hill and Women and Wives, both of which are set in Washington, D.C., but with his fourth novel, Hot Saturday (1926), he returned to a Southwestern setting. These three novels are his poorest and are hardly indicative, except for their graceful style, of the works that followed them. The scene of Hot Saturday is a Southwestern town. The book's title refers to the fact that the action occurs during a sweltering weekend; also, it is no doubt meant as a mildly salacious double entendre. In any case, the novel focuses on Ruth Bruck and her stratagem to escape, by seducing and marrying a wealthy Easterner, the restraints of small-town life. The complications of the plot are effected through a double cross by men whom, in the past, Ruth has apparently teased, and through a trick ending. The book has numerous faults, but, most important perhaps, it fails because it abandons the male consciousness which Fergusson, in his best novels, explores so convincingly. In subsequent novels, he fortunately made no attempt to further the unsuccessful experiment of Hot Saturday.

An exciting improvement on Hot Saturday is Wolf Song (1927), a novel which comes very close to matching the brilliance of Grant of Kingdom and The Conquest of Don Pedro. It has earned the high praise of J. Frank Dobie who rated it "above Guthrie's The Big Sky, as a novel of the mountain men. It is easily among the best half dozen
novels on the West, in my estimation.” Composed in the “swift and rhythmical style” (as the author describes it) characteristic of Ferguson’s early fiction, Wolf Song in passages, notably in the first chapter, ascends to the plane of narrative poetry. It is the story of mountain man Sam Lash and his love for the beautiful and aristocratic Lola Salazar. Not knowing how to break through the inflexible río society of Taos, Sam elopes with Lola, marries her and leaves her at Bent’s Fort while he rejoins his companions in the mountains. The final chapters of the book relate Sam’s fight to the death with a cunning Cheyenne warrior named Black Wolf. Victorious but badly wounded, Sam returns to Bent’s Fort only to discover that Lola’s father has found her and taken her back to Taos. With the aid of a friendly priest, though, he is ultimately accepted into the Salazar clan. The priest suggests as a dowry a vast, unsettled grant of land to the north—a recommendation the outcome of which we are not told, but which seems clearly to foreshadow a similar situation in Grant of Kingdom, written some two decades later.

In Sam Lash, Lola Salazar, and Black Wolf—representing the Anglo, the Spanish American, and the Indian—Fergusson dramatizes the traditional triangle of Southwestern racial strife. He describes the social background and limitations of each, but it is this point that a lapse in taste (by present-day standards, at least) gives rise to one of the few defects in his novels. He seems, in his portrayal of Spanish Americans, to accept a somewhat objectionable stereotype. In Wolf Song, Spanish women almost automatically favor Anglo lovers over men of their own kind. “How Mexican women,” Fergusson explains, “loved hard-riding, Indian-killing gringos, full of lust and money!” And later we are assured that, in dancing, they “would rather have gringos step on their toes than be whirled skilfully by their own men.” In a later novel, The Life of Riley, Morgan Riley’s ogling of voluptuous native women and his wish “that he could become a Mexican, at least for a while—that he could change his skin and his language and go among Mexican girls—he knew they were different,” is reminiscent of a similar folklore in the South concerning the Negro. This, of course, does not necessarily represent the author’s thinking, but it is perhaps significant that none of Riley’s escapades serves to contradict his original attitude. Fergusson, moreover, though he has a detailed knowledge of the history and social structure of the aristocracy, does not possess the deep sympathy for the less-exalted Spanish American that other Southwestern writers have displayed. Nor, interestingly enough, does he
seem to be particularly concerned with Spanish men; there are many beautiful and intelligent Spanish women in his novels but only one believably drawn native male: Ramon Delcasar. Obviously Ferguson prefers to deal in the main with hairy-chested Anglos, with whose behavior and motives he is more thoroughly familiar. His inclination in this area is probably well-advised since his depiction in *Wolf Song* of the arrogant, robust mountain men is both masterful and true-to-life, far more so than any of his portrayals of Spanish Americans.

