

The American West

HSTA 160D

Online

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Spring 2013



Your Humble Guide: Timothy J. LeCain, Assoc. Prof. of History

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Class Lectures: Online

Discussions: Online

Course Description: How has the centuries-long process of western expansion influenced the course of American history and world history? Why does the West occupy such an outsized place in the imagination of not only Americans but of people from around the world? How has the “westerling experience” brought together diverse peoples and cultures, and to what effects for both the past and present? And where the heck *is* the West in the first place?! Together we will be reading, talking, and thinking about all of these questions for the next few months. Decisive answers may prove elusive in some cases, but the intellectual journey itself will be well worth the effort.



Readings: There are three required books for the course, each of which serves specific though interrelated purposes. All books are available for purchase in the MSU Student Union Building bookstore. You may, of course, buy your books elsewhere, but be sure to match the ISBN number (usually found on the back of the book above the UPC code and also on the title page) exactly, as you need to have the proper editions.

- Milner, C. *Major Problems in the History of the American West* (ISBN-13: 978-0669415803), is a broad survey of the topic built around short readings of both contemporary historical documents of the past (what historians call primary documents) and subsequent interpretations by historians (secondary documents). The Milner book will

supplement the basic historical material provided in the lecture, but more importantly, will provide the material for your weekly on-line discussions.

- LeCain, T. *Mass Destruction* (ISBN-13: 978-0813545295), is a history of large-scale copper mining in the American West, particularly in Montana and Utah. This book will be the core reading for understanding the history of the industrial west, which is a major theme of the course.
- Owen Wister, *The Virginia* (ISBN-13: 978-0743436533), is considered to be one of the first western novels. Despite being just over a century old, it is still a good read that I think many of you will enjoy. This book will be a springboard for talking about the so-called “Mythic West,” that is, the imagined west often portrayed in fictional novels, movies, etc.

Getting Started Online:

Since this course will be taught entirely on-line, you will have to know or learn some new computer skills. The course software is Desire2Learn, a widely used on-line educational tool that many of you may already be familiar with. To access and operate this Desire2Learn course from your home computer you must have a reliable computer with a reasonably up-to-date browser. You can check whether your browser works at the D2L site itself below—just click the “System Check” on this page:

<https://ecat.montana.edu/>

This is also the time to make sure you have the correct username and password for the system. Typically, this is either your D2L or NetID Username with your NetID Password. Regardless of how you access the course, you also must have a reliable means of *regularly* accessing the Internet, as the class will require that you log-on frequently throughout each week of the session. **This is not a self-paced course—you must keep up with the weekly lectures, readings and discussions that only become available as the course progresses. Since you will need to stream some large lecture recorded files, it is strongly recommended that you have a reasonably high-speed Internet connection. An old dial up connection may not be adequate.** Please be aware that your instructors are historians, not computer experts. While we are happy to help you individually with issues of course *content*, we cannot teach you how to use Desire2Learn or provide much more than basic aid with any technical problems you have with the course software, your computer, etc. In signing up for this course it should be understood that you agree to take full responsibility for mastering the skills necessary to use Desire2Learn. If you turn in a paper late, miss an exam window, or miss a discussion solely because you failed to learn how to use Desire2Learn properly, this excuse will not prevent your being graded down. That said, the skills you need to master are relatively simple, and there are abundant resources to aid you at MSU’s Desire2Learn site, including the Student Resources Page that you can access at:

<http://eu.montana.edu/btc/tlt/support/D2L/>

If you have any problems with the technical aspects of the course, you should start at this website. If you have gone through all the on-line resources and you are still unable to solve some technical or software issue, you should call the MSU Information Technology Center Help Desk at 406-994-

1777. If they cannot solve your problem, they will pass you on to a live person who is a Desire2Learn expert.

Course Requirements

- **Please be aware that while this course does not require that you be at a certain place at a certain time to listen to lectures and engage in discussion, it is nonetheless highly structured.** As you will see in further detail below, you will need to access the course and do work on specific days throughout the week. You cannot do all the work, say, on a Monday and Tuesday of each week. Unlike some online courses, this is *not* a self-paced course. Rather, you will need to keep up with the offered material throughout each week. **Further, the midterm and the final exam will be offered ONLY at the specified times. It is your responsibility to make sure you are able to take the exams at the indicated times. See below for the exam times.**
- You will not, of course, be required to attend a regular classroom lecture, which makes this course much more flexible in terms of scheduling. However, you will need to watch and listen to about 40 hours of my pre-recorded lectures. These lectures have all the audio from my presentations coordinated with PowerPoint slides, though you will not be able to see me or the classroom.

