Commentary

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Many years ago I came to know an elderly lady, Miss Helen Verplanck, who had taken a Harvard seminar with Frederick Jackson Turner. I asked her what he was like—meaning as a teacher. Miss Verplanck had a martini in her hand at the time—she raised it in a toast, drained the glass, and exclaimed: 'Oh what a man!'

Obviously the accusation that Turner ignored women in his writings needs some qualification—all the more so because photographs of his Harvard graduate seminars show a sizeable number of women in the course. In these photos Turner looked like a slightly rumpled, more portly, and less athletic Ted Turner of Cable News Network fame.

I am not sure that any of these anecdotes or strained comparisons are relevant to the three splendid, thought-provoking papers we have just heard, but it gets me started, and I would even argue that Frederick Jackson Turner, like Ted Turner's CNN newscast system, has touched and influenced the thought of millions of Americans. In Frederick Jackson Turner's case, the Wisconsin scholar affected over four or five generations of Americans by creating an unforgettable image of Americans as an individualistic, practical, businesslike, innovative, vigorous, progressive, democratic and expansionist nation from its colonial foundings to 1890.[1]

If I might turn to Martin Ridge's paper entitled 'Frederick Jackson Turner and His Ghost: The Writing of Western History,' let me say that Professor Ridge is right in saying that Turner did

1. Frederick Jackson Turner, 'The Significance of the Frontier in American History.' American Historical Association, *Annual Report*, 1893 (Washington, 1894).

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rebel against the germ theory of institutional origins which was taught at Johns Hopkins by Herbert Baxter Adams. We make so much of this bold historiographical declaration of independence, but Turner was actually following a venerable tradition. As early as the eighteenth century, St. John de Crèvecoeur spoke of the American as this 'new man.'[2] Ralph Waldo Emerson in his 1837 Phi Beta Kappa address issued what many considered an American intellectual declaration of independence that suggested Americans were different from Europeans.[3]

Indeed, twenty years before the American Revolution and our own political declaration of independence, Benjamin Franklin had voiced the belief that America was destined for greatness in terms of land and population. Franklin said that because we did have surplus land it could produce food for large families who would, because of population pressure, inevitably swarm westward and occupy new regions. Further, he argued that Americans, by being agricultural, would never be especially rich and so a middling republican society would result.[4] In his essays in the 1760s, Franklin expressed concepts that Turner would voice in the most brilliant way in his 1893 essay on 'The Significance of the Frontier in American History.' In similar ways Jefferson believed in westward expansion and American dreams of free land, later to be embodied in the Homestead Act of 1862. In short, Turner was building on older traditional concepts of America's destiny and character.

One of the best points Professor Ridge makes in his paper is that Turner, while claiming that the American frontier experience was unique, felt that the local experience of pioneering actually

2. St. John de Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer* (London, 1782), pp. 46–48. See also the excellent discussion of Crèvecoeur, Franklin, and Jefferson in Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970).

3. Both Ralph Waldo Emerson's 'The American Scholar' (1837) and his 'Self-Reliance' (1841) pursued ideals of the independence of the self that were compatible with Turner's ideas.

4. James H. Hutson, 'Benjamin Franklin,' in H. R. Lamar, ed., *Reader's Encyclopedia of the American West* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), pp. 401–3.

had national meaning. In effect Turner said ordinary men and women made America. They, not kings and queens or presidents, were the main agents of development, of change. Turner's explanation of America's development was a down-to-earth process in which the land changed the man and then the man changed the land. It was a very democratic interpretation of who had shaped American history.