*In Those Days* (1929)—which, together with *The Blood of the Conquerors* and *Wolf Song*, was collected in *Followers of the Sun* (1936), a volume subtitled “A Trilogie of the Santa Fe Trail”—is the personal history of Robert Jayson, whose life parallels the development, from freight wagons to railroads to automobiles, of a Southwestern town. Jayson, like many young men in the nineteenth century, goes West, following the sun, because “West was the way out of everything. West was the home of hope.” He arrives in New Mexico a naive and untested youth convinced that life is “a thing of toil and blood and he had never before tasted either.” Here again we see Ferguson drawn by the spectacle of a man’s struggle for power and position. Jayson begins by working as a clerk in a general store, makes his first real money trading with the Apaches, gains and loses much (including his first wife) freighting on the Santa Fe Trail, and reaches the high point of his career as an entrepreneur in silver and lumber. “When everything comes easy,” his friend Tom Foote tells him, “you jest rot,” but there had never been any danger that Robert Jayson would vegetate from inactivity. “He gutted mountains and stripped them. He raped the earth. He lived in a rush of power visibly conquering rock and tree, making wheels turn and men sweat. And his power grew on its own conquest. More money, more things to do.” Though in his old age he loses most of his business enterprises, Jayson always remembers the glorious excitement of his youth.

*In Those Days* is first-rate historical fiction. It holds the reader’s interest because, like all of Ferguson’s novels which are set in the past, it emphasizes, not history, but those elements of human nature which are the same in any era. This is not to say Ferguson is careless with historical fact; just the reverse is true. Each of his historical novels is grounded in an impressive layer of detail, the accuracy of which can only be the result of solid research and, in some cases, of firsthand knowledge. *In Those Days*, for example, is based in part on the real-
life exploits of Fergusson's grandfather, who was one of the early traders on the Santa Fe Trail. It contains, in addition, much historical material which is deftly worked into the usual business of the novel. In much the same way, Fergusson has enhanced other of his narratives through the imaginative use of incidents in Southwestern history—the stories of the Maxwell Land Grant in Grant of Kingdom and the El Paso Salt War in The Conquest of Don Pedro are instances. His books are serious novels, not merely historical romances. Nevertheless, the illuminating glimpses into the past which they provide are without question one of their delights.

During the Nineteen Thirties Fergusson wrote two novels, Footloose McGarnigal (1930) and The Life of Riley (1937), both of which are among the writer's lesser-known works. These novels are similar in that the central character of each is an unambitious, happy-go-lucky type, almost a laboratory specimen of the Fergusson antihero. Further, the structure of both tales is episodic, and both fall, broadly speaking, into the genre of the picaresque novel. Otherwise they are undistinguished but interesting reading. The main character of Footloose McGarnigal is Alec McGarnigal, a dissatisfied employee in a New York engineering firm who is troubled each spring by a hunger for "motion and change." Finally one year, an uncle who owns a ranch in Texas dies and leaves Alec a few hundred dollars. He immediately strikes out West, and the greater part of the novel is concerned with his adventures in New Mexico—as a member of a surveying crew, among a colony of artists, and as a ranger in the Forest Service. Alec enjoys himself, but in the end faces the possibility that "perhaps he was going to pot," that his lazy days as a forest ranger have had a degenerating effect. As the narrative closes, he repents his decision to become a vagabond and prepares to go back to New York, to "the monster he had fled." He is returning, we suppose, to confront his destiny in the city which he at long last recognizes as his true wilderness, "his frontier of the spirit."

Fergusson himself, as he reveals in his autobiography, was strongly attracted to a life similar to Alec's interlude in New Mexico. Perhaps the following passage from Home in the West clarifies his attitude toward Alec and toward Morgan Riley in his next novel. Often, he says, he went to the mountains to escape the crowds and noise of urban living, but he never stayed for long. "I always felt clearly that my retreat was nothing better than a return to the past and to child-
hood, that my real business was elsewhere and especially in cities. . . . So I always went back to my perspiring struggle, whether in Washington, New York, or Hollywood.”

In *The Life of Riley*, the title character is Morgan Riley, a likable but irresolute Irishman who becomes an expert in the seduction of women. Returning from service in the First World War to his home town in New Mexico, he inherits a poolroom and cigar store from his father, has an opportunity but refuses to acquire a foothold in the city’s business community, and devotes himself mainly to a series of sexual adventures. Engaged in such pleasant pastimes, Riley watches the years float by until, in middle age, the depression robs him of his small enterprise. Shocked, he reviews the past and is appalled by the memory of his purposeless life; but, unlike Alec McGarnigal, Riley is apparently too old to turn from his haphazard existence. He must, instead, recognize the facts and reconcile himself to them. “He had confronted himself and his life,” Fergusson writes, “and had seen both for what they were. He was a failure and for reasons beyond his knowing. He accepted the fact, a little sadly, but without bitterness.” If Fergusson seems more sympathetic with Riley than with the other drifters in his novels, it is perhaps because the misery of the Great Depression (toward the end of which *The Life of Riley* was published) made the pursuit of money and power appear rather futile, if not ridiculous.