Weekly Responsibilities

Each week you will be required to do the same series of assignments. Note that these must be done within the days of the week indicated in order to keep up with the class—you cannot work ahead in the class (other than with your reading), and if you fall behind in discussions it will not be possible to catch up. Each week's initial reading assignment will be released on the website at noon of the Friday before. The standard weekly assignments are to:

- **View** two to three hours of pre-recorded lectures synchronized with a PowerPoint presentation. (*Friday noon to the next Friday noon—though these will be available to you anytime after this point for review*)
- **Read** the assigned material in the course texts. (*Friday noon to Friday noon—you can, of course, read ahead if you wish*)
- **Discuss** the assigned material in the on-line discussion forums. (See below for detailed information on the discussion forums). You will not be able to access the discussion threads before they “go live” on Wednesdays at noon. You will have the opportunity to contribute to discussions for 48 hours each week. Please note that at Friday noon the discussion boards close—it is not possible to contribute to the discussion for that week after that point. (*Wednesday Noon to Friday Noon*)

Two Short Position Papers

In addition to the above weekly requirements, you will be required to write **two short (two double-spaced pages) position papers or essays** based on the lectures, reading material, and discussions. You will be provided with a prompt during two of the course weeks that will require you to stake out a position or thesis on a debatable topic. Essays will be submitted to the online D2L Dropbox system. A good position paper does the following:

1) Offers a clearly expressed and interesting position or thesis. The rest of your essay is then dedicated to that task of convincing them. A good thesis derives from a substantial mastery of the material paired with sustained thought and analysis to arrive at an original observation or insight of your own into the topic. **Remember: An essay without a thesis is merely a report.**

2) Provides appropriate and specific historical evidence to back your arguments up and demonstrate your mastery of the material. Like a lawyer presenting a case before a jury, you must have evidence to convince them that your thesis is an accurate and useful way of understanding the past. Evidence should be specific and concrete. For example: "As was noted in lecture, the Compromise of 1877 shifted the national focus away from class antagonisms by emphasizing racial identities." **Remember: An essay without evidence is merely an opinion.**

3) Uses clear and grammatically correct writing in which each sentence plays a pivotal role, paragraphs are logically organized, and introductions and conclusions help to make your thesis shine through. Obviously, misspellings, typos, etc., are to be avoided as much as possible through careful editing and revising. Many students struggle with writing well. Please use the online resources offered and ask for help if you are not yet a skilled writer. I am always happy to read draft thesis paragraphs or discuss possible ways to approach the essays before hand. **Remember: An essay with typos, misspellings, organizational problems, and grammatical errors fails to demonstrate the minimally required care in writing necessary to earn a decent grade.**

On-line Discussions

Your participation in the weekly on-line discussion is absolutely essential to this course. **You will receive a grade for your discussion participation every week, and your overall average discussion grade will count for a full 30% of your final grade.** As you will learn, history is not primarily about learning a bunch of facts about the past, though as with any field, you have to know the basic facts to do anything. (E.g., the industrial chemist does not learn the properties of various substances simply to have that knowledge, but rather to be able to use those substances effectively.) The goal of history is to *think* about the past, to ask why something happened one way and not another, to debate which factors were truly important and which were secondary—in sum, history is about the study of humans and their world through time, with all the complexities, contradictions, and uncertainties that entails.

Popular belief to the contrary, our vision of the past is not 20/20, but rather is in many ways just as blurry and open to interpretation as our understanding of the present. Thus the goal of history is to find narratives and explanations of past events—the whys and wherefores—that best fit the observed evidence available. As you might expect, these explanations vary considerably from person to person, depending on their own views of how the world works. Just as people today may disagree about whether the president is doing a good job or not, so historians will disagree about whether past presidents were effective or ineffective.

To do history, then, we must enter into debates, to develop our own views of the past through discussion with those who might have different views. This does *not* mean, however, that each person's view of the past is simply a matter of opinion, or that every view is equally valid. While it may not be possible to ever arrive at a complete and final universally agreed upon historical "TRUTH" about past events, the views of history that best account for the available evidence come closest to realizing this goal and gain the widest acceptance by educated impartial arbiters. Views based on ignorance, narrow ideological prejudices, or twisted or highly selective reading of the historical evidence should be criticized and rejected.

