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The frontier and the west: realities, myths and the historians

There are many American wests. Generations of academics, especially the historians, have argued about what the west is and where it is, none more vehemently than in recent years. Generations of ‘others’, a collective name which is currently very popular among academics and which here denotes artists, authors or writers, film makers and entertainers have also looked at the west with diverse eyes. Frequently these others have been labelled as distillers of culture usually of the popular variety. At times the historians and the others have bumped into each other and have used each other’s materials and ideas, more so of late as popular culture has become a subject for academic inquiry. But for the most part the two streams remain apart, frequently decrying each other’s western visions because the academic is based on ‘facts’ while the popular relies on fictions and creates myths. Though the modern academic turn to cultural interpretations has led to more efforts to interchange respective visions, there remain possibly as many wests as there are interpreters.

Turner and the Frontier thesis

The debate about the nature, extent and progress of the American west has its academic roots in the late nineteenth century. Though some commentators point to the future president Theodore Roosevelt’s epic-style four volumes, *The Winning of the West* published between 1885 and 1894, as a moulder of historical views, most historians consider that the Wisconsin historian, Frederick Jackson Turner, penned the original professional vision in 1893.

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He certainly penned the most famous vision in his essay, 'The Significance of the Frontier in American History', where he talked about the existence of an area of free land and its continuous recession as American settlers moved west. The frontier as a place with a population density of under two persons per square mile explained American development. The abundance of available and free or cheap land provided the material foundation which enabled millions of people to build the United States into the wealthy and democratic nation that was visible at the turn of the twentieth century.

How did this 'frontier process' happen? Starting in the seventeenth century settlers pushed inland from the Atlantic coast to utilise 'free land', moving in a series of evolutionary stages progressing from simple to complex. The record of this social evolution

begins with the Indian and the hunter...it goes on to tell of...the trader...the pastoral stage in ranch life, the exploitation of the soil by the raising of unrotated crops...in sparsely settled communities; the intensive culture of the denser farm settlement; and finally the manufacturing organisation with city and factory system. (Turner, 1893)

Such a process of civilisation proceeded from the Cumberland Gap in Maryland to South Pass in the Rocky Mountains. Turner used the *Statistical Atlas*, based on the United States Census of 1890, to document this process and to show how it had spread across the continent and how, in his opinion, it was coming to a close. He thus created a national historical interpretation. At some point then in the American past the whole nation was part of the west.

In addition to being a means of evolutionary growth and geographical settlement Turner's frontier was also the source of American character. It was a major social force. As settlers moved west across the continent their confrontation with the savage Indians and the wilderness forced them to abandon their traditional customs and practices and to become new persons, the Americans. This repetitive engagement with western frontiers gave Americans

that coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic, but powerful to effect great ends; that restless nervous energy, that dominant individualism and withal that buoyance and exuberance which comes with freedom... (Turner, 1893)

Such frontier traits became American traits because the frontier experience was transmitted both geographically through space and historically through time. The pioneers also created and bequeathed democracy in a similar way because their struggle with the primitive environment encouraged active participation in public affairs. Regarding themselves as the equals of anyone, they spread democratic ideas to all parts of the nation.

Early responses to the thesis

Turner's thesis was the product of years of hard work and was an amalgam of many interdisciplinary ideas. Yet when he presented his paper orally in 1893 and when he sent copies shortly thereafter to other historians and to newspaper and magazine editors, he received perfunctory, unenthusiastic and even discouraging responses. This was not surprising. His basic propositions questioned orthodox institutional and political history and his general and poetic style failed to satisfy the rigorous and analytical methods of social scientists. He must have been a disappointed scholar. Undeterred, he continued to promote his western ideas. He disseminated them in his teaching – and he had many postgraduate students who went on to academic careers. He wrote in popular journals. He gave many public talks and he worked his way up the professional historical association to become a notable figure. By the early twentieth century his thesis was widely recognised in the academic world. Many western history courses were taught in universities and there was a Turnerian school of history (Billington, R. A., 1973; Walsh, 1992; Bogue, 1998).

The thesis fitted the optimistic mood of the United States at the turn of the century. Domestically Turnerian ideas often distilled by others in popular magazines, newspapers and public lectures, fitted both with the optimistic reforming ethos of Progressivism and a growing sense of national pride. Externally the nation was now recognised as a world power because of its economic prowess and it was beginning to look overseas to extend its imperial influence. There was nothing that the Americans could not achieve. They were unique or exceptional and this exceptionalism came from their own internal strength, endowed by the frontier settlement process (Wrobel, 1993, pp. viii–ix).

