

# *Frederick Jackson Turner and His Ghost: The Writing of Western History*

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FREDERICK JACKSON TURNER has doubtless received more critical attention than any American historian since William Bradford.<sup>1</sup> Although it is often pointed out that Turner wrote very little and was something of a scholarly failure because he never managed to write his proposed study of the American frontier,<sup>2</sup> two of his essays not only brought him lasting fame and attention but also stimulated lines of research and controversy that have not been exhausted. My discussion will focus on one of these, 'The Significance of the Frontier in American History,' which has been described as an American masterpiece because it influenced the way the American public sees, feels, and thinks about itself, its past, and its future.<sup>3</sup> Turner's other essay, 'The Significance of the Section in American History,' as will be mentioned later, should not be underestimated.<sup>4</sup>

Turner's essay on the frontier as a factor in American history was almost a historical accident. Turner received his doctorate at The Johns Hopkins University under the mentorship of Herbert

1. For an introduction to the literature dealing with Turner, see Vernon E. Mattson and William E. Marion, *Frederick Jackson Turner: A Reference Guide* (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1985).

2. See Richard White, 'Frederick Jackson Turner,' in John R. Wunder, ed., *Historians of the American Frontier* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), 660-81.

3. For a discussion of why Turner and no other American historian earned such praise, see Martin Ridge, 'The Life of an Idea: The Significance of Frederick Jackson Turner's Frontier Thesis,' *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 40 (Winter, 1991), 3-13.

4. See Michael Steiner, 'The Significance of Turner's Sectional Thesis,' *Western Historical Quarterly* 10 (October, 1979), 437-66. Turner's biographer was less enthusiastic about sectionalism. Ray Allen Billington, *Frederick Jackson Turner: Historian, Scholar, Teacher* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 396-98.

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Baxter Adams, who so stressed historical continuity that he is described as the major proponent of the so-called 'germ theory' of American history. Adams believed that American institutions were primarily the result of their Germanic and Anglo-Saxon antecedents or 'germs.' Although Adams may never have explicitly denied the significance of the American experience, his emphasis on the origins of colonial institutions certainly downplayed it by eliminating the impact of events and movements in the nineteenth century. Turner, born and reared in the Middle West in the late nineteenth century, preferred to see American history from both a presentist and a regional perspective. He accepted the idea of continuity in history,<sup>5</sup> but as a man who had witnessed political, social, and economic changes taking place around him in newly settled Wisconsin, Turner believed American history should be studied in a different way. It is ironic that when Adams was invited to give a paper at the International Congress of Historians at the Chicago World's Fair in 1893, he suggested that his virtually unknown student, Turner, speak in his stead.

Turner reluctantly agreed, and he used the occasion to set out both an intellectual declaration of independence from the 'germ school' and a new paradigm for studying American history.<sup>6</sup> Turner did not deny that European people, material and social culture, and ideas had been brought to America; but he added: 'Too exclusive attention has been paid by institutional students of Germanic origins, too little to the American factors.' Turner found a more compelling source of historical explanation in what he called the 'colonization of the Great West.' It was the experience of the American people as they moved west that had most influenced the nation's institutions. And he concluded that the nation

5. Turner's ideas were evolving and in some ways contradictory. See his brilliant essay on how to study history, 'The Significance of History,' Martin Ridge, ed., in *Frederick Jackson Turner: Wisconsin's Historian of the Frontier* (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1986), 48-62.

6. Paradigm is used here precisely as Thomas Kuhn intended—the result of struggle among competing elements for hegemony over a discipline. Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

was at a turning point. The superintendent of the census in 1890 had observed that the frontier line, as it had been previously depicted unbroken on census maps, could no longer be drawn. The closing of the frontier, to Turner, marked the end of an epoch that had profoundly influenced American history and national character. Both, he insisted, should be the agenda of study for his generation of historians. In this way he posited what came to be called the frontier hypothesis. Since Turner used the words west and frontier interchangeably, he is justly named the father of western history.