- **Discussion Requirements:** You must post a **minimum of three substantive messages** each week. You are welcome and encouraged to do more, and more posts may earn better grades. In other words, while three "A" level posts will be adequate to earn you an "A" for that week, six "B" level posts could well push your overall discussion grade for the week up into the "A" range. If you post less than three, you will be graded down. If you post less than three with some consistency over the semester, you cannot receive better than a D for your discussion grade. There can be no "make up" for discussion, as each week's discussion is time sensitive. You cannot go back and engage in a debate that the rest of the class has already moved past, so you must keep up. **Note that the discussions will be divided up into four groups of approximately 20-25 students each. The D2L program will automatically assign you to a group when you begin the course.**
- **Discussion Grading:** Although simple quantity of posts is one very rough measure of discussion participation, the real goal here is quality rather than quantity. Quality discussion requires that you know the assigned material, **have carefully read the posts your fellow students have already submitted**, and have given some real thought to the discussion questions in light of your knowledge. Posts that simply regurgitate a historical fact without making a broader point, that just express simple agreement with another post, or that fail to demonstrate that you have read the earlier posts on the topic, will not earn any points. Rather your posts must show that you are engaging in a historical intellectual discussion. We will grade your posts based on three categories:
 - **Posts that will be graded the highest (A-B Range):**
 - **The Analytical Post:** This sort of message takes something from the readings (or from what someone else has said) and analyzes it. It might make a criticism, it might make an extrapolation, or it might make an interpretation or draw a conclusion. It is the message that adds an insight.
 - **The Question Post:** It is easy to ask, "what's this" or "why that," and this is not the kind of question we are looking for, though genuine questions of fact may be occasionally necessary. The good question is the one that demonstrates that you have thought about the question and have done some research on the question. You might even propose an answer and ask for feedback. This sort of message

shows the historian at work, still digging, thinking about new ways of interpreting the past, applying new evidence, finding a different perspective. Good questioning is a creative endeavor.

- **The Reply Post:** This might be in reply to a question posed by another student (or your professor and TA), but it might also be a comment or other sort of response in an on-going conversation.
- In all cases, the post that cites its sources and clearly demonstrates use of the course material counts for more than the message that does not.
- Do not be intimidated or put off just because someone else seems to have "answered" something. There is always room for you to make your own statement, to add or comment on what others have said. The discussion questions are designed to allow for multiple responses and interpretations; there is no one "right" answer.
- **Posts that will count for less (C Range):**
 - Posts that do not cite their sources count for less. Exception: if your message is speculative or deductive; that is, if you are trying to think your way through something, then obviously there are no source to cite. This is a class, after all, not a professional convention, and even the professionals may speculate from time to time. In general, however, we will want to know where you got that piece of information you just posted or what historical evidence buttresses your opinion.
 - Posts that register only surprise or dismay without adding anything of substance are incomplete. These kinds of reactions to the reading are great, but you must relate them to larger themes and ideas. If you have that sort of reaction, always ask yourself, "Why do I feel this way?" "What does my reaction tell me about the broader historical meaning of these events?"
- **Posts that will count for little or nothing (D-F Range):**
 - **Off-topic posts that show that you obviously have not done the assigned reading or read the previous posts to that thread and are not engaging in the on-going conversation.**
 - Posts that reflect little or no knowledge of the topic at hand.
 - Posts that are merely "me too" or "I agree" or "thanks for that" do not count as one of your required posts, though they are certainly welcome and appreciated as friendly gestures in our on-line community.

Some good advice on discussions: The best thing you can do is to plan to check in with the discussion frequently. **To do well, you should plan on devoting at least 1-2 hours per week to participating in the online discussions.** You would be smart to visit the discussions threads every day it is active, as it can be a bit discouraging to log on late in the conversation and find there are 80 new posts to be read. **Remember: posts that do not demonstrate knowledge of the previous posts from your fellow students and GTA will, at best, earn a "D" grade.**

Midterm and Final Exam

There will be a midterm and a comprehensive final exam in the course that you will take through the D2L quiz system. These exams will consist of multiple choice and long IDs. **The questions and IDs will be drawn primarily from information offered in the course lectures, but there will also be some questions taken from the assigned readings.** I will provide a study guide a week before the exam that will list all the possible long ID topics, and I will choose the ones on the exam from the list. You will be able to take the exams at any time during a specified short time period when they will become available on D2L. Once you begin, you will only have one hour to complete the midterm and two hours to complete the final. The exam time windows and dates are:

Midterm Exam: Wednesday, February 27, 6:00-8:00 PM; you will have ONE HOUR to complete the exam once you begin

Final Exam: Monday, April 29, 6:00-9:00 PM; you will have TWO HOURS to complete the exam once you begin