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This type of positive and triumphant frontierism did not remain unchallenged. A reaction set in during the 1930s and early 1940s. Turner's vision revelled in the abundance of American resources. The 1930s, however, was a decade of pessimism and lack of opportunity, known as 'The Great Depression'. The decade saw rates of 25 per cent unemployment in its early years and unemployment never fell below 14 per cent despite massive government spending. A nation unable to overcome serious economic difficulties was a far cry from the robust and optimistic country portrayed by Turner. So he became unfashionable for contemporary reasons. He was also criticised for intellectual reasons. His thesis was grounded in a rural past or perhaps, more accurately, in an underdeveloped or developing economy. Clearly a nation which had become the world's leading industrial economy and was officially recognised as urban in 1920 had other explanations of its past. Furthermore as the world's leading modern immigrant society, the contributions of a medley of peoples offered insights into the distinctive nature of the American past. So there were alternative interpretations of the American past, which offered as, if not more, plausible explanations than the frontier. What is more, a detailed analysis of the thesis revealed verbal inconsistencies, for example, in the use of the term 'frontier', a tendency to generalise and internal contradictions. It also displayed elements of provincialism because the Mountain West, the South West and Far West were either ignored or at best marginalised (Billington, R. A., 1973; Jacobs, 1994; Bogue, 1998).

Old Western History

Though Turner's western vision lost its pre-eminence among historians looking for explanations of the American past, it did not die. The thesis was resurrected or revised for another generation, not only of Americans, but also of industrial westernised societies. Following the Second World War the Americans again enjoyed another period of confidence, optimism and material wealth. They had triumphed during the war and their economy had not only recovered, but had surged to high levels of productivity. Once again exceptionalism became the flavour of the day. This time an historian with better professional credentials than Turner carried

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the frontier experience to both the academic world and the American people. Ray Allen Billington produced the textbook that Turner never wrote. *Westward Expansion*, first published in 1949, was a massive tome which grew larger with each edition until its latest abridged version in 2001 (Billington, R. A., 1949). This volume literally saw hundreds of thousands of readers and educated many hundreds of academics. Billington did not stop here. He was a prolific researcher and writer, producing at least fifteen ‘western’ books and/or pamphlets as well as numerous articles, which all helped to reinstate Turner’s reputation in the historical profession. Furthermore, Billington was an inspiring lecturer, teaching thousands of students and through his postgraduate students, thousands more of what he called ‘his intellectual grandchildren’. He gave many public lectures, popularising his interpretations and, like Turner, he advanced up the profession not only to national, but also to international standing (Ridge, 1987; Oglesby, 1988; Limerick, 1991).

The evidence he and his supporters gathered provided more detailed information about western history by examining themes and testing ideas set within the frontier framework. Books with frontier in their title flourished. Billington stimulated some of this interest by founding the *Histories of the American Frontier Series* in 1961. This series originally aimed to examine regional and topical histories of the frontier experience as in Rodman W. Paul’s *The Mining Frontier of the Far West, 1848–1880* (1963) or Oscar Winther’s *The Transportation Frontier. Trans-Mississippi West, 1865–1890* (1965). It was subsequently extended to include areas and themes like the Mexican Borderlands and Latin America and peoples like Native Americans and women. The post-war wave of social scientists eager to test theory and increasingly equipped with computers capable of facilitating quantitative analysis also found in Turner’s thesis a series of questions and ideas that they could analyse (Elkins and McKittrick, 1954; Curti, 1959; Mann, 1982). Furthermore, ‘Turnerianism’ was taken overseas. Scholars talked about comparative frontiers when examining settlements in grass-land nations or in areas which were developed in the same time-frame as the American west (Sharp, 1955a; Hennessey, 1978; Lamar and Thompson, 1981). By the 1960s frontier had become a ‘buzz’ word and had moved more firmly into the rhetoric of American history.

It had also moved into popular language. Unlike Europe where frontier means a barrier or a political boundary, frontier in the United States became synonymous with opportunity and the potential to achieve anything. President John F. Kennedy spoke of the frontiers of space, referring to the space race of the 1960s. The science fiction television series *Star Trek* regularly introduced itself by sending spacecraft to new frontiers where no one else had gone before. Indeed the nation could conquer any frontier and frontier imagery became both potent and persuasive. The growth of area studies, like American Studies in the 1960s and 1970s, in part funded by American money overseas, stimulated a multidisciplinary or an interdisciplinary approach to the west and consolidated the all-encompassing frontier dynamic. Historians were introduced to new ideas and they were encouraged to use the tools and techniques of literary and cultural analysis. Academic interest in the west was lively even though it was cast in the framework established by Turner some sixty–seventy years earlier.