No one better summarized Turner's essay on the significance of the frontier than his biographer, Ray Allen Billington, when he wrote:

The Europeans who founded the New World settlements . . . and the later pioneers who were lured ever westward by the thirst for furs or cheap land or gold or adventure found themselves in an unfamiliar environment. In Europe and the East men were many and land was scarce; on the frontier men were few and land was abundant. There the old laws of governing compact societies no longer applied. The traditional techniques of production were unsuited to an environment where resources were more plentiful than manpower; innovation and experimentation became a way of life. Attachment to place diminished in a land where more attractive places lay ahead; mobility came to be a habit. Pinchpenny Easterners so profited by exploiting nature's abundance that their thrifty ways were outmoded; wastefulness was a natural consequence. Cultural creativity lost its appeal to men burdened with the task of clearing a continent; materialism emerged as a desirable creed no less than an economic necessity. Leisure was nonexistent in frontier communities; hard work became a persistent habit. Inherited titles seemed archaic and traditional class distinctions less meaningful in a land where a man's worth to society was judged by his own skills; a democratic social system with greater possibilities for upward mobility followed naturally. And most important of all, men found that the man-land ratio on the frontier provided so much opportunity for the individual to better himself that external controls were not necessary; individualism and political democracy were enshrined as their ideals. These were the traits which were revitalized

over and over again as the frontier moved westwards, eventually creating an American way of life and thought that was distinct.<sup>7</sup>

He might have added, too, that Turner saw patterns in the physical geography of the nation that influenced attitudes and settlement.

Turner's followers, then, studied and wrote about the internal history of the United States in the context of American uniqueness and its causes. Their 'West' was an ever advancing frontier of opportunity and revitalization; it was a triumphant national experience that culminated in an individualist democracy that only reached a crisis as the frontier itself—with all the opportunity that it represented—came to a close in the final decades of the nineteenth century. For Turner, the nineteenth century was an era of abundance and success; the twentieth, a century when the institutions formed in the past would be tested in a society of closed space with diminished opportunity.<sup>8</sup> He closed the essay by raising the question of what substitute for the frontier would revitalize democracy.

These views had a profound impact on historical writing. For one thing, they gave new relevance to local and state history. Local historians could now look not only to events in their own communities to show how they demonstrated national trends but also to the lives of persons still remembered to explain their roles in the making of a region. Local and state historians in both the Middle and Far West had gained a context into which to fit their work that gave it genuine meaning, although it took years before the boosterism and filiopietism that marked the publications of many of them gave way to more solid studies. Solon J. Buck's *Illinois in 1848*, initially published in 1917, is a superb example of Turner's impact on this kind of historical scholarship.<sup>9</sup> Buck's

7. Ray Allen Billington, *America's Frontier Heritage* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), 3.

8. I omit here the enormous contribution that Turner made to the establishment of American Studies as a field because he more than any other historian prepared the basis for the American exceptionalist hypothesis.

9. Solon J. Buck, *Illinois in 1848* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1967). There are many other excellent examples. One need only compare the work of William Watts Folwell

book was analytical, focusing on land, settlement, social and economic as well as political conditions, and it treated Illinois, a state, in the context of the Union.

Turner's emphasis on available farmland as an essential frontier factor that encouraged individualism and democracy led to significant studies in both rural political history and agricultural history. The two most noteworthy, Solon J. Buck's *Agrarian Crusade* and John D. Hicks's *The Populist Revolt*, although accepting the frontier paradigm, rejected Turner's negative 1893 pre-Progressive views of American agrarian radicalism.<sup>10</sup> Buck's work today seems so devoid of complexity as to be almost naive, but it was probably the most popular piece of writing on the subject for almost half a century and hammered the basic Turnerian construct into generations of students. Hicks's study, despite some flaws, remains an important and useful book.<sup>11</sup>

Although Turner was not a founding member of the Agricultural History Society, there is no doubt that he had a profound influence on the scholarship in the field. The early publications of *Agricultural History* list as the society's presidents Solon Buck, Edward E. Dale, and Avery O. Craven, all dedicated Turnerians. Turner himself expressed some surprise at the extent of his impact on the field. When he was asked to give a paper at the Agricultural History Society, he wrote a friend, 'I know too little of agriculture to distinguish barley from wheat; but I have started a lot of these men off in historical study of agriculture so they asked me to share myself.'<sup>12</sup> The society's journal, *Agricultural History*, was not devoted entirely to western subjects—although it published many articles in the field—but it did become something of a battle-

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with that of Grace Lee Nute on Minnesota history or Charles Carey with that of Dorothy Johansen on the Pacific Northwest.

10. Solon J. Buck, *The Agrarian Crusade: A Chronicle of the Farmers in Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1920); John D. Hicks, *The Populist Revolt: A History of the Farmer's Alliance and People's Party* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1931).

11. Martin Ridge, 'Populism Redux: John D. Hicks and The Populist Revolt,' *Reviews in American History* 13 (March 1985), 142-54.