Though Professor Ridge did not mention it, I would argue that studies of the New England colonial villages and communities, which have revitalized colonial history in terms of the newer social history, use the idea that somehow a local experience can have larger, indeed, universal meaning, just as E. P. Thompson's studies of British rural life or the Annales School in France do. John Mack Faragher has achieved this larger meaning in his exhaustive but fascinating study called *Sugar Creek*, a study of a frontier community in Illinois.[5] None of the above mentioned would be caught dead saying they believed in Turner, but he, like them, was addressing the question of community and institutional formation, as well as how individuals and the wilderness interacted. If I might come closer home, Kevin Starr's first book, *Americans and the California Dream*, managed to show how California's local experience enriched, shaped, and informed the larger 'American' one.[6]

When Martin Ridge mentioned Turner's students and successors, I wish that he had had time to point out what careful scholars and writers they were, how they followed population trends, census returns, or related voting behavior to the economy. Prof. Frederick Merk at Harvard, who succeeded Turner there, and was a member of the American Antiquarian Society, had a stunning course called 'The Westward Movement' (or 'Wagon Wheels,' as the students affectionately called it.) Wallace Evans Davies, a former Yale colleague who took the course, joked that so thorough

5. John Mack Faragher, *Sugar Creek: Life on the Illinois Prairie* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986).

6. Kevin Starr, *Americans and the California Dream, 1850–1915* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

was the coverage that one day when Merk got them across a whole county in Illinois the class was exhausted. Another Harvard-trained colleague, John Morton Blum, recalls that Merk was a functionalist: he showed how things worked—how a mountain man set traps, how a wilderness area was cleared, even how a beaver chewed logs to make a dam. I think it is the excellence of Turner's successors—Merk at Harvard, Frederic Logan Paxson and John D. Hicks at Berkeley and Paul Wallace Gates at Cornell—that kept alive the frontier approach as well as the intrinsic attractiveness of the overarching idea itself. Nor did they stick to one field. To mention only two of Turner's students: Merle Curti was a founder of the field of American intellectual history; Avery Craven at Chicago taught and shaped a new history of the American South.

I won't repeat what Ridge has said about the role of Ray Allen Billington, who did write the textbook, *Westward Expansion*, that Turner never wrote. Curiously I don't think we have appreciated the coincidence of Billington's text with World War II. The war gave the western states an affluence they had never had before. There was a rise of regional pride, accompanied, in the colleges, by new regional western courses. There was also a sense of change, of the passing of the kind of recent frontier that Alvin Josephy addressed in his paper. And so the West—meaning the trans-Mississippi West—replaced the frontier as the key word in these courses. Paradoxically, Billington adhered to a modified frontier thesis, but when his successors—my generation and after—spoke of western history, they shifted the subject matter: to territorial politics and relations with Washington, and cultural continuity.[7] A new Indian history emerged that studied Indians as Indians, not just Indian-white relations. A new women's history also emerged and later a Chicano history. In the past decade, studies of Asian

7. Earl S. Pomeroy, *The Territories and the United States, 1861–1890: Studies in Colonial Administration* (Seattle: University of Washington, 1969, ed.) and his 'Toward a Reorientation of Western History: Continuity and Environment,' *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XLI (1955).

Americans and Black Americans and the environment, have also come to be part of western history. These topics were at first paternalistically treated, i.e., historians said what happened. In the past decade, however, the racial and ethnic groups themselves are writing their history and finding a voice.

The new scholarship is sometimes narrow postholing; it is occasionally aggressive and defensive. As Ridge has observed, its practitioners see themselves as beginning a new era and they reject the old authorities. One result is that the newest western historians have created the liveliest debate in western history ever. At a doctoral orals at Yale recently, Prof. Mario Garcia asked the student, 'Is western history in crisis?' She not only responded affirmatively but added, 'Isn't it wonderful, because this kind of debate is healthy.' She noted that the debate was not just between older historians and new, but among the new historians themselves: Patricia Limerick declaring for place over process; Richard White stressing environment; Donald Worster saying that environment is all and can subsume race, class, and gender.[8] This is a debate that cannot end until there is a new synthesis which simply is not in sight yet. Among other things, that synthesis must explain the role of the West in the twentieth century.