Modern revisionism

But this post-war vision of the American west would not remain vibrant for long in the academic world. Already in the 1970s western historians were becoming anxious and were talking about the lethargy of their subject. There were more than enough micro-studies exploring aspects of Turner's thesis. Historians and social scientists were merely adding more examples, consolidating the status quo and producing nothing new and exciting. Even worse, western history as a subject seemed to be losing its attraction as other types of history, for example, urban, economic, political and immigrant, flourished in their 'revisioned' mode as 'New Histories'. This state of unease, however, proved short-lived. A cluster of historians who eventually became known as the New Western Historians were already doing research for articles and books which would shake up any feelings of complacency and stir up a mass, and at times, an acrimonious response. Furthermore, diverse groups of historians like women's, ecological or ethnohistorians, who based their work in the American west, but who drew their ideas from other theoretical and methodological areas, were also creating fresh perspectives.

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Of these academics the New Western Historians created most controversy. In setting out their agendas they needed first to encounter and to dismiss Frederick Jackson Turner. Unlike their counterparts in the 1930s they did not want to bury Turner, either in his original format or in the revised shape in which he had made a comeback in the post-war years. As modern revisionists they aimed to cremate him and scatter his ashes to the winds. Turner's vision, or more accurately that of Billington and his followers, now called Old Western Historians, was deemed to be far too discriminatory and triumphalist for post-modern society. Liberal social awareness had created an environment in which all Americans, whether they were racial or ethnic minorities or women, were to be fully recognised. Ecological studies increasingly pointed to the scarcity of resources and past wasteful patterns of exploitation, while political insecurity in the wake of the Vietnam War had shaken Americans' confidence in their world superiority and their imperial ventures (Worster, 1985; White, 1991). In the 1980s and 1990s the more complex vision of New Western History talked about legacies of conquest (Limerick, 1987). The dark side of western history was not only revealed, but became its dominant face.

Set within specific geographical boundaries, sometimes of the Trans-Mississippi West, but more often of the Trans-Missouri West and the Pacific coast, though occasionally including Hawaii and Alaska (Nugent, 1992), the New West, as a region, became a neo-colonial area. Whether in the seventeenth or the twentieth centuries, it was controlled by outsiders. The French, Spanish, British and Russians all used the area for their mercantile ambitions. The Americans, once they gained their independence, ensured that the west would remain subordinate either because of a lengthy territorial system which denied the area early self-determination or through federal control over large portions of western natural resources. Even public spending on the defence industry and conservation kept the west subservient. Gone was the freedom and individualism of Turner's frontier. In the New Western History opportunities were few and far between. Greedy capitalists exploited such western labourers as miners and loggers by paying poor wages. The mineral and lumbering wealth was taken out of the region leaving massive debris. Aridity in much of the region necessitated outside control over natural resources. Cities and towns

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suffered in a boom and slump style development and many farmers were disillusioned as their chances of success were destroyed by the weather or by such middlemen as railroad companies, bankers and landlords. There were, as Patricia Limerick suggested, more uncertain enterprises than triumphant individualists (Limerick, 1987).

The New Western Historians not only established the failures and disappointments of a colonised and exploited west with a continuous past which stretched from prehistoric times to the present; they also helped change its demographic face. Turner's western vision was white and masculine. Though Old Western Historians did include Native Americans and some ethnic minorities in their narratives, they often treated them as the 'others' or as different from, and marginal to, the superior white man. And they failed to recognise women. New Western Historians were able to draw on earlier research in ethnohistory and women's history to demonstrate an ethnically mixed if not a burgeoning multicultural society.

Ethnohistory, concerned with aboriginal pasts, had already drawn on the findings and methods of social anthropology, ethnology, archaeology and oral traditions to gain knowledge of Native American communities both pre- and post-1492 when Columbus reached the Americas (Axtell, 1997). Native peoples were increasingly being understood in the context of their own languages, customs and ways of life (Jacobs, 1973; Edmunds, 1995, pp. 723–6). Furthermore, their meeting with Turner's westward moving pioneers, now called imperial conquerors, was interpreted in the light of white greed, stupidity and inefficiency as well as native problems such as inter-tribal warfare. United States' Indian policy was a contested academic terrain in which federal authority was condemned, questioned or at least debated rather than being accepted at face value (Hagan, 1997; Fixico, 1997a; Deloria, 2002). Such findings well suited the tenor of New Western History approaches.