12. Frederick Jackson Turner to Mrs. William Hooper, December 19, 1922, Turner Papers, Henry E. Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

ground for the debate over the merit of Turner's theories regarding the American westering experience and its meaning, especially the idea that the frontier served as a safety valve for society's economic pressures.

Turner's influence spread widely through the profession, and it was evident in American history textbooks, which, for the first time, were either organized around the frontier theme<sup>13</sup> or included chapters devoted to Jacksonian democracy, the westward movement, and the Far West—all within the context of the expanding frontier.<sup>14</sup> A good example is one of the more traditional and popular college texts of the day, John Spencer Bassett's *A Short History of the United States* (first published in 1913).<sup>15</sup> In revised editions it remained in use well into the 1930s.

At the outset Turner's followers did not consider themselves western historians per se. They focused primarily on the interaction between the frontier experience—the era of settlement or national expansion—and American development and ideals. This was especially true of Frederick Merk, a distinguished trainer of graduate students, who succeeded Turner both at Wisconsin and Harvard and taught frontier history. Merk's work may be read in terms of understanding the early years of the Far Northwest and Southwest as well as the dynamics of the foreign relations of the United States.<sup>16</sup>

Turner had numerous advocates, some independent enough to test his theories. For example, John D. Barnhart's *Valley of Democracy* demonstrated the gradual growth of democratic insti-

13. See Oscar O. Winther, 'The Frontier Hypothesis and the Historian,' *Social Education* 21 (November 1957), 294-95.

14. Turner's argument that the frontier contributed to the transition of American democracy from Jefferson to Monroe to Jackson, according to Charles Sellers, contributed to the shift in American historical writing to a more pro-democratic ideological posture. Sellers was less interested in the frontier than in Turner's interpretation of Jackson. See Charles Sellers, *Jacksonian Democracy* (Washington, D. C.: American Historical Association, 1958).

15. It was published by the Macmillan Company.

16. See Frederick Merk, ed., *Fur Trade and Empire: George Simpson's Journal* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968); Frederick Merk, *Albert Gallatin and the Oregon Question: A Study in Anglo-American Diplomacy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950).

tutions on an expanding frontier.<sup>17</sup> The most impressive work was done by Merle Curti and a group of younger scholars who set up a model to test Turner's ideas by studying Trempealeau County, Wisconsin. As might be expected, Curti found Turner wanting in some ways but the overall results confirmed the existence of a fluid, open, mobile, and essentially democratic society in frontier Wisconsin.<sup>18</sup>

A later generation of western historians, those who reached maturity when the field of American history began to fragment and lose or abandon its sense of cohesion, not only studied the settlement period of the Middle West but also turned to virtually all aspects of the trans-Mississippi West. Robert Athearn, W. Turrentine Jackson, Howard R. Lamar, Rodman Paul, and Robert Utley are excellent examples.<sup>19</sup> They avoided theory but accepted the idea that there was both a West and frontier. For others—Leonard Arrington, Gerald Nash, and Earl Pomeroy<sup>20</sup>—Turner's 1893 disjunction in American history was simply ignored because their interest in the region overlapped the 1890s and extended into the twentieth century. They emphasized place over process.

Although there had been a persistent drumbeat of criticism of the Turnerian thesis beginning in the mid-1920s, it reached a flood tide in the 1930s. During the Great Depression, many American historians suffered a crisis in confidence and doubted the

17. John D. Barnhart, *Valley of Democracy: The Frontier vs. the Plantation in the Ohio Valley, 1775-1818* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1953).

18. Merle E. Curti et al., *The Making of An American Community* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1959).

19. For example, see Robert G. Athearn, *William Tecumseh Sherman and the Settlement of the West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1956); W. Turrentine Jackson, *Wagon Roads West: A Study of Federal Surveys and Construction in the Trans-Mississippi West, 1846-1869* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1952); Howard Roberts Lamar, *The Far Southwest, 1846-1912* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966); Rodman W. Paul, *California Gold: The Beginning of Mining in the Far West* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1947); Robert M. Utley, *Frontiersmen in Blue: The United States Army and the Indian, 1848-1865* (New York: Macmillan, 1967).

20. For example, see Leonard J. Arrington, *Great Basin Kingdom: An Economic History of the Latter-day Saints, 1830-1900* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958); Gerald D. Nash, *United States Oil Policy, 1890-1964* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1968); Earl Pomeroy, *In Search of the Golden West: Tourists in Western America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957).

future of their nation, looked askance on a theory that rooted American free institutions in individualism or praised capitalist democracy, and preferred to study history from the vantage of a failed industrial society. They saw the United States as merely lagging along the path taken by western European nations. The rise of fascism and the onset of the Second World War, however, enforced a renewed respect for American institutions.