The arc of Fergusson’s course as a novelist has been somewhat unusual in that it has reached its zenith near its conclusion. His fiction, examined chronologically, displays a steady, definite progression, and—with a few exceptions, to be sure—each of his books has been better than the one preceding it. His career seems to divide into two loosely defined periods: the first and most prolific terminated by *The Life of Riley*; the second encompasses his autobiography and last two novels. Read in the light of his final novels, most of the works of the early period seem products of an apprenticeship, vehicles which provided their creator with the occasion to learn and develop his skills and prepare himself for the brilliant climax of the Nineteen Fifties. In the Nineteen Forties he wrote no fiction, though he published his superb autobiography, *Home in the West*, in 1945. But with the first year of the new decade and the composition of *Grant of Kingdom* (1950), the full potential of Fergusson’s talent was first realized. In lean, supple prose, this majestic novel employs as its unifying agent the
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history of an immense Spanish land grant in northern New Mexico and of the men who struggled to control it. Specifically, it centers, as Fergusson says in the foreword, on four men, "each of whom achieved his moment of power in that dominion." In his foreword, Fergusson explicitly states the conscious pattern of the novel, a pattern which is present in some form in virtually all of his fiction: "Here, it seemed to me, was a struggle for power in a small but complete society, isolated by distance and wilderness, which had much in common with the greater power struggles that periodically shake the world."

The first man to attempt to subdue this awesome tract of wilderness is Jean Ballard, who, like Sam Lash in Wolf Song, gambles on his ability to breach the medieval family structure of the Taos aristocracy—and he wins. He marries Consuelo Coronel and receives title to a land grant which a Spanish king had awarded the Coronels' ancestors. With half a dozen laborers and an unyielding determination, Ballard and his wife fight the elements, predatory animals, and marauding Indians to carve their empire out of the wilderness, and in time they become absolute rulers of "a minor kingdom." The invasion of railroads and money, however, worked an irrevocable change on that part of the West: "they destroyed one kind of man and created another." They bring to northern New Mexico such men as the lawyer James Lane Morgan, and the money- and power-hungry Major Blore, who wrests control of the grant from an aged and diseased Ballard. The second half of Grant of Kingdom is given over to an account of the coming of "civilization" to what had still been, even in Jean Ballard's heyday, an unspoiled wilderness. Blore, who is the front man for a Denver syndicate, partitions the grant into small ranches, establishes a town, and imports a celebrated lawman to maintain order. Blore represents, with chilling effectiveness, those faceless, grasping exploiters who swarmed over the mountain West in the late nineteenth century. His almost psychopathic drive for power springs from his childhood status as a poor white in the class-conscious South, and he discovers in the newly opened West a go-for-broke society in which he may freely indulge his savage ambitions.

The character who dominates the book, who impresses himself most deeply on the reader's memory, is neither Ballard nor Morgan nor Major Blore, but the strange backwoods prophet, Daniel Laird, who for many years works for Ballard as a carpenter. When Blore takes over, Laird opposes as best he can the shenanigans of the new owners, and for his efforts is branded a troublemaker. In a desperate
attempt to escape the corruptions of the world of man, he flees to the mountains, where, in a snowstorm, he recovers his will to live. From Fergusson's descriptions, we perceive that Laird is a man of great inner strength who has never achieved fulfillment because he has never surrendered to (no doubt because he has never fully understood) his destiny. After his struggles in the valley and in the mountains, he marries and becomes a successful rancher and political figure in Colorado. Laird, though his relation to the land grant is somewhat peripheral, is one of Fergusson's most completely realized characters, and the beautifully told story of his misgivings about himself and his fellowman and of his spiritual and physical renewal is in itself an affirmation of life. The revitalized Laird is subtly contrasted with the condition of the land, which, during the course of the novel, ages even as do the human characters. The narrative concludes with an epilogue by James Lane Morgan. At the beginning of a new century, he revisits the locale where as a young man he acquired health and experience, only to find it almost deserted, the town having withered and died when the railroad passed it by. Morgan's nostalgic account is a fitting recessional, a reminder that regions, like men, have their life cycles: after a half-century as the scene of furious conflict and exploitation, the land seemed to have taken on the aspect of a tired old man, had aged and wished only to be left alone.