Women's historians initially were concerned to make women visible as real people and to banish traditional female images portrayed in long-suffering, dauntless or deviant stereotypes. They both put white females into Turner's westward-moving process and they challenged that process by recognising the importance of these women's domestic role in settling the west. Without the female contributions to the home and the community, whether rural or urban, there would have been no settlement and growth.

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The feminine role of housewife, mother, co-farmworker, teacher, hotel manager, reformer or prostitute may be less romantic or adventurous than the heroic masculinity portrayed by trappers, explorers, cowboys or the military, but it was no less fundamental (Myres, 1982; Riley, 1988; Walsh, 1995; Jeffrey, 1998). So too was the later acknowledgement of ethnic and racial minorities by women's historians. Inclusive women's western history, more often called multicultural women's history, has aimed to examine all women rather than only Euro-American women as active decision-making people. As yet it has been limited to examining experiences within specific groups, looking at power relationships and cultural values. Much work still remains to be done before all women can be fully integrated into, or can transform, the history of the American west (Jameson and Armitage, 1997).

Part of the newer, ethnically aware transformation of western history included minority men as well as women even though much more research again needs to be undertaken. The west was home to Asian-Americans, Mexican-Americans and African-Americans and to religious minorities. Though these groups, either singly or together, were not numerically dominant, their place in western society had started to be recognised and analysed. Asian Americans may have remained culturally isolated but their labour in the mines, building railroads and providing household services was an essential part of economic growth. Their contributions, however, were made as a segregated group and their lives were severely marked by social and legal discrimination. Mexican Americans also suffered from discrimination. Their prior settlement in the area rarely gave them access to better conditions, as most had been peon labourers on the land. Even the landed elite often found that they could not resist the pressures and the authority of white American newcomers. African-Americans moving from the American south, primarily as free persons after the Civil War may have suffered less discrimination and harassment, but they still faced racial prejudice as workers, as voters and in social settings. Mormons, living in Utah, were also disliked or barely tolerated as their religion set them aside from the mainstream. Given such tensions, discussions of western history framed in a multicultural society have offered a much more negative outlook than earlier interpretations (Limerick, 1987, pp. 222–92; Taylor, 1998; De Leon, 2002). Recognition of diversity has brought

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losers as well as winners, but understanding the full demographic experience suggests a greater appreciation of the complexity of the past.

The New Western Historians

Collectively the revisionists revitalised the general interest in western history, but of these, the New Western Historians, often considered the main protagonists, stimulated a long and strident academic debate. Though their interpretations were not always new, they proclaimed them with a vigour that called for a response. Both Old Western Historians and not so old historians replied, frequently in kind without couching their comments in polite academic language. *Rivers of Empire* (1985), a very important volume on the western environment was labelled ‘deeply flawed – arrogant, distorted and moralistic’ (Pisani, 1988, p. 319). The major textbook, *It’s Your Misfortune and None of My Own* (1991) was deemed to be more concerned with minorities than with everyone and was re-titled ‘A Victim’s History of the American West’. *Legacy of Conquest* (1987), probably the most influential volume of the New Western History was perceived to pay too much attention to continuity at the expense of significant changes, thereby sacrificing historical balance for journalistic appeal (Symposium, 1993; Thompson, 1994; Nash, G. D., 1994). *Nature’s Metropolis* (1991) and *Under an Open Sky* (1992) escaped much of the name-calling, probably because William Cronon has not easily been typecast as a New Western Historian. The ‘cheerleaders’ of this brand of modern revisionism should perhaps have been called the ‘gang of three’ rather than the ‘gang of four’.

The naming of the leading protagonists as a gang, thereby implying a bunch of hooligans or criminals, was a media stunt. The 1989 symposium, ‘Trails: Toward a New Western History’ led to a statement by its convenor Patricia Limerick, entitled ‘What on Earth is the New Western History?’ (Limerick *et al.*, 1991, pp. 85–7). Several participants also referred to the New Western History. Journalists then decided that a new academic movement was afoot and publicised this approach in a range of newspapers and magazines (Limerick *et al.* 1991, pp. 59–61; Wrobel, 1996b). For example, *The Milwaukee Journal* of 11 October 1989 proclaimed that