I have scheduled the exams for the evenings in the hopes that this will minimize conflicts with other courses, though I realize that some students may work in the evenings or have other responsibilities. **However, please note that in deciding to proceed with this course, you are thereby formally agreeing to take the exams at the indicated dates and times. Alternative times will not be offered. It is your responsibility to make sure that you take whatever measures necessary to ensure you can take the exams at these times. If you cannot do so, you should drop the course immediately.**

A Few Words on Plagiarism, Cheating, etc.: All students are expected to abide by the university conduct guidelines which I encourage you to read on the web at:

http://www2.montana.edu/policy/student_conduct/

Always bear in mind that any work submitted for this class—whether it be essays or test responses—must be written in your own words and give appropriate acknowledgement to the source of any ideas or arguments that are not uniquely your own. Students are encouraged to form study groups and to work together to prepare for exams. However, each student's final essay and exam response must be uniquely their own, in terms of words used, arguments put forward, evidence offered, etc. **In other words, two exam answers that offer almost exactly the same arguments and evidence could constitute plagiarism, even though the words used were not identical.** Ultimately, plagiarism is an issue of intellectual honesty. Students generally run into problems when they try to avoid doing the work by relying on the work of others. Provided you have genuinely done the work of thinking through an essay or an exam, gathering appropriate evidence, and writing your own response, you will be fine.

Grading

Your final grade will be determined by the following weighting:

Discussion = 30% of simple average of all the weekly discussion grades
Position papers = 35% (17.5% each)
Midterm = 15%
Final = 20%

Please note that all the major course requirements (viewing the lectures, participation in all discussions, submission of the papers, and completion of the midterm and final) must be fulfilled in order to receive a passing grade (a “D-” or above in some curriculums, though to count as one of your Core requirements you need a C- or better and the College of Education demands at least a C). All your grades during the course will be done numerically on a 100-point scale with the following letter grade equivalencies:

93-100: A
90-92.9: A-
88-89.9: B+
83-87.9: B
80-82.9: B-
etc.

SCHEDULE OF READINGS, PAPERS, AND EXAMS

Please note that all weekly readings must be completed by the time discussion begins on the Wednesday of that week!

(Please note that I reserve the right to make changes in this schedule as the course proceeds.)

Week One: Course introductory lecture available on D2L on Wednesday, January 9th

Week Two (Material available beginning January 11th)

- Milner, Chapter 1: Defining the West and Its History

Week Three (Material available beginning January 18th)

- **Position Paper One on the material from Week Two due in the D2L Dropbox no later than Midnight on January 22nd—see the D2L site for more details.**
- Milner, Chapter 2: Spanish Borderlands and Native Homelands

Week Four (Material available beginning January 25th)

- Milner, Chapter 3: Cultural Contacts and Contracts

Week Five (Material available beginning February 1st)

- Milner, Chapter 4: Federal Support of Explorers and Immigrants

Week Six (Material available beginning February 8th)

- Milner, Chapter 5: The Legacy of Acquisition

Week Seven (Material available beginning February 15th)

- Milner, Chapter 6: Cowboys, Outlaws, and Violence

Week Eight (Material available beginning February 22nd)

- **MIDTERM EXAM:** The midterm will be available on D2L for two hours on Wednesday, February 27, 6:00-8:00 PM; you will have ONE HOUR to complete the exam once you begin.
- Milner, Chapter 7: Children, Marriage, and Families

Week Nine (Material available beginning March 1st)

- Milner, Chapter 8: Contested Reforms

Week Ten: SPRING BREAK—no lectures or discussion

- LeCain, Chapters 1-2

Week Eleven (Material available beginning March 15th)

- LeCain, Chapters 3-4

Week Twelve (Material available beginning March 22nd)

- Milner, Chapter 10: Living on the Land, Leaving the Land
- LeCain, Chapter 5 and Epilogue

Week Thirteen (Material available beginning March 29th)

- Milner Chapter 11: Damn Water, Damn Dust
- Wister, Introduction, To the Reader, Re-dedication, Chapters I-X
- **Position Paper Two on the material from Week 12 due in the D2L Dropbox no later than Midnight on Wednesday, April 3rd—see the D2L site for more details.**

Week Fourteen (Material available beginning April 5th)

- Milner, Chapter 15: Imagining the West
- Wister, Chapters XI-XXI

Week Fifteen (Material available beginning April 12th)

- Wister, Chapters XXII-XXIX

Week Sixteen (Material available beginning April 19th)

- Wister, Chapters XXX-XXXVI

**The FINAL EXAM will be available for three hours only on
Monday, April 29, from 6:00-9:00 PM;**

you will have TWO HOURS to complete the exam once you begin