After the war, frontier history enjoyed a remarkable revival. In no small measure this was due to a renewed interest in the sources of the American character. To some extent, also, it resulted from the enormous success of Ray Allen Billington's text, *Westward Expansion*. Billington synthesized the significant state and regional monographic and periodical literature and, relying on Turner's basic course outline, wrote the frontier book Turner had always promised.<sup>21</sup> *Westward Expansion* not only afforded American professors and students a readable text but also provided a superb bibliographical tool that highlighted areas for further research. Shortly thereafter, Billington established *Histories of the American Frontier*, a series of volumes that would trace the westward movement in both the United States and Canada as well as tell the story of the Spanish advance into the Southwest. In 1966 he published an introductory volume—*America's Frontier Heritage*—which was a history, defense, and updating of the Turner hypothesis. Billington recognized that many of Turner's 1893 assertions were invalid. Nevertheless, he defended the study of the frontier as a phenomenon as well as for its impact on the American character and self-image.<sup>22</sup>

This high tide of Turnerian frontier scholarship did not still the voices of its critics,<sup>23</sup> some of whom quite recently have become increasingly shrill. Serious anti-Turnerian scholarship took many

21. Ray Allen Billington, *Westward Expansion: A History of the American Frontier* (New York: Macmillan, 1949).

22. Billington, *America's Frontier Heritage*, 22. For a survey of Billington's career and contribution, see Martin Ridge, 'Ray Allen Billington, Western History, and American Exceptionalism,' *Pacific Historical Review* 56 (November, 1987), 495–511.

23. This literature is too extensive to treat in detail. Very good discussions of it may be found in Billington, *America's Frontier Heritage*, 16–22; and Richard Hofstadter, *The Progressive Historians* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968), 118–51, 473–76.



forms: some came from scholars with interests in other areas (intellectual, immigration, legal, and labor history, for example), who felt the frontier paradigm contributed little to understanding their fields and thus distorted national history; some came from a spectrum of Marxists and cultural materialists, who were ideological and argued for class rather than sectional conflict as a perspective to understand United States history; some came from the anti-Progressive school, which rejected pre-World War II scholarship that stressed conflict rather than consensus; some came from western historians who tested aspects of Turner's views and found them wanting;<sup>24</sup> and some were strictly regionalists (many taking their cue from Turner's essay on sectionalism) who did not see the utility or merit of looking at the westering experience in terms of a frontier period but preferred to study the West as a place with an unbroken past to the present.<sup>25</sup>

The shift in focus from the study of an advancing frontier to the study of the American West as a distinct place was not without its problems. Even what seemed to be obvious—namely, what constituted the West—elicited a lively debate. Was the West a land of aridity, a conquered province, a strictly geographic entity, a socio-economic unit, a political section, or a cultural self-perception? The answer was something few could agree upon, even though they favored a regional history.<sup>26</sup>

These developments coincided with an entirely new set of interests among western historians that was challenging, broadening, and deepening the Turner paradigm. Although the intellectual and cultural origins of these interests may be debatable, what they are is quite clear. The current historical focus is on race, class, gender, and the environment. Although in itself scarcely new, it has not only reopened old arguments about the significance of the

24. For example, see Robert Dykstra, *The Cattle Towns* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968).

25. See Steiner, 'The Significance of Turner's Sectional Thesis,' and Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1987).

26. See Martin Ridge, 'The American West: From Frontier to Region,' *New Mexico Historical Review* 16 (April 1989), 125-41.

frontier as a liberating economic and political force but also allowed for the examination of previously ignored themes.<sup>27</sup> The polemicists among this new group of historians find it self-gratifying to denounce Turnerians for their male-oriented (Turner did not mention women *per se*) and triumphalist view of the frontier, which, they insist, praises the economic and political success of white males in the establishment of an individualistic, capitalist democracy at the expense of the frontier's failures, the oppression and exploitation of minorities and women, and a degraded environment.<sup>28</sup>

Serious scholars examining these subjects, especially when their work falls within the early years of the frontier, discover that many of their conclusions regarding race, gender, and the environment are controversial and problematic. This is particularly true when reviewing the story of women in the trans-Mississippi West. Lillian Schlissel, Anne M. Butler, Glenda Riley, John Mack Faragher, and Sandra Myres often not only disagree with one another on the same facts but also bring to the topic quite different contemporary perspectives, ideologies, and methodologies. Some feel that the westering experience offered energetic women as much economic freedom and adventure as it did men, and they welcomed the challenge of change and opportunity. Others deny this entirely, seeing women as being taken west against their will, a continuation of the oppressive patriarchal society of the time. The controversy represents only the tip of the iceberg of western women scholarship.<sup>29</sup> Their work demonstrates how the field has been enriched

27. For example, see William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and Ecology in New England* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983); and Elliott West, *Growing Up with the Country: Childhood in the Far Frontier* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989).