In closing my comments about Martin Ridge's thoughtful paper, I would argue that not only do we need concepts of process, which Turner felt was important, and a study of place, defined and used so effectively in Elizabeth John's paper, but that we also need studies of the hundreds of little Wests that exist, all in slightly different stages of evolution, of the kind that Alvin Josephy described. But to process and place, I would urge the studying of two more 'Ps': politics and power. The American West is a series of individual states. They deal with the federal government and the federal government deals with them. Each one has tried to, and

8. Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1987); Richard White, *The Roots of Dependency: Subsistence and Environment, and Social Change Among the Choctaws, Pawnees and Navajos* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983); Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).

does, manipulate one other. We all know that the West helped defeat Jimmy Carter when he ignored the region during his four years as president. To ignore political power politics in the West is to ignore a large part of the story. The rise to power of Richard Nixon, Lyndon Johnson, Ronald Reagan, and George Bush are western stories that can be enriched by attention to the vital factors of race, class, gender, and environment, but to stress the latter without acknowledging the political factor is to skew the writing of western history. And finally, there is the vaguer factor of power in many forms: energy, agribusiness, communications, and defense operations. How else can one describe the roles of Henry J. Kaiser in World War II, and the Bechtel Corporation in national and Middle Eastern affairs for the past twenty years? It is no accident that the one illustration in Frederick Jackson Turner's book *The Rise of the West* is not Daniel Boone, but Henry Clay, master politician and planner of the American System.[9] I for one would welcome the aid of both Turner's ghost and that of the new historians and place the history of the West in a broader political and economic context with a focus on this century.

Turning to Prof. Elizabeth John's thoughtfully polished and elegant paper, I almost had the feeling that I was dealing with someone who was totally at peace with the word 'frontier' in its several meanings: (1) the advancing edge of a peoples' territory, both Indian and white, (2) as a borderlands where people interact, and (3) as a scholarly frontier where the incredible written and artifactual records of the Hispanic-Indian Southwest are just beginning to be fully utilized.

And, as Professor John notes, the subjects of study on the Mexican borderlands frontier are still there—that is, the Indian and the Hispanic populations and cultures, along with the Anglo-American ones. It is both ancient history and modern history with no end in sight. The Anazazi peoples may be gone but their Pueblo

9. Frederick Jackson Turner, *Rise of the New West, 1819–1929* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1906).

descendants are not. In effect, Professor John is saying there cannot be a farewell address to the old days in the Southwest. There can be no sense of Native-American extinction as we assumed in the nineteenth century.

Curiously the latest scholarship in Indian ethnohistory stresses not just resistance but physical survival and coexistence, and persistence of cultures, but with accommodation and even mutual impact. Without saying it, she is pointing to the fact that America's lack of a sense of 'others' in the nineteenth century meant that once Indians were militarily defeated and reduced in number by disease and poverty that they no longer survived. The white conquest, and the closure, may have been overwhelming, but it was incomplete. Survival in Turner's day meant John Wesley Powell and Frederick Hodge recording dying languages and customs, Edward Curtis taking romantic photos, John G. Neihardt taking down what Black Elk said, or Frank Linderman interviewing Pretty Shield. Today, it is a different story with Native American historians and authors writing, Allan Houser painting and sculpting, and Wilma Mankiller serving as principal chief of the Cherokee Nation and saying let us keep both cultures and both worlds.

Professor John is not only correct in saying Indian culture has survived in the Southwest, but that the only way to comprehend it is to use various disciplines. Her own development as an ethnohistorian under the guidance of Max Moorhead is to me as exciting a story in the expansion of the canon of western historical scholarship and writing as any we have touched upon. Moreover, her argument that we must stand outside the narrative like a foreign observer to see what both Spaniards and Indians are like is an impeccable one.

Her call to study not just the church and missions 'but the deeply ingrained spiritual beliefs that shaped individual and community behavior on all sides'—Indian, Hispanic, and Anglo, and again with an understanding of the 'other'—is also an urgent one. Here I think Professor John's own *Storms Brewed in Other Men's*

Worlds is a splendid example of what she means.[10] One reads her fascinating panoramic narrative about Texas, New Mexico, and the Louisiana borderlands without being pro- or anti-Indian or pro- or anti-Spanish, for it explains the rationale and the behavior of all groups and traces the results of interaction in a gripping way. Understanding the word 'other' is the message of her talk, and Turner's failure to discuss the 'other,' that is, Indians and Hispanics, remains one of the most telling criticisms against him.