For all its magnificence and panoramic grandeur, Grant of Kingdom is not Fergusson's masterpiece. One can hardly say it has a weakness, though perhaps its episodic framework, while certainly better handled and more coherent than the similar structures of Footloose McGarnigal and The Life of Riley, is at least a partial flaw. The narrative derives its unity from the grant itself, but the novel's numerous characters and their various life histories sometimes produce a slightly disjointed effect. In any event, the final, perfect fruition of Fergusson's genius was reserved for the writing of his last novel to date, The Conquest of Don Pedro (1954), a book whose qualities of excellence are at times breathtaking. The hero of The Conquest is Leo Mendes, a gentle, reflective Jewish peddler who comes West with tuberculosis, is cured, and in the process learns to love the mountains and deserts of the Southwest. His "conquest" is the establishment of a store in the village of Don Pedro, a small native town a few miles north of El Paso. The title is not merely ironic, although there is probably a touch of irony in it—in a sense, Leo's accomplishment is
indeed a conquest. He is not ostentatiously heroic, in the manner of Sam Lash or Jean Ballard. His virtues are patience and a quiet determination, by means of which he penetrates, more completely than he ever could have by physical bluster, the rigid feudal society of Don Pedro. His business prospers, he has an affair with the wife of the local rico, Don Augustin Vierra, and eventually he marries Vierra’s adopted daughter, Magdalena.

His trading empire, however, crumbles with the intrusion of a Texan broncobuster named Coppinger, who befriends Leo, but falls in love with Magdalena and Magdalena with him. Rather than resort to violence in an effort to retain a wife who no longer loves him, Leo abandons the town, the scene of his impressive victory, and rides alone into the desert night. “After the agony of human contact, the ordeal of love and friendship, the prickly tangle of pain and confusion in which he had lived for weeks, this unpeopled quiet seemed a welcome refuge, and so did the weariness that promised oblivion.” With this expression of spiritual exhaustion, the story of Leo Mendes ends—but does it? Daniel Laird in Grant of Kingdom utters a similar wish to retreat from the teeming world of man’s making; but such, Fergusson implies, can never be the virile man’s fate. Renewed and refreshed, Laird returns from the mountains to make a name for himself. Other of Fergusson’s characters dream of “retiring to some beautiful wilderness where desire might peacefully subside and money seem unimportant.” But, except for the chronic idlers, they understand that these longings will never be realized, that they are fantasies not to be seriously entertained. Certainly we cannot believe that Leo, in his own way as vital and vibrant as any of the writer’s previous heroes, will be satisfied for very long apart from the competitive struggle which, in Fergusson’s scheme of things, is such a necessary ingredient of the experience of living.

In The Conquest of Don Pedro, all of the scattered attributes of Fergusson’s fiction—sense of place, a tightly focused plot, faultless conception and execution, a style as clear and sparkling as a mountain trout stream—seem to converge in heightened form, and the result is a novel which, in technique at least, approaches perfection. Fergusson has always diligently taken pains with style and technique, and his labors have paid many dividends—but none greater than The Conquest of Don Pedro. In addition, his final novel displays his wisdom and his understanding of the complex nature of man. Surely, Leo Mendes is
among the handful of Fergusson’s most attractive and believable characters, an individual drawn from a thoughtful man’s rich store of experience.

Reading Fergusson’s works as a whole and particularly Grant of Kingdom and The Conquest of Don Pedro, one can only be astonished at the lack of critical response these fine books have elicited. Defining “success” is, at best, a perilous undertaking, and there is little point in speculating about whether or not Fergusson’s writing career has been “successful.” He has been praised by a few highly regarded critics, and some of his books have sold fairly well. On the other hand, it seems clear that, for one reason or another, his works have not received the consideration they merit. No doubt an important factor in their relative obscurity is that Fergusson has been dismissed in some quarters as a mere regionalist. Perhaps another is that his fiction is in no way experimental or sensational, and therefore attracts none of the irrelevant attention that is showered on the works of more publicity-conscious writers. His novels are simply good books—two or three of them, I should say, will stand comparison with any prominent modern American novel one chooses to mention. The reasons for the high level of Fergusson’s fiction are several. He is a craftsman and prose stylist of extraordinary ability. Furthermore, he has succeeded, in an area where others have overreached themselves, in capturing the intellectual and emotional vitality of those brave men, past and present, who have contributed their lives and talents to the Southwest and in understanding the desires of their hearts as well as the fact of their courage. In his best novels, this conjunction of technical skill with a generous insight into the mysteries of human behavior has fashioned a body of truly distinguished fiction.

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BOOKS BY HARVEY FERGUSSON

Followers of the Sun: A Trilogy of the Santa Fe Trail, includes Wolf Song,