28. For example, see Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest*, 17-32; and John Mack Faragher, *Women and Men on the Overland Trail* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 75-82; and Donald Wooster, *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985).

29. Lillian Schlissel, *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey* (New York: Schocken Books, 1982); Anne M. Butler, *Daughters of Joy, Sisters of Misery: Prostitutes in the American West* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985); Glenda Riley, *The Female Frontier: A Comparative View of Women on the Prairie and the Plains* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1988); Faragher, *Women and Men on the Overland Trails*; and Sandra L. Myres, *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience, 1800-1915* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982).

by studying the lives of women on the frontier and in later periods in the West.

Although studying women in the West is both significant and complex, it is fair to say that the problems of analyzing what happens when competing groups and cultures—Indian and white—join as well as collide seem even more complicated. For example, Sylvia Van Kirk's *Many Tender Ties* shows how the status of Native American women living with white Canadian fur traders was undermined when Scottish women arrived in the West. By refusing to recognize Indian women as common-law wives, these white women—not men—legitimated concubinage.<sup>30</sup>

Richard White's work on Indians, *The Roots of Dependency*, is consciously aimed at ignoring Turner. It is based on anthropological assumptions regarding the role of social culture in inter-group contact. Studying Indian-white interaction from this perspective, he demonstrates irony in the fact that white men defined their world as 'civilized' and that of the Indian as 'savage,' while it was white social culture that degraded a relatively stable environment as well as destroyed the Indian. White's evidence, however, can be interpreted in other ways that cloud his conclusions. For example, the Navajo readily turned to sheepherding—perhaps the most environmentally damaging pastoral economy—when the animals were brought to them. Moreover, White makes clear that colonizers often starved until they mastered the self-sufficiency of the Indian. (Shades of Turner's assertion that white men shed their civilization on the frontier to survive.) But whites continued to think in terms of a market economy in which the staples of life were available for a price. Thus Indians, geared to a subsistence economy, seemed to live like American fauna, prepared always to adjust to seasonal changes when abundance and scarcity were determined by nature. They were threatened only when this balance was upset by natural disasters or alien intruders.<sup>31</sup>

30. Sylvia Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur-Trade Society* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1983).

31. Richard White, *The Roots of Dependency: Subsistence, Environment, and Social Change among the Choctaws, Pawnees, and Navajos* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983).

Although White has structured his work to demonstrate the impact of an international, European, market-driven economy on three subsistence economies (Choctaw, Pawnee, and Navajo), his paradigm is also neatly Turnerian as it traces the white man's march to the west. It confirms in detail Turnerian assertions that the fur trade corrupted Native American economies (perhaps not so readily as had been assumed), eroded Indian leadership patterns, changed Indian land use, and ultimately virtually destroyed the tribal structure. In Turnerian terms Richard White has confirmed that white society saw the Indian's presence as both an economic opportunity and a barrier to its development. Little wonder that they saw the Indian's collapse, albeit tragic, as inevitable.

Turner's critics have their difficulties. In denying the utility of his paradigm, denouncing him for remaining unspoken on issues of class, gender, and the environment, anti-Turnerians are strangely haunted by his silent scholarly ghost, for they deny the usefulness of his historical vision but often unwittingly work within it.

Historians who prefer to continue to analyze the advancing frontier (either as a place or a process) and its consequences are comfortable with the freedom Turner offered. For them, like many artists, novelists, poets, and playwrights, the frontier still beckons. Moreover, there is now the chance to look at race, class, gender, and the environment within the Turnerian context and test its applicability. This strips those issues of the preconceptions of the polemicists who have their own scholarly agenda.

The new western historians, Turner's recent critics, must explain what is new about their work other than their personal assumptions and value judgments, unless they focus on the twentieth century, a period Turner did not treat. They must explain the merit of what they have substituted for the overarching and imaginative work of Turner. They may find that it is exceedingly difficult to bury his ghost.

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