Finally Professor John addresses a problem that I feel should be considered in other fields of western history: she concludes by urging the incorporation of the Hispanic Borderland into this nation's knowledge of itself. That message could be applied to women's history, environmental, and Mormon history, still often treated in separate chapters. John is joined by scholars like the historical geographer Donald Meinig, who sees larger patterns in his *Imperial Texas* and in his small but key book, *Southwest: Three Peoples in Geographic Change, 1600–1870.*[11]

Alvin Josephy, Jr., whom friends admiringly call 'Chief Josephy,' so devoted is he to the writing of Native American history, is, I think, the blood brother of the late Robert Athearn of the University of Colorado. As Josephy himself mentions, Athearn in his last book, *The Mythic West in Twentieth-Century America*, said the real or old West was the one that was just disappearing and so people are always nostalgic about it.[12] Athearn's West, incidentally, was the Rocky Mountain and Great Basin area, regions still characterized by sparse population and an actual rugged wilderness with a distinct physical challenge to those who would hike, camp, or live there. One thing Athearn was also clear about: California was not true West.

10. Elizabeth A. H. John, *Storms Brewed in Other Men's Worlds: The Confrontation of Indians, Spanish and French in the Southwest, 1540–1795* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1975; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981).

11. Donald Meinig, *Southwest: Three Peoples in Geographic Change, 1600–1870* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971).

12. Robert Athearn, *The Mythic West in Twentieth-Century America* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1986).

Like Athearn, Josephy disguises a major point in a charming anecdote. His account of the Arizona land claimant outwitting the law and arousing more envy and admiration than condemnation hangs on a free-land theme fundamental to Turner's frontier concept, and on Billington's belief that, crooked or not, land speculators did develop the country and served a positive functional purpose. It echoes Professor John's objective view of both sides. Moreover, in a letter of a few years ago, Kevin Starr wrote me that if he had to do his book *Inventing the Dream*, dealing with Southern California, all over again, he would focus it around the story of real estate.[13] And now comes Patricia Limerick in *Legacy of Conquest*, in which she says that if Hollywood had really made accurate westerns, John Wayne would not have been a gunslinger but a lawyer in the courtroom defending a victim against land speculators.[14]

Josephy's story also illustrates a second theme—impatience with rules and laws—namely federal authority and the West's ongoing resistance to bureaucracy. With Athearn, he believes the New Deal era was the first time westerners really encountered rules and authority of a major sort and that has led to the consuming dislike of Washington.

Now, having demonstrated Alvin Josephy's talent for placing the hidden message in a narrative, let me comment briefly on what seems to me to be the main and most troubling paradox in western historical writing: Frontier and West are seen as simple, open, undeveloped places. Often it is people overcoming nature. Mr. Josephy's vivid description of all kinds of frontier stages and scores of types of occupants and, indeed, many scores of distinctive tiny little frontiers, leaves one with the strong suspicion that the frontier was complex, that it was hundreds of experiences, not a single pioneering story—that Darwin's evolution from the simple to the complex was not so true. Rather it was from complexity to com-

13. Kevin Starr, *Inventing the Dream: California Through the Progressive Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

14. Limerick, *Legacy*, p. 55.

plexity. Professor John's description of Spanish-Indian relations in the eighteenth century was of an incredibly complex process. One factor that made it so was an elaborate Spanish bureaucracy. So one of our historiographical problems is that we see a simple story when it is a complex one. This is the problem in environmental history, where the interaction of man and nature is so profoundly complicated and mysterious, we do not know the real story. Western history is as full of challenge now as any American field could be. One way to meet that challenge is to acknowledge complexity.

Mr. Josephy warned me that his paper would be personal, and while his stagecoach was a Greyhound bus, and the encounters bring a sense of nostalgia to all of us over sixty, with his sense of disappearing frontiers, again he makes some profoundly important points about how open space means wilderness and outlands to urban dwellers but a place for dumping toxic wastes to others. His point that life in rural areas is not that easy is all too accurate; just how hard that life was is brilliantly recaptured in a book by Elliott West, called *Growing Up with the Country*, a story of children on different western frontiers.[15] Their experiences were of work, more work, hardship, and deprivation, but knowing no other life they came to terms and made it a livable, even attractive world. West argues in fact, that children, knowing no other world, thought that frontier conditions were normal and this kept alive the American belief in the frontier.

Josephy is also correct in saying that the novelist and artist have a better sense of the western landscape and values than the historian. Indeed there is a new western regionalism espoused by writers like Joan Didion, who, remembering her Sacramento childhood, laments the passing of her own lost world. But there are also brilliant novels by Asian-Americans and Mexican-Americans and Indian-Americans.[16]

15. Elliott West, *Growing Up with the Country: Childhood on the Far Western Frontier* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989).

16. Richard Maxwell Brown, 'The New Regionalism in America, 1970–81,' in William G. Robbins, Robert J. Frank, and Richard E. Rose, eds., *Regionalism and the Pacific Northwest*

This leads me to my final point. Change produces nostalgia about a disappearing frontier or West. The nostalgia is based on youthful memories when we saw ourselves as meeting the challenge of adulthood which was often accompanied by moving or traveling. Thus the frontier—and rites of passage to manhood, or, in Josephy's paper, the young man wanting to see the West—coincide to make the frontier one of the most powerful symbols of achieving manhood and overcoming one can find. That has gone on since pioneers first crossed into Kentucky and Ohio. That repetition of rites of passage, physical, geographic, and psychological, has gone on down to the present. It is therefore not just because of Turner that we think in terms of frontiers; it is part of the national experience and culture.[17]

I am the least pioneering type one could ever meet, but in 1947 I set out to write a dissertation on the Dakota frontier, an area I knew nothing about. I caught a ride with two schoolteachers, husband and wife, from Cranford, New Jersey, to Mankato, Minnesota. On the way we visited the teachers' relatives on a remote farm on the upper Mississippi. The farmer was Fremont Rainey, named for John C. Fremont, whom his parents must have admired. The family lived in a house without electricity or running water. At night the men spoke of bear hunting on the backwaters of the river. Bearskin rugs were everywhere as were rope beds. The family sang ballads to entertain us and urged me to stay to bring in the pea crop. But I pressed on by bus to Pierre, South Dakota, where the wheat harvesters had come to town. It was like a gold rush town. Unable to get a room in a hotel, I and five harvesters slept in Mrs. Murphy's basement down by the Missouri River, each cot marked off by blankets on a rope. Near me were two harvesters, one of whom was coughing blood because of the irritation of the dust of the harvest fields. The next morning Mrs. Murphy gave us

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(Corvallis, Oregon: Oregon State University Press, 1983), pp. 79–81 contains an excellent discussion of Didion's nostalgic new regionalism.

17. Howard R. Lamar, 'Rites of Passage: Young Men and Their Families in the Overland Trails Experience, 1843–69,' in *Charles Redd Monographs in Western History*, No. 8, Thomas G. Alexander, ed. (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1978), pp. 33–68.

a great breakfast and I went to do research at the South Dakota Historical Society, where I met a newpaper reporter, an elderly woman who had known and hated Calamity Jane. Later I traveled to Bismarck, where I was introduced to an ancient gentleman said to be the bugle boy with the first troops that came to view the Custer battlefield after the fighting. On the way to Bismarck, I had passed Russian-German women, sitting by their farmhouse doors, their heads wrapped in kerchiefs, as they might have done in Russia. I came away knowing I had experienced a passing frontier, as Alvin Josephy had done, and as Turner had done in his youth in Wisconsin, and as Herbert Bolton had done with his students by retracing Coronado's, Kino's, and Anza's footsteps across the Southwest. While I knew there was still a frontier, if only in my head, I knew there was very much a real West. It is such personal and psychological rites of passage that will continue to guarantee that we write Western history and talk about receding frontiers.

The problem is to discover a way to synthesize the finds of older historians, and those of current ones such as Martin Ridge, Elizabeth John, and Alvin Josephy, with those of literally thousands of new historians, novelists, ethnologists, social scientists, and geographers writing today. The synthesis won't come in 1993, the hundredth anniversary of Turner's frontier essay, but it should be here by year 2000.

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